

FOXCRAFT

THE TAKEN

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INBALI ISERLES



FOXCRAFT

THE TAKEN

*For Amitai Fraser Iserles,
our little fox.*

THE SNOWLANDS

THE WHITE MOUNTAINS

TAKU
GROUNDS

BUBBLING
GEYSERS

ICE
RAZORS

THE RAGING RIVER

(THE UPPER
WILDLANDS)

THE DARKLANDS

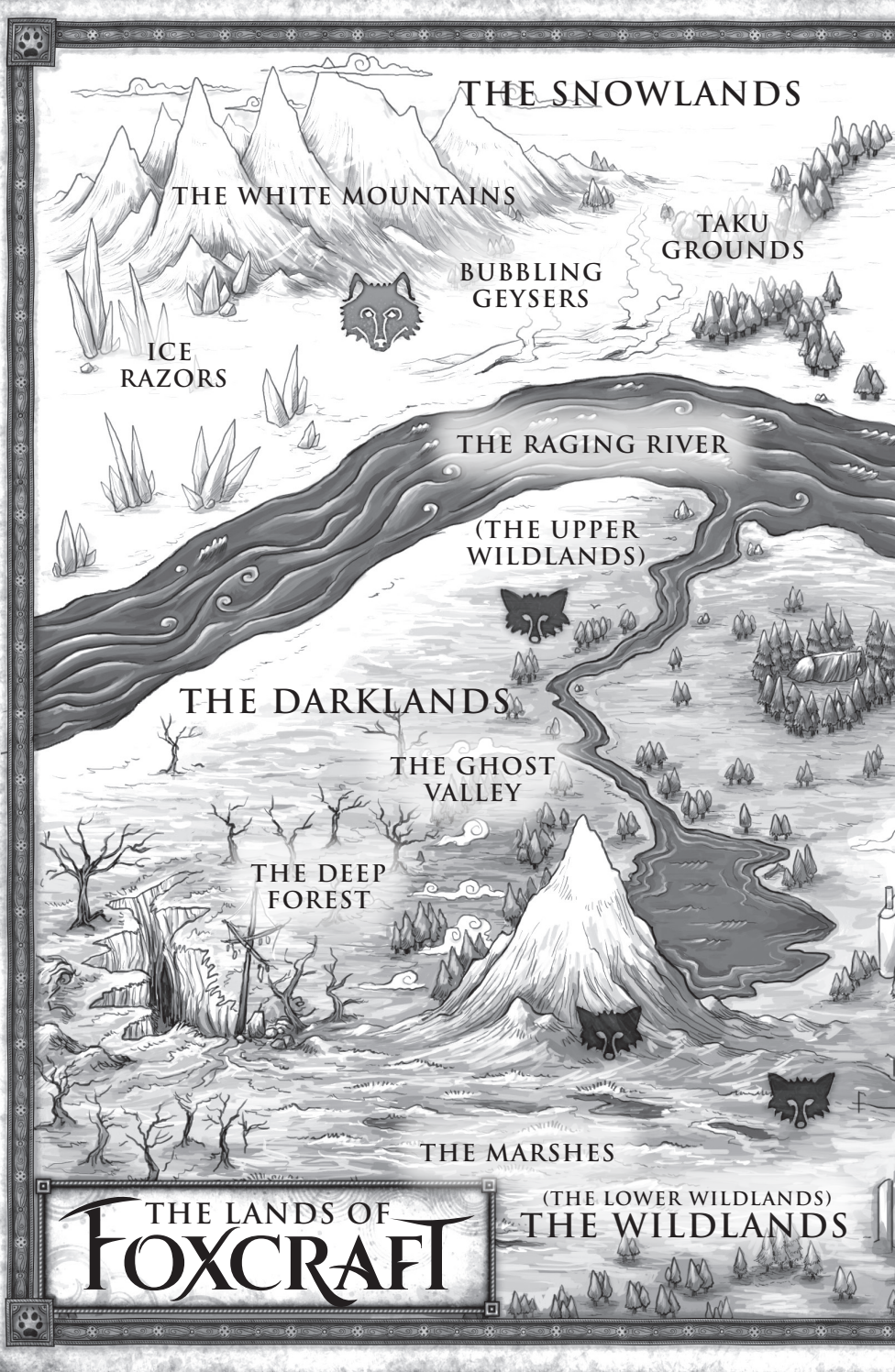
THE GHOST
VALLEY

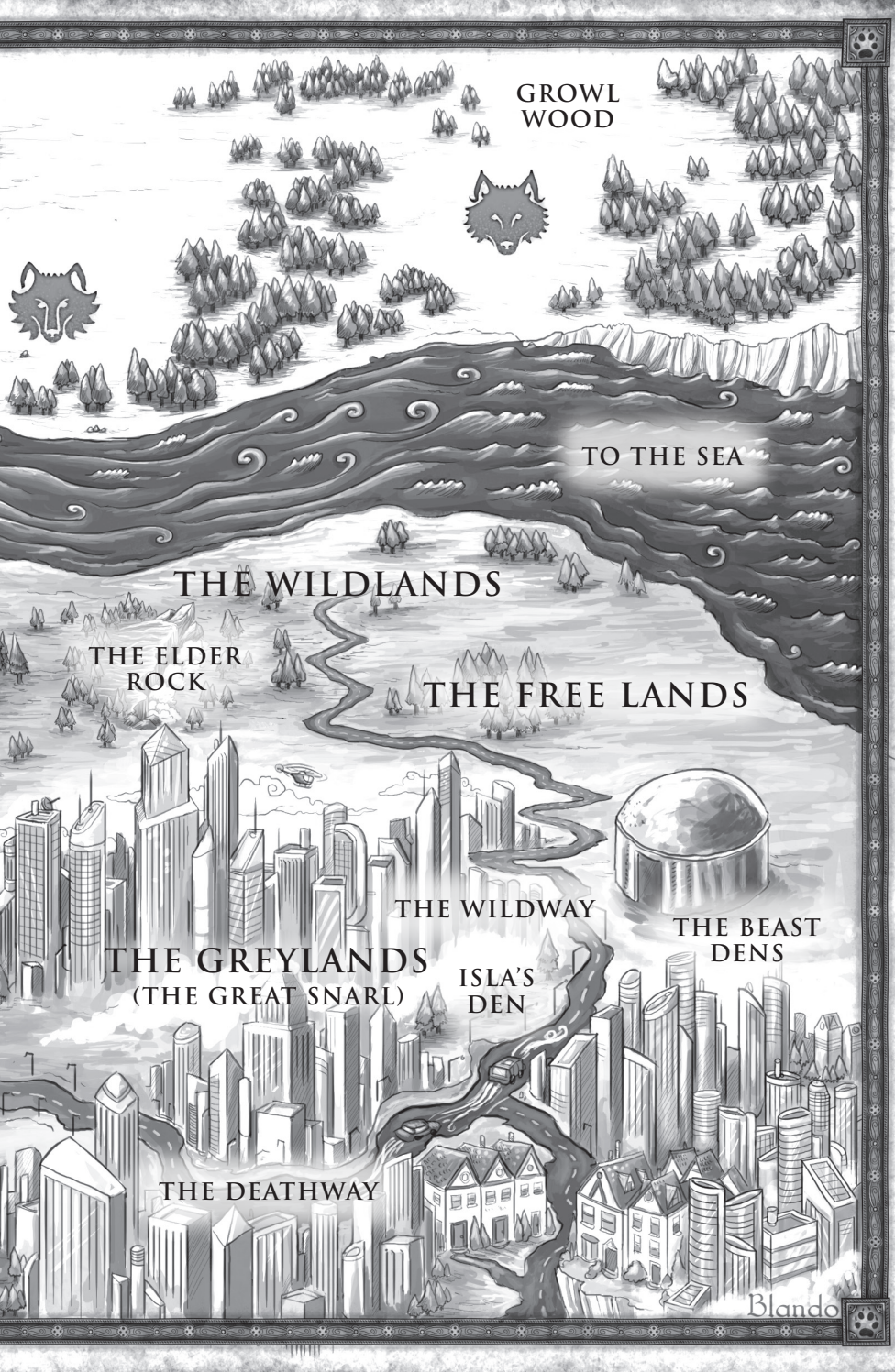
THE DEEP
FOREST

THE MARSHES

(THE LOWER WILDLANDS)
THE WILDLANDS

THE LANDS OF
FOXCRAFT





GROWL WOOD



TO THE SEA

THE WILDLANDS

THE ELDER ROCK

THE FREE LANDS

THE WILDWAY

THE GREYLANDS
(THE GREAT SNARL)

ISLA'S DEN

THE BEAST DENS

THE DEATHWAY

Blando



1

My paws slipped on dry earth. I kicked up shrouds of dust as I hurtled towards the fence. Swerving to avoid it, I righted myself and dived under the splintering dead wood. My pursuer was gaining on me as I grasped for the wildway, the tangle of greenery on the other side. I caught the rich aroma of hazel and cedar, the quiet and peace of the world beyond the web of grass.

His shrill cry shattered the silence.

