FOXCRAFT

BOOK THREE

THE MAGE
FOR PETER FRASER—
FROM THE GRAYLANDS
TO THE WILDLANDS,
THROUGH THE
SNOWLANDS AND BACK
Mad fox, bad fox, just another dead fox.

I couldn’t shake the words from my mind. I used to chant them with Pirie when we lived in the Great Snarl. It felt like a long time ago, another age. Before the Taken arrived and my brother disappeared. When life was simpler, when days were short and twilight was filled with adventure.

When Ma, Fa, and Greatma were still alive.

Before everything changed.

My paws sank into deep snow. A gale was shrieking over the tundra. Gray clouds webbed across the stars, flooding the night with an ominous glow. Wisps tumbled from the sky, ducking and darting like panicked mice. A blizzard was rising over the Snowlands.
The clamor of the Raging River dissolved beneath the howling wind. My paw prints followed me like a shadow. I squinted into the gloomy sky. I could make out a forest of spruce trees. Tall trunks shot up against ice-capped mountains. Beneath the branches, I’d find shelter from the storm.

A shriek and my head whipped around, heart lurching against my ribs. Was it only the wind, or something else? Someone else?

The Snowlands expanded before me in all directions, a hostile world of churning flakes and freezing air.

The realm of the snow wolves.

The screeching gales disguised their calls. The tumbling snow concealed the land in its shimmering pelt. Were wolves active by day, like dogs? Or, like foxes, could they hunt at night? I knew so little about our savage, distant cousins.

I blinked hard. If wolves were prowling, I couldn’t see them.

I couldn’t see much through the blizzard. I could hardly make out the spruce anymore, just a faraway jumble of thick brown trunks.

I strained to catch Pirie’s scent. The icy air betrayed no clues. I was alone in this wilderness. I cocked my head, my ears turning forward. Birds . . . Rabbits . . . Bugs. They had to be close. Even in the Snarl, there were always pigeons and mice, beetles and flies. There were so many different noises. The clacking of the furless, the roars of the deathway.
Freezing snowflakes stuck to my lashes and weighed on my fur. What creature would choose to be out in this?

I gave myself a shake. My paw pads were numb with cold. What had I been thinking? That I’d arrive and somehow know where to go? Siffrin was right, I shouldn’t have come here. Instinctively, I peered over my shoulder. He was impossibly far behind me now, on the distant bank of the river. Lost to the Wildlands and the Elder Wood. I only hoped he had outrun the Taken.

*He’ll be all right,* I tried to assure myself. *He has foxcraft.*

Doubt gnawed at me. There were *so many* Taken. Worse still, I’d seen the Narral, the Mage’s assassins. Unlike the Taken, they did his bidding freely. They were masters of foxcraft and would know Siffrin’s tricks.

I drew in my breath. I had to believe that he was safe.

Dropping my head against the wind, I pushed harder, determined to reach the shelter of the trees. The icy gales blew back my fur to graze my skin. How long would I survive in the open air, in this deep chill? The Elders’ maa had drained away. I had squandered that silver power when I’d shifted into the great bird. For moments I had sailed over the Wildlands, a creature forged of wings and feathers. Dizzily I remembered the thrill of the flight, the air that had gripped my body and lifted me high over the world.

Then the wa’akkir had failed, and I’d fallen.
Fast, deep, into freezing water.
Over the tumult, onto the bank. Into the land of bitter wind, a place beyond malinta’s reach.

My paw slipped on ice. I stumbled forward, crunching through snow to strike my muzzle on the frozen ground. Whiteness wrapped itself around me and I closed my eyes.

*Mad fox, bad fox...*

Mad to enter the Snowlands alone. I hadn’t thought it through—I hadn’t thought at all. Crazy to imagine I’d just *find* my brother in the endless tundra. Me, a stranger to the ice drifts.

Bad to abandon the foxes of the Wildlands, when they were under attack. The Elders were weakened, the Darklands were growing. But what could I do about it? Guilt gathered at the base of my tail. I had left them to battle the Mage on their own.

I scrambled to my paws with a mewl. My flanks trembled with cold. Flurries slapped my fur and wind screeched in my ears. I struggled against it, my head hardly rising above the thick snow. My heart sank: I could no longer see any trees. Everything had vanished beneath fresh snowfall. Even the ice-capped mountains were lost to the leaden sky.

Bewildered, I whipped around. My paw prints were fading, erasing my journey from the bank of the river.

*Soon I’ll disappear too.*
I’d only just reached the Snowlands and already the brutal land had defeated me.

No, I thought, with a surge of anger. It rolled through my limbs, warming my paws. I started again through the snow. But I no longer knew which way to go.

The wind shrilled like a fox’s cry.

This way.

My ears pricked up. Had someone spoken? I started toward the shrilling. A few paces along, I bumped into a wall of snow. Flakes cascaded to reveal a low cave. Gasping with relief, I stalked inside and wrapped my tail around my flank. Out of the lashing gales, the chill was bearable. I would wait it out till the blizzard ran its course. Then I’d start to look for my brother. I didn’t know where, or how. But I’d find a way.

