

A Thief's Honor

By Mindo Do

Roars of approval shook the throne room as onlookers cheered the king's verdict. Men and women alike joined the audience that peered eagerly from outside the doors of the grand hall, each hoping to catch a closer glimpse of the suspect so they could input their own piece of gossip later that afternoon, claiming to be a firsthand witness at the execution of the man who had stolen the king's crown.

The suspect, now charged as guilty, knelt humbly on the marble floor of the throne room, his head bowed so the audience behind him could see nothing but his tousled, shoulder-length curtain of ginger hair. His hands were clasped in his lap, his bottom resting on his heels, as he awaited the king's final sentence.

"Jal, notorious thief of the east, stealer of cattle and wine, robber of women's jewelry and men's dignity, you have now stepped beyond the boundaries of a common outlaw and have committed the high crime of treason, punishable by death." The king's deep, level voice rang out in the room, commanding a hush throughout the crowd. "Your execution will take place here, today, before the great people of Aspen, whom I have invited to observe your final moments and rejoice in the knowledge that their homes and possessions are many times more secure. However, as you have not resisted efforts to be captured, I will exhibit the mercy of a great ruler and allow you any final words or hopes."

There was a pause, leaving the air devoid of any noise besides the excited breathing of the onlookers. After waiting a few moments, the king parted his lips in preparation to deliver the order of execution, when suddenly, a new voice sounded with confidence that rivaled the monarch's and an almost light-hearted undertone.

“Your highness,” spoke the thief, sending startled murmurs rippling through the audience. “With no meaning to offend you or your wisdom, I must beg to differ as to my fate today.”

The king’s thick black eyebrows rose in a curious arch, mimicking the domed ceiling of the hall. “And how is that?” he demanded, dismissing the guards, who had started forward in an attempt to punish the thief for his outspokenness. “You have had a fair trial and much mercy; your history of criminal activity is more than enough to earn you this death penalty. You have been lucky to have lived long enough to snatch my crown, which belongs not only to me but also to this prospering kingdom, and yet you still wish to escape your fate? You should be grateful I have not punished your entire bloodline with you.”

The thief lifted his head, a nearly triumphant grin tugging on his lips. His eyes, a startling forest green, shone with the irritating smugness of someone who knew something nobody else did. “I did not commit treason, your highness, because I did not steal your beloved crown. Truly, I have made mistakes in my past, but under your great, merciful laws, I have been given the opportunity to better myself and have used that chance wisely.” His thin, hooked features were strained with a modest mask that hid his indecipherable emotions as he gazed upwards.

The king’s already cocoa-colored face darkened visibly, his muscled jaws clenched. When he replied to Jal, the thief, however, his voice was icy and quiet, imitating the calm before a storm. “Do you suggest you have not been served a just trial?” inquired the monarch from his throne, his earth-tinted eyes narrowing. “What right do you believe you have, when you were caught red-handed with the crown in your possession, fleeing from the palace under the moon and stars?” Slowly, he rose to his full height, towering on the raised golden platform above the kneeling outlaw. “You have the *audacity* to waste my time and the gathered hard-working

citizens' time today to pollute the air with your filthy lies?" spat the king, his sudden, aggressive shift in demeanor alarming the guards and drawing a mixture of excited and frightened conversation from the onlookers.

But Jal simply widened his peculiar eyes, his scrawny cheeks falling to a saddened sag. "I can only attempt to express to you my sorrow at the sight of you in this way, your highness. I have always been grateful to you for the grace you have ruled with, and it pains me that you would think of me in such a way. Yes, it is true that I have erred—but is it not your suit to offer all those who have made such mistakes a second chance?" Shuffling around on his knees, Jal gazed pleadingly at the crowd behind him, who had settled into a nervous quiet. "Please, people of Aspen, be not angry with our dear monarch for passing such harsh judgement. I have been marked a criminal due to my past, and it seems his majesty has deemed my life to have been extended long enough." He released a defeated sigh, his narrow shoulders sinking within his oversized rags that he wore as a tunic. The audience's faces fell with him, clearly absorbed in his dramatized surrender.

