

1



I didn't stop when I heard the scream. At the edge of the forest, where the tall trees gave over to hunching bracken, I didn't delay and I didn't look back. The Wildlands buzzed with peculiar sounds: the hooting of birds, the braying of beasts. Tiny insects hummed in clouds and the grass hissed under the wind.

Great lands rolled out before me. In the distance I saw valleys, and hills that leaped sharply into the sky. A feeble sun hung overhead. Fields were exposed to watchful eyes, without the cover of trees. I would make for the mountain with its fringe of rocks, where I could cling to the shadows. From high over the Wildlands, I'd know where to go.

I picked up my pace.

But the scream tore through my thoughts. The hairs were stiff along my back, the breath sharp at my throat. A

drop of rain fell on my nose and I quailed. A fox was begging for help.

I pressed through the bracken. *It has nothing to do with me*, I told myself firmly.

Since leaving the Great Snarl, I'd crept beneath trees in early bud, avoiding anyone I'd sensed on my path – even foxes. Once I had longed to be among my kind, hoping they'd help me find my family. Now I knew the truth: that my family was dead, except my brother, Pirie. He was lost to me in the vast green expanse of the Wildlands.

I would never see Fa, Ma or Greatma again. Where my memories of them faded, a dark knot had taken root inside me.

I tried not to think of Siffrin, the handsome fox I'd met in the Snarl. He'd protected me from the Mage's killers – the Taken foxes with red-rimmed eyes. He had helped me catch prey, had led me to shelter.

I had come to think of Siffrin as a friend.

Trust no one but family, for a fox has no friends.

Greatma had been right about that. Siffrin had deceived me. He'd watched as the Mage's skulk killed my family. He'd let me believe they were still alive. He bore the scar, like a broken rose, the mark of the Taken at the top of his foreleg. A mark he had tried to conceal.

He had lied from the start.

My head peeked over the bracken. The first drop of rain

was joined by others. They tapped against the leaves, bouncing and tumbling on to the ground. I paused, ears rotating. For a moment it was quiet, with only the shuffle of leaves in the wind, and the patter of rain from the darkening sky. Then the fox cried out again.

His voice broke into a series of yelps. "Help me! Somebody help me! I can't get out!" He started to whimper like a cub, though I could tell that he was full grown.

I stalked between the bracken, ears twisting this way and that. I couldn't work out where the voice was coming from. It seemed to be below me, almost as though it had burst from the belly of the earth. I tilted my snout. Up ahead was a tangle of hedge and ivy. Somewhere beneath it was the fizzle of water, perhaps a hidden stream. Was the fox down there? What was wrong with him?

I wove a path on tentative paws. Two ravens circled the sky, swooping in shimmering black feathers. One opened its beak with a *Kaah! Kaah!* As I neared the ivy, the rush of water grew louder. Nosing among the leaves, I caught my breath. The greenery fell away swiftly, the land plunging into a gorge. A stream gushed over the rocks below.

"Please help!" cried the fox. "I'm stuck!" I spotted him at the base of the gorge. He grunted, struggling to pull himself free. "I was chased by dogs and slipped down the bank. I didn't see it in time." He gave himself a shake and splashed back into the water. "I've caught my paw!"

He was wheezing and bucking but his hind leg was pinned between rocks. Ruddy water bubbled over his flanks. Overhead, the rain grew stronger. Rivulets coursed along the bank, swelling the tide below.

The fox was huffing and straining. "It's getting deeper. The rain . . ." He spat out a mouthful of water. My brush flicked with agitation as I traced the path of the stream. Dark rings ran along the bank of the gorge, high over the fox's head. Watermarks from previous showers. The stream would keep rising.

Trust no one but family . . .

The coarse fur flexed along my brush. I tensed to run. This fox had nothing to do with me. He wasn't my problem. I needed to keep myself safe, to focus on finding Pirie. I had to keep moving.

But my paws stayed planted to the ground.

I couldn't just leave him here to drown.

My eyes traced the top of the far bank, which was given over to leafy brush. "You said dogs were chasing you. Where did they go?" My muzzle wrinkled. I couldn't smell much but bark and soil. The sky trembled in the cool, clear rain.

"They saw me fall and they ran off barking. I guess they . . ." The grey-furred fox craned his head to look at me. His ears flipped back. "You're only a cub." Disappointment edged his voice.