With a surge of panic, I squeezed beneath the fence. Clods of soil clasped at my belly, tugging me back. My heart thundered in my ears. For an instant the dead wood enclosed me, pinning me to the earth. The grass mocked me, tickling my whiskers.

With a desperate shake I was free, lost in the green maze of the wildway.

Stooping snowdrops bobbed on their stems, snaps of white light.

I held my breath.

A pointed snout poked under the fence, stabbing the air. The fox's amber eyes caught mine, the black slits narrowed. Fear murmured at the back of my neck. I calmed myself; I was safe: he was too large to shuffle beneath the fence. He smacked against it with a growl, his slender black foreleg reaching through the gap, his claws grazing the earth by my paw.

I reared back, keeping my eyes on the fence. He couldn't go any further. He knew it too; he drew himself away, his leg disappearing behind the fence. I could hear him pacing. Flashes of his mottled red coat were visible each time he passed the gap. Then he disappeared from view and grew quiet. I was quiet too, inhaling the air.

I sensed the fox. The shape of his body. The silver-and-gold dappled brush of his tail. I pictured the colour in the eye of my mind and felt the bristles of his tail hairs as though I was touching them. For an instant, I saw the far side of the fence and tasted the frustration that tingled on his tongue.

I knew this fox like my shadow.

My ear rotated. A bird was cawing in a nearby tree. It was large, its feathers glossy black, and it paused when it spotted me. It dipped its beak, stepping nervously from foot to foot. Then it arched its shimmering wings as though summoning

storm clouds. With an angry caw it rose in the sky.

Wood shrieked and I spun round, my heart lunging against my chest. He had thrown himself at the gap! He burst through in a shower of wood chips. My stomach clenched and I bolted, plunging through the grass. I threw a look over my shoulder and saw him, for an instant, as he hunkered down to the ground.

In a flicker the fox vanished before my eyes.

The air in his wake had a gossamer sheen, like light bent through the wings of bees. The earth was a blur of grass and soil.

I knew his tricks and blinked furiously, catching a flash of his pelt. I rounded a tree stump in a flurry of grass. When I glanced back again he was in plain sight, his fur a blaze of red as he vaulted the stump. His breath was at the tip of my brush.

But I had a trick of my own.

I threw open my jaws and cawed like the bird with the shimmering feathers. I cast my voice to the twisted tails of the grass stems, to the fence, and the earth, and the clouds that gathered at the edges of the sky, mimicking the creature as best I could.

I zigzagged through grass that snaked around my paws, pulling and beckoning, slowing me down. I gave it up: the cawing – it wouldn't fool anyone.

I snuck another look over my shoulder. He was danger-

ously close now, his muzzle at my heels.

“Pirie!” I yelped as he pounced at me and his claws glanced my brush. I might have known that the birdcall wouldn’t stop him. I turned to face him, baring my teeth. “Enough!” I hissed.

His eyes caught the light. “Not till you beg for mercy!”

I started to run again, but with a final leap he slammed his paws on my back and threw me to the ground. I bucked against his grip, but he was stronger than me. “Mercy!” he gasped. “Say it!”

“Never!” I spat.

He pressed his muzzle to my ear. “Say it! Say it or else!”

“Or else what?”

“Or else this!” He dropped on top of me, covering my face with long lashes of his tongue, licking my ears, my nose, my whiskers.

I growled and licked my brother back, tickling his belly till he whimpered and twisted away, rolling in the dirt as I swiped at his neck. “You see, there is no ‘or else’! You may be bigger than me, but I’m cleverer. And I *always* win!”

He allowed me to assault him with gentle nips. “I let you win,” he panted. “I know what a bad loser you are.”

“You’re dreaming.” I clambered to my paws and shook off my fur.

Pirie looked up at me, his head cocked. “Whatever you say, little fox,” he gekkered mischievously – a series of high-

pitched, stuttering clicks. “Mad fox, bad fox, just another dead fox!” It was something we often chanted together, though Greatma complained it set her hairs on end.

“I’m not that much smaller than you!” I scowled.

He hopped, skipped and turned on the spot with a cheerful *wow-wow-wow*. “Little fox, little fox, you’ll always be the little fox!”

I sprang at him, but he ducked out of the way.

“And you’ll always be my foolish brother,” I sniffed.

He looped back to me, pressing the white of his muzzle against my neck. The game was over. I didn’t fight him any more. I closed my eyes and let the warmth of his body seep into mine. I could feel his pulse against my jaw. My own seemed to fall into step with it. We ran to the same *ka-thump, ka-thump*, growing slower now, *kaa-thump, kaa-thump*.

Fa stepped out from between the tall grass. “I hope you’re playing nicely together, foxlings.”

