



WHITE FOX in the forest

Chen Jiatong

TRANSLATED BY
JENNIFER FEELEY

Chicken
House

2 PALMER STREET, FROME, SOMERSET BA11 1DS

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The adventure so far . . .

Ever since he was a little fox cub, Dilah had dreamt of becoming human. Then one day, a day that was forever etched in the Arctic fox's mind, a rival fox named Carl hatched a plot that snatched away both of his parents. Before she died, Dilah's mother told him about an ancient legend: a long time ago, the patron saint of the Arctic foxes, Ulla, created a secret treasure like no other. Whoever found it would be granted the ability to transform from an animal into a human being, superior to all other living things! Determined to turn his dream into a reality, Dilah set off on a quest to find Ulla's treasure, guided by the precious object that his mother had left him – the moonstone.

On his journey from the Arctic, Dilah made several friends along the way, including a clever weasel called Ankel and a kind-hearted rabbit named Little Bean. They joined Dilah on his quest, braving all the adventures that came their way together. Carl, who was now the head of the Arctic foxes, kept close on their trail, eager to get his paws on the moonstone. A bloody battle broke out when Carl tried to steal the moonstone from Dilah. Just when Dilah had lost all hope, his long-lost older brother, Alsace, showed up, driving away Carl and saving the day – or so Dilah thought. In fact, Alsace turned out to be no better than Carl. He stole the moonstone, then imprisoned Dilah and his friends in a cave, threatening to kill them one by one if Dilah refused to reveal the moonstone’s secret.

Dilah found himself trapped in the cave alongside Ankel and Little Bean. He’d resigned himself to his fate, when a young female fox appeared in the moonlight at the mouth of the cave . . .



CHAPTER 1

Makarov's Loss

The guard fox snorted awake as the slender female fox approached him, her coat gleaming red in the moonlight. Dilah's ears stood up sharply as he watched from the cave's darkness.

'Miss Emily!' the guard exclaimed, leaping to his feet and shaking out his own red coat in embarrassment. 'What are you doing . . . I mean . . . to what do I owe the honour of your presence?' Ankel and Little Bean joined Dilah further towards the entrance, wide-eyed with

confusion . . . and a little bit of hope. Who was Miss Emily, exactly, and what was she up to?

‘Hello, Michael. Father sent me to relieve you,’ she said.

‘Oh . . . b-but your father, he never mentioned—’

‘Oh, it must’ve slipped his mind,’ Emily interrupted. ‘You know what Father’s like – his duties as head elder keep him so busy. He knows you’re all working so hard too, and wanted to give you a break.’ Dilah blinked, mesmerized by her enchanting voice.

‘Are you sure? Y-you’re not often on guard duty, Miss Emily,’ Michael stammered. ‘And there are three pri—’

Emily cut him off. ‘You think I can’t handle a puny white fox, a skinny weasel and a mangy rabbit?’ she giggled. ‘Come on, Michael. You know I’m tougher than that. Now, go get some rest.’

The guard appeared to relax. ‘Thank you, Miss Emily,’ Michael said, slinking off into the night.

Emily sat quietly at the cave entrance until

the guard was well out of earshot. Dilah, Ankel and Little Bean waited on tenterhooks. What were her intentions – was she really there to relieve the guard? Then, at last, she turned to the prisoners.

‘Dilah?’ Emily called.

Dilah stepped into the moonlight warily. ‘What do you want?’

‘There’s no time to explain. Hurry up and come with me,’ Emily said, scampering away from the cave.

The three friends looked at one another in astonishment. Dilah nodded, and they scurried out after their saviour, their steps as light as air.

But Dilah’s heart sank as he absorbed the scene outside. A small group of foxes blocked Emily’s way, sealing off the path down from the rocky cave to the grassy plains. He, Ankel and Little Bean hesitated a few paces behind. Emily didn’t appear to be afraid; in fact, her fluffy tail swished with impatience.

‘Miss Emily, you said that you only wanted to have a look at the prisoners,’ said the fox at the head of the group. ‘If we let them go—’

‘Listen, Frank – you’re my servants, all of you. So, blame everything on me. Say that I forced you to do it.’

‘But—’ Frank protested.

