

**Title: “Cycle of Kindness”**

**Author’s Note:** This is set in a fantasy-genre world, so there is a reference to magic, and the law enforcement is referred to as the city guard instead of police.

---

Targos wandered down the main road of Blackstone, a small, bustling city named for the mountain filled with obsidian deposits next to it. He walked past a shop with a large window that displayed some of its most beautiful merchandise, and he could see his reflection clearly in the window. The light brown dust coating his skin made it look tanner than he knew it actually was, and his hair was also discoloured - its normal dark brown made to look fawn. He sighed quietly and turned away. He certainly wasn’t out and about in the wealthiest part of the city to check his appearance.

Targos had stolen from one of the lesser parts of town consecutively and knew that soon the merchants would catch on that something went missing every time a certain green-eyed elf passed by. So, Targos had decided to give that part of town a break and ample time to forget his face. However, since he still needed to eat, Targos found himself wandering through the biggest marketplace in the city, the Silverun. The place had originally been called the Silver Run because coins simply “flowed” from hand to hand in the busy shops, but the two words had begun to get pushed together until everyone called the market “Silverun”.

Targos was hoping some of the big-shot merchants wouldn’t pay any mind to a few missing items, and as he first laid eyes on the market, he became confident that the rich merchants wouldn’t notice at all. The main street ran between two lines multi-sized buildings boasting every kind of good or service Targos could think of, and, lined up side-by-side in front of the buildings. There were countless wooden stalls and tents selling everything from pies and bread to fine jewelry and small gemstones.

Wandering through the market, Targos surveyed the wares of several stalls before finding one that sold food. The owner was busy dealing with a paying customer, and Targos knew his window was there but small. Targos swiped a good-looking loaf from the edge of the table with a practiced motion and was beginning to slip away when he heard an alarmed sound from behind him. Targos’ heart leapt into his throat, and a moment later his worst fear took over reality.

“Thief!” the stall-keeper yelled, pointing an accusing finger at Targos. Two guards seemed to materialize immediately, and they gave chase as the boy began to tear through the crowd. Targos was fast, but in the thick crowd, he couldn’t outrun the pair of guards. Targos didn’t dare look back, but he could hear them getting closer. He could almost feel gauntlet grab his shoulder, almost feel the sting of dust in his eyes as he was driven down to the ground.

His salvation came from a stranger. A tall figure stepped from the shadows, pushed Targos around behind him, and stood firmly between the guards and the boy. The armored men stopped in front of us and began talking.

“Move!” the senior guard demanded. “This boy is a thief.”

“What did he steal?” the teen, judging by his voice, asked. “Or, really, what did it cost?”

The merchant he had stolen from came running up at that moment, huffing and puffing from the exertion, "The wretch stole my bread...costs two silver coins!"

"Alright," the teen said, the cloak moving as he shrugged, and handed two coins to the merchant. Everyone else looked as astounded as he did. The merchant scoffed and walked away, having lost interest now that his money had been regained. The guards, however, remained.

"He is still a thief."

"I deem him worthy to go free," his savior said. His tone hadn't changed through this whole exchange, and he still sounded smiley, like this was such a simple misunderstanding. "Don't worry, I'll keep him with me."

"You can't make that call," said the younger guard impatiently, speaking for the first time. He reached out to forcibly move the annoyance away.

The man got more than he had planned for when the teen sidestepped the shove, pushed off the side of the stall beside us, and vaulted over the guard. His hands touched the guard's silver spaulder briefly during the vault as he used the surface to twist himself in mid-air to landing facing the guard's back. The guard was shocked and off-balance, so the well-placed kick that his opponent landed took his legs out from under him.

"Actually, I do have the authority to make that call," the teen corrected. "I am of the King's Shadow Knights, and thus, I outrank you."

The Shadow Knight pulled back a corner of his cloak to reveal an insignia pinned to the strap of the sword he wore across his back. Simultaneously, he raised his hand, so the guards could see the same insignia was glowing on the back of his left hand as he willed the magical mark to be visible.

"Sir," the young guard rolled into a kneeling position, "I'm sorry."

The higher-ranked officer smiled sheepishly, "Nah, you are not at fault. My friend and I will be on our way now. Forgive me that I can't offer you an explanation at the moment. Good day."

Clapping the officer on the shoulder as he walked by, the Shadow Knight ushered Targos off down the cobbled road. He brushed his cowl back, and his appearance only added to the oddity of the situation.

The boy's stark white hair was cut in a spiky, uneven way with longer strands in the front that framed his face and stopped about midway down his throat. A black blindfold with a silver, metal trim was tied around his eyes, but there were eye holes cut so perfectly for his bright eyes that they only just let his eyelashes through. Two dark-red tattoos curled out from beneath the black cloth. Each one looked like a single claw mark running over each eye, or so the younger elf assumed since he couldn't actually see if the markings went all the way to the other's eyes. Targos could see that the tattoos started just above his white eyebrows and ended just past his high cheekbones, but the eyes of his rescuer appeared entirely undamaged.

The older elf's eyes were only slightly less odd than the blindfold and his hair. It looked like his eyes had been intended to be brown, but the being that had made them had gotten drops of red into his irises at the last minute. They held the depth of a dark brown but the brightness of a much lighter shade, and the red made them near mesmerizing.

“Okay, kid, what’s your name?” the teen asked after Targos had had ample time to study him. Targos stood for a moment not quite sure what to make of this situation.