Ma appeared beside him. “Nicely?” Her eyes twinkled.

We hurried towards them, panting as they licked our ears, clicking and warbling.

“We’re *always* nice,” yipped Pirie, throwing me a look. Ma seemed ready to question this but stopped when Greatma approached. Like Pirie, her fur was mottled in thick hairs of silver, ginger and gold that glistened in the light. Her eyes were watchful, and she seemed distracted when we ran to her.

“The furless?” Fa watched her face for clues.

We stared over the tall grass. The wildway was a narrow area, little more than a path of green between grey territories, dotted with a few young trees.

The two-legged furless rarely entered here, but they were always close, baying, pacing, beating out the tempo of their noisy lives. The Great Snarl was their world, forbidden to young foxes: a rigid land of towering buildings and manglers with unblinking eyes. Snatchers stalked when the sun was up, furless with sticks who rounded up foxes that were never seen again.

Greatma pulled her gaze away. “It was nothing.” She lowered her muzzle and touched our noses. “You play so rough, you two. Pirie, you’re larger than Isla. I hope you remember that.”

“She’s tough as dried rat’s skin,” he sniffed, giving me a friendly shove.

Greatma’s snout crinkled. “All the same . . .”

“I can hold my own,” I piped up. “Mad fox, bad fox—”

“Stop that,” growled Greatma. “The Snarl is dangerous. You shouldn’t joke about it.”

Pirie moved quickly to lighten the mood. “Isla’s birdcall really threw me,” he told Greatma.

She cocked her head to watch me more closely. “Were you imitating a crow?”

My brush thumped the grassy earth. I was more inter-

ested in what Pirie was saying. “It really worked?”

Pirie panted cheerfully. “I didn’t think it was your voice at all. It was coming from nowhere and everywhere. It was . . .” One of his downy black ears flipped back. “It was like the wind was calling, and the earth, and the grass. I didn’t know where I was! Then the birdcall stopped and I realized it was you.”

I tipped my head and watched him. Was he teasing me? “But it didn’t fool you . . .” My voice came out a whine and my ears were flat.

“You should have kept it up. You’re getting too good at that, little fox!” He nuzzled my shoulder and I nipped him gently.

“You both have fine instincts,” said Greatma, a hint of pride in her voice. She lifted her snout and her face grew still. Her eyes stared unblinking, the tensing of whiskers her only movement. “A breeze is rising,” she murmured. “It is touched with river and ice. The rain will be here by first light.”

“But the air is warm!” I blurted out.

Ma stepped closer, her ears twisting so they pointed out to the sides. “What simple lesson can save a fox’s life?”

Pirie and I spoke together: “Watch! Wait! Listen!”

The tension eased on Greatma’s face and she looked at us with affection. “That’s right, foxlings. Watch, wait, listen . . . The answers are written in the song of the sky and the rhythm of the earth.” She raised her muzzle and sniffed again.

I mimicked her, inhaling the fragrance of grass and soil. I sensed no dampness, only the mild air of the deep sun. The clouds fringing the sky were white. I blinked at them, remembering from Greatma's teachings that only the dark ones were heavy with rain. She must have caught the confusion in my face, as she gave my nose a reassuring lick.

Fa trod next to us. "We should move the kill. It's in a shallow cache. The rain will spoil it."

Fa and Ma started towards the fence. Greatma trailed behind them, throwing a quick, anxious glance into the sky. They were too big to crawl under the gap where the wood was broken – even where Pirie had burst through and made it larger. They skirted along the edge of the wildway to the far side of the fence. There was a tree there with a drooping branch that bridged our patch. Pirie knew about this tree, just as I did – we'd wobbled along the branch many times. But he'd never have used it during our chase. Play had rules – we both understood that.

"Come on," called Ma.

I wasn't ready to leave. There was a sweetness in the air. Were berries hidden in the tangle of grass? I licked my chops.

Pirie was busy with a stick, rolling it in the grass and gnawing on it like a bone.

I sat, ears flattened. "We only just got to the wildway!"

Fa called over his shoulder. "We'll come back later. Pirie? Isla?"

Pirie turned to follow them, abandoning the stick.

I rose to my paws. A deep sniff and I was certain there were berries. If I gathered a few and took them back to the den, the others would be pleased. And if I was quick, I'd still be there before them – Ma, Fa and Greatma had to move the kill.

