



# WHITE FOX

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## CHAPTER 1

# *Secret Language and Legend*

Faraway at the North Pole, the night was quiet and serene. A blue aurora of light flared to life against the black velvet sky, winding through the brilliant stars like a lithe, shimmering curtain. The vast snowfields and hills were waking from their deep slumber, a soft breeze stroking the drifting snow, swirling up the glittering crystals.

Beneath the thick snow, there was an underground den. The inside of the den was pitch-black, but the distinct sound of voices

trickled out nonetheless.

‘Mama!’ a child called.

‘What is it, darling?’ the mother asked, smiling.

‘I can’t sleep.’

‘You napped too long this afternoon, didn’t you?’ the mother gently teased.

‘Mama, tell me a story. Can you tell me about Merla again?’

‘You’ve heard that one so many times.’

‘I still want to hear it!’

‘OK, if you want to hear it, Mama will tell you,’ the mother said lovingly. ‘More than a thousand years ago, Merla was the Great Sage of the Arctic foxes. It’s said that her entire body was covered in fiery red fur, which is extraordinarily rare for Arctic foxes . . .’

The little white fox listening to the story is the hero of our tale: Dilah. He was curled up against his mother’s chest, tightly wrapped in her big tail, snug as a bug. He listened to his mother’s story, the tip of his nose nudging her chin, feeling like the happiest little fox in the world.

Dilah's family den was buried deep beneath the snowfields of the Arctic Circle, soft hay strewn inside, making it feel warm and cosy. When Dilah's older brother Alsace turned one (the age when foxes become adults), he'd left home to join a skulk of Arctic foxes and live an independent life – that was before Dilah was even born. Now that five-month-old Dilah was the only cub, his parents focused all their love on him. At bedtime, he'd pester his mother to tell him stories, and during the day, he'd beg his father to give him piggyback rides. Young Dilah didn't seem to have a care in the world.

Dilah's family had moved three times since his birth. They kept moving from one hidden place to another, always avoiding contact with other animals. Strangely, no matter where they ended up, a few white foxes would always track them down. Each time, Papa would send Dilah away and talk to them in private. Growing up like this, Dilah hadn't made a single friend.

At the end of the snowfield, there was a small town called Lapula. The people who

lived there were cut off from the rest of the world. In the northern part of town sat a small two-storey house, the red roof blanketed in thick snow, the chimney puffing black smoke toward the sky. The stone path from the front door had been recently cleared – both sides piled high with snow – and led straight to a white pine fence. A black van was parked in the yard, where several hardy pine trees grew.

Dilah often wandered near the house – a little closer every day. The morning after his mother's story, he watched as a man drove the van up to the gate as usual, the engine rumbling, the exhaust pipe spitting out smoke. Dilah came over to the fence by the house and sat on the snow, peering through the window as two children bounded down the stairs, the creaking of the wooden steps audible to his keen ears.

'Bella, your hat's on inside out!' the children's mother cried. She had curly blonde hair, Dilah noticed. 'And Peter, if you wear your scarf this way ever again, I promise I won't knit you a new one next winter! Now hurry up or you'll be late for school.'

Peter giggled and tied the scarf tightly over his mouth.

The woman opened the front door, Peter and Bella bouncing outside behind her. Peter had on thick blue gloves, a blue hat, a yellow scarf and a colourful fluffy coat. Bella carried a backpack and wore a heavy pink coat and tall white hat with a giant pom-pom on the tip. She looked like a snowman.

Though Papa had warned Dilah more than once to stay away from humans, a fierce curiosity glued him to the ground. He couldn't take his eyes off the house that puffed smoke, the car that made rumbling sounds, the colourful clothing . . . Humans were so fascinating!

'Get in the car, kids!' the man said, rolling down the window of the van.

The mother went over to the car and opened the door. 'Peter, try to pay attention in class. Your teacher has complained to me several times!'

'Yes, Mum,' Peter said impatiently, trudging over to the car door.

'Oh! Peter, hurry – look quickly!' Bella

exclaimed, her little finger pointing at the fence.

Peter gazed beyond the yard. 'Wow!'

Dilah was frightened but thrilled. He stayed perfectly still, his heart beating terribly fast. He was perched on the ground like some sort of magical snow creature: a pair of bright and piercing black eyes, two small round ears, and a large bushy tail trailing behind, his pure-white body nearly blending in with the snow.

'It's so beautiful!' the woman sighed.

'What is it?' The man stuck his head out the car window, straining to catch a glimpse of Dilah, his entire face turning red from the cold. 'Oh, an Arctic fox . . . you don't see those too often.'

Bella gave Dilah a friendly wave, and Peter whistled. Dilah cocked his head, curious.

