

Mistress of
the Mirror
and other stories



Kyra Halland

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by Kyra Halland

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Five tales of strange things found in pawnshops...
and things too strange for pawnshops.

Mistress of the Mirror
Valuables
Of Rings and Lemon Cream Cakes
Pawned
A Worthy Instrument

Mistress of the Mirror

THE CITY STREETS had sunk into full darkness by the time Etta left the last pawnshop, still holding the mirror. Not one of the nine or ten pawnbrokers she had visited that day had wanted the mirror. It had to have some value; it was silver, or at least a metal that looked like silver, with all kinds of fancy swirls and designs on the back and handle. She had never really looked into the glass – she knew what she looked like, and it wasn't something she cared to see that often – but she knew the mirror was unbroken, even though it had been tossed out on a rubbish heap in the alley behind some rich person's house. Surely, especially coming from that neighborhood, it had to be worth at least a few pennies.

But every time she laid it down on a counter for a pawnbroker to look at, they barely spent any time inspecting it. A brush of fingers over the metal, a quick glance at the glass, then a hasty, "It's no good," or, "Nothing but a cheap piece of trash," or simply, "Sorry, can't take it."

Every damn one of them. Fools, who couldn't see that it had to have some value.

And now she was going home penniless. Lund, that no-good oaf, had gone out to see what he could win at dice tonight, but even if he won anything – which was doubtful, a toad was a better gambler than he was – she knew he would spend all of it on beer and some cheap floozy, and she wouldn't see any of it.

She could have been something once, she thought as she walked through the dark streets, clutching the useless mirror. Once, she had had ambitions. She had been smart enough and pretty enough and strong enough to make something of herself. And then she had fallen in love with a charming gambler – a bad gambler, as it turned out, and ever since then, life had paid her back over and over for that one stupid decision. Now, in debt, penniless, her looks gone, her mind dulled, she had no way out.

Into the silence of the narrow, deserted street sounded a scream from one of the side alleys. Not so unusual in this part of town, but what was unusual, what made Etta stop dead in her tracks, was the figure that slipped out of the alley the scream had come from.

It wasn't the usual thief or cutthroat. He was dressed all in black from head to foot, his face masked in black, and the blade of his knife was made of a dull black metal. A Stinger – an assassin for one of the city's great crime lords; something you never wanted to meet on a dark street. Even if you weren't a Stinger's designated target, no one who saw one ever lived to tell about it.

Etta stood frozen, afraid to even breathe. He was looking the other way, as though watching to see if the coast was clear for his getaway. She prayed over and over that he wouldn't turn around, he wouldn't see her, he would go on his way and she would live to tell about it.

Except that someone who told about seeing a Stinger also wouldn't live very long.

She'd been holding her breath too long. Involuntarily, she let it out in a rush. The Stinger turned. She felt his eyes, invisible beneath the hood, fixed on her. Then he leaped towards her, his knife aimed at her throat.

Instinctively, she raised the mirror to shield herself. The tip of the assassin's knife gouged into the glass –

The assassin disappeared.

* * *

Valuables

CLOSING TIME AT last. Smiling to hide his impatience, Mr. Higwill cheerfully waved as his last customer of the day left the shop. Even before the tinkling of the bell over the door faded away, he hurried over to the door and locked it, then turned the “Open” sign in the window to “Closed” and lowered the blinds. Alone at last, he returned to the counter. From under it, he retrieved the figurine he had taken in earlier that day.

At first glance, there didn’t appear to be anything special about the porcelain shepherdess. She was painted in delicate tints and trimmed with thin lines of gold that glimmered in the lamplight. She had golden curls and a ruffled dress, and stood holding a crook out to one side, gracefully peering down at the fluffy porcelain lamb curled up at her feet. It was a decorative item such as might be found in the well-appointed drawing-room of any merchant’s home, adorned with all the usual knickknacks and fripperies that pleased merchants’ wives.