‘No buts. We don’t have time for this. Thank you for your loyalty and help over the years. Now, step aside.’ Although her voice was gentle, it was filled with steel. The small group stepped aside.

Dilah, Ankel, and Little Bean followed closely as they passed through the group and into the night – into freedom.

The moon was half hidden by dark clouds. A cool breeze rustled the grass, brushing past Emily, Dilah and his friends as they ran. In the white moonlight, Dilah admired Emily’s delicate features. She’d mentioned that her father was the head elder – clearly one of Alsace’s trusted foxes. Why would the daughter of the head elder risk her life to save complete strangers?

The sky grew lighter, ribboned with wisps of drifting clouds, the horizon aglow with the orange glimmer of dawn. They ran non-stop

for hours, until they were out of breath and barely able to continue.

Emily slowed to a walk and finally to a blissful halt by a small trickling stream, leading down from a mountain range in the distance. Once the animals had drunk their fill, Emily spoke. 'We should be safe here, for now.'

Dilah stepped forward. 'I'm glad you rescued us, Miss Emily. But . . . *why* did you rescue us?'

'Because I'm joining your quest, of course! And please, none of that *Miss Emily* nonsense. *Emily* is fine.'

'Sorry . . . what?' Ankel said.

Little Bean hopped confusedly from foot to foot.

'I said, you can call me—' Emily started.

'No, before that,' Dilah interrupted quietly. 'You said you're . . .'

'I'm joining your quest.'

'But why?' said Little Bean, bouncing over.

'Because I want to. And besides, I have the moonstone!' Emily triumphantly declared, lifting her head to display Dilah's beloved leather parcel dangling around her neck.

Dilah stared at the parcel in awe, shocked and delighted in equal measure. They'd escaped from the cave, they'd recovered the moonstone, *and* they had a new companion!

'How'd you pull that off?' he asked, grinning.

'I stole it from Alsace,' Emily said proudly, smiling back at Dilah. 'He's so full of himself, he didn't think anyone would dare.'

'But *why* do you want to join us?' Ankel asked, eyeing her suspiciously – clearly he wasn't quite as delighted as Dilah. And perhaps he had a point – why would Emily surrender a comfortable life and betray her friends and family for the chance of . . . what? 'This isn't a game – do you realize how dangerous this is?'

Emily's eyes flashed angrily. 'Of course I realize how dangerous it is, you patronizing little worm! I've given this a lot of thought. I've lived with the fox clan long enough – I'm sick of being little "Miss Emily". I want to see the world. I want to make a difference! And I want some actual respect, if that's not too much to ask. Is that a good enough reason for wanting

to join you?’

Ankel bowed his head sheepishly as Dilah spluttered a laugh.

‘Welcome to our group!’ Little Bean said with a warm smile.

‘Yes – we’re glad to have you,’ Dilah added slowly, turning over his thoughts carefully. ‘But . . . Ankel’s right about one thing: treasure hunting’s no walk in the park. I don’t mean any disrespect, Emily, but it’s far less comfortable than what you’re used to.’

‘No problem! My mind’s made up!’ Emily firmly declared. ‘Now, we should probably get going. We don’t want to give them a chance to catch up. But first . . .’ Carefully, she lifted the moonstone from around her neck and offered it to Dilah.

He accepted it, relieved to feel its weight around his neck once again. Just like that, Dilah’s treasure-hunting team had a new member. Still, he couldn’t help but be wary of Emily’s sudden appearance and apparent selflessness. It still didn’t make sense to him – if she simply wanted to see the world, there was

no need for her to betray the other foxes in her clan. Could it be that she, too, was entranced by the ancient legend, the promise that at the end of the moonstone's path, an animal could be transformed into a human? Or did she have some other motive?

'So . . . where next?' Dilah asked, gazing doubtfully far into the distance. Beyond the grassy plains, a never-ending mountain chain merged with the blue sky. Mist curled around the snow-capped peaks.

'That doesn't look like an easy route,' said Little Bean.

Ankel glanced around. 'But is there any other way, if we want to lose Alsace?'

