THE TRAVELER’S CASTLE

by Lauren W.
Sylvie Whiskerkent had lived her whole young life in Fern Paw Gorge. While battles raged in the northern mountains, Sylvie and her family took shelter deep underground. News of the war was carried up and down the Great Muck Rivers, but Sylvie, her mother, and her father were safe and sound in their mossy fox den. As the battles came to a close with the defeat of the white fur foxes (Sylvie’s people), the red foxes spread their bases all over the eastern hills, right into Fern Paw Gorge. Frightened, Sylvie fled the burrow with her parents and ran south to the Blackhill Sea. The sandy shore would provide nice, moist ground to build a den with.

One day, Sylvie was out getting nuts and berries from the forest for dinner. Though the white fur foxes were drawn towards meat, Sylvie knew that nuts and fruits would be fine for a small time. She licked the staining red berry juice off her paws, eager for an excuse to eat. She scooped up the remaining black walnuts from the ground and ran back to the den. Her parents were bustling around the kitchen setting out dishes for supper.

Sylvie pulled up the oak stools to the counter and laid her fruits and nuts on the cutting board. She helped her mother stir the tomato stew and sprinkled coconut pieces over the blueberry pie. Her father swept the floor with a broom and cleaned the countertop with a rag. As the family wiped the last crumbs from their faces, Sylvie’s parents retreated to the parlor to rest while their loyal daughter cleaned up. As usual, Sylvie didn’t complain, she was too nervous.

Sylvie brushed her paws together and crossed her arms, inspecting her kitchen work for flaws. There were none, fortunately, and she went into the parlor to tell her parents. To her surprise, they had left the parlor and gone to bed. So Sylvie, feeling drowsy, rubbed her little eyes and fell back into a reclining chair. She didn’t take off her apron or anything. She just smiled and drifted off into deep sleep.
“CRASH!” An ear splitting noise woke Sylvie. It was only two o’clock and very dark in
the parlor. When she heard nothing else, Sylvie twitched her nose and dropped her head
back. Probably a bowl that fell on the floor, she thought. But she was aroused again when
the soft
pitter-patter of footsteps was in her ear. Sylvie eased onto her feet and crouched by her
chair. With utmost care she slipped into the kitchen and peeked around the doorway into
the room. Sylvie stifled a scream. There stood four red foxes in armor, with gleaming swords
fastened to their belts.

Sylvie was paralyzed with fear. She knew the power of the red foxes too well. They
could snap her like a stick. And here they were, in her kitchen, armed and ready to attack. It
was a wonder she didn’t faint in horror. “I’ve got to act smart,” she told herself. “These foxes
are on orders to charge at the slightest sound.” Sylvie escaped back to the parlor, from
where she ran down the long hallway and out the den’s back entrance. She was safe, but not
for long.

Sylvie knew that outside the den, anything could happen. She ran towards the forest
and didn’t stop running until the sun rose. By dawn, Sylvie was sure that with all her turns
the red foxes would never find her. But neither would her parents, if they were still alive. As
this thought struck her, Sylvie sat down on a stump and wept, deeply depressed. Although
all seemed lost, Sylvie still had a spark of faith and she wiped her eyes and ran on.

Soon in the distance Sylvie could see a great stone castle with a roaring waterfall
pouring over its side. It rested on a hill with a cobblestone path leading up to its drawbridge.
As Sylvie drew closer she began to notice how tall the structure was, with high towers and
steeples that cut the clouds. She ran to its front, while the sound of running water pierced
her ears. There stood an older fox with a gray beard and a scarlet cloak. Sylvie froze at his
feet, not sure what to do. He sighed and adjusted his spectacles on his nose.

“Welcome to Traveler’s Castle, friend. I am Lord Oaken,” he told her. Lord Oaken
smiled and ushered Sylvie into the castle. Sylvie gladly followed and was pushed into a
magnificent feast in a large room with duchesses and dukes whom she would soon call
family as they all took her in as their own. Sylvie’s smile outshone all the stars that night, and
she always felt at home in Traveler’s Castle.