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QUEEN OF FOXES

NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING AUTHOR

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PART ONE

The Thief

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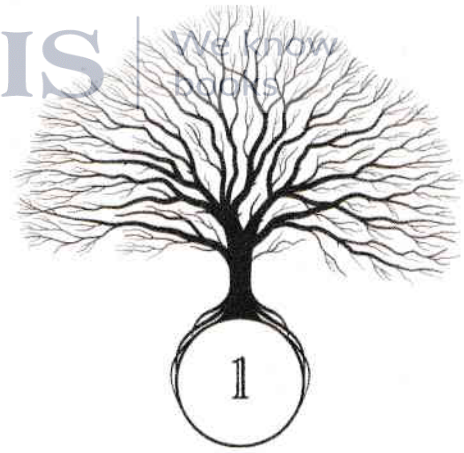

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Rinley

Most things were surprisingly easy to steal.

A skim of fingers removed a diamond cuff from a lady's wrist. A gentle tug netted the gold watch on a lord's vest. A hard bump into a guard's side procured the keys on his belt.

Oh, yes. Most things were simple to swipe. It's the ones that weren't so easily obtained that I couldn't resist stealing—like the item I was after tonight.

A raindrop slipped past the dark-green hood that covered my head and tapped the end of my nose like a playful finger. I pulled the long cloak a little tighter around my body. The night was cold and miserable, with a steady rain that showed no signs of stopping. The damp chill kept people inside instead of wandering the street below.

Fewer potential witnesses was always better for a thief like me.

I'd been ensconced on the roof for the better part of an hour, hiding in the shadows cast by a gargoyle statue perched on the corner. Two floors below, music and laughter trilled through the air, while warm, soft light spilled through the windows and arced into the darkness.

For the last week, I'd been working as a maid for Lady Fran, a demanding noble who had hired extra staff in preparation for her birthday soiree. Dusting, sweeping, and mopping weren't my favorite tasks, but playing the part of a meek, quiet maid let me access the lady's townhouse and smuggle all the necessary supplies onto the roof for my

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impending heist.

A fresh wave of music and laughter erupted. Impatient, I rubbed my thumb over the silver fox-face ring on my left index finger. Two small, diamond-shaped emeralds glittered as the fox's eyes, while tiny acorns, vines, leaves, and thorns were etched into the silver band that formed the creature's body and tail. The ring had belonged to my mother, Bellandra, a royal seamstress, and the fox was a crest of the Renards, her noble family that had fallen into disgrace and poverty a few generations ago.

Another raindrop tapped my nose. I sighed, wiped the wetness off my face, and peered through the drizzle at the opposite side of the street.

The Bemalen Museum took up its own block in Antiquas, the capital city of the kingdom of Tychen. Fat, stubby towers made the building look like a misshapen mushroom squatting in the shadow of Lady Fran's slim, elegant abode. A few lights burned in the museum's windows, but most of the structure was dark.

Two guards manned a ten-foot fence with a central wrought iron gate that served as the museum's main entrance. Their chins were tucked down into their gray uniforms to escape the chilly rain, their breaths steaming out in wispy clouds.

In the distance, a bell tolled the midnight hour.

Finally.

Time to work.

I crouched, scooping up a bow and quiver of arrows. They weren't made of the strong sherwood I preferred, but they would get the job done. Just about anything would, if you were determined enough.

Determination was the one thing I'd never had to steal from someone else.

As the last echoes of the bell faded away, the guards turned to face the sturdy gate, while two of their comrades in dry cloaks emerged from the museum. The shift change was right on schedule. Excellent. Prompt people always made my job *so* much easier.

The dry guards ambled toward the gate while the wet ones impatiently stamped their feet. While they were distracted, I nocked an

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arrow, lifted the bow, drew back the string, and sighted down the length of the shaft at my target—a lion statue on the corner of a museum balcony.

Inhale.

Exhale.

Release.

The *thwang* of the bowstring reverberated through my fingers and spread through the rest of my body like an old, welcome song. The arrow streaked through the air, trailing a length of thin black wire behind it. The arrow punched deep into the lion's chest, making a few chips of stone fly out of the statue.

Bull's-eye.

One of the dry guards stopped and spun around. "Hey!" His voice drifted across the street. "Did you hear that?"

I held my breath. The rain hadn't muffled the sound of the chips hitting the cobblestones below as much as I'd hoped. Drat.

All four guards looked around, their heads snapping back and forth, their hands gripping the swords belted to their waists.

"The only thing I hear is you," one of the wet guards complained. "Now hurry up and let us in so we can dry off."

The dry guard harrumphed, but he and the other man moved forward.