'OK, kids. You're really going to be late, now. Get in the car!' the woman urged, looking at her watch.

'But Mum,' Bella said softly, 'can't we—'

'Perhaps you'll have another chance later,' the woman said, smiling. 'Maybe our little

friend will be back.’ She picked up Bella and kissed her, then gave Peter a peck on the forehead. Peter seemed like he was about to protest.

‘Bye!’ Bella called to Dilah in a sweet voice, hopping in the car and waving again. Peter climbed awkwardly in after her.

‘Say goodbye to Mum,’ the man said.

‘Bye, Mum.’

‘See you tonight,’ replied the woman, wrapping her coat around her body.

The car and the roar of its engine faded away. The woman watched as it grew smaller and smaller, then suddenly remembered the small white fox. Turning around, she found there was no sign of him, only a trail of clover-shaped paw prints left behind in the snow.

From then on, Dilah was like a bee drawn to a flower – he couldn’t help but sneak over to the house and quietly study the family, spying on their happy life, and never telling his parents. Sometimes the children noticed Dilah. Bella always made a fuss and called for her mother to come watch with her, while Peter would tiptoe over to the fence alone and extend

a friendly hand. The children even worried that Dilah might freeze when it got especially cold, and wanted to dress him in their own hats and scarves. But because of Papa's warning, Dilah never let the children get too close.

Dilah thought about the family day and night, longing to be human. He dreamt about how wonderful it would be if he, his father, and mother could become humans, live in a house that puffed smoke, ride in a car that made rumbling sounds and wear colourful clothing . . . what a rich and varied life! If they were human, he was sure they wouldn't have to move around so much. Humans were the kings of the animals: they were never afraid.

One evening, as the sun was setting, the western horizon aglow and casting blood-red light on to the snowfields, steaming white smoke billowed from the chimney of the small house. Dilah sat close to the fence surrounding the garden, fascinated as always by the movements of the humans inside. It wasn't until the family drew the curtains that Dilah realized just how late it was getting – he turned tail and

headed home, knowing his parents would be worried.

He hurried back to the den, only to discover that his parents were nowhere to be found. They must've gone to catch lemmings. He crouched just inside the mouth of the den, looking out, patiently waiting, his stomach growling with hunger.

The dark night unfurled its wings, sparkling stars slowly climbing up the evening sky. Mama and Papa still hadn't come back, and Dilah was growing restless – today's food must've been hard to find. Just then, he heard heavy wheezing and saw a shape approaching through the gloom. Dilah leapt out of the hole in the snow to greet his parents as they returned from the hunt, but the shocking sight that awaited him would haunt him for many nights to come.

His mama was struggling to reach the entrance to the den, her stomach streaked with blood. Dilah drew in a deep, cool breath. What was going on?

'Mama, what is it? Where's Papa?' Dilah

looked at his mother with watery eyes.

‘Your father – he . . .’ She hesitated.

‘What happened to him?’ Dilah asked, his voice cracking.

Avoiding Dilah’s gaze, she staggered back into the den and collapsed on the hay, her entire body shaking uncontrollably.

‘Mama . . . what happened?’ Dilah couldn’t bring himself to think about it – hoping his imagination was far worse than the truth.

Outside the den, the sky darkened, and the cold wind began to shriek.

‘Dilah, we came across a human . . .’

‘Human?’ Dilah’s head jerked up at the almost forbidden word.

‘Yes, a hunter,’ his mother said sadly. A gust of bitterly cold wind blew into the cave. Dilah’s back was freezing, his chest suddenly tight. *Hunter.* The word left a scar on his heart.

‘We were looking for food on the beach. Who’d have thought a hunter would be there?’ His mother choked up, and could only speak between rasping breaths. ‘He raised his shotgun at us. We ran off immediately, but your

papa . . . he was shot . . . I'm hurt too . . .'

'Is Papa coming back?' Dilah's tears rushed out. He felt lost.

Sobbing, his mother said nothing. Dilah was overcome with despair. His father was dead. Never again would he take him to look for food, never again would he protect him, never again would he give him a piggyback ride. The wind outside the den howled even more mournfully. A scattering of snowflakes floated in the air. A blizzard was coming.

'Dilah, my darling, my time is running out. There's something I must tell you. Whether you succeed is up to you,' Mama said, clearly fighting to suppress the pain in her stomach.

'No, Mama! You'll get better soon.' Dilah tried to comfort her. Her weak voice made his heart sink. 'When you're better, I'll bring you out to rest in the sun!'

'I'm like the snow outside: by the time sunlight arrives, I'll be gone.'

'Mama, don't talk like that!' His eyes welled up with tears. Trying not to let them fall, he nudged his mother with the top of his head.