

# FOXCRIFT

✧ BOOK ONE ✧

THE TAKEN

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# 1



My paws slipped on dry earth. I kicked up shrouds of dust as I hurtled toward 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 color 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 dangerously 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 anymore. 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 toward 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 gray 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 interested 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 toward 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 toward 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 gray buildings. The sun slunk low, trailing a crimson light. I turned back toward 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 toward 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 smoldering earth singe their paws? I squeezed deeper behind the ivy, holding my breath as they climbed, one by one, from the den.

They stepped onto the grass, snouts low, ears pricked. They were met by a thickset vixen who trod toward 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 swiveled around and the other foxes looked at her.

A growl rumbled in the vixen's throat. One gray 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 onto 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 gray eye was gleaming with menace. It roved over the ivy and seized on me.