



(A Prequel to THE VENGEKEEP PROPHECIES)

By Brian Farrey

I could feel it in my bones: we were doomed.

To be more specific, my *grandmother* was doomed. I was merely chosen to *watch* her go to her doom. I know that's not as bad as being doomed. But it's not exactly a good thing either.

It all started on my twelfth birthday. Ma and Da had gone all out to celebrate. A big cloth banner saying HAPPY BIRTHDAY JAXTER spanned the width of our living room. Da had done a bit of late night burglary to steal a log of everember wood from the house of the local mage so the fire in our hearth flickered in a rainbow of colors. Ma had stolen only the finest ingredients from the merchants of Vengekeep to bake my favorite dessert: scorchcake with singemilk frosting.

Traditionally, this was one of the most important birthdays for a young thief. Twelve was the age when your thieving accomplishments were officially recognized by the Kleptocracy,

the secret, not-so-official body that governed all thieving clans. Soon, I'd get to go out on my first solo heist, the biggest rite of passage for any thief. It was a lot of pressure, seeing as I was a member of the most famous thieving clan in all the Five Provinces—the Grimjinx clan.

As my family gathered around the kitchen table, I unwrapped my parents' gift first. Tearing apart the paper packaging, I found a small leather strap that fit perfectly around my wrist. Tucked into the strap were a series of eight shiny brass lockpicks. Each pick had been crafted personally by my mother, whose forging skills were second to none in all the Five Provinces.

“Happy thieving, son!” Ma beamed.

Aubrin, my ten-year-old sister, silently pushed her gift to me, a devilish glint in her eye. Inside the small box, I found a wooden jar filled with cinderfig grease. Perfect for erasing any fingerprints left behind after a heist.

Nanni, my grandmother, had been watching me unwrap my gifts in silence. When everything was opened, she reached across the table and took me by the hand.

“Jaxter,” she said, softly, “as you know, the Kleptocracy will be meeting at Witchlock Cairns for the Brigand's Throne ceremony next week. As the oldest living Grimjinx, I'll be going to represent our clan. My gift to you is I'd like you to join me as my *seelah*.”

Ma gasped as Da broke down in joyful tears. Aubrin threw her arms around me and squeezed. Words caught in my throat. I could barely manage the smallest of nods. *Seelah* was an ancient par-Goblin word. It was hard to translate. It meant that I would assist Nanni in the Brigand's Throne ceremony. The only greater honor than being named a *seelah* to a clan representative at the Brigand's Throne was to actually be the representative. The responsibility alone was tremendous and intimidating.

But I wasn't worried about what *I* had to do. I was more worried that if my grandmother attended the Brigand's Throne, she'd destroy the reputation of the Grimjinx clan as the most prestigious thieves in the land.



I should have been thrilled to be selected. Serving as Nanni's *seelah* would give me a chance to prove myself worthy of the name Grimjinx. I come from a long line of accomplished thieves. To stand out, you had to really shine. And every *seelah* in our family's history had gone on to do great things. If you consider thievery great. Which I do.

But I had good reason to be concerned. Don't get me wrong. I love my nanni. Growing up, she would visit us frequently as our family went off on various heists. She was a font of wisdom and guile and a model thief for me and my sister.

But in the weeks leading up to my birthday, Nanni hadn't quite been herself. She'd moved in with our family a month earlier. From the first day, she seemed...different. She was quiet all the time. She seemed to get confused easily. For example, some nights she'd excuse herself, go upstairs toward her bedroom, and we'd find her asleep in the hall closet. Or I'd take her to the market at Brassbell Promenade, she'd gather what we needed for dinner, then try to pay the merchant with the balls of fuzz she found at the bottom of her coinpurse.

Granted, quite a few merchants felt sorry for her and we got more than a few meals free.

The day before Nanni and I were to leave on our journey to Witchlock Cairns, I went to visit Da at his phydollotry shop.

"I know she's your ma and all," I said, "but there's a lot at stake. Maybe you can go in her place."

“Jaxter,” Da said, “thieving tradition is that the oldest of the clan goes to the Brigand’s Throne. Don’t worry. She’ll put the Briarbanes in their place.”

For as long as there had been the Kleptocracy, there had been a rivalry between the Grimjinxes and the Briarbanes. It went back centuries. No one really knew how it started. Every time the Brigand’s Throne came around, everyone knew it would boil down to a competition between our family and theirs for who came out on top. The Grimjinxes had reigned supreme since I was an infant. That could all change if Nanni wasn’t at her best.

But that wasn’t why I was worried.

“I’m not talking about *that*,” I told Da. “I’m talking about...that other thing. You know. The *Throne*.”