"You may stop with your treacherous falsehoods, Jal," snapped the king, his eyes blazing. "We all know you have had plenty of chances in the past."

The thief shuffled awkwardly around again, nodding sadly as he bowed his head to the ruler. "Of course, my lord," he agreed resignedly. "Which is why I, Jal, a reformed man, will accept your sentence, although my life is being taken under a fabricated charge."

The king glowered down at him, lowering himself stiffly back onto his jewel-embellished seat. "Your *charge* has been proven with solid evidence," responded the monarch, his voice nearly shaking with the fury that boiled beneath his cold mannerisms.

“But I was framed, your majesty!” Jal protested, jerking his head up suddenly to meet the king’s gaze.

His exclamation gave rise to a ripple of unease among the watching citizens.

The king glared at him. “Nonsense. We found you with the crown in your bags while heading away from the palace.”

“That is true,” admitted the scrawny, pale young man, gnawing his lower lip. His eyes darted quickly around the room, as if trying to locate an opening amidst the accusing glares. “But I know I was framed, my king, because I myself am clear that I did not commit this unthinkable crime!”

The depths of the monarch’s eyes appeared to dance with shadowed flames. Still, he addressed the thief steadily. “And what is your evidence of this impossible deed?” he demanded. “What proof have you that someone could sneak my royal headdress into your satchel without alerting your suspicions, and why would they do such a thing?”

A tiny, ghost of a smirk played across Jal’s thin lips for a fleeting heartbeat. But before anyone even batted an eyelash, it was gone, had the expression even existed at all. He exaggerated his innocent, bulge-eyed look. “It was the *lura*,” he whispered, his breathing on edge.

The crowd erupted in puzzled, mystified conversation, and the king scowled, scratching the bush of black frizz beneath his chin that he called a beard.

“They are a legendary creature among us thieves,” explained Jal nervously, his gaze flitting around at the audience inside and outside the room who had been swept up in a wave of silence in their perked interest. “They are said to be able to change their physical forms and take on the appearance of any animal, whether it be of air, water, or land. They are beasts of trickery,

and even the most cunning of outlaws must admire them for their work. Their greed is unable to be sated; we thieves usually revere them, hoping they will lend us some of their cleverness so we may be successful.” He paused, swallowing, completely aware of the attention he had snatched from all corners of the room and beyond. “However, it seems I have fallen prey to one’s bottomless, horrible greed.”

The king eyed him warily, disbelief scrunching up his eyebrows. “What do you mean? The crown was found in your belongings—if the words you speak are true, then this creature has not taken its prize, which would seem most unlikely, from how you described it.”

“Your intelligence is most awe-inspiring, my good sir!” exclaimed Jal suddenly, scrambling forward on his knees. The guards stepped up to stop him from nearing the throne, but he remained a safe distance from the king’s bejeweled boots. “You are correct, of course. A *lura* would never abandon its prize, but there is one thing—they are easily alarmed. When danger approaches, the *lura* will flee first, not wanting to be discovered, for they are extremely secretive beasts. Simply enunciating their name now puts me in great danger, my king, which is why I have been so reluctant to do so; however, I had expected your majesty to have mercy, rather than execute me so quickly. Therefore, I am left with no choice but to expose this delicate matter.”

“Do you mean to suggest that this beast—this *lura*—left the crown with you for fear it would be seen? What proof do you have?” The monarch’s words were fair, yet they shook the room with a quiet intensity.

Jal bowed his head, letting his long, stringy hair drape into his thin face. “None, your majesty, besides my word, and a small bit of knowledge.”

“Tell,” commanded the king bluntly.

“Well, you see, the lura are quite attached beings; they tend not to forget a treasure they have once laid eyes upon. So the lura that snatched your royal hat and landed me in this predicament will return. When, I cannot say, but most likely soon, as it no longer feels its identity threatened after its victim, myself, has been charged.”