Crouched down, slipping between the long grasses, I followed my nose. I shivered with pleasure, absorbing the aroma of earth and bark, the sour tang of leaves and insects in their bitter shells. I paused to tear off some snowdrops, which always looked better than they tasted. A large green beetle scuttled along the soil and I batted at it excitedly, tearing grass with a sweep of my claws. The beetle was quicker than it looked. It scurried towards the base of a tree where it was hard to reach, nosing its way between bucking roots. I plunged my snout into the soil, snapping and yipping, but instead of the beetle I brought up a mouthful of dirt. *Forget the beetle!* I told myself, my thoughts returning to berries. I sniffed and prowled around the wildway, but the sweet scent had faded. There was a new chill in the air that made me remember Greatma's warning of rain . . .

Of a breeze touched with river and ice.

I looked to the sky. Darkness was creeping over jagged grey buildings. The sun slunk low, trailing a crimson light. I turned back towards the fence with a guilty skip of the heart. Ma and Fa would be worried about me. I was not allowed on

my own in the wildway – was not even supposed to leave our patch without Pirie.

I retraced my steps to the fence and crawled underneath.

Our patch lay to the far side of the fence. It was a space we shared with the furless, though we were careful to avoid it when they were out. Like us, only one family used it – two adults, two young. Fa had warned us that they wouldn't be friendly, that they'd turn on us if we came too close.

We kept our distance.

Our den was set away from theirs, behind a copse not far from the fence. I gamboled towards it, thinking of the cache. Ma, Fa and Greatma would have dug out those juicy rats they'd caught last night. My belly growled and I picked up speed.

A bitter smell seized my nose. I saw flares of red light amid the darkness of the den. Smoke spun in slow plumes, murky against the last fizzle of sun.

A ripple of fear ran along my back.

Where is my family?

I didn't sense them.

I took a step closer. There was movement in the den. My chest unclenched and I bounded forward, that instant of confusion gone. Then my pawsteps faltered and the blood drained from my body.

The things that were moving in there – I could tell it wasn't them. It wasn't my family.

I backed into a cluster of ivy that hung off the fence, not far from the gap that led to the wildway. The den was a trench by the trunk of a tree, hidden beyond the copse amid fallen branches. It was hard to see what was going on in there. I could just make out the shapes of unfamiliar foxes, maybe five or six, creeping about, digging and yelping to each other. What were they doing? Didn't the smouldering earth singe their paws? I squeezed deeper behind the ivy, holding my breath as they climbed, one by one, from the den.

They stepped on to the grass, snouts low, ears pricked. They were met by a thickset vixen who trod towards the entrance, her brush curling around her flank. From behind the tumbling ivy I could see her short, round ears and her lumbering frame. Her fur bunched at her shoulders, as though she had too much of it. She thumped a forepaw on the earth. Her ears swivelled around and the other foxes looked at her.

A growl rumbled in the vixen's throat. One grey eye glared across our patch. Where her other eye should have been, there was nothing at all – a sunken cave of darkness.

I could not control my shivering legs or the acid that stole the breath from my throat.

“Death,” she hissed, and the foxes stiffened. “The Master has spoken – all traitors will die!”

The foxes rolled back on to their paws, preparing to fight. But who was there to challenge them?

Where was my bold, courageous Ma? Where were Fa's protective jaws? I thought of my brother and wise, old Greatma. *Where has my family gone?*

The vixen's lips peeled back as she snarled, revealing a row of serrated teeth.

I gasped as I shrank against the wall. It was a tiny sound, like the wings of a moth.

But the vixen froze.

Her head shot around.

Her single grey eye was gleaming with menace. It roved over the ivy and seized on me.



2

The vixen stepped nearer, a loping movement. One leg was too short, perhaps once broken. I folded in on myself, becoming as small as possible – a speck of dirt on the wooden fence. I wished I had mastered Pirie’s tricks for disappearing. Had the vixen glimpsed me? Would she pick up my scent?

She paused only brush-lengths in front of me. Fear coursed through my body in sickening waves. The vixen reached out a paw and gnawed at a burr. Was it possible she hadn’t seen me with that piercing grey stare?

Her whiskers twitched. “Did you say there were only four?”

A tawny fox drew next to the vixen. The rest of the strange skulk was still standing at attention, ready to pounce. The tawny fox had a slender gait. Her narrow brush dusted the ground. I noticed a strange scar near the top of her foreleg – a pattern like a broken rose, beautiful and ghastly. “The

parents and the foxling son. There was a greatma too.” She had a jittery voice.

I whimpered inside. *Where is my family?*

The vixen’s whiskers flexed with tension. “Them and no others? Just one cub born to the ma of the den?”

The slender fox’s ears pricked up. “One cub, Karka, four foxes in all. Have you reason to think—”

The vixen wheeled around and snapped at her. “I told you not to ask questions!”

