

The Pursuit of Rebirth

By Jamie Byrne

The townspeople of Afusa walked along the busy streets, their coin purses jangling with gold and silver. That was exactly the way Jonas Aldren liked it. Holding his jewel-encrusted knife upward, held tight to his side, he listened to the gentle ripping of the cloth purses, soon-to-be dead weight at their owner's sides. He heard the clang of the coins as they fell into his hand. They made him complete.

He was really just passing time. The big steal was yet to come.

For the next fifteen minutes, he passed the time by spilling the coins of rich businessmen and their spoiled-rotten wives and children. The best part wasn't even the money. It was how sometimes, if he followed them long enough, he would hear their cries of terror as they realised that they were "lacking in funds". Walking past a man carrying a bouquet of roses with a tag that said "For My Beautiful Wife" in intricate cursive writing, he made a sharp movement with his hand, knocking the flowers out of their owner's grasp. Bending over to help the man pick them up, he slipped on into his jacket pocket. The man thanked him and went on his way. "Sucker..." Jonas said stiffly under his breath.

Then, he heard the rocking of rickety wooden tires upon the beaten stone path, gradually growing louder as the cart got closer. He nodded to a man across the street in a narrow alley. He was in his early fifties, but he still looked like a very young man. Only his hair betrayed his age; snow white, without a fleck of any other color in sight. A powerful shotgun was slung over his shoulder. The man nodded back. Jonas took a deep breath and started running.

He climbed lithely up the side of a nearby building and navigated his way over the roof without making a sound. Kneeling down on the edge of the roof, he waited for his cue. The cart entered the middle of the road. The boom of a shotgun filled the air. One of the wheels was ripped off, splinters covering the road. The horses struggled to pull, but the axel dragging on the road made it impossible. Jonas pushed off, landing in the cargo; burlap sacks filled with top-notch grain, on its way to the king. He peeked over the back. No one had noticed him. They were all busy running away from the gunshot.

He heard the driver exit the seat, sooth the horse, and attach the spare wheel. Within two minutes, they were moving again. He peered over the edge. The driver had his full attention on the road. *Perfect*. Jonas crawled up so that he was right behind the driver, then brought his knife across his throat in a sharp, quick movement. He tossed the limp body over the edge of the cart and grabbed the reigns.

The cart pulled up in front of the abandoned theatre. Jonas stopped abruptly and waited for his admirers to come out of the front door. Twenty-two people filed out of the front door. Many of them were teenagers who had run away from home. The rest were people who wanted to learn from Jonas's experience. He nodded thankfully to Terran Cahill, the man who had been in the alley. The shotgun was still slung over his shoulder. Terran had been his father's friend, ally, and accomplice. One of the young boys, who was known to be highly outspoken, questioned Jonas's accomplishment.

"You stole a cartful of grain, and I'm supposed to be impressed?"

"WRONG!" Jonas shouted, with a grin on his face, "I stole *almost* a cartful of grain. I had to drop some along the way so that I could get away faster. And there are also *other* things in the back." He hopped into the midst of the cargo and grabbed one of the sacks. He slashed open the bag, letting emeralds and rubies spill out among the rest his

loot. "The king has his jewellery brought in with the grain so that they don't get stolen. He's gonna need a new plan." He laughed and tossed two gems to each person, then carried the rest inside.

"Why not just ditch all of the grain, so that you could get away even faster?"

"A thief steals jewellery and gold coins. A *master* thief achieves wealth through any means necessary. That grain is the best quality grain in the country. Do you realise how much we can sell that for? It'll be worth almost as much as the jewels." The kid turned around, defeated, to talk to his friends

"Hey, Jonas, can you wait a minute?" Terran jogged up to walk beside him.

"I'm sorry, but I really don't have time to talk."

"After what I did for you back at the cart, I think you owe me a minute or two of conversation." Jonas sighed and turned around.

"Is there anything in particular that you want?" Jonas was annoyed now. He would do whatever he could to get this away from him, for now at least.

"Your father would have been happy with you. I don't think even he could've pulled off a heist like that."

"Yes he could have. I'm not half the thief he was." The man laughed heartily.