Emily smiled. 'Ankel's right, that's where we have to go. It takes almost a week to get around those mountains up ahead . . . but I know a shortcut. There's a small path that cuts straight through – and I'm pretty sure no one else in Alsace's clan is aware of it. Once we reach the forest beyond the mountains, we'll have ditched them!'

'Emily, lead the way!' Dilah said.

Hours later, they reached a pass between two mountains. As promised, Emily's route was well-hidden – but she clearly knew the terrain like the back of her paw. The path was strewn with rubble, sharp rocks jutting out on either side. As they climbed higher and higher, Dilah's, Ankel's and Little Bean's footsteps grew heavier. 'C'mon! We're getting close!' Emily didn't seem tired at all. She bounded ahead, cheering them on as they trudged up the slope, zigzagging around boulders. 'And to think, *you* were worried about *me* being too soft for adventuring!' She giggled.

Blushing under his fur, Dilah picked up the pace.

Finally, they came upon a gigantic ravine between the two mountains, the sides so steep that they couldn't see the bottom.

'All we have to do is jump across,' Emily said brightly. 'And from then on it's easier. Come on, I'll show you where the gap is narrowest.' The path grew steeper and narrower. Emily carefully crawled along, close to the mountain

wall, Dilah and the others nervously trailing behind, half crouching and half climbing to make sure they kept their balance. No one dared utter a peep. The only sounds were the crunching of stones beneath their paws and the pitter-patter of their hearts.

Suddenly, behind Dilah, Ankel cried out and slipped, plunging a few pieces of rubble into the abyss below, his foot hanging over the ledge. He clung to the path, panting, as Little Bean and Dilah carefully helped him up. Dilah listened for the rubble hitting the bottom of the ravine but it felt like ages before the dull echo rang out.

‘Are you OK?’ Dilah asked. Ankel bit his lip and nodded, shooting a mistrustful glance at Emily where she stood watching a few paces ahead.

After nearly an hour of this difficult trek, they finally reached the narrowest crossing point and, one by one, leapt the small gap over the ravine. Dilah allowed his heart rate to slow as they perched high atop the neighbouring mountain, surveying the other side of the

range. A forest stretched on and on like a vast green ocean, lush and vibrant.

And a forest meant *food*! Dilah's stomach rumbled in anticipation.

'Come on!' Emily said, catching Dilah's eye. 'I'm starving too!'

Together, Dilah and Emily bounded down the mountainside, Little Bean and Ankel following, hooting and hollering. At one point, Little Bean lost his balance and fell on his bottom – but it was all right, he coasted down the mountain on his fluffy backside as though he were riding a slide! When he reached the valley floor, he jumped up and rubbed his hindquarters, laughing gleefully.

As soon as they entered the forest, they started foraging for food. Ankel found hazelnuts and mushrooms, Emily discovered all sorts of wild fruits, and Dilah caught a large salmon from a nearby stream. Little Bean busied himself with finding the perfect place to eat.

At last, they settled down beneath a huge tree to feast until their bellies were full. When

night came, the moon shone brightly through the trees on to the grass, casting mottled white shadows, the forest echoing with the drawn-out cries of birds getting ready to sleep. Ankel, Little Bean and Emily curled up beneath a tree and appeared to fall asleep quickly, but Dilah tossed and turned on his bed of leaves. Despite the big meal in his stomach and the safety of his friends nearby, he felt restless, his eyes wide open.



As he stared up at the crescent moon, he decided it was time to seek guidance from the moonstone again. Afraid of waking up his friends, he crept through the bushes to a nearby clearing, where a pheasant darted out of the undergrowth and flew off.

Dilah was about to unwrap the leather parcel around his neck when he heard footsteps behind him and whirled around. But it was only Ankel. ‘You’re still up?’ Dilah asked, surprised.

‘With all that’s happened lately, I had a hard time sleeping,’ Ankel said with a grin. ‘I guessed what you might be up to,’ he added, nodding towards the parcel.

‘You’re just in time,’ Dilah said, removing the parcel from around his neck and opening it beneath the moonlight.

Inside, a large blue gemstone with a golden crescent moon in the centre radiated a slowly revolving light. As Dilah and Ankel watched, the small crescent moon started spinning. After a few moments, it slowed to a stop, an arrow pointing in the direction of Ulla’s treasure. Following its line, Dilah gazed far into the

distance between the trees, wondering how much further they had to travel.