I crept along the ivy, looking for a foothold. “And?” I snapped. “I know more than you think.” I’d learned some things since leaving my den in the Great Snarl. I had slimmered to avoid the watchful eyes of dogs, had karakked to confuse my prey. I had fed myself on mice and voles, caught with skill I never thought I’d possess. So what if it had been with Siffrin’s help? I was managing without him now.

The clouds had drawn a veil over the day. Sunlight tumbled into night with scarcely a pause for twilight. The rain grew stronger, licking back my coat. I could see it rising along the bank of the gorge, rolling over the fox’s shoulders. Curling about his throat.

The fox threw back his head and barked an alarm call, as though I wasn’t there.

I slid a forepaw over the bank of the gorge. “Do you want my help or don’t you?”

He peered at me through the gathering darkness. “Please . . . if there’s anything you can do. I don’t want to die down here. My family . . .”

A prickle touched my whiskers. I eased myself over the top of the bank, along the incline of the gorge. The earth was gooey, clinging to my paws in clumps and seeping between the pads. I slid down the bank. I moved slowly, bracing against clods of soil, blinking away the rain. The

bank rose around me steeply. It wouldn't be easy to drag myself out but it was too late to worry about that now.

Water frisked and swirled below. All foxes could swim if it came to it – I knew that from Fa, who had loved a dip in the Wildlands when he was a cub. “Nothing better for cooling the pelt on a hot day.” But I didn't relish the thought of springing into the stream. At least it was only the depth of the fox. His muzzle leaped up as he gasped for air, shaking away the water that splashed around him.

“I'm drowning!” he whined as I slid level with his neck, just above the water's edge.

“Stay where you are.” It was futile advice – he wasn't able to go anywhere. Gritting my teeth, I pounced into the stream. The icy water nipped my belly. For an instant I sank under, panic clawing at me. Sight lapsed into bubbles, sound to a whoosh. A moment later I bobbed to the surface. The current pulled me away from the grey-furred fox, dragging me downstream. I beat my paws against it and hovered back, relieved to find that Fa was right – swimming came instinctively.

With a fresh surge of water, I bumped into the grey-furred fox. I scrambled to my paws to right myself. Swimming may have been instinctive, but it wasn't easy. The fox met my eye. The blacks at the centre were slashes of terror.

“Please hurry,” he whimpered. His muzzle craned upward as he gasped for breath.

I tried to duck down into the water but the current forced me back. With a deep breath, I sprang again, breaking the surface with my snout and kicking my legs so I sank beneath. Pressure snatched at my throat, but slimmering had taught me to hold my breath.

It was hard to see in the ruddy water. I reached out my senses as best I could as I pushed against the surge. Dimly I saw the contour of the fox's legs. One paw was pinned beneath a clutch of rocks. I made for it, seizing the largest rock between my jaws. It wouldn't budge and I floated back as the fox's free legs thrashed about me. The air pressed tightly at my chest. I tried again, stilling my mind.

Move, rock . . .

I willed it silently. A faint glow lit the gushing water. The fox stopped thrashing, making it easier for me to reach the rock. I felt the need for air now, clawing at my throat. With a final surge of energy I pushed towards the rock, clenching it again between my jaws. It shifted with a stubborn wobble and fell from my mouth. My head burst out of the water as I toppled backwards against the stream. I launched myself on to the bank, gripping it with my claws as I gulped for breath.

The sky was gloomy with rain clouds. The stream rumbled on, growing higher beneath the downpour.

There was no sign of the grey-furred fox.

Had he sunk beneath the current? My ears pressed back.

I remembered the two foxes in the cages at the snatchers', the ones left behind when I'd escaped.

I dragged myself up the bank of the gorge, my paws slipping against the sodden soil. It took the rest of my energy to hook my forelegs over the bank and heave myself up. I collapsed under a spiky hedge, my blood hot despite the bite of the stream and the steady patter of rain.

I pictured Pirie with his bright eyes and mottled coat. I wanted to see him as I remembered him, playing in the wildway near our den, chasing beetles in the long grass. I tried to recall his thrashing tail. But the image that came to me was different.

Pirie was close but concealed beneath a fog. As my thoughts melded with his, I could make out dim figures, menacing and unfamiliar. One took a step towards me and I caught the white glint of his fang.