“Ah,” Da said. But he didn’t seem overly concerned. “Well, if that’s what you’re worried about, then I suggest you get started on your duties as *seelah* right away.”

I couldn’t believe him. This was his mother we were talking about. And this wasn’t just about protecting our family’s reputation. It was about protecting Nanni.

The Kleptocracy was made up of the twelve most powerful thieving clans in all the Five Provinces. Those twelve clans were chosen based on the amount of prestige they’d earned for their thievery. And that prestige was determined once a year at the Brigand’s Throne.

Every year, each of the twelve clans would gather at Witchlock Cairns where the Kleptocracy’s most precious artifact—the Brigand’s Throne—was hidden. Each head of clan would sit on the solid gold throne and declare aloud every bit of thievery their family had done in the past year. The more your family stole, the more prestige you earned. Once all twelve clans had spoken, the family with the most prestige, as determined by the total value of your thefts, received a tithe of ten percent of the other clans’ yearly earnings.

Of course, it wasn't as simple as just bragging about your clan's heists. It would be too easy to lie. But, the thieves who started the Kleptocracy over five hundred years ago had devised a clever trap for liars. The Brigand's Throne was enchanted. Not only could it recognize deceit, it was unforgiving of any error or slip of the tongue. Any lie, any false word—intentional or not—was met with the swiftest magical justice the Throne could dole out. When you sat in the Throne, you needed to know every detail of every heist by heart and speak accurately or face dire consequences.

Do you see why I was afraid for my grandmother who tried to pay her debts with bits of lint?

Da was right about one thing. The only way to avoid disaster and protect my nanni was to be the best *seelah* ever and help her prepare. I was up to the challenge.



Nanni, however, was not.

Black and gray clouds rolled across the sky as we entered the mountain pass that would take us to Witchlock Cairns. We sat side by side at the front of our family's covered wagon as it rocked gently back and forth along the rocky path. A large satchel, filled to bursting with parchments and scrolls, hung from my neck. For weeks, the far-flung members of our family had been sending us reports of all the thieving they'd done for the past year. It was Nanni's job to memorize each and every heist, caper, and burglary and know the value of each, right down to the last bronzemerk.

When the letters first started arriving at our house, Nanni would glance at them quickly, then toss them aside like she thought they weren't meant for her. It was my job as *seelah* to make

sure she committed every word to memory. Our trip had taken two days and I was getting the idea that we hadn't made that much progress.

"How about we review what we learned from Uncle Garax?" I said, pulling out a parchment covered with my uncle's messy handwriting.

"Garax?" Nanni said dreamily, coaxing the mang that pulled our wagon forward. "Who's that?"

I groaned to myself. We'd been over this three times already. "Nanni, he's your son. Da's younger brother."

She nodded but the distant look in her eyes said she didn't really understand. "Did he write me a letter?"

"Yes," I said, "a very important letter. A letter you have to remember."

Nanni frowned. "You sound so grave. You make it sound like my life depends on it."

I sighed. "It does, Nanni. Sort of. Look, we can make this a game. It sort of rhymes. 'Garax robbed the Bank of Vyx and got a thousand silvernibs.' See? Can you remember that?"

Well, I didn't say it was the *best* rhyme.

Nanni didn't respond. When I poked her, she jumped. She'd fallen asleep. She looked around, confused. Then she pointed along the path and said. "Look at the ladygills. That's my favorite kind of flower."

I stuffed the parchment back into the satchel.

Doomed was starting to seem like too gentle a word.



Twin moons peeked up over the horizon as dusk fell. As the road curved to the left, we rounded the corner to find a wide open field between mountains. Small mounds of gray stones,

the size of my fist, marked the graves of the Witchlock par-Goblins, the ancient thieves whose work still inspired thieving clans of all races to this day. Among these cairns, several other covered wagons had assembled. The rest of the clans had arrived and were setting up camp with small fires and tents.

We picked an empty bit of field and stopped. I hopped off the wagon and held my hand out to help Nanni down. She teetered at the edge of the wagon, then cried out as she slipped and fell on top of me. The clans closest to us saw this and started laughing. Face red, I helped Nanni to her feet.

“Let's set up camp,” I said.

“Are we going camping?” Nanni asked loudly. More laughter from nearby. I spotted the Briarbanes across the way. They were looking right at Nanni, whispering to one another, and snickering. I ignored them and unpacked the tent from the wagon.

Nanni and I each took a side of the tent to pitch. I finished my half quite easily. But when I went round to the other side to see why Nanni wasn't done, I found her trying to drive the tent stakes into the ground with handfuls of grass.

