

**Up To The Throne**

**by Toby Frost**

Giulia reached Carlo's house at dusk. She raised her hand to knock on the front door – and stopped. The door was already open.

Carlo always kept his house locked up. Giulia drew the long knife from her belt and held it so the folds of her cloak would hide the blade.

Fear settled in her chest like ice. She took a deep breath and slipped inside.

She closed the door behind her. The house was silent. The ground floor smelled of dust and the ashes of last night's fire.

There were two chairs next to the table. One lay on its back, as if someone had got up too quickly and knocked it over. Giulia crossed the room, treading carefully. There were a few crumbs on the tabletop. That was all.

She turned to the staircase.

The boards creaked softly under her boots. As Giulia reached the top of the stairs, she saw him.

Carlo lay on his back, mouth open. The blood on his chest was as black as shadow.

They had cut his throat.

She saw the fingers of his left hand, how they had been twisted and broken.

“Shit.” Giulia stepped back from the body. She sheathed her knife and looked for the chest where he kept his cash. Relief ran over her like sweat as she saw that it was still there, pushed into the darkest corner of the room. She crouched down and fumbled with the lid of the chest. The metal felt wrong.

*No, no.*

The lock was twisted, wrenched out of shape. They'd blown it open with gunpowder, or magic or something—

She lifted the lid. Even in this bad light, she knew at once that the chest was empty.

*My money.*

She clamped her hand over her mouth and screamed silently into the palm.

*Think, damn it. Think.*

Then she realised that she was kneeling beside a corpse, looking into a chest that had been full of stolen coins, and that whoever had murdered Carlo was probably still nearby.

“You’re the woman.”

She looked around. A man stood at the top of the stairs, a mace in his hands. He was about twenty, stocky, slightly hunched. There was something dead in his eyes: he was a living man, but he had the dull menace of a revenant. He seemed to blot out her way of escape, to swell up until she was trapped in here with him.

She heard the threat in his voice and knew that there would be no talking her way out of this. She knew his type: the kind of scum who’d carved her face six years ago.

Giulia stood up. “I’m the woman,” she said.

“You stay still.”

She glanced towards the stairs.

“No! You stay still or I fucking smash you.”

He took a step forward, remarkably quiet for his bulk, and she knew he meant to beat her, no matter what. Something inside her tensed, hardened itself, ready to break loose. She felt the old fury rise up inside her, together with vicious contempt.

He raised the mace in his right fist and grabbed at her with his left hand. His thick fingers caught hold of her shirt.

Giulia sidestepped, pulled his left arm taut and chopped down onto his locked elbow with the edge of her right hand.

He bellowed with pain. She tore free and he swung the mace at her head. She ducked and pulled the long knife from her belt. He raised the mace for a downward blow, and suddenly his front was wide open. She darted forward, threw her weight against him and stabbed him in the neck.

He collapsed against the wall like a dropped marionette. He made a coughing noise and blood ran down his front. The man looked up at her, as if with wonder, his hand pressed to his throat. Then something went out in his eyes and he slumped back.

*It was him or me*, she thought. She made the Sign of the Sword across her chest – not for his soul, but for her own.

She hurried downstairs. As she reached the front door, a voice came from the street outside: stern, educated. “Luca! Luca, what the hell’s going on in there?”

Giulia crept back through the house. She reached the back door, slipped outside, and ran.

She reached the Gauntlet twenty minutes later. Giulia took one last look to see if she was being followed. The road was empty. She pushed the door open.

The Gauntlet was long and narrow, and it smelled of fireplaces and spilled ale. There was no bar, just a row of barrels at the back from which the drink was scooped.

The usual crew were starting the night’s drinking: people to whom she would nod but never speak. At the far end of the room the landlady, Irmgard, was putting clay cups on a shelf.

Irmgard was a Teut. She’d once told Giulia that she had fled Sudestenland after its bishops declared for the New Church, early enough to avoid the worst of the religious violence. She had three sons and four daughters, and all the toughness of a matriarch. Over the last year, she’d put a few jobs Giulia’s way, linked her up with two good fences.

One of whom was now very dead.

Giulia closed the door and walked down the hall. Irmgard looked around. The landlady's eyes widened. She beckoned Giulia over.

"Yulia," Irmgard said. Even after ten years in Astrago, her Teutic accent was still strong. "Come round the back, now. Quick. Out of sight. Sophie," she called, and a girl stepped out of the shadows. "You mind the front."

Giulia followed her through a door, into the rear of the inn. The room was half-full of empty barrels. Irmgard closed the door behind her.

"Two men were in here earlier, looking for you."

*Oh, no.* "What were they like?"

"An older man, well-spoken but you could tell he was tough. The young one was wrong in the head. He frightened me. He looked like he was going to go crazy at any moment."

Giulia wondered what Irmgard had told them. She tried to look unconcerned. "Are you sure it was me they were looking for?"

"Pretty much. They didn't use your name, but one of them described you. He said you had scars like this." She held up her hand, pressed two fingers against her left cheek as if surreptitiously giving Giulia the Bowman's Salute.

