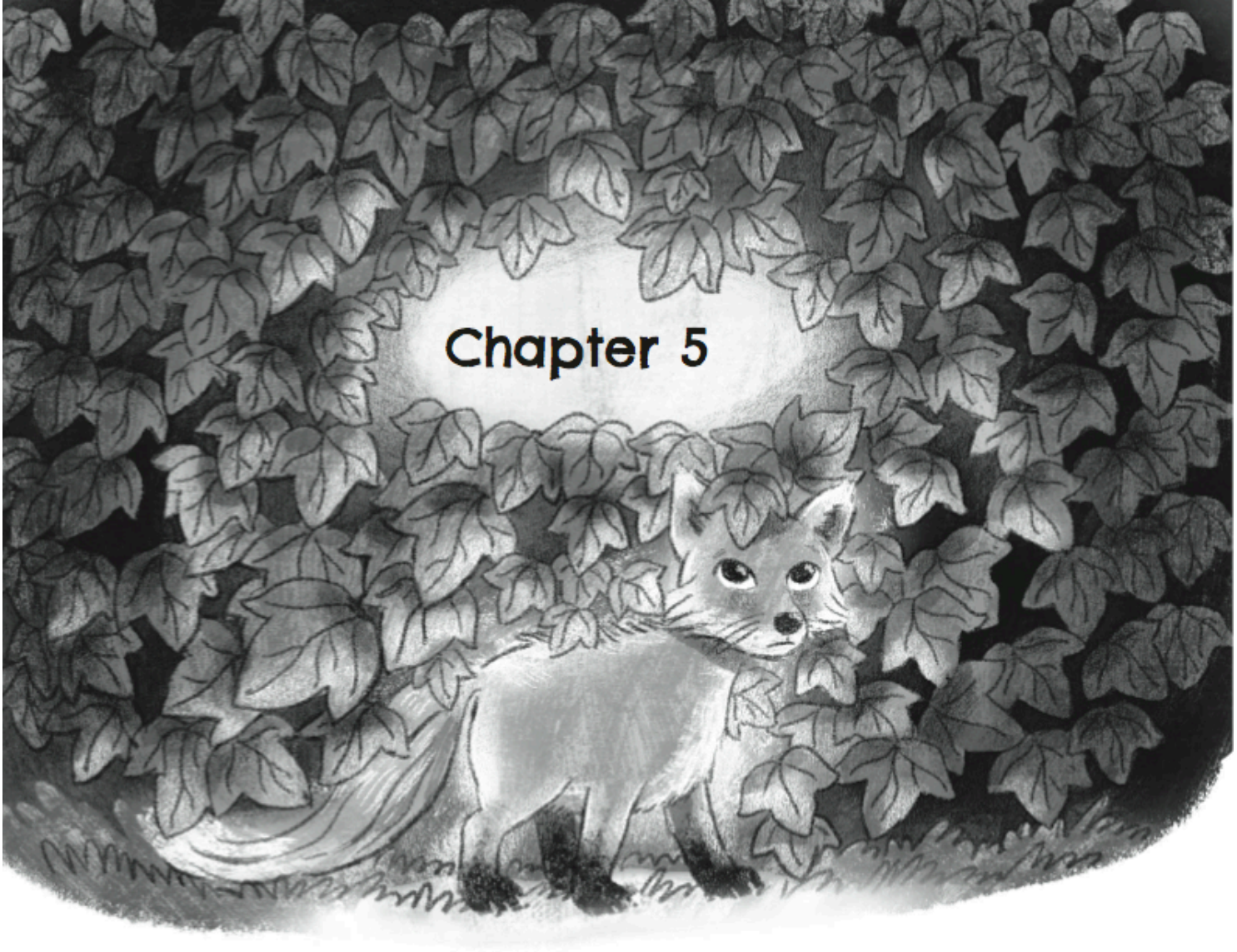


For a second, I think I must have bumped my head because when I look up from the ground there's a boy standing over me, dressed in these weird clothes. Weirder still, he's carrying an orange puppy.

Definitely must have bumped my head. I try to blink him away, but he doesn't fade. Then he starts talking and I start to suspect he's not a side effect of my bumped head after all.

He's wearing a brown fur coat that rises and falls rapidly on his shoulders as he pants. He's been

running. He keeps glancing over his shoulder towards the ivy, as if he's worried about being followed.

'Erm. Who are you?' I ask, clambering to my feet.