The king watched him silently for a moment, his dark eyes sparking with interest and thought. Then, when he spoke again, a small smile played on his regal, tanned face. “Yes, I suppose it wouldn’t feel threatened,” mused the royal figure agreeably. He pondered wordlessly for an extended moment before continuing. “Then, with this new theory you have presented, how would you feel if we struck a deal, my reformed, dutiful subject?”

An indiscernible mixture of emotions stormed in the thief’s eyes for a moment. Then his expression cleared, and he exuberated that familiar, knowing grin. “It would be my honor, great lord.”

A series of animated murmuring awoke within the gathered citizens; even the guards exchanged puzzled looks at this new, unprecedented encounter. For, in the history of all the kingdom, what thief, and one supposedly on death row at that, had ever been made a bargain by the king?

“I will wait three days, with my crown left unguarded at my bedside,” began the monarch, his announcement directed toward the trial’s observers. “If it is stolen once more, with Jal the former thief still in imprisonment, and the beast he speaks of captured, then Jal will be set free, his name cleared of all charges,” he declared. The king paused, eyeing the thief precariously. “Is there anything else you wish for if you are to be proven innocent, due to the—ah, *inconveniences* you have suffered?”

Jal beamed up at the king as the throne room came to life with startled conversation. “No, your majesty. The restoration of my honor, as a former thief, is quite adequate. Even among thieves, there is honor, and I would never commit treason to you and the great country under your greatness’ leadership.”

The faint smile on the king’s lips broadened. “That we will see in time, Jal the former thief.” He nodded at one of the guards stationed a step lower on the raised golden pedestal. “May all of the present citizens be my witness to this promise, and may you all spread the word to your friends and relatives.”

The audience sank to their knees, until they were at the same height as Jal, who stooped ever lower to the polished, smooth floor. Word of this deal would spread, definitely, without the king’s instructions.

The monarch rose to his feet, and, without a second glance at the thief or his audience, he swept down the stairs, his rich crimson robe trailing after him on the glittering surface. As soon as he ebbed out of sight into a branching hallway, two guards warily approached the thief, muttering complaints to one another about their misfortune in having to deal with him. They jerked him to his feet, their dull grey gloves gripping his armpits, and dragged him off to his cell, with a flurry of gratitude from Jal that oozed with his sardonic character.

The next day, as the king had broadcasted, the royal crown was left in its radiant, gem-embroidered glory on his nightstand beside his bed. This proved to become the prime topic within the palace. Guards would peer on their tiptoes to see the previously shielded head of the kingdom’s ruler, whose commonplace black waves of shedding hair was now in clear view. Servants would at times forget to lower themselves in the presence of the monarch when he donned sleeping wear at night or in the mornings without the vibrant emblem of his authority

perched above his ears. Noblemen and their wives would exchange hushed chatter about the leader's graying hairs or bald spot.

Despite being aware of these issues that threatened his powerful image, the king continued to exempt the gleaming headwear from his daily dressing routine. No word was heard about Jal, besides the fact that he remained dutifully in his jail cell, tossing occasional merry jibes at his inmates and the patrols and singing meaningless tunes to rodents.

By the third day, the crown rested at the bedside of the king, and the entire kingdom was certain that it would not vanish by the next day, or the day after, or ever, until the king decreed it be so. Bets had been made, and debate articles that closely followed the recent events in the palace had been published nationwide. Everyone prepared to attend the next and final trial of the accused thief after the fourth sunrise.

When all the commoners gathered again outside the throne room of the palace on that fateful morning, however, this time in a crowd twenty and three-fourths folds larger than the audience at the preceding trial, the king did not appear. Jal, of course, was kneeling in his location before the great throne, but the golden seat was empty, and more gossiping simmered in the background. The thief beamed at everyone, assuring his guards that he would miss the gruff, stocky sentries when he strolled out of the palace later that day.

By noon, with the sun scowling down at the citizens shifting around in the courtyard to peek at the curious scene, the crowd had grown, rather than shrunk, as one would expect. The nosy, idle people of Aspen had abandoned their shops, farms, and beds to attend the historical assembly.