No, it wasn’t the figurine itself that had attracted his ever-eager curiosity, but the metallic clanking sound that came from inside it. A quick inspection as he evaluated the piece had revealed no openings or seams; it was one solid piece. The customer who was pawning it hadn’t said anything about the object concealed in the figurine, and though she was young and attractive, she had had a stern, businesslike manner and had answered the few questions he had asked, necessary to the transaction, as tersely as possible in a tone that said she would rather not speak at all. So he hadn’t dared to ask.

Thus suppressed, his curiosity had churned all the more the rest of the day while a constant and tedious stream of customers pawned, bought, and redeemed items. But now he was finally alone, the shop was locked up for the night, and he had a few minutes before one of his children would come calling him upstairs to dinner. He set the bright lamp that he used when evaluating

items on the counter, put his jeweler's loupe to his eye, and studied the figurine.

He had always loved mysteries and the hidden stories behind things. It was how he had gotten into the pawnshop business; he had always collected unusual items, had even started offering to pay for things that snagged his eye and his curiosity, and then realized he could turn around and sell those things and make money with his passion as well as spending it. He did well enough with his shop to support his family in comfortable fashion, but the best part, always, was finding some new mystery to puzzle over.

And this mystery baffled him. The object in the figurine sounded like a coin, or perhaps a ring or some other piece of jewelry, something valuable. But if there was a valuable hidden in the figurine, why hadn't the customer mentioned it?

And how in the world had it gotten in there?

He examined the shepherdess carefully, peering between the ruffles of her dress and the curls of her hair and the cleavage showing above her neckline – impractically low for a shepherdess, the poor dear would get a terrible sunburn if she were real – and didn't find anything that would indicate a hidden opening. Finally, he saw a thin line concealed by the ruffles of her neckline, woven so carefully among the curves of porcelain it was all but invisible even with the aid of his loupe and his brightest lamp.

So, that answered the question of how the object got in there. But now he had to wonder, what in the world could it be? If it was something valuable, why hadn't the customer mentioned it, asked for extra money for it? Perhaps, despite the clanking sound it made, she wasn't aware it was there. In that case, he would be doing her a favor by finding out what it was. He could discover where she was and send her some additional money for it; she must be in need of money, for she had seemed desperately anxious to pawn the figurine. Or if it was something she wanted to keep, she could come back and claim it before it ended up in someone else's hands. So, yes, he would be doing the right thing by finding out what was inside the shepherdess.

He grasped the figurine by her pretty head and slender waist and, ever so carefully, began trying to work the top free. The two pieces fit together firmly, with not the slightest bit of wiggle –
And then the head snapped off.

* * *

SAMPLE

Pawned

Author's note: I wanted to call this one "Pwned," but that would just be silly.

Based on a rather wonderful little writing prompt from SeventhSanctum.com, "That lady, with her strange bottles."

EXCUSE ME!"

Niebert flinched. He knew that voice. It was the voice he'd thought – he'd hoped – he would never hear again.

"Excuse me!" the woman said more loudly after barely giving the shop owner enough time to respond to her first summons. Patience never had been among her virtues. Such as they were.

Niebert cringed in the place where he was concealed. *Please don't let her find us*, he prayed. *Please let the shop owner forget we're here*. Around him, he could sense his fellow prisoners, his fellow refugees, sending up the same prayer. Not that he thought it would do any good; if any deity was listening to his prayers, he wouldn't be stuck here in the first place. Still, the sound of that voice was enough to drive a man to cling to any desperate hope of escape.

"Yes, madam?" The pawnshop owner's voice grew clearer as he stepped out of his office behind the counter. "What can I do for you today?"

"I'm looking for something of mine, that my son pawned without my permission. He never does stop to think when he does these things, never thinks that maybe someone else wouldn't like it. How I ever raised such a selfish son, I'll never know. He must have gotten it from his father. He probably lost at gambling again, or maybe it's that girl. I heard he isn't the only one she's seeing, she probably got herself pregnant and wants money –"

"Can you describe the item, madam?"

Don't, don't, don't, Niebert pled silently with the shop owner. Just let her talk until she forgets what she came in here for, then she'll leave and I'll be safe.

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