Pirie's voice, very soft: I'm in trouble, Isla. There are shadows here, and trees with branches that catch like claws.

"I won't give up on you, Pirie! I'll find you, I promise!"

A gentle nudge stirred me from my trance. At once my eyes snapped open and my ears were alert. The rain still pattered against the hedge. Standing before it was the figure of a fox. The breath caught in my throat. It was hard to make him out with thick mud clinging to his fur.

I blinked in confusion. "Pirie?"

The voice that replied was not my brother's. "My name is Haiki. I think you just saved my life."

I frowned, momentarily confused.

"That hidden stream," he went on. "I slipped down and my paw got stuck. I don't know how you freed it, the rock was so heavy." He cocked his head, staring at me in awe. "What's your name, foxling?"

I blinked in surprise. He hadn't drowned after all. "I'm Isla."

The fox studied me for a long moment. Then he shook out his muddy fur, throwing a furtive look over his shoulder. His voice was low. "Those dogs . . . the ones that chased me. I don't think they went away after all."

My tail bristled. "Where are they?" I hissed.

A twig snapped a few paces away.

It wasn't a fox who replied from the darkness of the ferns.

"Right here," the dog snarled. "We've been waiting for you."



2

There were two scrawny dogs with narrow faces and jagged teeth. The one who'd spoken was larger, with dark brown fur. The other was black-and-tan with small, floppy ears. Both towered over Haiki and me. I could see ribs poking beneath their short pelts. In the Great Snarl dogs bullied foxes for sport, or at the command of their furless lords. These dogs looked shabbier than those in the Snarl. They were out after dark, with no sign of furless.

And there was hunger in their eyes.

Would a dog *eat* a fox? I shuddered, fear rising along my back. My gaze flicked over the shady bracken. There were plenty of places for a fox to hide, but we had to get away first. These long-legged dogs would easily outrun us.

Haiki edged closer to me, his face trained on the larger of the two. "You look like . . . like nice dogs," he said cheerily.

They stared at him in challenge. They looked nothing of the sort.

Haiki wasn't deterred. "We don't want to be any trouble," he went on. "We didn't mean to stray into your territory."

The larger dog took a step towards him. "But you *are* in our territory," he snarled. "Two foxes in a field. We're not fools. We know what you were up to. Chasing rabbits, that's what."

The second dog's eyes bored into us. "The rabbits here are *ours*."

I opened my mouth to protest. I'd seen rabbits in the distance but never tried to catch one. I didn't even know how.

"Our rabbits!" echoed the larger dog. He dropped his head with a growl, his hackles raised along his back. I swallowed, at a loss for words.

Haiki spoke quickly. "That was just practice, I was showing the cub what to do. Of course we'd never steal one of *your* rabbits!" His eyes jerked towards me, then back to the dogs. "It was just so *strange*, what the rabbits were doing. We couldn't help but watch."

The larger dog's muzzle crinkled. "Strange how?"

"Don't you know?" Haiki's eyes widened with surprise. "The rabbits . . . they all bounced over the field. I saw them, even the little ones. They were making for those, I think." He tipped his muzzle towards a distant jumble of hills.

The first dog gawped. “What do you mean, you *saw* them?”

My body was tense with fear. What was Haiki doing?

He gazed earnestly at the dogs, ignoring their threatening glares. “It looked like the whole warren. They were moving in a large group. Great big rabbits, lots of them, and little ones too. Just over there.” Haiki threw a glance towards the open fields.

“The rabbits wouldn’t leave just like that,” rasped the black-and-tan. “What did you do to them?” He took a step closer, levelling up to the dark brown dog. I flinched, heart drumming. If I slimmered I might get away from them, but would it work when I was so close? How about Haiki? I could hardly leave him to the dogs, now that he was free from the gorge. Siffrin had slimmered over both of us on our first night together, hiding us from the Taken. My tail flicked behind me. I hated to admit it, but Siffrin’s grasp of foxcraft was better than mine.

A lot better.

Haiki seemed to have a plan of his own. “We didn’t do anything to the rabbits! Honestly, we just saw them. If you take a look now you’ll see them too, a great many rabbits crossing in a group. No trees, no escape – they’re just out there alone. Easy pickings.” He ran his tongue over his muzzle with meaning.

The larger dog’s head shot around towards the fields, but the view was concealed by ivy and bracken.