I fell into a deep sleep, where the snowstorm rose around me, lifting me into the air and carrying me over clouds. Like the great bird, I was high over the sky, watching the Wildlands, soaring above the Snarl. The storm set me down in a peaceful meadow. Birds were peeping and trilling in the trees. Insects were clicking in the long grass. Sun tickled my nose and glinted off my whiskers. I had a strange sensation that I’d been here before, but it wasn’t the meadow where the Wildlands skulk had lived. Not far from the peace of
the long grass, I could hear the deathway. Furless dens hunched in the distance, gray and imposing.

*It’s been a long time, Isla.* Greatma padded out from the grass.

My heart leaped and I ran to her.

She rested her dappled nose against my muzzle.

“I wish you’d never gone away, Greatma.”

*So do I. Sometimes things happen that you don’t plan.*

“You said we’d be all right if we stayed near the den. You told us, me and Pirie. You promised.”

*But you didn’t stay near the den, did you, Isla?* She drew away from me. Her eyes searched mine and my tail-tip shuddered.

“I was only in the wildway. I didn’t mean to be there long. I didn’t think you’d miss me . . .”

*And Pirie?*

I blinked at her. “He wasn’t with me.”

“But he didn’t come back to the den either. Like you, he got away.”

I lowered my muzzle. “I’m sorry,” I whimpered. “We let you down. After all your warnings, we didn’t listen. We wandered off without you.”

*I’m glad you did.*

I looked up at her.

*Of course I’m glad,* said Greatma. *It saved your life.*
I lowered my muzzle. I should have been there when the Taken came. I should have done something to help my family.

*None of this is your fault*, said Greatma, as though reading my thoughts. *You didn’t bring the Taken.*

“Why would anyone bring them?” I asked sadly.

I became aware of a deep stillness. The roars of the deathway faded. The peeps and trills of the meadow had gone. I stretched my claws, as though I might hang on to the dream by force.

“Greatma?”

Chill shot through me. My eyes flicked open and I shivered. My muscles ached against the hard floor of the cave. I looked around me, trying to remember how I’d gotten there. Stiffly, I rolled onto my paws. I padded to the mouth of the cave. The blizzard had swept away in the night. Golden light speared the dark horizon. Nothing stirred, not even a flake of snow.

My ears pricked as I gazed over the tundra.

Silence had a color. It was arching, endless, and perfectly white. It crept over the distant mountains, laying its pelt across forests of spruce. I could feel its bite on my damp fur, sharp and still.

The light of dawn was blinding against the snow. Crystals hung in the crisp air. My breath floated as mist, the only
movement as far as the eye could see. At least the storm had passed. The wind had dropped.

The crunch of paws over snow. The thump of weight on the earth. Cautiously, I peered around the mouth of the cave. At first, I could only sense their pawsteps. Moments later, they rounded the sweeping snow. Three giant wolves with furious jowls were thumping over the tundra. I took in the sway of their shaggy pelts, the flexing of muscles at their powerful haunches. The sheer size of them amazed me. Had the wolf in the beast dens really been that large? He’d been lean, his long fur tatty. These three wolves were broad and thickset, their pale eyes shining, their muzzles clean.

I scrambled back against the mouth of the cave.

_They mustn’t see me!_

At least the snowfall would have covered my tracks. Heart quivering, I remembered the tunnel that had cut through the mountain in the Wildlands. There had to be another way out. But as I sniffed along the cave, I met a wall of rock. I reached out a black forepaw. The rock glittered with ice, freezing to the touch.

I couldn’t risk crossing the tundra, not with wolves so close. My ginger fur made me vulnerable against the vast whiteness. Here at least I had cover. I would wait it out, ears pricked in case they were close. Three giant beasts couldn’t pass in silence.

_Watch! Wait! Listen!_
I tensed, my senses straining.

The crunch of paws over snow. A shadow leaped on the rock.

I spun around.

The wolves were at the mouth of the cave. I dropped onto my haunches and started chanting. “What was seen is unseen; what was sensed becomes senseless. What was bone is bending; what was fur is air.”

Nothing happened. I looked urgently to my paws. They were black and stark against the floor of the cave.

_I don’t have enough maa!_

I darted against the icy wall, my fur rising in spikes. The wolves had blocked the exit. It was too late to run.

The one in the center was white as snow. “What is _this_?”

The wolves on either side of him stepped closer, their heads dropped and ears back. Their movements threw dark shapes across the cave.

One had a fuzzy gray-and-white coat. He glared at me. “A trespasser.”

The white-furred wolf at the center wrinkled his muzzle. “How dare she come here? Into _our_ domain?”

“I’m not doing any harm,” I gasped. “I didn’t know I was in your territory, I’m not from the Snowlands.”

“You stand and answer _me_, shrewling?” the white wolf growled. “Do you not stoop before a lord?” The corners of his huge jaws turned down in disgust. “This is not just the
Snowlands, this is the Bishar of Claw, the greatest Bishar of the frozen realms. Our code is etched in the air and the earth. And you . . .” He ran his icy gaze over me. “You are an intruder. There is one punishment for those who trespass on our lands.”

The female by his side took a step toward me. Only the silvery tips of her ears and tail disturbed the whiteness of her coat. Her large eyes were sky blue. “Shall I kill her, Lord Mirraclaw?” Her lips rose over her great fangs.

The white wolf turned away, as though already bored. “Drag her into the snow,” he growled. “Let her blood be a warning to others.”