Behind me, a river of whispers raced through the cairns. By now, all the other clans had noticed Nanni's behavior. No one even bothered trying to hide the fact they were watching closely. I knew by their confident smiles what they were thinking. This year, they thought, was the year the Grimjinx clan fell.

The moment I'd finished pitching the tent, Nanni put her hands on her hips and said, “Let's go for a walk.” Before I could respond, she headed off. I grabbed a handful of parchments. This would be my last chance to help her before the ceremony tomorrow morning.

We wandered through the cairns, passing the tents of the other clans. Most had gathered around campfires, preparing dinner. From what Da had told me, the night before the Brigand's Throne usually found people feverishly studying the reports of their family's thievery. Strangely, only Nanni and I seemed to be preparing. Everyone we passed nodded respectfully—we did, after all, have the most prestige—but the moment we passed, the cackling began.

I threw a withering gaze at the others, then turned my attention to the scroll in my hand. “What do you remember about Great Uncle Ollanger?”

Nanni scratched her head. “Don't tell me, don't tell me... Great Uncle Ollangar plundered the Bloodtombs of Arroth.”

“No,” I said, trying to not let the panic in my heart seep into my voice. “Great Uncle Ollangar only *pillaged* Arroth.”

Nanni clicked her tongue. “Silly me. That's right!”

I lowered my voice. “Nanni, *please* pay attention. You can't mistake a plunder for a pillage.”

A pillage was any theft that resulted in a take valued at one hundred times the thief's weight in silvernibs. A plunder, a far more valuable endeavor, was valued at one thousand times the thief's weight. Mistaking one for the other could be disastrous.

“Yes, yes,” Nanni said, picking at her messy hair as though she were pulling invisible bugs from it.

As Nanni moved ahead, I felt a tug at my arm. I turned to find Hedra Briarbane, head of clan, holding a small cage.

“Thought you might need this,” she said, nodding at Nanni. “After tomorrow, it'll be easier to take her home.”

My ears burned as I guided Nanni away. Once our backs were turned, the entire Briarbane camp burst out laughing.

We spent the rest of the evening next to our campfire. I tried to quiz Nanni but she couldn't take her eyes off the other clans. They'd gathered in the center of the cairns to play games and drink ashwine. I almost suggested we join them. It would have been nice to have one last night of fun. Because I figured after tomorrow, Nanni wouldn't be having fun for a long, long time.



As the rising sun lit the cairns the next morning, it was time to begin. Each of the clan heads, their *seelahs* at their sides, took a small dirt path leading away from the cairns up a nearby hillside as other members of their clans wished them well. Every ten steps or so, Nanni had to stop to catch her breath. She leaned on her cane and wheezed. I heard the Briarbanes chortle as they passed us.

When we made it to the hilltop, we found a wide circle made of twelve, smooth stone domes no higher than my ankles. Each head of clan and their *seelah* stood next to a dome. Nanni and I took our place next to the one vacant stone. Everyone looked around, acknowledging each other with a nod. Then, as one, the head of each clan slowly sank down to sit atop their respective stone mound.

A cool breeze grazed the hilltop. A moment later, the ground shook. I laid a hand on Nanni's shoulder. She stared toward the mountaintops, eyes glassy and distant. Suddenly, the dirt in the center of the circle was pushed aside, as if by invisible hands. A thin spire shot up from the ground. The spire grew taller and wider until it became the back of a great, golden throne. As the chair rose up fully out of the hilltop, the shaking stopped.

The throne sparkled, not a trace of soil on it, despite having just emerged from the ground. It looked like your standard throne—very regal and impressive—with one exception. The arms on either side of the seat each ended in a large, golden hand, palm up and fingers outstretched.

Selera Vellex, head of her clan, approached the throne and drew a deep, cautious breath before taking a seat. She leaned back, laid her arms on the chair's arms, and slid her hands into the throne's hands.

"I speak for the Vellex clan," she cried out, loud and clear. Slowly, the golden fingers of the throne's hands curled, lacing themselves between Selera's fingers, gripping her tightly.

"Mendis Vellex, paintings stolen from the Port Scaldhaven art gallery, valued at three hundred silvernibs." Selera's voice shook with every word. "Erindal Vellex, pillage of the fire catacombs of Rexa, valued at one thousand six hundred twelve silvernibs..." As she spoke, the stone dome near her *seelah* rose slightly from the ground, revealing it to be the tip of an obelisk. With every theft she detailed, the obelisk grew taller.

When she was done speaking, she shouted, "This I declare!" The golden hands on the throne released Selera. She looked over to her clan's obelisk and frowned. It was only slightly taller than me. Embarrassed, she slipped off the throne and went to stand with her *seelah*.

