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Fox Tale

Emily Catedral

Fox crept forward, every muscle tensed for the steal. The crown lay on a scarlet satin pillow, plump enough that the gold and jewels barely made an indent. The pillow wouldn't miss the rubies or garnets, but the guards probably would. He resisted the twitch in his fingers that longed to snatch the crown right that very instant and ducked into the shadows of an alcove to wait.

Thirty seconds. The wait was always the worst part, but better a bit of extra time than not enough.

Fox counted every moment, tapping his fingers together silently at the half-beats to keep himself in time. He loved music, though he'd never learned to play anything besides his voice. Thieves don't have time for that sort of thing, especially not when they had a debt fit for a king to pay off.

Twenty seconds 'til the guard would circle the room, glancing around for twenty-two seconds before leaving. Then the real countdown would begin.

At the fifteen second mark, he could already feel the thrill of the steal flowing through his veins. He'd cased the palace for months, between smaller jobs, and knew the layout (and guard schedule) like the back of his hand, or the side-streets of the poor side of town.

Ten seconds. Fox used to resent the government, the palace, perched on the north hill of the city like a vulture overlooking a carcass. He didn't mind living in the capital too much now, though. Stealing from the Queen wouldn't be half as easy if he had to trek halfway across Anglen to get to the palace.

The guard walked in, Matthew Langston, as expected. He was on the last round of his shift and ambled through the crown room while digging in his pocket for his pipe. It was the last room of his last round. He barely glanced around the room, let alone took a moment to investigate the cloaked shadow by the suit of armor, before leaving even sooner than Fox had anticipated him to.

Lucky break. Fox had seven extra seconds as the door shut behind Langston.

Fox moved quickly. The crown was in his knapsack and he was in the hallway, door shut behind him silently, before they were over. The alcove for the door hid him from the guard's sight, should he turn around, but Fox heard him round the corner easily. Langston would go back to the guard room, which opened out into a small courtyard, where he would smoke his cigar and listen to the other off-duty guards tell ribald stories (which were actually pretty entertaining, as a few weeks of observation and eavesdropping had revealed).

Funnily enough, that was Fox's way out too. He waited until the echoing footsteps rounded a corner, then followed. There were no skylights Fox could use to escape. Making his way out any of the doors from this deep in the palace would be nearly impossible. He'd made his way in through the servant's quarters, but it only worked one way; the guards' routes weren't as convenient for intruders attempting to get out. It might be possible, but Fox didn't like the odds.

Fox ducked behind a statue of Matthias IV, the king's great grandfather. Down the hall, he heard Langston enter the guard room. Laughter and comments turned to chuckles and murmurs through the heavy oak door, but Fox was able to pick out Langston's voice calling out his replacement. Down the hall, the guard room door swung open with a slight creak, and, momentarily, the sound of voices in the guard room grew louder before the door swung shut again. A series of crisp clicks told Fox that Cromwell, Langston's replacement, was on his way.

He had ten minutes before Cromwell made it to the crown room and realized that the pretty golden thing was not where it was supposed to be.

There were only two ways into the guard courtyard: through the guard room, or through the storage room next to it, which had doors to the courtyard, hallway, and guard room. In a month of trying, Fox hadn't been able to get the key. Only the Captain of the Guard carried it, and he was, unfortunately far too tight-fisted to allow anyone else easier to pickpocket to carry the key.

Cromwell's footsteps disappeared down the hallway and around the corner. Nine minutes left. Fox dashed out of the alcove and down past the guard room door to the storage door, picks in hand. He was completely exposed, on his knees as he picked the lock in the hallway, and, generally speaking, thieves ought to at least try and not be caught picking locks right outside the palace guard's break room.

Five tumblers took him four minutes, but, thank God, the door popped open with a beautiful click just a moment before Fox heard the doorknob to the guard's room start to turn. He was inside the storage room, door shut silently behind him, before they even finished turning it.