"That's me, all right." Giulia screwed her eyes closed and pinched the bridge of her nose. Her head swam. She remembered the corpses in Carlo's house, the clumsy way that dead bodies lay. *Fuck. This is all I need.* "What did you tell them?"

"The truth," Irmgard said. "They said there was no point lying: they had a flask of Veritatis and they'd make me drink it if they thought I was messing them around. I told them you came here sometimes, and right now, you were out."

"Fair enough. What were they, Watchmen?"

Irmgard shook her head. “Bounty hunters.”

“Great. Bloody wonderful.” Giulia leaned against the wall. “Irmgard, Carlo’s dead. I just went to his house to get some money he owes me.”

Quietly, Irmgard said, “What happened to him?”

“The bounty men got him. It wasn’t pretty. They nearly got me, too. I had to kill one of theirs. I think it was the crazy man you said about.” Giulia felt terribly weary, as if all her muscles had been pulled too hard. “I’ve got to go. It’s not safe me staying here, not for either of us.” She took a step towards the door. “You take care.”

“Hey,” Irmgard said. “You owe me money, Yulia. You’ve had two bottles of good wine off me for free.”

“I know. I’m a little short at the moment. I’ll get it to you later.”

The landlady glared at her. Then the hardness in her eyes faded. “Be careful, woman. You can’t pay me back if you’re dead.”

Giulia put it together as she strode towards her apartment. It wasn’t hard to work out.

She’d done a job for Carlo last week, a simple in-and-out burglary at the Lombardo mansion on the edge of town. It had gone perfectly, and she’d escaped with the painting Carlo wanted and a fair bit of extra stuff for him to fence.

Maybe Carlo had become greedy, and had been too obvious about trying to find a buyer. Or else one of the other fences had sold him out to get his work.

It didn’t matter now. What mattered was the gear and the money she had stashed away. It looked as if the coin from the Lombardo job was gone for good. *Fine*, she thought, *call it a lesson learned*. But she couldn’t afford to lose the rest of her stash. Not when she was so close to being ready to go back to Pagalia.

The thought of losing it all made the Melancholia swell up inside her like a rising black tide. She pulled her hood up and made herself focus. *Stop it. You're not beaten yet.*

As she rounded the corner and caught sight of her tenement block, fury washed over her. She stood in the shadows, her mind swimming with outrage for being ripped off like this. For a moment she wanted to scream at the sky, to curse God and the angels for cheating her.

And then she was back again. Giulia narrowed her eyes and looked at the tenement like a boxer sizing up an opponent. Her apartment was at the top of the block, on the third floor. The shutters were closed, but she could tell if there was a light burning inside. Right now, it was dark.

*Maybe it's empty. Maybe they're inside, waiting. Maybe they've bought a flask of night-eye so they can see me coming.*

There was no time for excuses. Either she went in or she accepted that her money, and her plans, were done with.

Someone moved in the doorway. Moonlight glinted on the handguard of a sword. Then something dropped over the sword and the man drew back, out of sight.

So, they had a man on the door, waiting to ambush her. Giulia realised that any attempt to enter by the ground floor, whether through the doors or the windows, would be too dangerous.

She slipped into an alleyway. The walls loomed high above her. Her boots sounded very loud on the stones.

The apartment block next to hers was almost drowned in shadow. Giulia strode to the back of the building and stopped beside the porch. The windows were shuttered, held in place with latches.

The tip of her knife slipped easily between the shutters. She flicked it up and the blade caught the latch and knocked it open.

Nobody shouted, nobody shot at her.

Giulia climbed over the sill. The ground floor of the block was one large area, where half a dozen shopkeepers would lay out their wares in the daytime. Now the moonlight turned it into a landscape of boxes and sacks, like a massive attic. The real valuables would have been taken upstairs for the night, locked safely away. She picked her way across the room, to the staircase. She began to climb.

The boards creaked softly under her boots. She tried not to think too much, made herself focus on what she was going to do rather than what might go wrong. She passed the first landing, then the second.

The stairs ended at the third landing. Each floor was slightly wider than the one below. This high up, the eaves would almost be touching above the road.

The window on the right would work. She lifted the latch and, very carefully, pushed the shutters back.

Giulia looked out of the window, felt the cool night air on her skin. The sloping roof of her own tenement was six feet away.

A light moved below: someone was carrying a lantern. She waited for the light to disappear around the corner.

*Here we go.*

Giulia climbed into the window and perched on the frame. The air felt very still, as if God was holding his breath. Giulia licked her lips. She braced her legs on the wall below her. Then she leaped across the gap.

She landed on the roof of her tenement. Quickly, she scrambled up to the peak of the roof, where she knew that the beams would take her weight. She crouched there, suddenly able to see the city of Astrago spread out around her on all sides: the smoke in the moonlight



from a thousand chimneys, the soft glow of alchemical streetlamps around the mansions of the rich. On the far side of the bay, the new lighthouse flashed its warning.