Finally, when the monarch finally appeared, he did not ascend his throne and shockingly, he did not show off his crown. Instead, he just stood bare-headed in front of his thousands of sweating subjects and Jal, the seemingly reformed thief.

“Great citizens of Aspen!” thundered the king, projecting his words across the crowd with ease in his deep rumble. “And Jal,” he added, with a brief glance at the glowing young man, “I understand you have all attained news that I have given my word to the accused of this mystifying case. I agreed that upon the passing of three days with the crown remaining at my bedside and Jal in his guarded cell, then I would set him free and restore his honor. It seems that this must be fulfilled today, as this morning when I awoke, the crown was absent from my nightstand. The lura he speaks of may be true at this point, and I will assure you all that I will train specific warriors and security to watch out for these treacherous beasts. Jal, in fact, will lead the cause, as he knows much about them. He and any other thief that steps forth about this mystery-shrouded creature will receive the greatest honors in return for completing such a gallant task, which is to protect the possessions of our kingdom and its people.” The king finished his announcement with a slight gesture of apology to the thief, a dip of his head. “And I presently must offer my sincerest regrets to doubting your integrity, my loyal subject. I now understand there truly is honor among people of any past occupations, including thievery.”

The grin that stretched the former thief’s lips could not have extended any farther on his sunken, bony cheeks. It truly was ear-to-ear, with his crooked teeth flashing shades of jade green, withering yellow, and earthy brown. “It will be a pleasure—an *honor*—my majesty, to serve my country and its citizens. I do not know how to—”

“Your majesty!”

The outburst knocked Jal's hyperbolic acceptance speech off balance as the owner of the voice, a pale young man with wide brown eyes and a sentry's uniform, rushed forward, skidding to the ground in an attempt to kneel before the king. He carried a strange, dome-shaped object in the crook of his right arm, but it was cloaked so none would be able to suspect its contents.

The king frowned, his thick brows shadowing his forehead. "Nemo!" he addressed the sentry. "What brings you before this trial in such urgency?"

The young man bowed his head, his ragged breaths clearly heard throughout the room. "My king," he began, "I have found and arrested the beast this thief speaks of—and it is nothing as he explained it!"

The monarch narrowed his eyes, fixing his dark stare on Jal for a moment before gesturing to the sentry. "Rise, Nemo, and tell us what crime you mean to accuse my loyal subject of."

The sentry nervously returned to his feet and cleared his throat. "As you are aware of, your majesty, I was stationed by the palace gates this morning. Everything had been uneventful as usual in this prosperous kingdom..."

"Do get to the point, lad," grunted the king as the sentry shifted his feet uncomfortably, trying to relate his findings.

"My apologies, your majesty, of course." He cleared his throat again before continuing. "I was maintaining watch by the gates, when suddenly I noticed a strange bird. I know not why I paid such attention to it, but I was drawn to it; perhaps it was due to the fact that it did not join the other pigeons in their scavenge for bread crumbs. Instead, it hopped away through the crowd of its feathered fellows, in a brisk pace away from the palace. So, with nothing else seeming to endanger the peace of your majesty's residency, I investigated and plucked it up by its kicking,

squirming legs, off the ground just as it attempted to launch away into the air. And what I found was extraordinary, my king. It began to *change* before my eyes, its gray feathers melting into brown fur and its wings elongating into forelegs until it appeared as a ferret. The only thing that was left of the bird was its beady, black eyes. And, shockingly, your majesty, this changed animal had something of great value poking from its fur, which had a pocket folded within the stiff hairs.” He paused for breath, gazing up at the king with wide, unsteady eyes. “And from this pocket I pulled out your crown, your majesty, your royal crown which this thief—” He turned and jabbed a finger accusingly at Jal, “—claims to be innocent of stealing.”

The crowd started speaking all at once, their multitude of voices creating a sudden roar of indiscernible noise. The king frowned and motioned for them to settle.