No one was surprised. Each year, the Vellex clan ranked so low that outsider clans—those desperate to become one of the twelve—were constantly challenging them for their seat on the Kleptocracy. So far, the Vellex had won every challenge.

Next, Alikor Brendletar took a seat and joined hands with the throne. He rattled off a litany of his family's achievements over the year. It was impressive. Not stunning, but

impressive. By the time he'd finished, his clan's obelisk was nearly twice as tall as the Vellex clan's.

This continued as, one by one, clan heads took the throne. Nothing particularly exciting happened until the fifth clan, the Blackscratches, came forth to give testimony. Revin Blackscratch appeared confident as he sat, gripping the throne's hands eagerly. He began calling off accomplishments with firm assurance.

"Endris Blackscratch, plunder of the Lost City of Creeve, valued at sixteen thousand two hundred twelve silvernibs. Synjar Blackscratch, pillage of the vaults at Korinthar, valued at three thousand, four hundred silvernibs...."

Suddenly, the spire on the top of the throne began to sparkle. A soft hum filled the air. Revin's eyes widened in horror as he realized what was happening. He yanked his hands, trying to free them from the throne's unbreakable grip.

"No! No!" he cried.

It was hard to say what had happened. Perhaps Revin had made a mistake, a simple slip of the tongue. Maybe he'd misremembered. Or maybe he'd been given false information, either by accident (unlikely, as most people wanted their accomplishments recorded as accurately as possible) or maybe on purpose (lying about your thievery to the person sitting on the Brigand's Throne was a favorite method among thieves of getting rid of a family member you didn't really like).

In the end, it didn't matter. The Throne was unforgiving of anything but the absolute truth. The bluish sparkle ran down the spire, across the back of the chair, and all over Revin's body. As the light grew brighter, he screamed and writhed. There was a flash and then silence.

The hands on the throne were open again. Perched on the chair, where Revin just sat, was a garfluk.

Considered the stupidest bird in all the Five Provinces, the garfluk had a stout body covered in multi-colored feathers. Two heads sat atop a spindly, v-shaped neck. One of the bird's heads squawked madly and looked around, wild-eyed. The other head had Revin's confident smirk. The bird flapped its wings and bounced up and down on impossibly thin legs.

The other clans roared with laughter. Many pointed. Some laughed so hard, they hit the ground and rolled around. The Blackscratch clan's obelisk, which had risen to waist height, sunk slowly into the earth until it was just a mound again. Revin's *seelah*, flushed red with embarrassment, scuttled forward and scooped his clan head up under his arm. The garfluk's heads bobbed around curiously, as if trying to figure out why everyone was laughing. Loudest of all was Selera Vellex. For once, their family *hadn't* come in last.

I didn't laugh. I looked at Nanni, who was using her coin purse as a sock puppet. I started rehearsing how to tell Da his mother was now a bird. A particularly stupid bird at that.

The rest of the clans proceeded without incident until it was down to the Briarbanes and us. Hedra Briarbane waddled up to the Throne. She cleared her throat and when I looked to her, she nodded at the cage her *seelah* was holding. She gave a meaningful look at Nanni, then took the Throne.

The Briarbanes had worked especially hard this year, racking up theft after theft. When Hedra finished her testimony, their obelisk towered above all the others. Theirs was the family to beat. And only Nanni's testimony remained. A hush fell over the camp as all eyes turned to my grandmother. Nanni rocked back and forth, her eyes dreamily studying the throne. Everyone waited.

“Nanni,” I whispered, “I can’t let you do this. You wait here. I’ll take care of this.”

I didn’t care about proving myself. I didn’t care about bringing prestige to our clan. All I cared about in that moment was saving my grandmother. Tradition said the head of clan had to *attend* the ceremony. Any member of the family could sit on the Throne. And I’d spent so much time going over the thieving reports with Nanni that I knew most of them by heart. I didn’t have to list *all* the family accomplishments. It would cost us some prestige to leave some out but it was easier than guessing and making a mistake. I was sure I could do better than Nanni, even if it meant we came in dead last. And I would have preferred that to having a garfluk for a grandmother.

But as I took a step toward the Throne, I felt Nanni’s thin fingers wrap tightly around my arm. Turning, I watched the glassiness in her eyes fade. Her gaze narrowed. Her face became the very model of clarity and sagacity as a sly grin spread across her lips. Rising, she gently pulled me back, tossed her cane aside, and swaggered her way over to the throne. Whereas everyone else had taken a cautious pause before sitting, Nanni dropped into the seat without hesitation.