The room was dark, but there was a small shaft of light from underneath the doors. From the door that led to the hall, he heard voices.

"I could have sworn I heard something." That sounded like James, if Fox was remembering the guards right. James was young and eager. Alert and quick. Fox didn't like James.

"You're so jumpy, newbie." That sounded like one of the lazier older guys. Maybe Farris. He was friends with Langston.

"Sorry, I just could have sworn that I heard something."

Fox crept across the room, aiming to hide behind a pair of crates of armor if they opened the door.

"Well, check around if you're so worried, I'm going back inside."

Fox settled down into his hiding spot and drew one of his knives. If James walked into the room, Fox could slit his throat and cover his mouth as soon as he got close enough.

"Alright, Farris, I'll be back in a minute just gonna check the hall and the door."

Dammit, he was down to four minutes as it was. Cromwell would be getting to the throne room around now.

Fox heard James walking down the corridor and back again. Then James walked past the guard room door. If he wasn't checking the guard room door, he would be checking the storage room door!

Panic coursed through his system as Fox leapt over the crates he'd been hiding behind and sprang for the door. Silent, silent, silent he ordered his breaths. His hand hovered over the bolt. If he sprung it now, James would hear.

James turned the knob and, on the other side, Fox mirrored his motions and turned the deadbolt.

Tug tug. Door locked. James made a small, "Hm," sound on the other side of the door and went back into the guard room. Fox heard them make small talk on the other side.

What was he down to? He'd lost count. That was dangerous. He hesitated, then pulled a simple brass pocketwatch out of his knapsack. He didn't check it much. The ticks made too much noise for his comfort when it wasn't muffled by a lined pocket in his bag.

The numbers glowed dimly in the closet. One minute. Probably less if Cromwell sped up his route in any way.

Fox took a moment to stretch and attempt to loosen the knot building in his shoulders. Right as he settled back down, he heard it: sprinting footsteps, with just a little click in the shoes. Cromwell was back.

Fox sat back as he raised the alarm and allowed himself a smug moment to enjoy the chaos he'd caused.

The Captain had a gravelly voice. "What do you mean 'it's gone'?"

"I mean that the crown is not there, Captain," replied Cromwell, terse even now.

"Did you see anyone?" Fox wanted to laugh.

"Let's search the palace!" Sounded like Farris.

"Raise the alarm!" That would be Frederick.

Langston stumbled in and coughed, still probably holding his lit cigar. "I saw it," he insisted, "it was there on the last round I did, not ten minutes ago!"

"The thief can't be far, spread out and search!" ordered the Captain.

A chorus of, "Yes, sir!" met him, and the guard room emptied in a few seconds.

Fox opened the guardroom closet door and ambled into the courtyard. It was a beautiful night. The clouds were illuminated by an unusually bright waning crescent moon. The guard courtyard and break room were empty. Small, distant clatters reached his ears from within the palace. Just as planned.

It was only a moment's task to swing himself onto the branch of a very well positioned tree and ready himself for the leap onto the rooftop.

"Hey, you!"

Fox spared a glance back as the branch bounced slightly under his weight. James' outline stood black against the lit doorway of the guardroom closet. It took a moment for Fox's eyes to adjust, but when they did, he grinned in response to the young guard's shocked expression, lit by the solitary lamp in the guard courtyard.

"Have a good evening, guardsman," he called with a wink. Fox mock saluted, then, in one motion, leaped for the roof and slung himself on top by the storm drain. The crown didn't make so much as a clink, smothered in his bag nice and snug.

He allowed himself a moment to watch James stare a moment before knocking over a chair as he stumbled back through the guard room. His shouts of, "Wait! Guards, wait! He's on the roof!" were both music to his ears and a warning. He would need to hurry if he wanted to hug his children again with both hands intact.

Across the palace rooftop, he could see small skylights light up as the news spread outward. He could hear faint shouts and panicked voices. They likely wouldn't be far behind him. Once the word spread out.