‘Look!’ Ankel softly cried out. He nudged Dilah, then pointed his snout down at the quivering moonstone.

Dilah stared at the crescent moon in awe. The moon engraving in the stone . . . it was different. Brighter. In all his months of travelling, he’d never seen it so bright!

‘Wow! What do you think it means?’ Dilah breathed.

‘Well . . . maybe Ulla’s secret treasure is close by?’ Ankel suggested, his voice tight with hope.

‘Do you really think so?’ The two friends stared at one another, eyes glowing. After travelling for so long, finally they could be nearing the end of their journey.

Snap. Withered leaves crackled in the dense bushes.

‘Who’s there?’ Dilah hissed, whipping his head to face the noise. Had someone been watching? An enemy? Dilah growled at the bushes as Ankel rushed to wrap up the moonstone, its light extinguished by the leather binding.

The forest fell deadly silent. As Dilah's eyes adjusted, he saw a pair of glowing green eyes peering suspiciously at them through the branches and leaves. Scared out of his wits, clutching the moonstone to his chest, Ankel drew in a breath – he appeared to be on the verge of letting out a blood-curdling scream.

'Come out!' Dilah ordered, stepping in front of his friend.

'Dilah, it's me,' a familiar voice called out. The creature stepped out from the bushes: Emily. The suspicious expression in her eyes had disappeared completely, her face now unreadable. Ankel let out his breath in a huge, relieved huff.

'What're you doing here?' Dilah asked.

'When I woke up, you guys were gone. I was worried something had happened to you, so I came to check,' Emily said calmly.

'Why were you hiding in the bushes?' Ankel asked, bristling, apparently recovered from his fright.

'You had your backs to me, and it was dark. I wasn't sure who you were,' she explained.

Ankel raised an eyebrow.

‘All right,’ said Dilah, ‘so it was just a misunderstanding. Let’s head back.’ He hung the moonstone back around his neck and turned in the direction of their campsite.

‘Wait,’ said Emily. ‘Aren’t you curious to see where the moonstone is leading?’

‘We can do that in the morning,’ said Ankel. ‘We should get some sleep.’

‘But it was glowing brighter, right?’ Emily turned towards Dilah. ‘Don’t you think there could be something *really* close by?’ Emily sniffed the air. ‘I don’t know about you, but I smell an adventure!’

Dilah’s face brightened. He glanced at Ankel. ‘You go back, if you want.’

The two foxes headed though the forest in the direction the moonstone had indicated. Ankel trailed behind, lost in thought, his tiny paw covering his mouth as he gently gnawed on the claw of his index finger . . .

Before long, the trees became thinner and thinner, and they found themselves approaching the foot of what appeared to be a volcano

that had erupted long, long ago. The ground was littered with black volcanic rocks. As they approached, Dilah noticed how peculiarly shaped the rocks were: some tall and perfectly straight like plants, a few huddled over like small animals, while others resembled larger beasts baring their fangs and brandishing their claws. Had all of these creatures been caught in the volcano's path?

'How horrible!' Dilah said.

Then Dilah's sensitive nose caught a whiff of a familiar scent – possibly another fox, but he couldn't be sure.

'Do you smell it too?' Emily asked, sniffing the air.

'I'm not sure, but I think there might be foxes nearby.'

'What?' Ankel twitched in fear.

'Don't worry – it's not Carl or Alsace,' Dilah said. 'This is a fox we haven't encountered before.'

The smell grew stronger and stronger as they crept forward cautiously. After a while, a large black rock appeared – different from the others

along the path. Unlike the plant and animal forms, the rock was tall and flat, with a small arched gap at the bottom. A white form was wriggling through the gap, towards the friends.

‘Wait here,’ Dilah whispered to Ankel.

Dilah and Emily slowly approached the form – soon Dilah recognized an Arctic fox. He had a large build, but he’d lost at least half of his fur. The remaining fur was a mess, matted and clumped with twigs and dust. His bare skin was speckled with scars, his bald tail crusted with ringworm scabs. He sat on the ground in front of the odd tall rock, focused on eating a rotting crow carcass, black feathers strewn across the dirt.