I slung the bow and quiver onto my back, then tugged on the end of the black wire I'd knotted around one of the gargoyle's curved horns. Satisfied it was secure, I donned a pair of gloves, hooked my belt to a sturdy leather strap, and attached the other end of the strap to the wire.

I eased over to the edge of the roof and peered down at the street ten stories below. Warm, heady excitement rushed through me, driving away the damp chill. In the circus where I worked when I was younger, the high-wire, trapeze, and other stunt artists had called this the moment of no return, when they would either walk or fly through the air—or fall to their deaths on the ground.

Inhale.

Exhale.

I stepped off the roof.

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The metal hook slid down the wire with a quiet whisper, taking me along with it. Wind whipped the hood off my head and tangled my black hair, while rain spattered against my cheeks and soaked into my dark-green tunic and black pants.

I swallowed a happy laugh and looked down, watching the guards again. All four men clustered around the gate, which featured four locks with four different keys that had to be turned all at once. The guards were so focused on synchronizing their movements that they didn't see me sail right over their heads. Museum officials trusted guards and gates to keep thieves at bay, so they didn't bother to protect the open air overhead.

Their mistake was about to be my gain.

The museum rushed closer and closer. I could still be smushed against the wall like a bug on a glass pane, so I gripped the wire tightly through my thick gloves to slow my rapid approach.

Five...four...three...two...one...

I lifted my legs so my feet touched the wall first, the soles of my black boots scraping against the stone. I quickly bent my knees and tensed my muscles to keep from pitching forward and slamming my nose against the dark-gray granite. I hung there for several seconds, absorbing the jarring impact, then lifted my legs a little higher and maneuvered my body up and over the low wall that cordoned off the balcony.

I unhooked myself from the wire and dropped down into the shadows beside the lion statue. The glass doors that opened onto this level remained closed, no lights blooming behind them. No one had seen me slide into position. Good.

I exhaled, got to my feet, and peered over the balcony wall. Down below, the guards had turned all their keys and changed positions. Once the wet guards entered the museum and the dry ones faced the street, I pulled a glass vial from a pouch hanging off my belt.

I popped out the stopper and sprinkled the pale, red-orange powder—crystalized luxoil—onto the arrow still stuck in the lion statue. The powder ignited with a hiss of white smoke and started climbing the wire. In the circus, we often used the powder to create magical effects,

but thanks to the extra *oomph* in this concoction, the arrow and the entire length of wire started burning.

I peered over the balcony at the guards. A few bits of ash fluttered down and landed on the left shoulder of one of the men. I tensed. If he grew suspicious and looked up, I would have to run for my life the way I had so many times before.

The guard coughed and waved away a wisp of smoke. "Bloody fog. I hate the damp creeping into my lungs."

The other man muttered his agreement.

I exhaled with relief, then slid the empty vial into my pouch and headed for the nearest door. Locked, of course, but that was no problem. I placed my index finger against the oak frame, then drew a quick semicircle around the lock. The wood quivered in response, and the lock flipped.

I grinned, opened the door, and slipped inside the museum. The luxoil lights in the brass wall sconces had been turned down low for the night, and the dancing flames cast faint orange glows onto the paintings that adorned the walls. Slender black marble pedestals topped with pretty porcelain vases and crystal statues jutted up here and there like flowers sprouting in a nighttime garden.

It didn't take long to creep down the steps to the third floor, which was filled with long, tall shelves housing relics imbued with a variety of magical properties. Relics could be any shape, size, or object, though most were fashioned into everyday items—rings and bracelets, daggers and books, cups and combs. I moved past those and a dozen other objects before stopping in front of a simple but elegant silver hairpin studded with sparkling white crystals.

"Hello, gorgeous," I whispered.

The hairpin's magic made a person look ten years younger. Not particularly powerful compared to other relics, which could shoot out blinding rainbow prisms or emit clouds of smoke that would put folks to sleep for days. But even the smallest, simplest relic could be useful and valuable.

A museum worker had found the pin two years prior at an open-air market and given it to her sister as a gift. After the worker's death

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a few weeks ago, museum officials had claimed ownership of the relic and confiscated it from the grieving sister. Looting the possessions of regular folks was a despicable but common practice at some institutions.

I hated bullies above all else.

When I'd heard the story from my employer, I'd decided to do something about it. What was the point of being a master thief if I couldn't right a few wrongs every now and then? *Steal from the rich, give to the poor* was just about the only code I had.

Besides, the Bemalen Museum officials lauded the fact their facility had never been breached, much less robbed. I loved a challenge, particularly when it gave me the chance to pop a bubble of puffed-up pride.

I plucked an ordinary pin out of my own hair and used it to jimmy open the lock on the thick glass sheet protecting the shelves. A few seconds later, the glass was out of the way, and the sparkling relic was tucked into one of my pouches.

