

Not much is known about the zephel-cruled rubies that make up the Fractured Jewel. Shards are rare, and multiples from a single seller can triple or quadruple the price. But legend has it that, when all the shards are combined, the wielder is granted a power beyond any creature's wildest dreams.

Though *how* the power is wielded or controlled, in fact, *how* the shards are combined at all - glue? prayers? - the lore never states.

Of course, Seraphina Tealeaf and VM knew even less about the infamous zephel-cruled rubies than most in Aminos. In truth, they were hearing about this particular treasure trove for the first time, sitting opposite renowned thief Kadthane - a man so great only one name was needed - in a pub called The Rubber Duckling, as he tried to convince them to break into the chancellor's palace to steal a piece.

"I already have one shard," he said, his ale sloshing out of his growler and onto his scaly forearm as he leaned forward. He didn't seem to care. "We get one more, we'll never have to work again. A third? We could buy our own island, our own country! Name it after yourself, Vee...Emm...?"

"Could do," VM nodded, giving the dragonborn no indication that his sales pitch was working.

Kadthane continued, "My sources are certain the shard is embedded in the ceiling of the center tower. I have the blueprints. The first snow is expected in a few days and that," he pounded his fist against the table, more beer sloshing, "is when we will strike."

VM and Seraphina glanced sideways at each other, a barrage of head tilts, scrunched noses, and raised brows serving as their only communication.

On the other end of the table, Kadthane cleared his throat. "It will be easy," he said. "You two have succeeded in much more difficult heists before, so I've heard." His promises flowed as freely as the ale. "We'll do it under the cover of night. In and out in

less time than it takes to pick a pocket. And the guards will be of no concern," he further explained, for he had hired the best muscle this side of the Mylen-Hanz.

At this, he gestured behind himself, at a table just a few meters away, where a pair of nearly identical half-orcs grunted and flexed.

Muscles, brains, clear plans, "and for our escape, we'll scale the tower down to the ground and be able to walk right out the front gates," Kadthane swore.

But where were those promises now, a few days later, as Seraphina stood atop VM's shoulders, outstretching her tiny halfling arm toward the gem embedded in the solarium's chandelier?

Of course, this wasn't the first time Seraphina and VM had found themselves stacked on top one another, scrambling for a prized possession. That's why they'd initially agreed to be part of Kadthane's little crew: to avoid the one situation where a halfling and a dwarf were at a disadvantage. And, naturally, if the Fractured Jewel was as valuable as Kadthane said, they wanted a cut too.

From outside the walls, no one would have suspected a thing. The season's first snow floated lightly from the sky, cloaking the entire town in a soft, white embrace. The night was calm, quiet. There was still a month leading up to the nearby Fireball Festival, where there would be anything but peace - mostly debauchery and alcohol-fueled mayhem, the perfect place for a pair of thieves - so for now, the chancellor, her husband, her guards, and her people reveled in the tranquility.

Even inside the palace walls, everything seemed as it should. The chancellor slept off her inevitable hangover after a night of dealmaking and treaty signing, her husband read by the fireside, and the guards made their pre-determined and Kadthane-predicted rounds.

But the thieving crew had taken far more time than it took to pick a pocket. In fact, they'd taken more time than was needed to pick a pocket, snatch a purse, launder their taking, and spend it all on booze combined.

"Come on," Seraphina muttered under her breath. A howl of biting wind brought with it gusts of fluffy snow through the window they'd cracked open. A few inches coated the perimeter of the intricately designed octagonal structure, sitting far above the grand hall and reaching higher than any other part of the palace. On sunny days, the gleam from the shard could be seen for miles and miles. Tonight, its glisten reflected the moonlight, only serving to further taunt the thieves.

"Higher!" Seraphina hissed.

"I'm trying, I'm trying," VM said. His feet were steady and sure, even as he rose an inch more onto the tips of his toes.

"I just - can't - ugh!"

They didn't have time for this. Seraphina took her hand off the vaulted ceiling, balancing entirely on top VM's shoulders with no brace to keep from falling, and reached into her pack. She fumbled around, her muscles straining until her tiny hands felt the cool, smooth sheen of metal. As she pulled out the crowbar, the moonlight glinted across it.

"Be gentle, the zephel-crusted ruby is delicate," Kadthane had repeated earlier that night, over and over and over, until both she and VM had decided they'd never work willingly with him again.

"Be gentle."

She practically heard Kadthane in her head now.

From the corner of her eyes, she spotted movement. She dared to glance at the open arched window, and lo and behold, the dragonborn was staring at her. "Gentle," he whispered again, mimicking the movements she needed to perform. His spiked green hair stood straight up, unmoving even as the rest of him rudely gesticulated.