He sprinted across the roof if I could make it off the roof and over the containing wall, he'd be much better off. He could evade them forever once he made it to the city, if they even made it that far.

There were some guards on the roof, but not many lanterns. He'd been sneaking around the roof for weeks, watching the guard courtyard and eavesdropping on their schedules; he knew the patterns of watch better than the guards did themselves. Plus, in a time of peace, the rooftop guards weren't as vigilant as they ought to be.

Fox was rounding one of the last corners of a raised part of the roof when he heard a voice. He stopped instantly and silently and dropped to the ground.

"They're mobilizing the main guard force to the rooftops, but we need to maintain a perimeter and search for the thief until they get here."

"Yes, sir! Should I search the area, or keep watch over this section of perimeter?"

Fox cursed under his breath. He'd hoped to make it to the edge before this happened. There was a thin, but existent, maintenance ladder right behind where they were standing, but he couldn't take out two of them at once to get down it without calling every guard and set of conscious eyes in the palace to that damn ladder.

"Hm, say here, son," the commanding voice said with a fatherly sort of ring. Fox hadn't spent as much time studying the rooftop guards, but it was probably one of the older veterans. After the war, they'd opted for a low-danger duty as guards to keep building their pension.

"Alright," replied the younger voice. Fox curled in a ball as close to the corner of the raised rooftop as possible and listened for the footsteps of the older guard. He resisted the urge to close his eyes and waited.

Fox was rewarded a few moments later by the sound of receding footsteps and breathed a small sigh of relief; the guard had started his rounds in the opposite direction. Meanwhile, the young guard was just standing there, and he'd be no trouble at all.

Fox crept forward until he was close enough to peer around the corner and see the guard. He looked too young for his armor. Oh well, Fox wouldn't kill him, just make him into a non-issue.

Fox slipped off his bag, took a bit of the strap, and waved it by the lower edge of the corner, just visible to the guard. It would probably take a minute for him to see it, but when he did, he'd come over to investigate a small motion. Fox drew his knife. Then he would jump him.

"Hm?" The small noise came as a signal of success after a minute or so. Fox tensed as the guard's footsteps came closer.

It was darker around the corner than the guard would have realized. In the split second it took for his eyes to adjust as he looked at the floor for what had been moving, Fox ripped off the guard's helmet and smashed the pommel of his knife down on the guard's head.

The guard went limp with a small thunk. Fox caught him as he fell forward and lowered him silently to the roof. The clatter and clank of his armor would bring the whole damn guard down on them if Fox let it make any noise.

"Sorry, mate," he whispered, "I know it's your job, but I've got kids to feed and debtor's prison to avoid."

In a moment, he'd grabbed his sack, took the guard's dagger and sheath from his belt (just to add to the collection, really) and started over the edge of the rooftop and down the ladder.

Only a few guards were stationed in the gardens, but there was enough cover for Fox to slip past, or at least wait until the patrol had passed. True to form, they looked around, but didn't check the thick prickly bushes.

Once they'd passed, Fox rolled out from under the bush. It'd scratched his face and hands up a bit, but he'd bought his clothes not to snag much, so at least that wasn't a problem. It was only a few seconds to clamber up the vines that clung to the wall before he was crouched on top.

Fox looked around. He wouldn't try to pull off another job at the palace for a while, they'd be too on their guard. But, for now, the crown was safely tucked in his sack and even though he was about to drop off the wall onto the East Side, he could easily make it to the West Side without running into trouble.

He was about to when a blinding white light appeared to his left on the wall. He shielded his eyes and turned at the same time, squinting his eyes to try and adjust. The light was coming from something- someone? on the wall with him, not a light from the palace. They hadn't found him- had they? Whatever it was, he needed to eliminate it before every eye in the city was on them.

Fox squinted, rubbed, and blinked his eyes for a few more seconds. It felt like an eternity of vulnerability, but, as his eyes adjusted, he made out the figure of a woman.