The slender fox cringed. “I’m sorry,” she mumbled.

That single grey eye glowered into the gathering darkness. For a moment the vixen took in the tall, square building that was the den of the furless. Light flickered through one of its large spy holes. “You never know who could be listening . . . The Elders have eyes, hooded eyes everywhere!”

My heart thundered in my chest. It was all I could do not to turn and run, back beneath the fence to the wildway. They would hear – they would catch me.

The thickset fox shook out her fur. I smelled cinder and ash. “Our enemies will not get far. Tarr is already searching. Traitors, all of them!” She slammed down her forepaw.

The other foxes threw back their heads. Their voices rose in haunting cackles. “Traitors!” they cried. “All of them, traitors!”

I huddled to the earth as the vixen turned. She began to lead the others beyond the den, loping over the fallen branch to the wildway.

I could breathe again, but only just. I hurried to the den. The embers were low, the last crackles of charcoal drifting like mist. I peered inside, taking in the ash that coated the bed of twigs. There was a patch of dappled fur there, silver and gold; I spotted a red trickle of bittersweet blood.

I stifled a cry.

My family had disappeared.

Their scent still lingered on the bark of the tree trunk, the cold, bitter earth, the twigs on the soil. I turned to stare into the yard. The light was fading fast, the dusk a gloomy pelt that swathed the world in darkness.

“Ma . . . ? Pirie . . . ?”

My ears rotated and I listened. I could hear a furless creature inside its huge den, barking in a low voice. But outside there was no reassuring yelp from my parents; no playful yips from Pirie.

Instead I heard a rustle of leaves. There was movement near the fallen branch that led to the wildway. My heart leaped with hope. The silhouette of a fox – it might be Fa! It might be—

I made out small, round ears and a lumbering frame. In the vanishing light, the single grey eye flashed green.

My blood curdled in my chest.

“A foxling! I knew it!” Suddenly she was flanked by others, who balanced along the branch to the wildway.

They stormed the patch with jaws bared, howling and cackling.

I scrambled around and bolted beneath the fence into the wildway, breaking through the long grass, past the tree where the beetle had scurried to safety. My legs flew beneath me as I dived under a hedge, skidding on the ground of the other side. I was beyond the wildway, on the hard stone paths of the furless, squeezing between their legs as they stumbled in surprise. They pointed and muttered as I flew past. I tried to avoid them, scrambling up steps and under hedges to the shadowy lands behind their giant dens.

I sensed that the foxes were still behind me, edging along buildings, just out of sight.

I thought of Pirie and our games, the safety and comfort of his muzzle on my neck. My pace quickened.

My mind was a jumble. Why did those foxes come? What did they want?

I was scarcely aware of the world that whirred past my whiskers. The buildings were all a blur. I knew only one thing: that my family was gone, that our den was abandoned.

I had to find them.

A mangler howled and the ground thundered.

I leaped across its path without daring to look. In an instant I was panting on the far side of the deathway. I shied

against a wall as other manglers careened past, glaring at me with white eyes.

Manglers were the greatest hazards of the Snarl – boxy, hulking beasts with spinning paws and arched backs. They stared ever forward with bright, unblinking eyes, prowling the endless coil of stone paths we called the deathway. Their bodies were strangely hollow, and the furless rode within them. Though the deathway might look empty and quiet one moment, this was just another furless trap. Manglers were deadly fast.

I remembered Greatma’s warnings: “The death river claims more foxes than all other assassins.”

But the deathway was everywhere, impossible to avoid. Its many claws etched paths through the Snarl where shimmering manglers hunted night and day.

I had to find the place where the deathway ended. But no matter how far I ran, it was always there . . . What if it went on for ever? My legs quivered with exhaustion, refusing to be still. I struggled to catch my breath. When I blinked, I saw echoes of the burning fires of the Great Snarl, the floating brightglobes, the blazing eyes of manglers. It was a land of grey walls and hard dens, broken ground and thumping beats. My head spun and I clamped my eyes shut, waiting for the world to slow down around me.

At least I’d eluded the foxes. There was no hint of their scent on the evening air. But in doing so, I’d lost my way. I

cowered as another mangler screeched past me on the death-way. I wasn't supposed to be here. Greatma's voice again, inside my head, wrestling against the din of the Great Snarl: "The death river is the furless's cruelest trick. Tread it rarely. Never trust it, no matter how calm it seems." She'd be furious if she found out how many times I'd crossed it tonight. My brush sagged guiltily. But of course, Greatma wasn't where she should be either, not at the den.

I remembered the sharp tang of cinders, the scarlet embers that smoked without warmth . . . the trail of blood. I knew instinctively that the vixen with the grey eye would return to our patch with her horrible skulk. I was better off far from that place, and so was my family. If only we were together.