VM grunted from below. "Aren't you supposed to be our lookout?"

"I — "

"Then look. Out."

The dragonborn growled before climbing the rope to the top of the solarium, the best vantage point in the entire city, let alone the palace. Seraphina rolled her eyes, ignoring as the dragonborn's steps above rattled the chandelier, and returned to the task at hand. She stretched the crowbar above her head with nimble fingers and hooked the bent claw around the cradle holding the shard. "Come on," she pleaded. "Come on." She pried and pried, not wanting to break the shard - indeed, unsure if there could become *more* shards this way, she'd have to consult VM later, for this was possibly a way to make more money - but also needing it to unhinge itself right this very, bloody, motherfucking instant.

Just as the crowbar wiggled the claws of the setting and just as Kadthane hopped out of view again, a cry pierced the air. With a clang, her crowbar landed on the tiled floor.

Seraphina came tumbling down next but held tightly in her tiny fist was one of the zephyl-cruised gems.

"Let's go!" VM said, grabbing at Seraphina's wrist. But as he tugged her off the ground, toward where the escape rope once dangled, it was no longer there. "Kadthane! The rope!" But instead of lowering it back to where either the dwarf or halfling could jump and reach, the rope continued to rise. "Kad - "

"Throw me the jewel!" Kadthane's gruff voice commanded from above. Through the glass ceiling of the solarium, Seraphina and VM stared up at him. He stared down. "Throw it to me," he said slowly, "and I'll lower the rope."

No one blinked as they studied one another. Trust amongst thieves was rare, and for precisely this reason.

From far outside the solarium, one of the orc twins shouted, "We got company!"

VM cast Seraphina a quick, wayward glance, sizing her up. He scoffed, then took a step back. With a quick lunge, he took off in a sprint, charging for the small strip of wall, his delusions of grandeur propelling him forward. One foot landed on the floor, then the other on the glass wall, then -

VM slipped, a fluff of snow shooting up behind him in a poof.

"Were you aiming for the rope?" Seraphina asked, her chin tilted back as she watched Kadthane completely remove their escape route.

VM grumbled, dusting the snow off his pants and shirt and readjusting his eyepatch. "What now?" He asked.

"We run."

"Where?" He gestured wildly.

"Throw it to me!" Kadthane said again, his voice calm and cool, but the command betraying his intentions.

Footsteps rumbled in the distance, the crunching of several boots trudging quickly over pebbles and ice.

Down below, a hundred meters or so, give or take, though a halfling and dwarf's perception of height was often faulty, a fight had broken out. One of the two half-orcs yelled, "Hurry up Kad, we gotta leave!" just as he was nearly impaled by a dragonborn wearing the palace uniform.

Seraphina and VM took a step back as Kadthane's head stuck over the side a few meters above theirs. "Now's the time, you gotta throw me the stone."

"Throw us the rope!" Seraphina yelled, but Kadthane just shook his head.

It seemed the intruders were at an impasse.

"He didn't even give us a chance to double-cross him first," Seraphina huffed.

"There truly is no honor amongst thieves," VM agreed. He flipped off Kadthane with both hands before the duo turned on their heels and sprinted in the opposite direction, smashing open one of the windows and leaping off the side of the solarium.

Seraphina twirled in the air, keeping her shoulder down so that she rolled into the plush snow that had accumulated on top of the roof of the grand hall. VM landed with another thump beside her, but the worst jump was yet to come as they trudged through the soft snow still accumulating on the rooftop.

Kadthane's shouts in the distance muddled with the battle cries from down below, but neither VM nor Seraphina looked back. The balcony extended for thirty strides - forty for Seraphina - before the two slipped and glided to a halt, with only a step to spare. VM cursed. Seraphina glared at the softly falling flakes and the tree just out of jumping distance.

"Do we go back?" VM asked.

Lights flickered on below, shouts about intruders growing louder, the stomps stronger as if growing in number.

They'd entered through the drainage area, alongside Kadthane, Bogan, and Organ. The original plan was to bypass the guards and open the gate themselves - the orc twins' job beyond flexing their muscles - but it seemed that none of the intruders would be able to use the main entrance as an exit. The fallback plan was to use the rope that Kadthane had stashed and climb over the palace walls.

That was now, obviously, out of the question, and they were running out of time. Though they admittedly had pitiful little to begin with. Kadthane's predictions allowed only ten minutes in the room with the jewel and an understanding that the guards would be alerted. It had not called for a betrayal, but such was a life of thievery. Good crews were hard to find. Good crews that didn't betray one another once the

treasure was stolen were even rarer. VM and Seraphina should know; that's how they met.