From my pocket, I withdrew a small acorn with an emerald-green cap resting atop a glossy ebony nut. A pang of longing shot through me. Sherwood trees were native to Feronia, my home kingdom, and it had taken me three days to find one in a botanical garden in Antiquas.

I placed the acorn on the gray velvet pillow where the hairpin had been. Like many thieves, I had a name and reputation to uphold. Leaving a sherwood acorn behind at the scene of my crimes was my calling card—a way to take credit for the seemingly impossible heist.

The Green Fox had struck again.

Over the next thirty minutes, I coaxed open half a dozen more locks, grabbed all the relics I could stuff into my pouches and pockets, and left sherwood acorns behind in their places. The more things I stole, the less likely the museum officials were to realize what my true target had been.

On the second floor, I opened a window and crawled onto the thick

branch of a sugar maple tree that butted up against the museum. The branch steadied under my feet, while the leaves rose up to shield me from the eyes of the guards stationed below.

I moved from one branch to another, using them like stepping stones to circle the tree. A few seconds later, I crouched, flipped over a low branch that stretched out over the museum fence, and landed on the street below.

With my dark-green cloak hiding the bow and quiver, as well as the bulges of relics in my pockets, I strolled around the corner and walked right past the front gate. The two guards gave me suspicious looks, but I nodded respectfully, keeping my pace steady as I breezed past them. As soon as I was out of sight, I let a grin spread across my face, then walked away whistling a merry tune.

It didn't take long to reach the neighborhood where the museum worker's sister lived.

I wrapped the hairpin in a clean cloth and laid it on her front stoop. Then I knocked on the door, hurried away, and ducked behind some bushes in a small park across the street.

A light appeared in a window. A few seconds later, the door creaked open. A woman cautiously stuck her head outside, her white nightgown making her gleam like a ghost in the semidarkness. She glanced around before her gaze fell to the cloth.

She frowned, picked it up, and unwrapped it.

At the first sparkle of the crystals, a choked sob escaped her lips. She clutched the hairpin to her chest, shoulders shaking and tears streaming down her face.

A pang of longing shot through my heart. Once upon a time, I'd had someone I considered a sister, and I would give almost anything to have something of hers. A ribbon, a pressed flower, a tattered book. *Anything* that would make me feel close to her again, if only for a moment.

The woman cleared her throat and wiped her tears away. "I don't know who you are or how you got this," she murmured. "But thank you."

You're welcome, I mouthed silently.

She glanced around again, then retreated into the house.

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I stared at the closed door for the better part of a minute before shaking myself out of my melancholy memories. I left the neighborhood and quickly returned to the hotel where I'd been renting a room while planning my heist. The foxtail lotus seeds I'd scattered on the floor before I left hadn't been disturbed, indicating that no one had approached the door in my absence. Good.

Inside the room, I turned up the luxoil lights to a bright, warm glow. With the curtains drawn, I pulled one relic after another out of my pockets, lined them up on the dresser along the wall, and tossed my sodden cloak and other clothes in a laundry hamper.

An hour and a hot bath later, I crawled into bed and picked up a small gray notebook from the nightstand. Silver foil formed pretty flowers and whorls on the cover, while matching threads of magic glittered on the edges and ribboned through the white pages inside. I cracked open the notebook, plucked out the charcoal pencil inside, and scribbled a message.

I returned the hairpin to its rightful owner and picked up a few things at the museum I thought you might like.

When I finished writing, I ripped out the page, which vanished in a puff of gray smoke that smelled like dusty old books.

A few years ago, I'd been working as a trick-shot archer for a circus in the kingdom of Gavila when someone had slipped a note under my door asking me to steal a relic from a noble's home. No surprise there, since I had let it be known through various channels that I wasn't above helping myself to things that didn't belong to me.

Stealing from the rich and giving to the poor might bring me joy and satisfaction, but it didn't pay the bills.

Helping greedy nobles acquire the expensive treasures they secretly coveted was always an in-demand service. Plus, it was a lot more exciting and challenging than dutifully putting arrows in a spinning target night after night.

The relic—a silver wristwatch that sped up a person's healing—had been easy enough to swipe. When I'd delivered the item to the agreed-

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upon location, I had found a hefty purse of coins waiting, along with the gray notebook, which I recognized as a relic in its own right. The book was a scriptus that allowed communication across great distances. The relics usually came as a matched set—write a message on the page of one, and the words would appear on a page of the second no matter its location.

Ripping out a page started a conversation, but the remaining messages appeared on the same page, then flowed to subsequent sheets, if needed. When a conversation ended, the user could rip out all the used pages, deleting the messages and replenishing the blank sheets.