“Nonsense,” snarled the black-and-tan. “Rabbits hate to get wet. Why would they choose to cross now?”

Haiki was quick to offer an answer. “Because it’s dark, of course! They know that if they cross by day, you’d see them. Foxes would see them. Ravens would spot their young. It wouldn’t be safe.”

The larger dog was smacking his chops and craning his neck over the ivy. His tongue lolled out of the side of his mouth.

“Rubbish!” snapped the black-and-tan. “Why would they go at all?”

The larger dog frowned, his eyes growing hard. He turned back to Haiki. “Why would the rabbits leave?”

Haiki’s eyes twinkled. “Why leave?” He paused a moment. My legs quivered nervously, but the grey-furred fox seemed to find his words. “Why leave, when two mighty dogs with fast legs and great teeth rule over this territory? If you were a rabbit, wouldn’t *you* risk a night in the fields for the safety of the hills?”

It didn’t make sense – rabbits lived beneath the ground, not high in the hills. Even I knew that, and I was from the Snarl. My ears pressed back. Haiki was flattering the dogs, and to my surprise it seemed to be working.

The dogs glanced at each other and took a few steps towards the fields.

“If you hurry, you’ll catch up with them,” said Haiki.

“Imagine the feast. They say the young ones are especially tender . . .”

The larger dog was already prowling through the ivy, his thin tail wagging. The smaller dog started after him but paused, his head whipping round. “Stay here, foxes. If you’re right about the rabbits, we may be kind enough to let you go. If you’re wrong . . .” His lips peeled back to reveal his fangs.

“I know what I saw,” Haiki insisted. “Trust me, you won’t be disappointed.”

I could hardly believe my eyes as the dogs disappeared through the bracken. I stood very still, Haiki watchful by my side. Then I dropped low on my haunches, preparing to flee.

“This way,” urged Haiki. We started racing through the bracken, dodging hedges and roots, tracing a wide path outside the gorge towards the base of the mountain. We kept low, our tails brushing over the ground, beneath the line of foliage. The rain was easing up but I was grateful for its gentle tapping – it would help to conceal our scents.

Despite all I’d learned in the Snarl, I wasn’t as fast as an adult fox. Gritting my teeth, I hurried to keep pace with Haiki. A short stretch ahead of me, the ferns petered out and the ground became rocky. Haiki paused at the edge of the bracken, waiting for me to catch up. I crept to his side, breathing heavily.

“The dogs are in that field,” he murmured under his breath.

My ears swivelled forward and I traced the bleak horizon. Hills stooped beneath clouds, their outlines faint in the darkness. Before them I could just make out two figures, pacing and snarling in angry loops. A volley of barks burst from the dogs.

“Those foxes are dead!” the larger dog snarled.

But we were already far away.

In the Great Snarl, no place was beyond the touch of the brightglobes. The whole land hummed with their yellow light. Only here, in the Wildlands, did the night grow as black as a fox’s ear-tips. In darkness we passed through a tunnel of ferns and reached the edge of the mountain. We stepped lightly over loose pebbles, hugging the land as we zigzagged uphill. The dogs would never find us now.

Haiki’s pace slowed as we climbed the mountain. Deep furrows bored into its sides. I followed Haiki as he slunk along one and finally stopped to catch his breath. I sat a short distance away as he gnawed at clumps of mud from the gorge. Dust crumbled on to his tail, but he didn’t seem to notice. He wasn’t finicky like Siffrin.

After a moment he paused. “You saved my life, Isla. When I ran from the dogs, I tripped over some rocks and fell into the gorge. My paw . . . I couldn’t free it. But

somehow you did . . . such strength!" He cocked his head in gratitude.

"You got rid of the dogs, so I guess we're even." He'd succeeded not by fleeing, not with foxcraft, but through trickery. I had never seen anyone do that before.

In the distance, I heard a last angry yap.

"They said they'd seen us in the field, but that wasn't me." I glanced over my shoulder. "Is there someone else here?"

"No one I saw," said Haiki. "But dogs aren't the brightest!"

"Those rabbits weren't really crossing, were they?"

Haiki snorted. "In the rain? Of course not. Skittish creatures, rabbits. They can't stand water. But a dog is a greedy sort of beast – a dog will swallow anything."