The first thing he could see was her dark hair, the next were a pair smiling blue eyes.

"Hello, Fox," she said, sitting on the edge of the wall with her feet dangling off like it was an everyday occurrence for her.

He blinked, frozen. Then his eyes made out flowing white robes, both rich looking and yet plain, that contrasted with tan skin. The last thing he saw was a pair of angel's wings folded loosely on her back.

His leg moved then, in what direction, Fox wasn't sure. He fell off the wall onto a thick bush on the city-side with a crash.

Up on the wall, the angel snorted, then laughed and leaped lightly down to join him. Her wings made her descent into a light glide, and Fox had a momentary flit of jealousy. Stealing would be so much easier if he had wings. Her feet, in a pair of leather sandals that laced up her calf, barely made a sound as she touched the ground.

"You don't seem like you see angels very often, Fox-Thief," she said, head tilted to the side.

"I- I don't," he mumbled as he extracted himself from the bush. He was sure this was an important occurrence and he hadn't been to church in a while, but he was in the middle of a job. That light was going to get him killed, and while he was sure she was a nice, wonderful angel, he'd rather not go home with her right then.

"That's no problem," she said, "Don't worry, for the record, I just wanted to talk."

"Um," he started, unsure how to phrase his reply, "that sounds, ah, wonderful. Really, but I'm in the middle of a heist right now. I'm a thief, as you seem to know. You're glowing. Extremely brightly. I'd be glad to talk, but you're glowing, and this isn't really a good time..." Fox glanced around as he trailed off. He was still on East Side, where the rich, noble, and upper middle class resided. "or place," he added, "This isn't a good place either."

He started to back down the alley between two rows of expensive town-homes. "So, let's talk... later. If that's not rude. I'm sure Heaven is nice and I really hope that's where I'm going, but the kids will be sad if I'm not there when they wake up, and the palace guard don't take kindly to thieves who go about stealing royal crowns and the like."

"I can stop glowing," she said. Fox glanced over his shoulder. She had, indeed, immediately done so. He wasn't sure if she'd gotten the point. She started following him down the alley and he faced front again "I'm not going to hurt you. I just need to speak with you."

Fox kept walking down the alley, quickening his pace. Glowing or not, the angel clearly had no idea how to be stealthy. He wanted to run off, or tell her to go away, but he wasn't sure what the protocol for that was with angels.

"I can walk and talk." She seemed to take his silence as consent to keep speaking to him. "Alright, so, ah," she paused, and it seemed like she was suddenly unsure as how to breach the topic, "Fox. You are a thief and occasionally kill people for money."

Fox nearly stopped walking to turn and stare at her. He kept himself from doing so and quickened his pace. He was, naturally, aware of those things. Did she expect him to deny it in the presence of an angel?

"Yeah," he said after a pause, "I am indeed." Maybe honesty would earn him bonus points. He was generally honest, when he could be. Well, for a thief anyway. "Did you need to hire me for a job?" Of course, his sarcasm would probably cancel out all those honesty points.

He could practically feel her stare at him and had to quash the urge to turn around and flash her a cheeky grin.

"No, actually," she stated after a false start and a few moments' pause, "I'm here to reform you from your life of sin, Fox."

Fox snorted. "Reform me?" He flipped a few strands of his reddish-brown hair off his face. She had to be joking.

"Yes, and just what exactly is so amusing about that?" She seemed indignant, and he found it amusing enough to turn his head and flash her a smile.

"That your goal is absolutely hopeless. I don't see anything to change about my life. I like it as it is," he winked at her as he said it, and, out of the corner of his eye he saw her shoulders tighten.

"I've been sent from Heaven to reform you and you reject me?"

Fox laughed then. "Yes, and gladly. Go find someone else."

"Maybe I will," she snapped.

"I can recommend some people for you."

"No, thank you," she responded.

He smiled patronizingly and walked backwards a few steps to see her face. "Well, if that's all, I'll see you around, angel. Or not. Whatever happens."