

The Thief and the Collector.

Rain met stone on the path beneath her, the beat resonating with the sound of her heart which lurched erratically. She was running as fast as she could. Hands curled protectively around her chest, as if she could protect whatever was left inside from breaking with each step. She was running away from it all. Away from the pain.

Just, away.

Shouting from behind reminded her of what she carried in her pocket. The crystal diadem dug into her ribs painfully. The princess was still stabbing her in the heart. *Even at a distance.*

Rainwater had loosened her tightly curled hair, which stuck to her face and obscured her vision. She turned corner after corner, zigzagging to shake any pursuers but forgetting to remember where she was heading. Before long, she was lost in a dark side street of the commerce district. Panic clawed its way into her throat.

She clutched at the diadem, pushing it even further into her ribs as she tried to calm her breaths. Looking around, she couldn't see anything recognisable. A sob almost escaped her. She was soaked through and freezing, her legs shook almost uncontrollably.

I'm done for, she thought, they'll hang me for this.

She was too much of a risk for them to leave. If she was left to her own devices they would risk exposing the princesses' affair with a common thief. The stolen tiara was an extra slap in the face. In her anger, she probably hadn't thought this whole thing through.

Shadows skittered along the walls towards Az. The flames of her pursuers from the palace crept closer and orange light began to fill the streets. She had only a few moments to make her decision. Each direction looked just as bad, but as long as she moved before they came round the corner she could still escape.

She ran towards the darkest path in the hopes that the guards from the palace would quickly lose her in the shadows.

As she breached the darkness, a shudder came over her - almost as if she'd been dunked under cold water. It passed from the crown of her head right down to her toes and disoriented her as she emerged into the street.

Except, it wasn't a street.

Az's feet found a smooth surface beneath them, the shock of it nearly making her lose her balance after the uneven cobblestones she'd been running on.

Now, she was surrounded by hanging plants and crawling vines. Rows of books wrapped round the room and glass cases lay over antique trinkets in the centre. It was quiet here. The moonlight crept in from the windows and reflected off the glass. She could no longer hear the shouting or footsteps from outside. In fact, she could no longer hear anything. An eerie silence lay over the whole room.

What was this place?

A high-pitched clang woke her from her daze. Looking down, she saw the princess' crown on the tiled floor beneath her. She winced, hoping it hadn't been dented or cracked. As she bent down to pick it up, a small noise drew her attention to the counter at the very back of the room. Az made a rather unflattering yelp and almost lost her footing again.

A white haired woman stared at her. Tall and beautiful with long hair that framed every curve. Her eyes were intelligent and sharp, no detail escaped her gaze. No skirts or frilly blouses in sight, this woman wore an ice blue shirt and a navy waistcoat with some loose flowing pants. A business woman of some kind then.

Az began to apologise and held her hands up in an unthreatening gesture.

"I'm sorry", she backed away a step, " I'm not even sure how I got in here and I'll be on my way now." She glanced to the crown at her feet.

"I'm sure the guards have given up chasing me." She muttered to herself.

Bending down, she lifted the crown from the floor and inclined her head towards the other woman. As she did so, the other girl moved her hands in a series of gestures.

Az flinched back, thinking that maybe the girl was a mage and she was using her hands to cast against her. But no attack arrived. The gesture was repeated and Az finally caught on. She was signing to her.

"*What is that you're holding?*" Her dominant hand was clenched in a fist with the index pointing upwards and swivelling side to side. The woman raised an eyebrow and looked pointedly to the crown.

Az wasn't the best at signing, but she at least had some knowledge from one of the guild members. An older woman who had told her the skill could come in handy one day and said she'd be willing to teach for free. Az, forever hungry to learn, had accepted enthusiastically. It still took her a second to recognise and piece together the signs.

She signed back, "*Princess crown.*" Which she hoped would be explanation enough.

Apparently it had only peaked the woman's interest and she tucked a pencil and paper into her pocket.

"*Interesting story ?*" She asked in response.

Az huffed a smile and scratched the back of her head, not knowing where to begin. She wasn't sure she knew the signs for 'I am a romantic catastrophe'.

The girl gestured for her to sit on the floor and they both sank down.

She wrote on her paper "VOX" and gestured to herself, telling Az her name.

Then, to her horror, she opened her mouth to reveal a stump where her tongue should be. A mass of scarred flesh could be seen at the back of her mouth and she quickly closed it before Az could stare any longer. Vox gestured to her ears and then gave Az a thumbs up.

After a second of staring dumbly, it clicked that Vox was mute and couldn't talk, but her hearing was fine.

"Oh right, sorry." She felt stupid now, she could have been talking this whole time.