The rain had drizzled to a stop. The clouds lifted, revealing a sky dappled with stars. Canista's Lights shone brighter than I'd ever seen them in the Snarl. I gazed overhead, mesmerized by the pulsing flares. I could make out shapes within patterns, faces and figures etched in white fire. Had the sky always looked this way, hidden behind the beam of brightglobes and the angry eyes of manglers? Or was it only in the Wildlands that the stars dared to sparkle?

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Haiki was watching me.

I wrapped my brush around my body. "I'm not used to such clear nights."

"What are you used to?"

I turned to look at him. Close up, I could see his grey fur was fuzzy at the edges, his limbs stocky and his face broad. I rose to my paws. "I should be going . . . But I'm glad you're all right." I stretched my back legs, preparing to leave.

"You should probably stay put awhile, in case the dogs come back. They'll be searching for us."

I paused, peering out over the edge of the rocks. The fields were so dark now that they looked like great hollow caverns. Somewhere in the distance, a creature hooted. It wasn't like any bird I'd heard in the Snarl. There was an accusation in its reedy voice, a warning to those down below.

I needed to climb the mountain to see what lay beyond – but even a fox's vision could not make sense of this vast, open blackness. I would have to wait until the sun rose over the horizon.

Haiki flopped down on to his belly with a yawn. "I can tell you're not from around here."

My tail-tip quivered. This fox may have got us away from the dogs, but I didn't know anything about him. Experience had taught me to be wary.

Haiki panted cheerfully. He stretched out a hind leg in order to groom it, but he tipped awkwardly, rolling on to his side and righting himself with a yip. "Me neither. I'm from the lowlands. I've been walking a long time."

"Why did you leave?" I shouldn't have asked. The less

I knew about this clumsy fox, the easier it would be to leave him.

But Haiki seemed delighted at the question. He puffed out his chest self-importantly. “I’m on a quest! I’m crossing to the Upper Wildlands. I’m going to find the Elders!”

I looked away, catching the distant gleam of Canista’s Lights.

“Have you heard of them?” asked Haiki in his quick, cheerful voice. He continued without waiting for a reply. “Where I come from, they say that the Elders are cleverest of *all* the foxes – they’re the keepers of foxlore! They know practically everything.” He dropped his voice, although there was no one around to hear us. “It’s said they have powers. Strange magic . . .”

I dragged my eyes away from the lights. I thought of Siffrin, who had claimed to be a messenger for an Elder Fox. I remembered what he’d told me.

They are the guardians of foxlore, the wisdom and teachings of foxcraft. They are the seven wisest foxes of the Wildlands.

He’d said Jana, one of the Elders, was seeking Pirie. But Siffrin couldn’t be trusted, and that meant that the Elders weren’t to be trusted either. Still, I found myself asking, “Have you ever seen them?”

Haiki barked with amusement. “Seen them? Me, a simple fox from the lowlands? No one in my skulk has seen them. Some even doubt they exist, but I just know they do. We grew

up hearing about them, me and my brothers and sister. We all loved the legends of the Black Fox – how he could turn himself invisible or shape-shift into other cubs of Canista.”

My ears rotated. Siffrin had mentioned the Black Fox but I’d hardly been listening.

Haiki gave a wag of his brush. “That’s the most powerful fox of all, the best at foxcraft. Have you heard about foxcraft?”

I murmured that I had.

He went on as though I hadn’t. “It’s how the Elders survived the cruelties of the furless. Each age has Elders and a very special Black Fox. This age needs one more than most, wouldn’t you say?”

My ears flipped back. “What do you mean?”

Haiki seemed to contemplate me as though for the first time. “Where did you say you were from?” A wary edge had crept into his voice.

“From the south and across a bit, towards the rising sun.”

“Not the Lower Wildlands?”

I chewed a claw in order to avoid his searching gaze. For some reason I didn’t want to admit I was from the Snarl, though I couldn’t imagine what difference it made. “The Greylands,” I said shortly, using the term of the Wildlands foxes.

Haiki stared at me. “I’ve never met a Greylands fox before. What’s it like there? Is it really as noisy and dark as you hear in the stories?” His eyes trailed over me. “Is that

why you were so much better at moving the rock in the stream? Was it some type of . . . of Greylands foxcraft?"

"I don't know," I told him honestly. "I used the scraps of skill I've learned since leaving my den."

"You aren't with family?"

A shadow crossed my thoughts and I focused on my paw, gnawing away at a clump of dried mud. "I'm travelling alone."