It was neither day nor night in the land of the furless. No trace of the sun remained in the sky, but brightglobes hung on straight-backed trunks, lighting the paths of the furless when it grew dark. I could hear their whispering hisses and feel the faint vibration of their thrumming. Dark clouds eddied above them, sticky with the promise of rain.

Clusters of furless dens blocked the horizon. Gleaming spy holes were cut in their dark frames, and I saw movement within: a furless prowling; the flicker of colourful screens. Turning slowly, gazing up, I noticed that the dens seemed to rise in one direction, creeping higher and higher into the sky.

Perhaps up there it was possible to look over the Great Snarl – to get a better view.

To find my family.

I stole along the bank of the deathway, making my way to the higher climbs. The Great Snarl was a grimy maze of fences and dead ends, of mesh and wire as sharp as talons. The furless liked their walls.

Walls to keep them in.

Walls to keep others out.

The Great Snarl was full of them.

My legs were throbbing but I couldn't rest. I trod along the greystone. I could feel myself rising, constantly rising, and when I looked back I saw the path behind me roll downhill. I couldn't see far – a building blocked my view – but I was encouraged. When I reached the top of the Great Snarl, the world would be clearer. I'd know what to do.

At last the ground levelled out into something that resembled a wildway. I was comforted by the scent of earth and whimpered with relief as my aching paws sank on to the grass bank. This wildway was much larger than the one by our patch. The grass was strangely short, as if gnawed to stumps. It sprawled across a hill, with tall trees circled by colourful plants. There was a building in the middle surrounded by fences.

I turned to look out over the Snarl with a sigh. It was a twinkling constellation of brightglobes. The ugly grey dens

of the furless had evaporated amid the glow. In the distance, I could see a huddle of towering buildings. They rose in strange shapes and sparkled like frost. One was pointed like fox ears. Another was round. But most were square, like furless dens, though even from this distance I could tell they were a great deal taller. Light shimmered from the buildings, enough to rival the sun. From this vantage point, it was almost beautiful.

I could not make sense of the crisscross of tiny grey lines beneath the brightglobes of the Snarl, which disguised the many tributaries of the deathway. I squinted my eyes and tried to pick out details.

Down there, a skulk of foxes was haunting the graystone with their ash-tipped fur.

Down there, was my family searching for me?

I lifted my muzzle to look for clouds. At last I saw the moon, a yellow ball in the dreary sky. My brush curled around my flank. The clouds were drifting, cloaking the moon in a hazy pelt. Its light paled against the brightglobes below.

I turned to the building, head cocked. It was different from others I'd seen. Instead of the usual walls of the Great Snarl I saw circles within circles of fences. Not the wooden kind, like the one that separated our patch from the neighbouring wildway. These fences reached into the sky and looked as hard as stone, each upright bar an evenly spaced black railing.

I padded towards the building, curiosity twitching at the base of my tail. A path cut between the grass, leading towards an archway over what looked like two great, closed doors. I avoided the archway and skirted around the bars for a few brush-lengths before slipping between them with ease.

It was as though I'd stumbled into an invisible mist. The air around me crackled with the scent of unfamiliar beasts: woody, fragrant, pungent, acrid . . .

I raised a forepaw and hesitated. There were creatures nearby, lots of them. They weren't foxes, they weren't furless . . . I smelled pelts, feathers and leathery skin. Ahead of me, further bars were cast in darkness. I paused, struggling to disentangle the jumble of odours, growing woozy with the effort.

I started to turn back towards the deathway. I didn't like this place.

Then I heard a squawk and my belly growled excitedly. Something tasty lived here. My ears pricked and I stepped lightly on my paws. I could still sense other creatures. From the strong, fleshy stench, some must have been large – even larger than the furless. I guessed they were sleeping, as I couldn't detect movement. I had to be careful not to disturb them.

Beyond further bars, there were cages. A lower fence ran around the outside – nearly as tall as a furless. The bars of the

low fence were widely spaced. I slid between them cautiously.

Why did the furless keep creatures in cages? What was this place for?

I took a step towards the closest den and spotted the outline of a great beast lying on its side. Its skin was thick as a tree's bark, and its face was wide and heavy with a pointed horn. It didn't even twitch as I passed, oblivious to my presence.

My stomach was churning, but a sense inside me urged caution. There was something very wrong with these strange beast dens, something *unnatural*. Again I wondered why the furless built this place of traps. Did they plan to kill the creatures and feast on their flesh? Why did they hoard so many?