‘We’d better stay away,’ Ankel hissed, frowning, from behind Dilah and Emily.

‘Don’t be stupid, come on!’ whispered Emily. ‘Maybe he knows something.’ The ragged fox, sensing movement behind him, turned towards the trio. He leapt to his paws, glaring at the newcomers. The stench from his body and that of the mangled crow was suffocating. Dilah took a few steps back, holding his

breath. But what was more disturbing was the expression of shock and recognition on the stranger's face.

'Nicholas . . . you're . . . you're alive?' he said, his voice rough and hoarse.

Nicholas. Dilah remembered the name – he'd been the patriarch of the White Foxes in Mama's tale of Gale and Blizzard. Then the stranger's eyes slid over Dilah's face. 'No, no, no . . . you're a far cry from him! A far cry . . .'

'Who are you?' Dilah asked gently.

'Who am I?' the Arctic fox repeated, his eyes blank. 'Oh right, who am I?'

'What're you doing here?' Emily asked stridently.

'Who are all of you?!' the fox suddenly bellowed, growling.

Dilah stepped a little closer, shooting a glance at Emily – this conversation needed a soft touch. 'My name's Dilah. I'm from the North Pole. These are my friends.' He spoke lightly.

'Dilah? Never heard of you,' the fox muttered, confused.

‘Just now, you called me Nicholas. Do you know him?’

‘What did you say? Have you seen him?’ the fox excitedly asked – then he hung his head slowly as his memory appeared to return. ‘No, that’s impossible. You can’t have seen him. My child is . . . he’s . . .’ He shook his head, his eyes welling up with tears. ‘Leave me alone,’ he said, and turned to walk away.

‘Your child? Nicholas is your child?’ Dilah called.

The old fox hesitated but didn’t reply. Dilah searched his memory for everything he’d been told about Nicholas and the white foxes’ complex system of leadership.

‘You’re Makarov, the second elder of the Arctic foxes,’ Dilah said. ‘Isn’t that right?’

The crazed fox turned to face Dilah again, apparently stunned into silence. He cleared his throat. ‘Makarov,’ he said in a hoarse croak.

‘Second elder?’ Ankel asked. ‘What does that mean?’

Dilah and Emily both opened their mouths to reply but instead, the elder drew himself up

straight and started to speak in a low, measured tone.

‘The leadership of white foxes is divided in this way: The patriarch oversees the entire clan. The head elder convenes and presides over meetings and safeguards the moonstone, a treasure that’s been handed down among generations of foxes. The third elder is responsible for migration, disaster relief and food distribution. The fourth elder commands the army. But the second elder . . .’ His eyes gleamed, and he appeared suddenly like a much younger, sharper fox. ‘The second elder’s job holds the most mystery and danger. He or she collects information and protects secrets, and also handles the toughest cases in the fox clan. We second elders know the most and thus are particularly vulnerable to ambushes and assassinations, and so we must be highly skilled.’

Dilah, Ankel and Emily blinked at one another in astonishment.

Makarov continued. ‘It’s good to see some foxes after so long. How are all the white foxes doing?’ he asked Dilah. ‘Arthur’s probably the

highest-ranking one now – I suppose he took over after Nicholas?’ Arthur was Dilah’s father and had been ordered by Grey, the head elder, to protect the moonstone.

Dilah swallowed. How long had this fox been lost in the wilderness? ‘Actually . . . Carl is the patriarch now.’

Makarov shook his head in apparent shock. ‘He actually did it. Carl’s always been ambitious. He and Arthur are war heroes, of course – but the status never turned Arthur’s head. Carl was different . . . but I never thought he’d go so far.’

‘Second Elder, why’d you leave the fox clan?’ Dilah asked.