Haiki leaped to his paws. "Me too!" He promptly sat, his tail jerking around his flank. "They've all gone." A whine touched his voice.

I looked up. "Gone?"

Haiki sighed. "All of them, the whole skulk. I was trying to catch this rabbit, you see. Not a normal rabbit! It had a fuzzy white tail, and white spots on its fur. I thought if I caught it I'd make Ma and Fa proud." He dropped his head on to his forepaws. "But the rabbit escaped down a hole . . . and when I got back, the skulk wasn't there."

A chill caught the back of my neck. It was like what had happened to my own family.

Haiki dropped his voice. "That's why I'm going to the Elders. If I want to find my family, I'm going to need help. I didn't know where else to go. The Elders are the cleverest foxes in all the Wildlands. They have to help me, don't they?"

I tipped my head in understanding. My voice was tight when I spoke. "Do you know where your family went?"

“I don’t,” he said quietly. “But I know they didn’t leave by choice. And I know who took them. He must have used his wicked spells. His strange pale eyes, that shrub of a tail. He’s the one who took my family.”

A hiss escaped my throat. I didn’t need to ask who Haiki meant.

Wicked spells . . . that shrub of a tail.

It was the fox who had ordered my parents’ deaths. The one who had killed my Greatma. Stealer of wills, master of foxcraft. I still didn’t know who he really was.

I only knew what Siffrin told me.

He built his den in the Deep Forest, hidden among ancient trees. They say he bends foxcraft to his command. The skulks from the Marshlands spoke of strange noises from the forest, odd smells and disappearances . . .

It could only be the Mage – the lord of the Taken.



3

The air about me felt sticky, trapped in a mizzling rain that carried no breeze. The cool sky didn't penetrate the web of vines between the branches. Peering overhead, I trained my eyes on the canopy, searching for shards of light. Was it day or night? No sunshine pierced the gloom beneath the trees, no hint of Canista's Lights. Only a faint yellow haze hung in the air, enough to capture shadows and cast them over the ground before my paws.

Beetles of terror crawled across my belly. What was this place?

Life as I knew it did not dwell here. No songbirds trilled in the branches – only the haunting caw of crows. I lowered my gaze. Nothing green dwelled on the forest floor. Not a single blade of grass. Instead strange mushrooms bobbed up from the earth like angry heads, shunting their way in the darkness. Invading the dank soil.

I sniffed one. Only a faint smell reached me, of something caustic and overripe. The fizz of acid coated my tongue.

“Watch out!” I yelled. “They’re poisonous.”

But when I turned to the fox by my side, his eyes were blank.

I woke with a growl in my throat.

“What’s wrong?” A soft grey face was staring at me in alarm.

Dawn was rolling over the mountain. Its warming sun gave the rock a rosy flush and lit the tips of Haiki’s fur. I could make out each whisker at his muzzle, each silvery hair along his flank. His pelt was longer than any I’d seen before. Despite his short, thick limbs his features were delicate: angular brown eyes, a narrow snout. My eyes settled on his foreleg.

What did I really know about this fox? Only what he’d told me . . .

I remembered the scar like a broken rose that I’d seen on all of the Taken – that I’d finally spotted on Siffrin.

On impulse, I sprang forward. Haiki recoiled but didn’t strike as I shoved back the fur of his foreleg with my paw. Beneath the long grey hairs was a glimpse of pale skin.

I fell back, ashamed. “I’m sorry.”

Haiki stared at me. “What were you . . . ? What was that about?”

I sighed. I would have to explain a few things. “I was just making sure that you were . . .” I struggled to find the words. “Like me. That your will hadn’t been stolen.”

He cocked his head in confusion. “Stolen? How?”

I wasn’t sure where to begin. “You told me about that fox who took your family.”

He rose to his paws. “What about him?”

“Is he known as ‘the Mage’?”

Haiki ran his tongue over his muzzle. “The Mage . . . Yes, that’s him. I never saw him, but there were murmurings among lowlands foxes.”

“I’ve heard things too. I’ve seen the Taken, and I heard that the Mage was responsible.”

Haiki stared at me with his steady brown eyes. “The Taken?”

“The Mage’s skulk, though it’s bigger than any skulk I’ve heard of before. The Taken aren’t like us. They don’t think for themselves . . . They follow his commands like slaves.”