I moved along the narrow bars to another den. I smelled dried grass and mud inside the cage – I couldn't work out what lived in there. There was a wooden structure where the creature must have slept. I sensed it was harmless – an eater of grasses, not flesh and bone.

By the third den, I paused to draw in gulps of air. My head was buzzing from all the odours. I closed my eyes, allowing the smells to fall into place. The creatures nearest to me had thick hides or pelts of fur. Deeper along the cages I was sure I smelled feathers. That's where I needed to go: to the birds.

To the one that squawked, announcing itself, inviting my approach.

I was heading the wrong way. As I opened my eyes and began to turn, I was struck by a pungent, musky odour. It was coming from the den in front of me. I couldn't see any movement. I crept closer.

The cage was empty now, but I could tell that something had recently lived there. Instinct hissed in my ears like an icy wind. Yet curiosity compelled me . . . I peered through the bars. There was a patch of grassy earth, some shrubs and a small pond. I strained to see further. Nearer to the bars, a tree had been hacked to a stump. Parallel grooves ran along the bark.

Giant claw marks.

A shiver ran down my back. The grooves were many times deeper than anything a fox could do. A creature of great power had been in this den.

I caught a whiff of something tasty. My eyes seized on a bone not far from the bars. There was a hunk of meat hanging off it, with globs of white gristle. My belly rumbled excitedly. I stretched a forepaw through the bars. I couldn't quite reach the bone. Yipping in frustration, I tried again. My claws prodded the bone, which shifted a whisker closer. I remembered how calmly Ma had eased some berries from a high branch, using one forepaw to draw the branch down and the other to hold it still. If I was patient, I could retrieve the

bone. This close I could almost taste it. I imagined the fatty meat in my mouth, the juices running down my throat.

Another careful bat of the paw and it was almost close enough to snatch. The hunk of meat was pink and smelled delicious. The bone was long and white as teeth. There were dents across its surface. Something had gnashed at the bone with mighty jaws.

I squeezed my paw further between the bars. Halfway up my foreleg I could feel the pinch. But my belly's complaints were louder.

I'm hungry, it told me.

It's late, I've not eaten.

Gritting my teeth, I shoved my leg deeper and nudged the bone. I lowered my snout, opening my mouth to scoop it up. This low to the ground, the scent of the creature was powerful. Its musk stung at the base of my jaw. My body tensed. I didn't feel right about this . . . The scent was too strong, too fresh –

A roar exploded from the dark side of the den. A monstrous thing bounded towards me. I jerked at my paw and yelped in pain. My foreleg was trapped! I crumpled with terror as the monster threw himself against the bars, his massive jaws expanding with a furious howl. Other creatures stirred in nearby dens. The squawking started up again, and I cursed the bird that lured me to this horrifying place. I yanked and twisted but couldn't pull myself free.

The beast dropped on all fours. His eyes were yellow like the moon, edged in darkest black. His frame was that of a giant dog, but with his broad shoulders and wild eyes, he looked much more savage. Pointed ears framed his enormous head. His shaggy white fur was flecked with grey, falling about him like a knotted mane.

“Fox-ka!” he growled in a voice as deep and dark as the earth. “Conniving, crafty wretch!”

I was astonished to understand his words. He must have been a cub of Canista – a creature like me – though I could hardly imagine how we might be related. What was this monster, this giant dog with fire in his eyes?

He dropped his shaggy head. His black lips curled back, wet with spit. “You have the nerve to steal *my* food?” he snarled. Wrinkles coursed his muzzle. Beneath his black lips his gums were pink, and his fangs were as large as a fox’s paw.

I opened my mouth but my tongue was dry, and the sound I made was barely a whimper. I was mesmerized by fear, by the frenzied rage in his yellow eyes. He glowered and I looked away, yearning for the comfort of my old life. Fa and Ma never warned me about monsters like this. If only they were here to help, to tell me what to do.

The creature pressed his muzzle near mine. “Speak!”

Although I didn’t look up, I could still feel his eyes boring into me. I cowered, lost for words.

My silence seemed to enrage him. “You have disrespected me, Fox-ka, eater of broken meats! You are a thief without honour, and now you will pay!” My eyes darted up to see the soft pink folds of his tongue. It was hard to imagine that a thing so fragile could hide in such a ferocious creature.

I tugged at my leg but couldn't free myself.

I wasn't even sure why he was angry. Was it because of the bone? “I eat rats!” I cried as he rolled back on his haunches.

His face contorted with disgust. “Rats?” he rasped with a twitch of his ears. “A thing that eats rats has no right to exist!”

I had just enough time to see his fangs yawn wide. Beyond the pink of his tongue, there was darkness.