'Nobody,' he insists. He glances at the puppy in his arms, then looks me up and down. 'Hmm. You're a bit small, but you'll have to do. Here, hold him.'

And, just like that, I have a puppy in my arms. It's a chubby little thing, all big ears and cheese-puff-orange fur, which is strangely warm. It's like hugging a hot-water bottle. And that's when I realize – this puppy has a long, bushy tail and too-pointy ears. In fact, there's something decidedly *un*puppyish about it . . .

'It's a fox!' I exclaim, holding it back out to Nobody. The cub dangles between us and lets out a little whine. 'Hey, I don't want it!'

Nobody stands up straight, his expression severe. 'It's a *he*. His name is Firetail. And don't hold him like that. Keep him close to you.'

I stare dumbly down at the cub before clutching him to my chest so that his heart beats rapidly

against mine. 'Why is he called Firetail –'

I'm cut off by a piercing howl. It turns the air cold and makes the hairs on the back of my neck stand on end – and it's coming from behind the ivy. Now that I'm looking closely, I can see fragments of darkness through the greenery.

There's no wall there at all. It's a *doorway*.

The stranger's eyes widen in fear. 'You're about to find out. Put him down. Hurry!'

I frown and lower the cub to the ground, and through the ivy the howling stops abruptly. The cub's hackles rise, a growl rumbling in his belly. Then, unbelievably, his fur starts shimmering. He glows brighter and brighter, and I feel a prickle of heat on my skin. It's almost like he's on –

'Get back!' the boy shouts, shielding his face – but it's too late. The cub erupts on the spot, an orb of angry fire bursting from his body. I leap back, the flames so bright that I can barely look at them.

After a few seconds, I peer through my fingers. The flames have mostly died down, and there's the



cub, still standing in a ball of orange fire, completely unscathed and snarling at the ivy.

I can't believe what I'm seeing. Maybe I *did* bump my head.

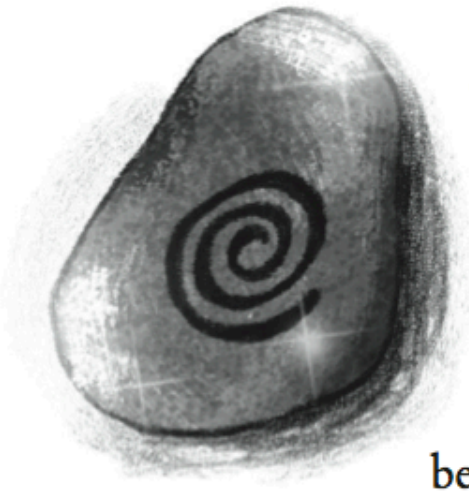
'That happens when he's angry or scared or excited,' the boy says hurriedly. 'And sometimes when he's hungry. Now I really have to go. I'll be back to pick him up in two days –'

'*What?*' I exclaim. 'You can't leave him here with me! What is he? Who are you? And *what on earth* is going on here?'

The boy peers through the ivy, then back at me, his eyes wide with fear. 'There's no time to explain. The Grendilock is hot on my trail, and I really have to lead it away or it'll follow me through and we'll all be done for.'

'The *what*?'

The boy groans. 'Through there,' he says, pointing over his shoulder at the ivy, 'is a place called Fargone. A fantastical place where the giant emperor rats can eat you for breakfast, and the sky-whales roost in the



clouds. I got here using this –' He pulls out an amber stone with a swirl painted on it. 'It's a sealstone. This one belongs to the king – or at least it did before I took it. But we don't want him to find out about this gateway because he's the one who's after *him*.'

He nods his head at the cub. The little fox has crawled between his legs and is nervously peering round them. His fur still looks fiery, but it's calmed down a lot.

'W-why?'

The boy's expression darkens. 'Firefoxes have been kept by the Royal Family in Fargone for centuries, but through neglect and carelessness they started to die out. The royals are selfish: all they want is to showcase their pets. I witnessed Firetail's own mother dying within those cold castle walls. It's no life for a firefox. They need to be free. A firefox hasn't been seen in the wild for over a hundred years. For all we

know, Firetail here is the last one – and so I vowed to find him a new home.'

'You mean you stole him?'

'Well, you could put it like that. I think of it more as rescuing him.'

'C-can't you just keep him?'