The old fox’s eyes grew serious and sad. ‘As you know, my son Nicholas was the patriarch, while I served as second elder. He led the white foxes to victory over the blue foxes, driving the blue foxes out of the Arctic Circle entirely and securing his status among the fox clan. Carl, who was known as Gale, and Arthur, who was called Blizzard, helped him win that crucial battle and were hailed as great heroes. But if

not for Nicholas, the white foxes would've been wiped out by the war with the blue foxes. My son's contributions to the fox community and the entire species were huge . . . I worked hard to bring him up, giving up so much, watched him fulfil his potential . . . and in the end, all I got was . . . was a dismal death note. Oh, oh! Oh!' Makarov roared wildly, his strong body shaking violently, his limbs beating the ground.

Dilah stumbled backwards into Ankel, unsettled by Makarov's sudden change in temperament.

Emily shook her head. 'A death note? What do you mean?' she said gently.

Makarov slumped down. Moments later, he glared up at Dilah and Emily, a strange expression in his eyes.

'What're all of you doing here?' Makarov asked, squinting at the leather parcel dangling in front of Dilah's chest. 'Have you come all this way from the Arctic in search of Ulla's secret treasure, just like my son?'

Dilah blinked. Nicholas had been after the treasure too? 'We—'

Before Dilah could finish, the second elder rushed toward him at an astonishing speed, snatching the moonstone from around his neck. The old fox was quicker than he looked!

‘Hey!’ said Dilah, growling, ready to give chase.

But Makarov didn’t run away. Instead, he laid the parcel on the ground and opened it, rays of ghostly blue light shooting out from the moonstone, shining on his unkempt face.

‘This is it! This is it! It’s really it. The moonstone!’ Makarov let out a thunderous roar, gasping, his chest heaving. ‘You fools! You fell for the lies and are trying to track down that evil, bloodstained, unlucky treasure!’ He avoided the moonstone’s light as though it would burn him.

‘Evil, bloodstained and unlucky?’ Dilah was even more confused now.

Ankel edged forwards. ‘What do you mean by that, Makarov?’

‘Listen, young fox,’ Makarov started, fixing Dilah with his bloodshot eyes. ‘The secret treasure you seek is cursed by Ulla. Whoever

possesses it will suffer a fatal disaster. Every hero in historical records who is rumoured to have found it or possessed it died mysteriously shortly afterwards, without exception. Mark my words, none of you who seek the treasure will come out of this quest alive.'

Makarov's warning possessed a kind of cold magic, each and every word deeply etching itself into Dilah's heart. His fur stood up on end and he found himself completely speechless.

The sun had started to rise and, in the eerie silence, a crow swooped down from the red-washed sky and perched atop the huge rock, screeching and fixing Dilah with a death-like stare. It felt like an omen. What if Makarov was right?

Emily broke the silence first. 'Impossible! That doesn't make sense!'

Her words snapped Dilah to his senses, his shock fading. 'Why would Ulla place such a curse on the fox clan? To curse the offspring that the foxes are supposed to protect?' he said.

Ankel nodded thoughtfully. 'It's hard to believe that Ulla would curse his own followers.'

Makarov barked out a laugh. ‘Foolish weasel. It’s actually genius! The secret treasure is bait. Those who believe the rumours and want to search for the treasure are greedy opportunists who’ll stop at nothing to achieve their goals. As such, Ulla created a marvellous way to quietly eliminate the dangerous elements in the fox clan and maintain stability.’ Dilah couldn’t help but think of Carl – what Makarov said did have the ring of truth. Had Dilah really gone to all this trouble to search for a treasure that was actually nothing more than a cruel death? A trap for the power-hungry?

He shook his head, trying to think logically. ‘If that’s the case, then why do tales of the moonstone and Ulla’s treasure keep resurfacing? Why didn’t these rumours disappear after the first bad foxes died?’

‘There are always more bad foxes, little one. The moonstone automatically returns to the fox clan after completing its mission. The blood-thirsty treasure reappears every time the previous adventurers die, silently waiting to send a new group of opportunists to their deaths.’

Dilah lifted his chin. 'Not everyone who seeks the treasure is a power-hungry opportunist! Some follow the legend of Ulla out of hope, a desire to make things better. If we find what we seek, we could change the world. Surely Ulla recognizes that?'

Makarov let out another of his strange, hoarse laughs. 'Can't you see? How many unknown heroes and villains have fought to the death for this broken stone and the treasure it leads to? Some of them would have been good foxes, like you,' he said, now glaring at the moonstone as it caught the sunlight, glowing red, 'like my son. Blood flows like water to feed its power. *That* is why it's cursed.'