“Targos,” he responded hesitantly. “Who are you?”

“Aaron Firace of the King’s Shadow Knights,” came the reply, “but no one calls me that. Everyone calls me ‘Slick.’”

“Why?” Targos asked desperately, falling to his knees.

Slick stopped, and surprised, asked, “Why what?”

“Why would a Shadow Knight help me?” *It’s too good*, Targos’ mind screamed, *it can’t be true.*

“You looked like you needed it,” Slick replied. “Plus, I can’t begin to explain how wrong I think it is to arrest a starving kid for stealing bread.”

“Thank you, sir, and I promise I don’t steal ‘cause I want to - it’s ‘cause I’ve got to!” Targos gushed.

Slick chuckled and held out his hand, palm up. Targos hesitated but held out the bread to what he supposed was its rightful owner. Slick’s eyes went wide, and he shook his head quickly and waved his hands in a “no!” gesture.

“Your hand,” he requested, holding his hand out again. “If you want to, you can come home with me tonight. I don’t know what’s for dinner, but I know you won’t have to steal it.”

Targos stared at Slick as though the Knight had just offered him the world on a plate. Targos grasped the hand hesitantly, still thinking this was way too good to be true as Slick gently pulled Targos to his feet.

Slick started walking again, and Targos fell into step beside him, still clasping the elder’s hand. They walked together to Slick’s house, and Targos discovered that Slick lived with five others in a large, mansion-like house. There were two other older teens that seemed to be near Slick’s age and three others that appeared various years younger. They all introduced themselves and smiled at Targos amicably.

None of them but two, the ones that were Slick’s age were twins, mentioned being related, but they all operated like one, big family. One of the twins, a brown-haired, green-eyed boy, pulled an extra chair up to the table, and they all ate dinner together.

Targos was excitedly pestered with questions, and he smiled and answered each one. Much to his surprise, he didn’t feel entirely out of place. Targos was, of course, a bit odd in a setting full of strangers, but he felt like he could belong there in time.

A thought struck him, and, not that he would’ve have minded if it had been the case, his curiosity compelled him to whisper to Slick, “Is this an orphanage?”

“No,” Slick whispered back. “The twins and the others that are old enough have jobs, and I, of course, am a Shadow Knight. We pay rent, buy food, and house ourselves, so we’re not an orphanage. We’re just kind of an odd family. We stuck together while we were growing up on the streets, so we didn’t feel like splitting up when we finally started to get somewhere in society.”

“It’s great that you guys are a family. Thank you for having me here for dinner,” Targos whispered sincerely.

Slick nodded and smiled - he smiled so often that his grin seemed to never leave his face - before continuing our hushed conversation, "You know, it is a shame that we always have that extra chair sitting in the corner. Would you like to live here with us and fill it?"

If Targos had had any food in his mouth, he would've choked on it. He quickly glanced up at the older boy and saw that he was serious in his offer. Targos stared for a moment and then, lunging out of his chair, wrapped his arms around Slick in a hug, stray tears slipping unbidden from his emerald eyes. Slick returned the embrace and his sharp ears caught the hushed word "Yes."

After dinner, Slick walked upstairs with Targos to help the boy get settled into a room.

Targos didn't want to be rude or to make the older boy realize what a chance he was taking on Targos, but Targos had to know something.

"Why do you have any faith in me? You rescued me, but what've if I turn out to be the worst person ever? Why are you helping someone that you don't know?"

Slick laughed and shrugged, smiling, "Why not have faith in you? What if I helped you, and you turned out to be the best person ever? How would I ever know anyone if I didn't take a chance and introduce myself?"

"I saw you steal the bread, and from the look of it, you're experienced. You could've stolen more than one lousy loaf if you had wanted to," Slick continued. "So, I knew you were either forced to steal and innocent or were just bored and deserved to go to jail. Perhaps, I am naive for my faith in the world, but I believe I'm better for it. I decided to help you because I believed you were worth helping. Why should I believe that you are a villain when, for all I know, you may grow up to be the hero of the whole kingdom? You didn't wrong the world, but its treatment has wronged you. I believe you deserve the chance to be better than stealing, so I'll give you the chance to be whatever you make of yourself, whatever you want to be."

"Thank you..."

---

## *Epilogue*

"Why are you helping me?" he asked, looking up at the older boy with suspicious eyes that almost wished to be proved wrong. "No help is free! So what do you want?" Tears began to stream down his face, and he fell to his knees, sobbing.

"I'll tell you what I want, and, really, what I don't want," the elder said softly. He brushed back his cowl the rest of the way, running his hand through his dark brown hair. "I don't want to see children live on the streets and die if they don't have to. So, I want to help you."

He knelt down so he was on the same level as the younger boy and brushed away some of the dirt and tears on the boy's face. The teen pushed himself up with a quiet breath, keeping his emerald eyes locked with the streaming blue eyes of the child. He straightened his posture

and held out his hand, palm up, toward the boy. The young kid stared at the ground under him for a moment then threw his hand forward to clasp the outstretched hand. The older boy smiled and pulled the child gently to his feet.

“But...why?” the child asked, holding the older boy’s hand tightly as they started off down the street. Targos, now in his late teenage years, chuckled softly, looking away for a moment as if locking eyes with someone only he could see.

“Because someone did the same thing for me once.”