"I don't know, son. I helped him out with a lot of thefts, and I never saw him do anything that creative." He frowned slightly. "Well, I guess this chat's over. Your mob is coming." Cahill pointed to a group of children running over to them.

The kids crowded around him, bugging him to play with them. He chuckled lightly. "I have some work to do first, but then we'll play." He ruffled one of the boy's hair, then walked down into the basement, happy to get away from his father's old friend. He looked around to make sure no one was watching. He pushed aside a wooden chest full of gold and silver coins to reveal a trapdoor, opened it, and stepped down the ladder.

The room beneath glittered with mountains of gold and precious trinkets. In the very centre was a stone tomb. Setting the sack down next to the casket and pushing aside the top, a thin, sorrowful smile spread across his face. "Hello father. I stole a bag of gems today. Maybe that'll be enough... You should've seen me out there, you would've been so proud! The way I took over the cart, it was brilliant. Then again, I did learn from the best." He pulled the rose from his jacket pocket and placed it on his father's chest with care. He pulled the lid closed, picked up the bag, and continued to the next room. The man who stood within was quite obviously not of the human persuasion. He had six arms, two from each shoulder and two from his hip. Where his stomach should have been, there was instead a glowing orb, with long tendrils of energy grasping with greedy grandeur, searching for anything they could steal. Every now and then, one of them would happen upon a gold coin, and would happily bring it back to the centre, where it would be transported back to the floor. His rotted, blue-tinted flesh was pulled taut across his face, each yellow-white tooth shown in a non-intentional grin. Each burnt hair was strung into a braid, each group of hairs held together at the bottom by a gleaming ruby. Rancis, the god of thieves, did not look happy.

"A single bag of gems? You try once again to swindle me? You know that there is nothing you can hide from me. There are two more bags of jewels in that cart. I expect them here within the hour. And I also want all of the proceeds from the grain when you sell it. Understood?"

“How am I supposed to keep my team alive when everything we steal goes to you?”

“Do you want me to resurrect your father?”

“Yes, but I don’t want everyone on my team to starve in the process!”

“*You* came to *me* for help! You knew the price! You’re so close... do you really want to give up now?”

Jonas stared at the floor. He didn’t like putting himself ahead of the team, but what else was he supposed to do? This was the only way to get his beloved father back.

“There’s one particular item that I would like you to steal. You may know of it... it is called the Emerald Tower.”

“You want me to steal the Emerald Tower? You must be insane! How do you expect me to get into the king’s throne room? You know as well as I do that’s always the most guarded part of the castle! I couldn’t get in there, no matter how much I wanted to.”

“Oh, I think you could. This is the last job I want you to do. After this, I *will* bring your father back.”

Jonas was taken aback. It would prove difficult, but he had to. To get this close, and then not do what needed to be done... it wouldn’t be right. “Will you do this last job for me?” Jonas nodded reluctantly. “Excellent! As soon as the Emerald tower touches the floor, I will give your father back.”

About an hour later, Jonas stood gracefully atop the steeple of the church. One arm was wrapped around the cross for support, while the other held his bronze spyglass up to his eye. The imperfect exterior of the spyglass glittered in the moonlight. A crossbow was slung over his shoulder. The city was quiet, peaceful. Through the slightly cracked glass, he could see through the king’s window. He and his wife were asleep.

Dancing across the rooftops, hardly making a sound, except for that of the older houses, which creaked gently as he passed over them, he made his way to the castle on the edge of town. He decided on a small shop, not far from the castle, for his place to take the shot. He had one chance to get the king. If he messed this up, he’d never get the tower. He looked through the scope and lined up the crosshair with the king’s head, lying lazily on the pillow. He fired. Glass shattered. The queen screamed. Guards stormed the bedroom, pouring in through the two doors. Jonas ran for the gate.

Actually getting into the castle was easy. No one was patrolling the grounds, because they were all in the bedroom. Navigating the castle was a different story. He cursed himself for not being more thorough. For any other job he would’ve made a rough map of the house, highlight areas where there was a lot of guard activity, and found a path around those areas. He’d been too anxious to commit this particular crime. He hadn’t gone through his regular cycle. He wanted his father back too badly. It was clouding his judgement.

