

BRIAR KNIGHTLY

THE
FOX
HEIR

THRONES OF RUIN ♦ BOOK TWO

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FOX
HEIR

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PART ONE

THE CASTLE

CHAPTER 1

THE TREES SHIVER. Their last leaves cascade around us as the icy wind howls through the Spires of Annwyn. It sounds like a pack of hungry wolves.

Above us, the sky darkens as black clouds roll over the mountain peaks. The oncoming storm feels like a living thing, tearing leaves from branches and hurling them through the darkening forest. Thunder shakes the ground beneath my feet.

We have to reach Gwyllion Castle before the winter storm swallows us whole. I haven't come this far just to die from foul northern weather.

Behind us, another massive pine crashes to the forest floor, cracking and splintering like breaking bones. The Dead Queen's skeletal hand flashes in my mind and my stomach roils. I shake the grotesque image away. As it is, I barely slept at camp last night with the nightmarish queen haunting my dreams. The dead don't need rest, so she traveled ahead of us. She's already at Gwyllion Castle by now. Waiting for me.

Tristan runs at my side, his eyebrows drawn together in concentration. His hands are outstretched, casting shadow power from his palms in swirling clouds of inky black. He's blasting fallen branches from the path ahead, but we're like moths caught in a turbulent sea. Thrashing will only keep us alive for so long before we drown. Once the storm gets here, no power—neither his shadows nor my light—will be enough to protect us.

He shoots me a glance, his gray eyes unreadable. I keep my mouth in a grim line. If I die out here, it will be just another tally to add to his long list of offenses. Tristan, the Wolf, is a liar and a cheat, and I haven't had

sufficient time to lick my wounds. We both know that I'm only in Annwyn because of one thing:

The Wolf has outfoxed the Fox Heir.

Or the former Fox Heir, at any rate. Now, I suppose I'm just Sienna.

Fury prickles my skin, and I clench my jaw to keep from screaming in anger. Hail hammers through the tree canopy, knocking down whatever autumn leaves remain overhead. I hold my hands up to shield my eyes as hail bites my skin like tiny teeth. Mighty pines creak and rain their needles around us.

Above the sound of wind and crashing thunder, something else makes my skin prickle. First, it's just a distant howl so faint I almost mistake it for the screaming wind. But then Tristan stops, his feet sliding on the wet leaves scattered across the path. His arm sweeps in front of me like a barricade, forcing me behind him. The move is instinctive, protective. Infuriating.

"They're tracking us," he says, his voice low.

I listen. Another howl. Closer this time. And I'd bet my life these are no ordinary wolves.

"How—" I start, but Tristan's already scanning the trees.

I follow suit and grip the bronze hilt of my knife, drawing it from the sheath tucked into the ankle of my boot. The moths engraved along its silver blade gleam in the dim light. It looks delicate, but it's all the more deadly for it.

As heir to the Fox Throne, I've learned this above all else: men always see femininity as fragility. It's their favorite delusion, mistaking beauty for something that cannot bite.

Tristan's hand closes around my elbow, tugging me closer than I want to be. If these were ordinary wolves, Tristan could use his shadow power to stop their hearts in their chests, killing them instantly. But corpse beasts can only be stopped by severing the spine.

"Stay with me," he whispers. His breath is warm against my ear, and a reluctant shiver runs across my skin.

He nods toward the left, and I follow, darting off the main path and down a game trail. Out of the corner of my eye, I see movement, flashes of dark fur blurring between pine-green branches. Corpse wolves. My eyes strain to see them through the trees.

My ribs ache and the cold air makes me cough, but we can't stop. The silver moth necklace bounces against my chest as I sprint behind Tristan. I tuck it safely out of the way beneath the collar of my dress.

Up ahead, the first corpse wolf lurches onto the trail. It's massive, larger than any wolf should be. But that's not what makes me recoil. Its black fur is matted with dried blood. Several ribs poke out from its side, the muscles between them glistening with rot. Its maw is filled with broken, jagged teeth, ringed crimson with blood from a fresh kill. Luminescent eyes stare at us, devoid of life. Behind it, more shapes dart through the darkening forest.

"The trees," I say, my voice firm.

Tristan nods once before we bolt off the path. Howls echo around us, mixing with the crashing storm like an ominous symphony. My boots slide on dead leaves as another gust of freezing wind nearly knocks me sideways. Tristan steadies me with a hand at my back.

The temperature is dropping so fast my fingers are numb, but I don't loosen my grip on my knife as we sprint through the forest. Trees groan and bend under the onslaught. Branches snap above our heads and crash to the ground. I glance at the sky through gaps in the canopy. The storm front is closing in on us with a curtain of snow so thick it obliterates everything in its path.

I reach for my light power, but it slips through my grasp like fog. Ever since I exhausted my abilities escaping the battlegrounds of Llwyn, my power has been inaccessible. Burnout is a fickle thing. Even now, when I need my power most, it refuses to resurface.

We leap over fallen trees and push branches aside. Sticks slice at my skin, but I can't slow down. Speed is the only thing that will save us now. My red cloak whips around me with each gust of wind.

A corpse wolf lunges at me from the trees, teeth bared. I sidestep and slash out with my knife. The blade bites into fur and flesh, scraping against its shoulder bone. Black blood sprays, but the corpse wolf barely notices. I spin around, narrowly avoiding its jaws as it snaps at my throat. It bears down, bending its knees as it readies itself to pounce at me again.

We both startle at the sound of a thunderous crack. An enormous oak crashes to the ground, pinning the corpse wolf beneath it.

I stand there stunned, but not for long. Tristan catches up, and we continue running from the snarling wolves still on our trail. He yells above