

# FOXCRAFT

» BOOK TWO «

## THE ELDERS

Text and illustrations copyright © 2016 by Inbali Iserles

Map art by Jared Blando

All rights reserved. Published by Scholastic Press, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., *Publishers since 1920*. SCHOLASTIC, SCHOLASTIC PRESS, and associated logos are trademarks and/or registered trademarks of Scholastic Inc.

The publisher does not have any control over and does not assume any responsibility for author or third-party websites or their content.

No part of this publication may be reproduced, stored in a retrieval system, or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic, mechanical, photocopying, recording, or otherwise, without written permission of the publisher. For information regarding permission, write to Scholastic Inc., Attention: Permissions Department, 557 Broadway, New York, NY 10012.

This book is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places, and incidents are either the product of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously, and any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, business establishments, events, or locales is entirely coincidental.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available

ISBN 978-0-545-69084-3

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

16 17 18 19 20

Printed in the U.S.A. 23  
First edition, October 2016  
Book design by Nina Goffi

# 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 onto 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 gray-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 slimmed 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 gray-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 gray-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 center 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 toward 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 backward against the stream. I launched myself onto 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 gray-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 wild-way 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 toward 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."