Jal’s usual loose, self-assured demeanor had vanished. Instead, he fixed a cool glare on the young guard and challenged levelly, “I fail to comprehend how this serves as evidence against me, Sir Nemo. Perhaps you should return to your place behind the gates and continue ensuring the safety of our beloved kingdom.”

The sentry looked at him, sucking in his bottom lip like a child caught doing something wrong. He snuck a glance up at the monarch, who watched him intensely, before swallowing and turning to face Jal. His posture relaxed, and he lifted his chin, lowering his eyes down his nose to meet the accused thief’s darkened gaze. “Perhaps you should listen before you pass judgement so rashly, thief.” He raised his sight to take in all of the kingdom before him and picked up where he left off. “My evidence will be clear as day when I reveal to you all my witness.” The sentry turned around again and faced the king. “Your majesty, if I have permission, that is.”

The monarch waved his hand, his eyes glimmering with interest and a slight touch of amusement. “Of course, my good subject.”

With dramatic flair that rivaled the theatrics of Jal, Nemo crouched and held up the cloaked, dome-shaped object he had brought before the court. With a flick of his wrist, he snatched the cloak from the object and revealed a bronze cage that appeared rusty and of little worth compared to the grandeur of the throne room. It was the resident of the cage, however, that truly held value.

His face lacking all emotions that one would expect the young man to have, the sentry spun and brandished the cage and its contents before all the kingdom. The men and women in the courtyard outside pressed against the guards lined at the doorway, craning their necks to view the large, ferret-like beast that snored inside the golden-brown bars.

Its bristling fur pushed against the edges of the cage, its wrapped tail pressed against the thin slits between each cylinder. The animals' soft black snout twitched as it rested on its paws, poking through an opening. But most spectacularly, its body seemed to shimmer, despite its dull brown fur; no, the restless shifting in its form was not due to the sunlight flashing off its hairs. It was, upon closer examination, a constant change in shape, a restless transformation that faded in and out of the current state. Sometimes bright blue wings of a jay appeared beneath its shoulders, and other times, the rippling, muscular flank of a lioness would harden its sides.

As Nemo allowed all to view the surely-unreal creature, he and the king noted the thief's stunned, terrified expression. His innocent mask of unjustified conviction was gone. Now, his concerned emotions were fully on display before the kingdom, and he started forward, grabbing for the cage.

The sentry stepped back, causing the thief to stumble forward, landing on his palms as he snapped his ginger head backwards to glare upwards, his eyes wild.

"This is the lura, am I correct?" he demanded to know from the accused.

Jal stumbled on his words. “Yes, but that proves nothing!” he managed to form at last. “I have only ever seen a blur of them briefly, never so up close—”

“Do stop your lies,” the sentry broke into his rushed defense. He turned to the king again, presenting the animal before him to the monarch. “Your majesty.”

The king nodded at one of his guards, who swiftly took the cage from Nemo and held it before the king to examine. The monarch peered closely at the sleeping creature, which stirred every so often.

“This is still insufficient proof to support your claim,” the king addressed the sentry, though his eyes were slanted at Jal. “The accused has already pointed out that he knew of the lura and that it would attempt to steal my crown.”

“Yes, your majesty,” admitted Nemo, offering a head dip in acknowledgement of the fact. “However, did he also bring to light his involvement with this lura? And that lura are the familiars of thieves, not the revered masters he illustrated them to be?”

The crowd rumbled behind him at this revelation, some calling for proof. Jal, who remained on his hands and knees on the glittering floor clenched his gaunt jaw, his green eyes engulfed with horror.

“You slanderer!” he barked at the youthful sentry, who tossed him a sideways look of disdain.

“I present no falsehoods to this court, unlike you, Jal,” replied the sentry levelly. He nodded at the king as the ruler waved one of his guards forth. The guard took the cage from his royal hands and returned it to Nemo. The sentry responded with a brief expression of gratitude, before tapping on the cage. The lura rustled slightly. Using his metal-clad fist, Nemo knocked on the thin pillars thrice in a rhythmic melody of clangs. The lura grunted, and to the breathless

onlookers, it awoke, opening its midnight black, beady eyes which the young sentry had evidently not conjured from his imagination.