There was still plenty of activity inside the house. They thought that the culprit had been inside, so they were trying to stop him from escaping. They were no longer trying to stop someone from getting in. That made things a little bit easier for Jonas. Either way, though, the guards were present, and that made things complicated.

The easiest way to get around was through the rafters. Sometimes, he’d even strike a really easy spot where the rafters led into an area above the visible ceiling. These places were completely free of guards, and he even managed to grab a few valuables that were lying around.

After spending what felt like days navigating the rafters, he finally found the throne room. Sitting on the far side, on a shelf directly behind the throne, was the Emerald Tower.

The tower was an intricately carved piece of art. Jonas shook just thinking about how large the emerald must have been *before* it was shaved down. It was in three layers. On the bottom layer, a man on one knee struggled to hold up the other two layers. Upon closer inspection, Jonas could even see the bead of sweat rolling down the man's face. On the second layer, a raven, the symbol of Afusa and the surrounding cities which made up the country of Talura, held up the top layer with the tips of his wings. On the top lay the crown, each golden vine carved with the utmost care. Jonas almost felt bad taking it. Almost.

He tucked it in his jacket and ran to the window. He folded his arms in front of his face, so as not to get any glass in his eyes, and jumped. Luckily, the throne room was on the fourth floor, so he didn't have too far to fall. He made his way back slowly, limping to the theatre.

"Jonas, they're saying the king's dead! Is it true?"

"Yes, it's true." Jonas said shortly. He was pushing the team out of the way. He just wanted to get down to the basement. He didn't want to have to live without his father for a moment longer.

"How'd he die? Did you hear about it?"

"Arrow through the head."

"Who would do such a thing?"

"I can't even *begin* to imagine."

"Hey Jonas, are you alright? You seem... pre-occupied."

"I'm fine, leave me alone!" he snapped at them loudly.

The people backed away and let him pass through. He didn't even bother to check if any of them were watching before he pushed aside the chest. They were. They all were.

"Rancis! I have your tower!" he threw it at the god's feet with triumph. Rancis just stood there. "What about my father? WHY AREN'T YOU DOING ANYTHING ABOUT MY FATHER?" Rancis just turned as one of the tendrils of energy grabbed the tower.

"I can't bring back your father, Jonas. No one can."

"What?" Jonas was crushed. All this time... wasted money and energy. All for nothing. "But... why? Why would you do something like that?"

"A thief steals jewellery and gold coins. A *master* thief achieves wealth through any means necessary." He spoke Jonas's own motto maliciously. Words which Jonas had spoken a million times over. It made his heart pound.

"You killed him, didn't you?" Jonas sobbed gently. How could he have let this monster fool him? "Tell me. Did you kill my father?" Rancis remained silent, unblinking. "TELL ME!"

"Yes. He tried to get your mother back. Most of the fortune here was collected by your father. The rest was gathered by you. Your father was in my service for a very long time. Most of your childhood"

"Is that why we were always poor? Because you took it all?" Rancis nodded again. Jonas wasn't sobbing anymore. It wasn't enough. Crying just wasn't sufficient

anymore. His anger was no longer just a feeling, it was part of his body, flowing through his veins, intermingling with his blood.

Jonas ran, striking out with his knife. Rancis's flesh, weakened from years of aging, ripped open easily. One of his arms fell to the floor, followed by a rush of golden blood. There were no thoughts in his head besides revenge. Nothing but a blind urge to have this immortal being's blood on his hands. All of Rancis's remaining arms reached out. Jonas realised his mistake a split second too late. He had no choice but to follow through with his impulse, and hope. The tendrils stopped their searching and attacked his neck. He let out his last breath, and then dropped to the floor, his face purple. The god of thieves had killed his servant.

"Jonas? Jonas, are you down here? What is this place?" One of the children had come down through the trapdoor. Rancis looked over at the child, and whispered softly.

"Jonas is dead. Do not mourn child. I can bring him back," He smiled greedily "for a price."