There was something different about those foxes.

Something rotten beneath the skin.

“Their fur is bitter and smells of ash. Their eyes are lined in red and when you look inside you see nothing.” I cleared my throat. “Whoever they used to be, they are hollow now. I hope your family was spared that fate.”

Fear crossed Haiki’s face. “I don’t know what happened to them, only that they’re gone. But I know it was the Mage. My skulk . . . They weren’t the first. We heard rumours from the Marshlands. Then the darkness came to us. My

family disappeared, gone overnight.” He shivered, despite the warming sun.

“Mine too,” I whimpered.

Haiki’s ears twisted forward. “The Mage took them?”

I gazed at my forepaws. “Those loyal to him tried. My family fought back . . . Only my brother escaped, but I don’t know where he is. In the Wildlands somewhere. It’s all so vast, even greater than the Snarl. I’ve been here for days and seen nothing but trees and fields.”

“You mean . . . Your family’s dead?”

“My brother’s alive. I’m going to find him – I’m going to find Pirie.”

“That’s awful.” He dipped his muzzle and gazed at me with sad eyes.

“I don’t know who’s loyal to the Mage, who’s loyal to the Elders, or what it all means. So I’m wary.” I said it as much for myself as for Haiki – I needed to remember to be careful.

“That thing you did to my leg . . .”

I ran a guilty tongue over my muzzle. “I’m sorry about that. I was checking you weren’t one of the Taken. They bear a mark like a broken rose.”

Haiki didn’t reply right away. He stood and began pacing along the rock. When he spoke, it was over his shoulder. “Things are changing, Isla. I wish I didn’t have to think about it . . . A fox can’t live in this world and ignore it, not any more. You and I are the same. We’ve both lost our

families. Nothing matters more than family . . .” He turned suddenly, his eyes widening. “You should come with me to the Elders! They’ll help us. You said it, the Wildlands are huge – bigger than any fox can imagine. You can’t just go wandering without a plan. *We need* the Elders.”

He gazed at me in appeal. I thought of the nights I had travelled alone, watchful and anxious in this unknown terrain. It felt like a lifetime since I’d walked by another fox’s side, though it had only been days. That fox was Siffrin.

I tried to picture the Elders. Could they be trusted? Siffrin was Jana’s messenger, and he’d lied to me.

A memory pricked my thoughts – Siffrin’s anguished face as the snatchers pulled away in a mangler, dividing us for ever.

Greatma’s warning returned to me.

Trust no one but family . . .

I pressed my forepaw hard against the rock. “I have to do this alone.”

The amber sun was climbing over the mountain. Soon it would highlight whatever lurked on the other side. A forest? A valley? The Wildlands were full of green expanses. My tail-tip tingled. Perhaps I lacked the Elders’ wisdom, but I had a secret, a special power beyond the sight of others. I could reach out to Pirie through gerra-sharm. Our bond was so strong that our minds could interweave, collapsing distance through our thoughts.

The peak of the mountain disappeared into the clouds. It would take all day to climb but if I got there before sunset I'd be able to see in all directions. I would call to Pirie and he would guide me.

Haiki's tail was wagging like an eager cub's. "But we're both looking for our families."

My throat was dry. "Just my brother," I reminded him.

"Imagine it!" Haiki yipped. "The two of us across woodland and heath. You can tell me all about the Greylands, and I'll tell you stories from the lowlands. Soon there'll be rabbit cubs *everywhere*. Did you know that they're born without fur? The newborns are tiny, but so tender."

I frowned, my ears twisting this way and that. Had I heard a pawstep somewhere below? Rock was a difficult surface, like the greystone in the Snarl. Fallen leaves betrayed passing paws, but rock was silent. I craned my neck. It was hard to hear anything over Haiki's chatter.

"Though mice have been known to have cubs all year round, they're more active when it's warmer," he went on eagerly. "You can hardly prepare yourself for the taste of their cubs! My sister's an amazing hunter. She caught a litter once. She knew just where to look. They're quite hairless, you know, when they're born. Rabbits are too. Oh, I just said that! I wonder if that's why the furless don't have pelts – they're cubs that never grew up?" He didn't wait for me to answer. "And then, another time . . ." He trailed off. He

must have seen the look on my face. “Is something wrong? Ma says I talk too much.”