Dilah was silent. His belief in Ulla's treasure had been dealt a severe blow. The less he wanted to believe Makarov's words, the more they made sense to him.

'Like your son, you said,' Ankel ventured. '*This* is how Nicholas died?'

Emily's ears quivered with curiosity.

The old fox took a deep breath. 'One day, Nicholas came to me, beside himself with joy,

and said, “Father, I’ve been investigating our patron saint’s secret! I’ve decided to go and conquer it.” He set out from the Arctic accompanied by an underling, in spite of the opposition of the elders. During the year after he left, I suffered a lot, constantly worrying about his safety, waiting anxiously, until one day, the underling came back, mortally wounded. As soon as he handed Nicholas’s note to me, he stopped breathing. No one knows what truly happened to them. By the time I opened the letter, paws trembling, Nicholas had already been dead for weeks.’

‘What did the letter say?’

Makarov wordlessly walked to the foot of the arch and dug up a piece of worn-out leather, which he dropped in front of Dilah. ‘See for yourself.’

Everyone concentrated on the piece of leather, the writing blurred by wind and rain. Nevertheless, they could still make out the neat, confident symbols. Perhaps Nicholas’s elegant writing was a clue to his mindset at the time:

Dearest Father:

By the time this letter reaches you, I hope you're still in good health. I miss you very much.

Please forgive my sudden goodbye. I regret that I won't be able to receive your patient guidance any more. I shall die soon, and perhaps by the time you receive this letter, I'll no longer be in this world.

You must be wondering why I've written this letter. When I left the Arctic, I was already prepared to die to discover the truth of Ulla's legend. I wanted to confirm that legend with my own life. I'm not doing this solely for myself: if the stories and historical sources are to be believed, I must take this step — otherwise, I fear, no one else will. I know you'll be sad upon reading this letter, and I'd also like to apologize for my selfish behaviour. I have not done my duty to you as a son, and for that I beg

*for your forgiveness, and for you to forget that
you ever had a son like me.*

*I'll always love you,
Nicholas*

Dilah lifted his head to meet the old fox's eyes. He wasn't sure what to make of the letter – it wasn't straightforward, by any means. Nicholas had been prepared to die – but did he? 'Is it possible that Nicholas became human?' he suggested.

'Impossible! I knew Nicholas better than anyone. I raised him. If he became human, he'd come back for me, as long as I were still breathing . . . That's why I came here, to a place as close as I knew to the end of his journey. But in all the years I've waited, he's never returned – in fox or human form. He is gone. I know it.'

Dilah felt himself plunging into despair. If even a fox like Nicholas had failed, with all his experience and power, what hope did Dilah have of succeeding?

'I'll never see my child again!' Makarov

sobbed, suddenly overcome. 'Ulla, you stole my only child!'

He threw himself against the huge volcanic rock with a thud. Everyone stared, dumbfounded, afraid to stop him. A moment later, he slowly sank down the slippery stone wall, blankly staring off into the distance. He started to mumble under his breath about food and Nicholas and the moonstone . . . 'I'll find you,' Dilah deciphered from his incoherent rambling. 'Someday I'll find you.'

Dilah and Emily exchanged a glance. The old fox had retreated into his madness. Dilah carefully wrapped up the moonstone and replaced it around his neck, glancing at Makarov one last time before he turned away.

To think that this fox had once helped rule over the Arctic – now look what had become of him!

'Let's go,' Dilah said, his tone serious. The three friends walked off into the dawn.

They retraced their way to the campsite in silence. Makarov's words and the letter had

shaken the group to the core. Despite the warm sunlight, the forest unfurling all around, a shadow hung over them, and the air was tinged with an unsettling chill.

Dilah's mind was a jumble of mixed-up thoughts. He felt a dull ache in his stomach, as though he'd swallowed a bunch of caterpillars with wriggling antennae. *Ulla's curse . . . the bloodthirsty treasure . . .* These blasted words kept circling in his mind. Makarov's warning pulsed in his ears, the words gnawing at his will like a moth. He didn't want to believe that what Makarov had said was true, but it all felt oddly persuasive. It was as though death were a fanged spider, unfurling its web and quietly awaiting them, luring them in with a dazzling, enticing treasure right in the middle of the web.