"The drop's too big," VM said. "At least ten of me. I've survived eight, but ten?" He scoffed. "What are you — "

"I'm aiming for the tree," Seraphina said, bow already nocked, arrow aiming for the section of the trunk with the fewest branches. She'd tied a short, thin rope to the other end.

"You're too heavy," VM said.

"I don't see you coming up with any other options." She aimed.

"Wait!" VM hissed and, like the idiot he was, nearly threw a hand in front of her arrow. Seraphina let out a measured breath, following with only her eyes to where VM pointed toward the ground with his other hand. A group of five more guards had been released, running in the direction of the fight. And, as it turned out, right under where Seraphina would have shot her arrow.

"You're a madman," she whispered.

"Aye," VM said.

"Aye, and a pirate now too?" She asked as the guards ran farther and farther away. VM dropped his hand.

"No, but that's how I lost this eye."

"No it isn't."

"It is."

"I believe fifty percent of the words that come out of your mouth," Seraphina said, pulling her elbow back and aiming again. "And only ten percent when it involves your eye."

The arrow landed with a thud, rustling leaves and sending bits of fresh snow plopping to the ground. The guards definitely would have heard it. It might have even landed on a couple of them. Seraphina ignored the smirk VM gave her as she walked

over to the very edge, tiptoeing as close as she could get to the footfall. "I'm going to swing," she said.

VM pulled on the rope, gauging his own possibilities. "I'll jump."

"Best of luck, VM. It was good knowing you."

"You too. Should I perish, be sure to tell everyone how I lost my eye."

"In a tragic, pathetic fight with a fish."

"At least make it a big one," VM said, but Seraphina was already swinging, swinging, swung.

She landed with a thud against the bark, stinging her skin, but the rope held firm. She half-dangled, half grasped one of the branches, waiting and watching to see what VM would do.

He turned his face skyward toward the stars he only believed in during times of great peril. "Bless up," he said, then sprinted down the slope and over the edge.

Seraphina watched as the dwarf with the eyepatch soared through the air. His arms pumped, his legs kicked forward to balance himself; he was going to make it. He was going to make it!

With a thump, VM crashed into the tree. With another thump, he hit the branch below. Thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, thump, *fwoomp*. VM landed, finally, on the ground, spread eagle, staring face-up at the sky.

"Good thing we waited for the guards to pass," Seraphina said.

Snowflakes swirled through the air, landing lightly on a stunned VM's face. He could only blink and watch, the wind knocked out of him, as Seraphina yanked her arrow free from the tree and began scaling the trunk.

Then she cursed. Loudly.

VM didn't move his head, just his eyes, trying to follow her gaze. The yells grew louder. "Mordue! Breckeshaw! We found the intruders!"

Seraphina rushed over to VM, stopping next to his head. "Can you run?" She asked, extending her hands and yanking him upright before he could answer. They had no choice but to run.

Few traits are pervasive across all professional thieves: a mind for maps, a sharp tongue, and a quick wit for even quicker escapes.

Most thieves never make it to the professional realm. They're caught and hung or caught and chastised or caught and cast into prison. It's a tough gig, a tough life to lead. To become a professional means to become something of a legend. But to do that, you have to risk your livelihood - repeatedly - and succeed. But get too good and people - governments, rich folk, those you've already stolen from - start coming after you. Running the thin line of greatness is an art in itself, but fortunately, VM and Seraphina had gotten good at it.

And so far, Kadthane's blueprints had been correct.

The dwarf and the halfling ran parallel to the center tower, their only cover until they reached the stables. Well, VM sort of hobbled at an accelerated pace. Both were bogged down by a myriad of weapons, but professional thieves didn't walk into a government official's property without the means to defend themselves.

The whistling of the wind was not nearly as loud from the ground as it had been in the solarium, so every rustle and crunch kept them on high alert. They were closing in on the stables, it was only a little farther and then they would be —

The dragonborn guard leaped from above, landing with a thump in front of VM and Seraphina, cutting off their escape. She wore armor made of leather, and in one mighty arm, she held a longsword, bigger than the two thieves combined.

There was only one choice now: They had to fight.

"Halt!" The guard screeched, brandishing her weapon in front of her. "In the name of Chancellor Newbray, you are under arrest."

Without giving the guard any time to expand on their litany of crimes, Seraphina nocked back her bow and sent another arrow flying. The hit was powerful and direct, ripping through the dragonborn's armor. She staggered backward, her shock and confusion rapidly transforming into rage as her eyes narrowed in on the arrow still sticking out of her shoulder.