“I speak for the most prestigious clan in the Kleptocracy,” she called out, making sure she met the eye of every clan head as she spoke. “The *Grimjinx* clan!”

She grabbed hold of the Throne’s hands and began.

“Sareth Grimjinx, pillage of the tin mines of Rexa: net worth, 4,124 silvernibs.
Allamondas Grimjinx, plunder of the cenotaph at Wrathborne Castle: net worth: 28, 246 silvernibs...”

She spoke so quickly and surely that it was impossible not to stare. I rifled through the parchments in my satchel and tried to follow along, checking each accomplishment as she rattled it off. In the end, I couldn’t keep up. With every word she spoke, our obelisk grew higher and

higher until the Briarbane's looked positively miniscule. Everyone watched, most no doubt praying her speed meant she'd slip up and they'd be laughing at a garfluk.

But it never happened. When Nanni finished, the golden hands released her. She remained seated, surveying the assembled thieves with an arched eyebrow. Most everyone looked ashamed. It was then that I understood what she'd done. By acting befuddled, she'd tricked everyone else into not studying as hard. They became overconfident, thinking they could easily beat her.

One by one, each clan turned and made their way back down the hill to the cairns. I went to Nanni, who hadn't stopped looking directly at Hedra Briarbane, even as her rival disappeared from view down the hill. Dumbstruck, I offered Nanni her cane. She twirled it in her fingers, then slung it over her shoulder. She linked arms with me and we walked together down the hill.

Back at the cairns, everyone was breaking camp while the clan heads lined up, bearing large sacks containing their tithe. As Nanni and I passed, each laid their sack before her. Some spit at Nanni's feet but she met them all with a kind smile and nod. Once they'd paid, they spun on their heels and left.

"Don't just sit there gawping," Nanni said. Apparently, my jaw had locked in the open position, frozen in awe since she'd finished her testimony. "Let's load up and go home."



We traveled a day from the cairns before setting up camp. By sundown tomorrow, we'd be home in Vengekeep. Nanni hadn't said a word the entire trip. She'd left me to steer the wagon while she sat in back, counting the tithe. Once the tent was pitched, I couldn't stand it anymore.

"You could have told me it was all part of your plan," I said.

Nanni shook her head. "You're a good actor, Jaxter, but the genuine despair on your face, thinking your old nanni was about to become a garfluk, was better than any performance you could have given. I needed everyone there to believe without a doubt that I would fail. You convinced them."

I struck a piece of flint, igniting the kindling for our campfire. "You've been acting daft for a month. I was really worried about you."

She reached out and put her arm around my shoulder. "I'm sorry. You know, I couldn't have chosen a better *seelah*. You were ready to risk making a mistake on the Throne to protect our family's prestige."

I shook my head. "No. I was trying to protect you. It's what Grimjinxes do."

Nanni kissed me on the cheek. "I was your age once too. I know how it is. Eager to prove yourself. Well, trust me when I say you'll have plenty of time to prove what you can do. I reckon you'll outshine us all someday. But don't rush it. Take your time. Learn all you can. Now, what did you learn from this?"

"Not to trust my grandmother?" I said.

She laughed. "No. People who trust the obvious invest in lies."

Nanni was always quoting the wisdom of our Grimjinx ancestors. "Who said that?" I asked.

"I did. Just made it up. You know, it's pretty good. Remind me to write that down in the family album when we get home."

We ate our dinner beneath the moons high above. Nanni was right, as always. Despite everything I knew, I still had a lot to learn about being a thief. And I had plenty of time to make my mark as a Grimjinx.

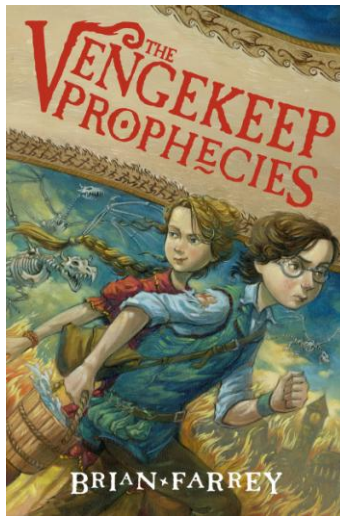
In the days ahead, Da would be taking me on my first solo heist. It was going to be my shining moment, one the Kleptocracy would talk about for years to come.

I could feel it in my bones.



For more information about Jaxter Grimjinx and his family, please visit Grimjinx.com.

Jaxter's adventures begin in:



THE VENGEKEEP PROPHECIES

Available Oct. 2012 from HarperCollins Children's
ISBN: 978-0062049285