

Jewellery's Gambit Part two

by Juliet Robinson

'Little mouse,' Isles called. Her voice playful, Lisbet could picture the smile she would be wearing on her face; smug and self-satisfied. 'I see you twitching the curtains. Out you come.'

Footsteps, heavy and authoritative, guards were on their way. Without thinking Lisbet hid the bag in the folds of the heavy curtain and stepped from her hole. Perhaps easier if she went willingly.

'Well now,' Isles purred, 'this is a surprise. If it isn't Lisbet, The Keeper of the Jewel House's assistant. Why, your boss he was here earlier – though, we had a disagreement.' Princess Isles hitched her head towards the foot of the dais, where several bodies lay. 'Rhys didn't seem to think my crown was authentic. Said it was fake.' Her hawklike eyes were boring into Lisbet, who broke under their intense gaze and looked at her feet. 'Perhaps you can be of assistance?'

Lisbet, kept her eyes on the ground, her knees were knocking, she was being crushed by the weight of the real crown the one she had mere moments ago stashed in the curtains.

'Look at me, little mouse,' Isles commanded, the playfulness turning into a cold, hard blade. 'Tell me what you see. Is this the true crown of the realm, or am I wearing a bauble?'

Lisbet forced her eyes upwards. Oh, the replica was good, near perfect. It had cost enough; it was a masterpiece of gold and light. She took a tentative step forward and the guards who Lisbet now saw were wearing green ribbons tied round their left arms – Princess Isles colour, stepped forward, blocking her way, a musket pointed at her chest, a sword drawn and held at her neck.

'I need a closer look,' Lisbet tremored. Play the part, fuck she wasn't pretending to be scared, she was terrified, but she needed to be the jeweller's assistant.

Isles gestured for the guards to step aside, she saw no threat in this frightened little mouse and she wasn't wrong, Lisbet wasn't fool enough to do anything rash.

She climbed the dais, not looking down at Rhys, who had been a kind-hearted man. Why hadn't he lied?

'May I?' Lisbet nodded at the crown, but Isles drew back.

'No. It is mine by right. You can look from there.'

Ha, so Isles suspected the truth. She didn't want Lisbet to confirm what Rhys had told her. If she played this right Lisbet could yet walk away.

She studied the crown from where she stood, cocking her head this way and that. She narrowed her eyes, mimed intense scrutiny. The room was silent save for the dull noise of the revolt, which continued outside the throne room. Lisbet sensed the false Princess' impatience, she steadied herself and spoke.

'Your Highness wears the true crown. The Heart of the Realm,' Lisbet gestured to the giant ruby at the crown's centre, 'has a tiny, feather like crack deep within it. A flaw, that causes the light within the ruby to refract, to dance in a way no common stone or glass replica can mimic. I see the refraction from here, Your Highness. That signature shimmer. It is unmistakable, you wear the true Heart of the Realm.'

Lisbet held her breath. The ruby that Isle's bore upon her wretched head was a fake, it was a brilliant one, but to a trained eye like Lisbet's it was a dull, lifeless imitation. Isle's hand drifted upwards, her long pale fingers stained with dried blood, they hovered inches from the fake ruby. For a second she looked like a child seeking reassurance, but then the mask slammed back down. She sat straighter on the throne, her shoulders squared. Lisbet's words had lent her the legitimacy she craved.

Lisbet was back in her quarters, having been escorted there by green ribbon wearing guards – for her own protection Isle's had explained. Which she supposed was why the door had been locked and a guard had remained outside. The palace was quiet, the sounds of rebellion silenced by the swing of a sword or the acceptance of change. She had been so close to escaping.

Lisbet curled up on her bed and stared up at the familiar ceiling. She assumed her bag with the stolen crown was still concealed behind the curtain in the throne room, it wasn't like the servants would be attending to duties. Half of them were likely dead. Like Rhys, Lisbet clenched her eyes shut pushing back the prickling heat of tears. The face of the woman she had toppled flashed across her mind, then that of her screaming child, fear-stricken grey skin, eyes wide with terror, mouth drawn wide in a soundless scream.

Crying isn't a sign of weakness, Lisbet reassured herself as hot tears forced their way past her eyelids. When a newborn cries it's a good thing, a sign of life. Unlike others she had made it through the day. She still had the crown; well, she knew where it was. She could still play this out. She rubbed at her eyes, forced herself to still, she had this. Her gaze drifted to the small window, which afforded her room a narrow view of the sky. Smoke drifted, obscuring the sunset, tomorrow the world would be an entirely different place and she was determined to own a piece of it.