*I've got to get out. I'm done with Astrago – and it's done with me.*

She had delayed enough. Now, with hired men looking for her, there could be no more waiting about. It was time to go back across the bay, to Pagalia.

*Home, she thought. That's a bloody joke.*

Back to Pagalia, to finish what Publius Severra had started six years ago. She'd spent money and time preparing for it, had thought of little else, but it still seemed like a huge step to take.

*First, let's get this money.*

Giulia crawled along the spine of the roof. She'd done this journey once before, shortly after renting the apartment, except in reverse. She had chosen the tenement partly for its seclusion, and partly because, if the place was surrounded, she could climb out through the ceiling. She hadn't ever expected to be breaking in.

A scrap of white rag protruded from the roof, pinned down by a loose tile. She crawled over and began to lift the tiles away around the rag. Giulia set each tile down very carefully. After ten tiles she paused, listening. Nothing. She got back to work.

Soon the hole was big enough to let her down. The room below was dark and, as far as she could tell, empty. Moonlight caught weakly on bare floorboards.

*Easy does it.*

She put her weight onto her hands and lowered her feet into the hole.

Something moved on her right. Giulia whipped around. A tile slipped down the side of the roof, almost lazily. Powerless to stop it, she watched the tile slide towards the edge.

*No – don't fall—*

It dropped into the street. For a second everything was still, and then the tile smashed on the road below.

She winced. Nobody could have failed to hear that. They'd go to see what the noise had been, and some clever bastard would suggest looking on the roof.

She didn't have long. Giulia slid down until half her body was in the hole. She, dropped, landed neatly and was up and ready in an instant.

The room had always been pretty empty. They'd searched it well enough, tearing the sheets off the bed and pulling it out from the wall. They'd broken the lock on the big fancy chest and tossed the junk out. She saw that they'd taken the money bag full of coppers that she kept there as a distraction. Worse, the whoresons had stolen all three of her books.

Giulia tugged the bed forward and climbed up on it. She jumped, caught hold of one of the cross-beams and pulled herself up to chin-height. Her satchel was still there, wedged out of sight.

One good shove and it fell down onto the bed. Giulia dropped beside it. She didn't need to check the contents. She pulled it on and took a long look around the room.

She'd miss this place. It seemed cruel, somehow, to leave the things she'd bought to make it more homely: the tin bath, the plaster saints' figures, the cheap lamp in the shape of a leaping dryad.

*Don't get soft now. Time to go.*

She crossed the room and listened at the door. She opened it a crack and looked into the hall, then sneaked out. Almost bent double, Giulia crept down the stairs.

Two flights down and she heard them open the front door. "Up here, you mean?" a voice said. It sounded like the educated man she'd heard outside Carlo's house, the captain that Irmgard had talked about. Giulia hurried to the window and opened the shutters.

She climbed onto the sill and lowered herself down until she was hanging by her fingertips. Then she let go.

The landing knocked the air out of her chest. *Up, now.* She got to her feet, heart pounding.

“The window! Someone jumped out the window!”

Giulia turned and sprinted away.

She slowed to a walk and checked the road behind her. The street was deserted. It seemed that she’d lost them in the alleyways, thank God.

Giulia picked her way through the city, keeping to the shadows. There was one thing left to do before she left Astrago.

One of Irmgard’s sons loitered outside the Gauntlet. Giulia pulled her hood back, waiting for him to recognise her scars. The lad nodded and stepped aside, keeping one hand under his tatty cloak.

Irmgard was waiting for her. “Thought you’d be back,” the landlady said, handing her a cup. “This one’s on the house. Unlike all the others.”

Giulia took a deep swig of wine. It was cheap stuff, probably watered down, but it tasted like pure life. “I needed that,” she said. “They had people at my apartment, waiting for me. It was close.”

“Did you get your things?”

“Most of them. All the stuff I need.” She finished the cup. “I’m leaving the city for a while. Thought I’d wait for things to calm down.”

“Where will you go?”

Giulia shook her head. “Probably best if I don’t say. I’ve got business to take care of. Have had for a long while.” She sighed. “I’d nearly saved up all the money I needed. This

last job was going to be the lot. Looks like I'll be leaving the city a little lighter in the purse than I intended."

The landlady said, "You can stay here this evening, if you'd like. You'll have to sleep out the back, out of sight—"

"Thanks, but no. It's too dangerous me staying here, for both of us. I can get out tonight if I start now." Giulia reached to her belt and took out a purse. She counted coins onto the tabletop. "This is for the first bottle I owe you for. This is for the second. And this is for a third, so you can drink yourself silly and forget that I was ever here."

Irmgard looked at the pile of coins for a moment. Then she shrugged and swept them off the table, into her apron. "Thank you."

"That's all right. God knows I've sinned in my lifetime, but I always pay a debt. The dwarrows say you should know a man by the debts he pays. That's what I'm going away to do."

"You owe someone for something?"

"Yes." Giulia stood up. "I owe them for a lot. But they're the ones who're going to pay."