Without warning, the dragonborn lunged, her free arm outstretched, slashing across Seraphina's chest with her claws. The halfling fell to her elbows, knocked breathless. Seraphina didn't need to inspect her shirt - nor did she have time for it, as she crawled backward, out of range - to know she'd begun bleeding. The sticky dampness told her, as did the sharp, stinging pain of ripped skin exposed to ice-cold air.

VM switched weapons, pulling out his great ax and swinging with a wild cry. The dragonborn grunted and groaned as she blocked his blow, meeting his ax with her longsword. With another grunt, she deflected him to the side.

"Come on, VM!" Seraphina shouted as she rolled out of the way of the next strike. She angled herself closer to the stables, trying to grow the distance between herself and the guard. Up-close fighting and hand-to-hand combat had never been Seraphina's forte, but what she lacked in strength she tried to make up for in tenacity and blind confidence, the main traits she and VM shared.

She shot another arrow at the dragonborn, this time aiming for her head but missing entirely.

"That was the wrong move," Seraphina muttered to herself, as the guard only then seemed aware that Seraphina was no longer to her left but behind her.

With an enraged cry, the guard aimed for Seraphina again, but the halfling ducked at just the right moment. The sword met a stone fixture holding up a lamppost, reverberating on impact. The lantern at the top swung dangerously as the vibrations reached the top, then it unhooked and fell to the snow below, its light blowing out.

"Now it's go time, baby!" VM shouted, raising his arms above his head. With the fortitude of someone who hadn't been shot in the shoulder, the dragonborn guard jumped out of reach of VM's swing. His own ax also ate stone, this time from the center tower, vibrating so intensely he had to drop it out of his hands before it clattered to the ground.

The once-distant yells and cries were now very close yells and cries. Their weapons were not the only ones clanging together, and the sounds seemed to be growing as they all congregated near the stables. Perhaps Kadthane and the half-orcs had chosen the same escape route.

Seraphina's second-to-last arrow whizzed through the air. "Run, VM!" She shouted. She nocked back her last salvation as the guard's attention turned to her.

Realization seemed to finally dawn on the guard's face that the halfling with wild hair, and even wilder eyes, and her dwarf companion with manic enthusiasm weren't going to be easily defeated. She shouted, "I've got two over here! One's escaping!" Then she let out a long, final, screeching battle cry, but at the last moment, VM rolled out of the way of her swing, picking up the handle of his ax. She swung again as VM held his ax in both hands, barely blocking the blow.

Their faces mere inches apart, VM winked before rolling backward. The dragonborn's sword grazed the trim of his coat and cut off half his ponytail. But he was free. He sprinted away as the last of Seraphina's arrows whizzed past him. He didn't turn back, not as the dragonborn growled in pain, not as she yelled for assistance, and not as more and more boots on the ground hurried toward them.

He passed Seraphina, who secured her bow behind her pack and turned and ran with him. They sprinted - or very quickly hobbled - together, past the stables and toward their only hope.

The screams echoed and faded, the weapons that once clanged now merely clings in the distance, and they could no longer hear orders being barked or deaths wheezed.

The doorway to the sewer was almost exactly as they'd left it, ever so slightly ajar. One of the twins - neither VM nor Seraphina ever knew which was which - had pried open the wire, enough so that all of them could slip through.

Seraphina ripped it open again, holding onto it as she climbed, then dropped, splashing into the wet sewer below. The water and waste came up to her knees.

VM followed. The sludge came up to his calf.

They turned to follow their exact entrance, in reverse, but suddenly footsteps, then splashes, sounded from that direction.

Without discussing it, VM and Seraphina turned on their heels. They rushed in the opposite direction, down a tunnel that neither knew where it would lead.

"I can see them!" Kadthane's voice echoed. "They're headed to the forest. Organ, make sure they don't leave. Bogan, make sure they — "

"Organ's a shite name!" VM shouted over his shoulder as the halfling and the dwarf made their escape, trudging through sludge as it slowly morphed into a mixture of mud and freshly fallen snow.

The trees, once sparse, grew thick as they continued to "run." The branches scratched their skin as they serpented deeper and deeper into the forest. Twigs snapped underfoot, their huffs the only other sounds they could hear. But still they "ran" until they couldn't hobble any longer.

VM bent over at the waist, panting. Seraphina tilted her head back, looking up at the sky mostly blocked by leaves. She wiped the sweat from her brow with her tunic. With a simple pat on her shoulder, VM grabbed her attention, and she turned to see him pointing at the tree. She nodded.

They climbed without speaking until they were high enough to sit safely and securely out of sight. Just the two of them, the forest, all they'd ever owned, and now, one sliver of the mysterious Fractured Jewel.

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