The cub eyes me dubiously before looking up at his rescuer. He's clearly saying, *You can't leave me here with him. Look at him! He wouldn't say boo to a goose.*

Well, he's got a point. The last goose I bumped into said boo to me.

'Dastardly dragons, no!' the boy exclaims. 'I work in the royal kitchens. I haven't got time to look after a firefox. I'm just his guardian until I find him a better home.'

'And what makes you think I can give him a better home?'

He frowns. 'Absolutely nothing. What gave you that idea? If anything, you've got a bit of a frightened look about you. But you'll have to do. It's only for a day or two while I lead the Grendilock away.'

There's that word again. 'The Grendilock?'

Before he can reply, another howl slithers through the ivy. It's closer this time, running up my spine like an icy fingernail.

'*That's* the Grendilock,' he whispers. 'Accomplice to the king, and seeking His Majesty's only remaining firecub. The Royal Guard noticed his absence from the menagerie, and, ever since, the king has been in a royal rage. He ordered a reward for the return of Firetail. The Grendilock is a terrible thing. It can take many forms, its favourite being the hound. But they're all monstrous in their own way – and, right now, it's close!'

The next sound that thunders through the ivy is a bark. A furious, rumbling bark that rattles my ribcage. Firetail lets out a squeaky cry.

'I have to go,' says the boy, picking up the fox and plopping him in my arms again. 'Here, take him. You need to get used to each other.'

Firetail looks up at me mistrustfully, and, just when it looks like he's about to leap away from me,

the howl returns. It's even louder, like the wailing wind on a stormy night.

Instantly, the cub changes his mind about trying to escape and burrows deeper into my chest. I feel a warmth spread down my front, and my heart pounds as I recognize what's about to happen.

He's heating up. He's going to burst into flames – in my arms!

But then the warmth starts to *smell*, and I let out a horrified gasp as I realize what's really happened.

'He's peed on me!' I cry, plonking the cub on the ground. He darts over to his guardian and cowers between his legs again.

'Oh, that's brilliant!' the boy says delightedly.

I gawp at him. 'Eh?'

'Pass me your jacket. I can use it to lead the Grendilock away. It's got an excellent sense of smell.'

I do as I'm told, wriggling out of my jacket and tossing it to him. He bundles it into a ball, then eyes me imploringly. 'You must look after him. I'll meet you back here in two days, at

midday. Until then, keep him safe.'

He leans down, scoops up the cub and holds him out to me.

I take the little animal uncertainly. He feels soft and podgy in my arms, and his fur looks like ordinary fox fur again.

'Here, before I forget, take this,' says the stranger, digging into his pockets. He presses something into my palm. It's a metallic disc, a bit like a watch face, set with delicate cogs that glint in the sun.



'What is it?' I frown.

'It's how you're going to contact me if anything goes wrong, which it *won't*.' He pulls out an identical gizmo. 'I have its brother. If you turn the cogs on yours, it will activate the cogs on mine and I'll know to come and find you. It acts as a sort of compass, too. It will lead me to you, wherever you are. It's called a pennycog. Give it a go.'

I use my finger to wind the little cogs on my disc.

When I let go, the cogs begin to spin – and, to my amazement, so do the cogs on his. One of the dials has an arrow engraved on it, which whirls round until it finally settles and points directly at me.

'Good,' he says, nodding. 'Now I really have to go. I've wasted enough time already.'



He turns to make his exit, and I feel a rush of panic.

'Wait!' I shout. 'Who are you?'

The boy hesitates. 'Teg,' he finally says. 'And you?'

'Charlie.'

Teg flashes me a quick smile. 'Charlie, as soon as I've stepped through the gateway, run. I'm going to close it as quick as I can. Got it?'

I nod, my heart pounding. With that, Teg pushes through the ivy and vanishes from sight. The howl immediately comes again, louder than before.

I don't waste any time. I bolt round the corner with the cub tucked into my chest and press myself

against the wall. After a few seconds, I peer back into the clearing.

At first, I can still hear the shrieking howl – but then, suddenly, it stops. A breeze rustles the ivy and, instead of blackness behind the leaves, I see the familiar cold stone of the castle walls.

The gateway is closed. Teg must have used the sealstone, and now he's making a run for it. I don't know who he is, or even if all of this is real, but I hope he gets away. I wouldn't want to meet whatever's making that dreadful howling face-to-face.

I look down and see the cub's huge amber eyes blinking up at me from my arms.

What have I got myself into?