“I think there may be—”

I didn’t have time to finish. A furless rose over the edge of the rock, clutching a long brown stick. He was too far away to catch us, but there was something alarming about his frozen posture, and in the way he’d angled the stick towards Haiki.

A deafening explosion ripped through my ears. Haiki leaped from the furless as a burning hole cracked the rock above his head. I smelled fire and smoke, saw the furless rise and start chasing us, but no sounds reached me beneath the shriek of the stick.

I broke over the rock and pounded uphill. Blood pulsed at my throat as I scurried through crags and sprang over boulders. When I’d rounded a bend, I glanced back. Haiki was just behind me, his mouth twisted in a frantic yelp. I still heard the shriek of the stick, but beneath it I grasped his muffled words: “Run!” and “Hunter!”

Dizzily I lurched upward. Another look over my shoulder brought no sign of the furless, but I kept on going. My paws pounded over the sunlit rock, skidded on pebbles, and scabbled to grip on to them.

Up I climbed, fear driving me on. As the rock crooked ahead of me, I saw flashes of a valley down below. Hedges clung to the side of the mountain. Their branches glanced

my flank as I wove between them. Sunlight dazzled the rock, shining against my black forepaws. Haiki appeared at my side. A squirrel shot ahead of us and skittered up the rock face, staring down in alarm. I licked my lips but kept going.

At last I stopped on a smooth ridge of rock and Haiki flopped next to me. "Are you all right?" he panted. His words sounded muffled; the whine of the stick was still shooting through my ears. I shook my head violently.

"My ears," I mouthed.

Haiki blinked in understanding.

I looked up the incline of the mountain. It swept away steeply. Beyond it, the sun was high in the sky. Climbing was exhausting, and there was still so far to go. Turning, I surveyed the path behind us. There was no sign of the furless. I knew they couldn't run like foxes – it might take him half a day to reach us, and how would he track us? Greatma told me that they lacked a sense of smell. It was a wonder they survived without one.

I allowed my head to rest on my forepaws. Gradually, my breathing grew steady. Weariness edged through my aching muscles and I let my eyelids close. I found myself wondering about the Elders. Were they hostile, like the vixen I'd met on a wildway my first night alone in the Snarl? Were they thoughtful and wise, like Greatma? If they were really so mysterious, how had Siffrin grown close to them?

When I opened my eyes the sun had crept over the

mountain. All around me, the rocks were burnished orange. Haiki was lying on his side fast asleep. As I yawned and stretched, he opened his eyes.

“How are your ears?”

The shriek had dulled to a hiss. “Better. How about you?”

His tail gave a wag. “I feel all right now. Glad we got away from that furless.”

“I’ve never heard one make so much noise. He must have been furious.”

Haiki shook his ears. “It wasn’t him that made the noise, it was his stick. That thing can kill instantly. The furless have stumps for teeth and claws as soft as leaves. They use the stick to hunt.”

I ran my eyes up the rocky path ahead. “I’m going to keep climbing. I’d like to see what lies beyond these rocks.” *I have to get up there before the sun sets, I thought. I need to talk to Pirie.*

We took the rest of the mountain at a gentler pace, clambering carefully as the light deepened. Already the sun was bobbing lower on the horizon, throwing long shadows across the rocks.

By the time we approached the peak, I was ready for another rest. The air up here was cooler, banked in cloud. A sputter of dampness touched my nose and I breathed deeply. We’d made it to the top of the mountain! I turned to look over the rock, creeping up a shallow incline.

Instead of a valley, I was greeted by a giant lake of glistening water. Far beyond it was a craggy hill, with outcrops of grass clinging to its borders. At the edge of the horizon, the sun was starting its slow descent. Its body hummed deep red, like a fox's pelt, and it trailed a violet brush. With a pang of sadness, I remembered how Siffrin's eyes lit up as he spoke of sunsets in the Wildlands.

My gaze trailed back to the lake. Even the strongest swimmer could never cross so much water, or survive the drop to the surface. A lip of rock overhung it, a cliff that loomed over the glittering water.

I looked at Haiki. "There's no way down." I couldn't conceal the disappointment in my voice. "We'll have to go back the way we came." My tail curved around my flank and my ears twisted sideways.

"But it's so far," Haiki sighed.

I craned my neck. Over his head, I'd caught movement. A shadow crept across the rock. A head loomed into view.

A furless with a long brown stick.