"No problem, thank you for signing. Not many know how." Vox seemed genuinely grateful and Az realised how many people out there faced the same issue and struggled to communicate. Her basic knowledge of signing was not so trivial a skill as she'd once thought. Az vowed to herself that she would learn to be competent so that should she meet someone else like Vox, she would be able to converse with them the same way.

"Vox is a pretty cool name" It sounded too ironic to have been her given name, but Az felt it was rude to ask.

"Chosen name, it suits who I am now." Az understood. Sometimes you grew out of the person you once were. Changing a name was like shedding old skin. Being reborn. Az nodded her understanding.

She smiled encouragingly and pulled out a tiny glass circle which she hovered over the gems in the crown. Frowning in concentration, she inspected the piece for a couple of minutes. Apparently satisfied she put the glass away.

"What's the story there?"

After one more hesitant look at the door, Az figured that this was a better hiding place than any and she might as well lie low here for a while. She began to talk.

It began last summer, when she'd been in the midst of her teenage reckless phase. At seventeen, she'd thought she owned the streets, that her sword skills and several successful heists made her invincible. If she was being completely honest, it had made her cocky. Looking back, she wasn't proud of that behaviour and she knew that snapping out of it had saved her a shocking awakening one day. Overconfident as she was, she was well on her way to getting caught and locked up.

The princess has been the one to stop her in her tracks.

Az explained to Vox that one night, she had peaked in her cockiness. After a drunken conversation in her guild's tavern, she had accepted the challenge to steal from the palace. In retrospect, she could see how her guild mates were riling her up and she had so easily taken the bait. They would laugh if they saw her now. She'd fallen for two cons in the end.

"Turns out, the window I climbed through at the palace actually led to Princess Nomi's bedchamber. I'd somehow miscalculated on my approach. I'll never do recon on a job after drinking ever again. Definitely learnt my lesson there".

Vox had covered her mouth in horror at the awful mistake and her eyes lit up with humour imagining Az in such an awful position.

“Hey it’s not funny, if I wasn’t so good looking, the princess might’ve turned me out then and there.” Vox dissolved into laughter.

“*So why didn’t she?*” Vox was hooked on the story now, Az could see.

The moonlight pooled around them and the crystals on the diadem soaked it up. They gleamed as if they too remembered the day Az and the princess had met.

“I guess she took one look at me and knew I could offer her the adventure and escape she so desperately craved. I went along with it because- well, I’ll be honest, she was prettier than I’d expected and I didn’t fancy getting turned out on my ass. I still had a bet to win after all.”

Vox and Az had taken to laying flat on their backs, staring through the glass in the ceiling at the stars above them.

More seriously now, she explained that she’d spent the night there, with the princess. They’d talked for hours about everything, laughing together and flirting. And then Az had come back the following night and every night since. Until tonight when the Nomi had told her they couldn’t continue. Her parents had decided it was time for her to be married. Nomi said that their affair had been good fun and a welcome escape from her royal duties, but she could no longer mess around with a street thief like Az.

The betrayal had burned like acid through her veins. Every word they’d spoken to each other, every promise and gentle touch had all been a lie. A ‘welcome escape’ as the princess had called it. She was off to get married to some serious noble woman who could offer her family wealth and power. Az was nothing to her.

“So I took the crown right off her head. Said that she didn’t deserve to wear it and her reign would be cursed. I was pretty upset at the time and I said some dumb shit but I couldn’t back down after I’d snatched the thing. She called her guards and I just ran.”

Vox took a moment to consider her reply.

“It sounds like you’re better off without her. If she could lie about her feelings for you, she could lie about anything.”

They lay in a comfortable silence before Vox lifted her arms to sign again. Az watched.

“I could sell it for you”.

“The crown?” She frowned deeply, she hadn’t actually thought about what to do with the thing. Keeping it could only lead to more trouble, but she didn’t want that trouble to fall on her new friend.

“They’ll come for it. You’ll be in danger.” The whole palace guard was likely looking for that thing now.

“*That’s what I do here, I trade items.*” Az looked around and again considered all the trinkets and jewels spread around the shop. Ancient books and contraptions from cultures all over the world. The most varied collection she’d ever seen actually.

The vines along the walls fluttered in a breeze that whispered through the cracks in the walls.

“*I have wards around my shop, only those who I allow in can enter.*” So that meant that Vox had heard her outside and had known she’d needed refuge. She had been allowed into this place, with its strange owner and ethereal atmosphere. Vox had allowed her into her trove of precious and probably illegal items. If the white haired woman could trust Az so quickly, why couldn’t she return the favour?

“We split it fifty fifty?”

“*Deal.*” They shook on it and that was that.