“Go to your master,” ordered the sentry, his large brown eyes flashing meaningfully at the creature.

It shifted on its shimmering haunches, its velvety tail bristling for a moment. Then, the animal snapped its small, seed-like eyes to Jal, fixing them on his shocked green orbs until he could not turn away.

Nemo jingled the lock on the cage door as he twisted a thin key in the mouth and swung it smoothly open.

The lura wriggled its hind legs for a moment, then, to everyone’s amazement, flew from its captor. Its matted brown fur elongated into colorful plumes of blue and green; its forelegs melted into wings of the same material and its hind paws sharpened into miniature, defined talons. Its nose became beak, and its tail shrunk to become licks of bright feathers. The only thing that remained after everyone blinked but once were its hard black eyes.

The animal, now a small bird the size of a starling, fluttered onto Jal’s shoulder and squawked thrice.

Jal glared at it, attempting overemotionally to shoo it away, but the bird remained firmly planted by his face, its claws biting into his rags.

“Why do you insist on framing me?” he cried, swatting at it fiercely. He turned to plead with the king, “Do believe me, great king, ruler of this prospering land, I have naught to do with this beast!”

The bird squawked sadly, and the king simply looked on with a cold bemusement.

“It seems your case will be difficult to prove,” he stated simply. He nodded at Nemo briefly with respect, before addressing the gathered citizens and subjects. “See here today that Jal, now truly a thief, has been tried fairly and been given the highest mercy of my own words. He has been proven guilty in associating with a criminal whom he ordered to rob my crown and my honor. I will now sentence Jal to death, and his beast will be locked in the dungeons for further examination as to ensure the safety of the kingdom’s properties by gaining further knowledge on its species.” He paused, glancing at Jal. “As before, I will offer you a chance to present any last words.”

Jal had quit struggling. Instead, he simply sat back on his legs, staring in stunned silence at the king and the lura. Finally, he spoke, this time his voice hollow and cold. “You betrayed me.”

The bird squawked in agreement with him, but offered a gentle nudge with its beak as if to give its final condolences and apology.

“Very well. I take it that is all you have to say.” The king waved his hand dismissively at two of the guards. “Lock him up. The execution will take place at dawn.”

The guards bowed quickly before hoisting Jal up again. The lura sprang away into the air and glided to perch on one of the steps beneath the throne. There were no thanks given this time that Jal was once more taken to the prison.

The sky was heavy with dark clouds the day following Jal’s execution. The king stood on a balcony and studied it, a small blue-green bird on his bent arm.

“Perhaps the world misses its clever criminal,” mused the monarch, his matted black beard tugged at by the breeze.

“I think not,” chuckled the bird, its voice mellow and clear. “It is simply nature.”

The monarch smiled without humor. “I suppose no one, not even the most powerful of kings, can change nature at will, just as a being cannot change their nature.”

“No,” agreed the lura, its obsidian-black eyes reflecting the thick swaths of darkness rumbling ever nearer. “Which would be why I had agreed to assist you when you caught me attempting to complete my own mission.”

A flicker of lightning flashed and disappeared in the distance. “A familiar’s loyalty to its master exchanged for a lifetime of luxury and gold,” ruminated the king, his gaze lowering to examine the bird’s shifting feathers. “I suppose there truly is no honor among thieves.”

The bird did not reply, and a silver droplet shattered on the monarch’s exposed hand, staining it with a fragile bubbles of liquid that trembled on his dark skin.

“It appears nature has arrived,” sighed the king, casting a final scan over his beloved kingdom. “Let us return inside, my spoilt thief.” Turning, he carried the bird on his hand inside, but just as he was about to close the doors to the balcony, the bird squawked and launched itself outside, spiraling through the thickening curtain of precipitation.

The king watched it leave, his lips parted in surprise, but he relaxed after a moment. Quietly, he strolled into his quarters. Perhaps he would arrange for a window to be open later.