

## The Wizard's Art Thieves: Part One

It was—in Aren's opinion—the perfect plan. The crew left something to be desired.

"The lighting is off..." Torren said, folding his arms critically.

"First it was the shadows," San grimaced, gripping her paintbrush with white knuckles.

"Then it was the face. Now it's the lighting! If you're such a genius, why don't you paint it?"

"San, take a breath," Aren said. "I'm sure Torren only meant to help. And Torren, I think the lighting is fine."

"You asked me to help," Torren told Aren to avoid the artist's ire. "I have a Crystal Mind and can recreate anything perfectly in my memory. You tested me to prove it. And I'm telling you that the lighting our 'master forger' has created is off."

"Well, unlike our paunchy princeling here," San scoffed, slapping her paintbrush down. "I've never seen the painting! Idore of the Ives is such a masterwork that this lowly painter has no privilege to see! I'm doing this based on your flimsy descriptions!"

"Alright, enough!" Aren snapped. She pinched the bridge of her nose and exhaled as she collected her temper. "Torren, it doesn't need to be perfect for long. Only long enough for us to get the painting out of the city before anyone notices. San? We understand that this is a challenge, but we need to make this believable enough that Torren and I can swap it out without people noticing. Maybe it would help if Torren could be more...specific with his criticism? Just for the sake of civility."

"Fine," Torren sighed. He turned to San with a diplomatic smile. "If I may, could I instruct you on Master Riovani's principles of light? They are a staple of his work and I have read about his technique enough that I can walk you through the process."

"You may," San said, trying to mask her excitement with an appropriate amount of venom. Aren knew the temperamental artist would relish the chance to receive proper instruction. On the fifth iteration of this painting, Aren thought San had proven her skill many times over. Torren, despite the delivery of his critiques, only pushed because he felt that they were close. Aren knew that because the nobleman would have abandoned the group if he wasn't completely competent in the plan's success.

Aren took the moment and stepped out on the balcony for some fresh air. She leaned on the wooden railing of the villa and looked down onto the market. The last of the day stalls were changing their wares and lit lanterns to prepare for the night shoppers. Aren followed the road up through the city and saw Castle Morver looming in the distance. She had walked along the outside walls, but somehow being at this angle made it feel closer than she'd ever been. Footsteps approached behind her, but politely waited for an invitation before coming any closer.

"Something to say, Mander?" Aren sighed.

Mander was the only person on this crew she had worked with before. They'd known each

other since they were young pups in the market below them, paying for meals and rooms with stolen coin purses and games of chance. He could find buyers for almost anything, but Aren made their plans. Her current scheme put Mander far from her side at the critical moments. It made her uneasy, but it was necessary.

“I don’t know about this team,” Mander told her bluntly. “I can get our buyer to pay for it... double, even triple, what we asked for. The actual Idore of the Ives? We can retire on that, even after we split the profit. I can only do that if those two don’t kill each other.”

“I know,” Aren said. “And we’ll succeed.”

“How?” Mander said. “You’ve only told me bits and pieces of the plan. Last time that happened, I got a black eye and three broken fingers.”

“Non-centralized plans are the best. If anyone gets caught, no one knows the whole plan. Everyone only really knows their part in it.”

“Unless you get caught.”

“More reason to protect me.”

“Aren, be serious for a moment...”

“Serious stress me out,” Aren said. “You know our banter relaxes me.”

“What is the plan, Aren?”

“Simple: make a forgery, get into Castle Morver, swap it for the real painting, get the real painting out, sell the real painting to our Ivan buyer, then retire on a houseboat in the Sorvarn Sea.”

“That’s not a plan, that’s a goal...an ambition, at best. Castle Morver is a cultural fortress. The Galleria is protected by armed guards and sealed in a vault that doesn’t let in sunlight, sea air, or confident thieves.”

“Trust me?”

“Last time I said yes, we both ended up in a jail cell.”

“That’s not a ‘no,’” Aren smiled.

“It’s not a ‘no,’” Mander smirked. “Go get some rest. I’ll keep the artist and critic from killing each other. At least until San finishes the painting.”

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San was still alive in the morning but slept like the dead after spending all night and fifteen canvases to create a convincing fraud that met Torren’s standards. Idore of the Ives was a painting that Aren had only heard of, but she felt that she knew it through San’s copies. Idore stood in the middle of a lake, thick ivy reaching up and tying itself around the tree she was extending an arm to. The painting was so lifelike that Aren felt she could see the texture on each leaf, each delicate strand of Idore’s hair, and it almost seemed to be moving. She thanked San by letting her sleep. The painter’s part was over, now Aren was the artist in charge.

As canvases went, Aren didn't think she was the finest choice. Her hair was brown and scraggly, her eyes were tired, and she felt her face was too plain to be considered beautiful. Years of practice with makeup and disguise, however, were able to compensate for what she lacked naturally.

She had purchased freshly cut hair a few days ago and had spent the morning delicately weaving the strands into her tresses to make it longer and fuller. She'd braided it and draped it down her shoulder, meticulously smoothing the parts of the braid with oils to hide the stray frizz. She concealed her imperfections with makeup, hiding her tired eyes with a fashionable dark eye shadow and accentuating her lips with a deep red color. The completed look made her look like she came from old money like Torren. She allowed herself a moment to preen as she felt beautiful in the flowing red dress with a wide base.

"You could keep it," Torren offered from the doorway, as Aren adjusted the long skirt again. "My mother has a closet of gowns that no longer fit her. It's just collecting dust in her armoire if not in yours."

"I'm afraid my lifestyle doesn't allow for pretty luxuries," Aren said, forcing her hands away and feeling sheepish for her vanity. "Are we ready?"

"Your carriage awaits, my lady," Torren said, offering his arm. "As does our quarry."

"I'll be out in a moment," Aren said, adjusting the bodice a final time.

"The rich boy shouldn't be here," Mander scowled.

"We wouldn't be able to pull this off without him. A Crystal Mind that's nurtured and honed is rare enough, but he also has money. And he can get us access to the Galleria that no one else can. And the fact that he's related to the King gives him more pull than most."

"All the more reason to be concerned. What happens if he gets caught? He may not know the whole plan, but he knows enough to get us all in prison if it keeps him from even a moment of discomfort."

"He told me he wants the challenge."

"So we agreed to let him play pretend with our lives on the line?"

"Mander Grave...are you jealous? Would you rather be the doting gentleman on my arm?"

"Not on your life," Mander scoffed. "I'm just saying he's got no dog in this fight. He's only doing this for fun."

"And if the rest of us play our roles? We'll be able to get plenty of distance between us and him. One job, Mander. You can play nice for that long, yes?"

"Don't expect me to enjoy it..." Mander shook his head. "Be careful."

"Worried for me?"

"If you get caught, I'm not much more than muscle for hire. Plus, you're the only person I could tolerate as a roommate."

Aren smirked and adjusted her hair one last time. She adjusted her posture and lifted her chin. “How do I look?”

“Amazing,” Mander softened with a gentle smile. “You better not miss your ride.”