The first thing my mysterious employer did was congratulate me on my exploits as the Green Fox.

The fact that someone had managed to connect me, lowly circus performer Rinley Renard, to the master thief the Green Fox had worried me more than I cared to admit.

But I'd also been highly intrigued, so I'd written back.

My employer was known as the Iron Tortoise, after the animal famed for its extremely hard shell, ability to survive in harsh climates, and exceptionally long lifespan. Not the most awe-inspiring nickname, but they had proposed a lucrative arrangement: continue my circus work and travels through various cities and kingdoms and steal relics for them along the way.

The Iron Tortoise was quite the collector. Over the last few years, I had stolen dozens of treasures from locations boasting some of the best security in all the kingdoms of Brydania. I had no idea what the Tortoise did with the relics and didn't really care as long as they kept paying me. Coins in my pocket were much more important than someone else's whims.

Thanks to my benefactor's relic obsession, I'd built a nice little nest egg. After a few more heists, I could finally take a break and do some living instead of merely surviving. Buy a cozy cottage and a minor noble title somewhere safe, quiet, and remote.

The scriptus quivered in my hands. A new page appeared, along with a message written in black charcoal. *I look forward to seeing what you picked out. You always have exquisite taste. I also have a new job.*

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What? I wrote back.

I want to acquire a relic in Feronia.

My fingers tightened around the charcoal pencil, its ridges digging into my palm. I generally tried to avoid pulling jobs anywhere in the iron-fisted grip of the Caligan Empire, but I never, ever went to Feronia. The Tortoise knew I didn't go to my home kingdom for any reason, and it was one of the few rules I'd imposed on our arrangement. Still, my curiosity got the better of me, the way it always did.

What relic? I wrote.

The Imber Sword.

An arrow of shock slammed into my chest, driving the air out of my lungs. The pencil slipped through my fingers and rolled across the page. This was no minor trinket easily swiped from a noble's home. The Imber Sword was one of the most important, well-guarded relics in all the kingdoms.

Its magic and purpose? To reveal and confirm the true queen of Feronia.

The last time I saw the sword, it had been in the possession of Queen Diana Theian—right before she was burned to a crisp by decima fire.

Memories roared up in my mind like a tidal wave, crushing me under their force.

Soldiers in black uniforms.

Swords slicing through flesh.

People trampling one another.

Magic streaking through the air.

Screams echoing in my ears, the coppery tang of blood filling my nose.

I fell back against the pillows, suddenly weak and boneless. Violent shivers racked my body from head to toe.

Thirteen years ago, Edrissa Dreiko, the oldest daughter of King Ignus of Caliga, had come to Adamas Palace in Feronia under a banner of peace. She arrived as a princess and left an empress bathed in blood.

Feronia and Caliga had been squabbling for centuries, with neither

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kingdom able to get an advantage over the other—until Edrissa masterminded a brutal massacre during the annual Queens' Day celebration. Edrissa and her followers murdered the Theian royal family, along with all the dryads—magic users charged with protecting Adamas Palace and the rest of Feronia. Meanwhile, a horde of Caligan soldiers hiding on a nearby island had invaded the coastal capital city of Greywald, and the kingdom had been quickly, ruthlessly conquered.

At the time, I'd been twelve and working as a palace servant. Everyone I had ever known and cared about had been killed, and I'd barely escaped the massacre with my life.

I couldn't return to Feronia. I didn't *want* to return...or did I?

The scriptus quivered in my hand again. *Are you still there?*

Icy rage crashed through my body like a tidal wave. How dare the Iron Tortoise ask me to ignore the terms of our agreement and dredge up things that were better left in the past? I dove into the emotion, letting it freeze out my horrid memories. Straightening up, I grabbed the charcoal pencil. But before I could tell my employer exactly what I thought of their outrageous suggestion, a new message appeared on the page.

I'll make it worth your while.

I hesitated. Despite all my lingering, conflicting emotions about the massacre, curiosity, my perpetual nemesis, and greed, its eager partner in crime, had me writing back. *How much?*

The number that appeared made me gasp in shock. The Iron Tortoise had never paid me so much, but then again, they had never asked me to steal such a powerful, important relic. With that amount of money, I could not only quit thieving and circus performing altogether, but I could enjoy a level of luxury I'd never even *dreamed* about.

The offer was tempting, but I still hesitated, the pencil wavering over the page. Could I really do this? Go home and steal a relic that meant so much to so many Feronians? Betray my kingdom and extinguish whatever tiny ember of hope remained that Feronia would one day be free?

I seesawed a moment longer, then buried my doubts and the stomach-churning guilt they stirred with the unwanted memories in