

WHITE FOX IN THE FOREST

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Chicken House

Scholastic Inc. / New York

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Published in China as *Dilab and the Wheel of Reincarnation* by Jieli Publishing House in 2019.

First published in the United Kingdom in 2021 by Chicken House, 2 Palmer Street, Frome, Somerset BA11 1DS.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data available
ISBN 978-1-338-79403-8

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

22 23 24 25 26

Printed in the U.S.A. 37

First edition, December 2022

Book design by Stephanie Yang



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 honor of your presence?" Ankel and Little Bean joined Dilah closer to 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 warily into the moonlight. “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 savior, 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 dim, 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 nonstop 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 that flowed 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 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 to 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 snowcapped 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 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, as Dilah and the others nervously trailed 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.