

“The Fox and the Ghost King” by Michael Morpurgo

Chapter 1 “Over the Moon”

Imagine a family of foxes – Mum, Dad and the four of us little cubs – living in our den under a garden shed in Leicester. That’s us. I am the oldest, and I am the boss cub too, the friskiest, the peskiest, the pushiest. Dad likes that because it reminds him of himself, he says. And that’s why, if I pester him enough, he takes me out with him, now that I’m a little older, when he goes on his hunting expeditions at night. Mum never does, because she says she hunts better without me there to worry about. And it’s true; she always brings back a fat rabbit or a rat or a vole every time she goes out. Mum’s milk is so good and tasty and there’s always enough for all of us. But she does snap at me when I push my sisters off to get the best place to feed.

Dad never snaps at me. He’s a good hunter too, but he prefers dustbins, he says, because they don’t run away, and they’re full of tasty surprises. He hunts pizza crusts, and chips – my favourite, because I love tomato sauce – and chewy Chinese spare ribs, bits of burgers and buns – all great stuff. He’s the best dustbin hunter in the world, my dad, and he’s the top fox around, top dad too.

He’s not afraid of anyone, or anything, not ghosts, not kings, not ghost kings – as you will see.

But the most important thing you have to know about our family is that all of us are football crazy: Leicester City fans, Foxes fans. The Foxes are our team, win or lose – mostly lose – the best team in the world. Every fox in the whole town, in the whole country just about, is a Foxes football fan. We foxes are brought up Foxes fans.

All his life Dad has been going to the home games; Mum too, when she can, when she’s not having cubs. Down in our smelly old den – we like it smelly – all the talk is of football, or food. We talk a lot about food, it’s true; pizzas worms, frogs, mice, chips – especially chips. A varied diet we have.

So you can imagine how excited I was when Dad asked me for the first time, one winter’s night, to come with him to the football. I felt at long last I was becoming a proper grown-up fox. All I wanted now was my silly droopy, drippy little tail to grow into a proper brush, like Dad’s. Once you’ve got a proper brush for a tail, then you’re a proper fox, but I was off to my first football match, and that was good enough for me.

Over the moon, I was. I loved it that first time I went, and every time afterwards, the lights, the roar of the crowd, the smell of hot dogs, the music, the singing, the chanting. The losing wasn’t so great. Dad always said that the referee was rubbish, that he favoured the other side.

He hated Chelsea especially, so did I, especially their manager. He was such a pompous-looking fellow.

I went with him after that whenever I could, whenever Mum would let me go. She worried about me, but mums do that. It’s their job.

The night this story began was the night we lost to Chelsea, again, a night we’ll never forget, but not because of losing to Chelsea.

No, not because of that at all. Because of the ghost we met afterwards.

Chapter 2 “Weird or What?”

We were not happy foxes on our way home. Dad was going on about how the Chelsea manager would be crowing like a cockerel, and how foxes knew how to deal with cockerels.

“Give him a good neck-shaking I would, then gobble him up,” he was saying. But we did pick up titbits of this and that from the pavement, leftovers; hot dogs and beef burgers, and fish and chips. You would not believe the stuff people throw away, but I’m glad they do. After that we knocked over a couple of dustbins and found some dribbly ice-cream and some mouldy old cheese, which was delicious. We were trying to make ourselves feel a bit better, and we did too. So the Foxes had lost again. So what was new about that?

“Always look on the bright side of life, eh, son? Not the end of the world,” he said as we padded along homewards, down the lamp-lit city street. “The Foxes are still the best team in the world, son, right?”

“Right,” I told him. We stopped to do a high-five together, then chased our tails round and round three times – three times would bring us luck the next time, Dad said. I didn’t believe him, of course. We did the same every time we lost, and we still lost the next time. I knew really that he made me do it to cheer me up, and to cheer himself up too.

A little while later, and happier now, we were on our usual way home, trotting through the empty car park, half of which was still being dug up, for some reason or other. We always stopped here, because the earth was always freshly turned, just right for worm hunting. We leapt the fence – well, Dad did; I crawled underneath – then jumped down into a shallow trench and, noses to the ground, began sniffing out worms, and listening for them too. We can hear worms wriggling, you know; it’s what we’ve got these pointy ears for.

I was good at worm-catching – watched Dad doing it and just did what he did – loved it too, the snuffling them out, the watching, the waiting, then, best of all, the leaping and pouncing. I was happily chomping away on the nice fat wriggly worm I had just caught, which was trying to curl itself round my nose, when I thought I heard a strange voice. It seemed close by and yet far away at the same time. And somehow it was coming from below me too. *Weird or what?* I thought.

Dad had heard it as well. His ears were pricked, turning, turning, this way and that, and that way and this. Then the voice spoke again, definitely a man’s voice, and it really was coming from somewhere deep down below the ground.

“I know a fox when I smell one,” it said. “You all wear your smell about you like a coat of rank and rotten onions.”

I could feel the hair standing up in fear all along the back of my neck. But Dad wasn’t frightened, so after a moment or two I wasn’t afraid either. Like me, he was looking for the voice, trying to smell and hear exactly where it might be coming from. So I did the same.

Dad spoke then, in his growliest angriest voice: “I don’t know who you are, but how we smell is our business. So, whoever and wherever you are, you have no business making rude remarks to strangers you have never even met, and who mean you no harm and have never hurt you. I have my son with me. So mind your manners, stranger, whoever you are. And there’s something else I want to tell you: all onions are delicious, rotten or not. Especially old pizza onions in tomato sauce, however rotten they are.”

“I do not wish to discuss onions, Mister Fox,” the voice came again. “I have much more important things on my mind.”

“Such as?” Dad asked.

“Such as getting out of here,” came the reply. “I have been stuck down here for hundreds of years, and I need to get out. You must help me. It is my command, and I am used to people doing what I say when I say it.”

He was sounding rather hoity-toity, and I could see Dad did not like being told what to do by this voice one little bit.

Dad told him in no uncertain terms, but politely, what he thought of his command. “So don’t you come all lah-di-dah and lordly with me. I don’t know who you think you are, but if you want our assistance, then you are going to have to explain yourself. How can we possibly help you get out of where you are if we don’t even know where it is? And, by the way, we don’t know who you are either. You’re just a strange, rather snooty, disembodied voice to us at the moment. Where are you? Who are you, for goodness’ sake?”

“The king,” said the voice, more haughtily even than before. “You are speaking to the King of England, Mister Fox.”