Finally they reached the big tree – Little Bean enjoying a lie-in under its boughs – and Ankel volunteered to gather some breakfast. Dilah and Emily woke the snoozing rabbit and filled him in on everything that had happened. He blinked in surprise, scratched his floppy ears in puzzlement, but sat quietly, absorbing

the story. When they'd finished, he said philosophically, 'Well – the old fox has certainly given us a lot to think about.'

As Ankel returned with berries and nuts, the foursome settled down to eat. 'The thing is . . . what Makarov said is completely different from what Mama implied just before she died,' Dilah said hesitantly. 'And Mama knew the story from Papa, who had been close to Nicholas, I think. She said the treasure was magical. She said I should seek it out for myself – she wouldn't have sent me if she thought I was going to my death. So . . . was Makarov lying? Or were Mama and Papa?'

His mama's words returned to him as he thought back to the terrible day when she had returned from the hunt alone and mortally wounded. *Legend has it that the patron saint of the Arctic foxes, Ulla, created a secret treasure like no other. It contains an incredible magic that can turn animals into humans . . .* Ankel's voice returned him to the present. 'There aren't any holes in Makarov's story, plus, he has no reason to lie,' he said.

‘There is *one* hole – why did Nicholas leave behind that note? It sounded like he knew he was going to die. How did he know that?’ Emily pointed out.

‘Exactly!’ Dilah agreed. Finally, a glimmer of hope. ‘Why go on a treasure hunt if you know you’re about to die?’

‘Maybe he thought that the treasure hunt would be so difficult that he might die on the road at any time,’ Little Bean mused.

‘So, what did he mean by “confirming the legend with his own life”?’ Dilah asked.

Ankel clearly had an answer on the tip of his tongue. ‘He meant that if he could find the secret treasure, he could confirm the curse first-hand,’ he said smugly. ‘And you know the outcome. He died! He knew he was going to die. All of which proves Makarov’s story.’

‘Why would you go to all that trouble to confirm a legend, knowing that in doing so you would die and not even be able to tell anyone about it?’ Emily argued, her eyes flashing. ‘That makes no sense!’

‘I suspect he didn’t die but became human,’

Dilah said.

‘Then why didn’t he tell his father that directly?’ Ankel shot back. ‘Why did he tiptoe around the subject like that?’

‘That’s the big question.’ Dilah was excited now, his mind spinning faster and faster. ‘Maybe he was afraid of someone else getting hold of the letter?’

Ankel humphed, grudgingly admitting it was a possibility.

Dilah continued. ‘Nicholas also said something like *I’m not doing this solely for myself. . . I must take this step – or no one else will*. Remember? It sounds like there’s more to it than simply *dying!*’

The four friends pondered this as they digested their food. ‘Dilah, do you remember when we spoke to Lund?’ Ankel asked. ‘You know, Little Bean’s giant rabbit friend?’

Dilah nodded.

‘He mentioned the Spring of Reincarnation, he told us it was in the Enchanted Forest.’

Dilah chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully. ‘Even at the time I wondered if

that was where the moonstone might be leading us, if maybe the spring was the treasure. But Lund really didn't appear to think the spring would kill anyone.'

'Perhaps it's a different source of the reincarnation magic. Why don't we try to find it first?' Ankel suggested.

'And give up our dream?' Dilah huffed.

'No, that's not what I mean. I mean . . . um . . . the Spring of Reincarnation can also help us fulfil our dream, and it maybe seems a bit safer.'

Dilah glanced at Emily. 'I don't know . . . I wasn't there when you heard about this spring, but it doesn't sound quite as exciting to me,' she said. 'But if you're all convinced . . .'

Dilah turned to Little Bean. 'What do you think?'

The rabbit's nose twitched. 'I think it's a good idea. Finding the spring could be the answer to becoming human, but if it isn't we still might find something useful. What've we got to lose?'

Dilah sighed. 'OK, that's decided . . . but there's just one problem: does anyone know the way to the Enchanted Forest?'