**Three for a Sword**

**Legends of Penetralia: Book One**

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Part One: Pinewood Forest

“For Pinewood, and for Penetralia.”

Prologue

I

n the land of Penetralia, there once was a large forest called Pinewood. And there in Pinewood Forest lived a large tribe of squirrels. The tribe was led by three kings, Bushtail, Moonlight, and Ember. Bushtail (of course) had an exceptionally long and bushy tail. Moonlight had extremely rare, deep blue eyes, and his fur was known to shimmer in the moonlight. Ember had the brightest and reddest fur you would ever hope to see on a squirrel.

They all were known as The Three Kings of Peace. For all was well under their rule. They fought off unwelcome intruders in Pinewood Forest, and they treated other squirrels fairly and justly.

Deep in the great castle where the three kings lived, lay a beautiful sword with an emerald in the hilt. This Sword was no ordinary sword. For the Sword possessed great power that could be used for good or evil. The three kings used the power of the Sword seal the unity and friendship between them. The Sword also protected Pinewood from harm. There wasn’t any threat from open attacks from the outside.

One day, the Sword mysteriously disappeared. All the squirrels of Pinewood were in a panic. They searched high and low, but the Sword was gone. Without the power of the Sword to guarantee their unity, Bushtail, Moonlight, and Ember began accusing each other of stealing it, wanting the power to themselves. The quarrel eventually became so bad Pinewood split up into three tribes. All the squirrels with long and bushy tails became one tribe, called The Bushtail Tribe. And all the squirrels with deep blue eyes and fur that shimmered in the moonlight became one tribe, called The Moonlight Tribe. And finally, all the squirrels with bright red fur became one tribe, called The Ember tribe.

It was soon known who had taken the Sword when a dark evil began growing nearby. Zodamere, a corrupt and mind-twisted mouse had stolen the Sword. Zodamere used the Sword for evil, just as the three kings used it for good. Using the power of the Sword, Zodamere bent the minds of many innocent creatures to his evil will. The minds of his victims were exchanged for a strong urge to obey Zodamere and do what he pleased, and once their minds were transformed, they would stay that way forever. Zodamere’s victims were called the Powerseekers, and they ran wild and unopposed throughout Penetralia, burning, plundering, and killing. There was no stopping the Powerseekers, for the power of the Sword was great.

It has been thus for many years. Pinewood divided, Powerseekers rampaging across Penetralia, and Zodamere possessing the Sword. Hope of reuniting the tribes of Pinewood seemed just a faint mist growing smaller each passing day. And it would be that way until the Sword was restored to its rightful place in Pinewood Forest.

 1

The Life of Squirrels in Pinewood

T

amm Bushtail was the youngest out of a litter of three squirrels. His parents were common, no one of great importance. Therefore, making Tamm and his siblings common and unimportant. His family was with the Bushtail Tribe because they had exceptionally long and bushy tails. They all lived in a large pine tree, with the inside hollowed out.

 They were all reasonably happy together, but life wasn’t easy for the lowly and common. The likes of Tamm had to wait till the highly and important got the best of everything. Nuts, berries, straw, trees, and everything a squirrel needs to live. Just the other day, Tamm nearly lost his tail (which was the pride of all Bushtails) by scampering up a tree, which belonged to an advisor of the Bushtail king, just to get a large pinecone to play with. A huge male squirrel stormed out of the tree and aimed an arrow and Tamm’s tail. It just narrowly missed. Tamm got a severe scolding from his parents that night in front of his whole family. Tamm could tell his big brother, Benji, was enjoying his little brother’s scolding immensely by the smug look on his face.

The Commoners didn’t really receive anything of formal education or anything like that. But they miraculously found ways to educate themselves by finding old abandoned books and teaching themselves from that. There were also a few elderly squirrels whose parents had taught them to read before Pinewood fell. Those few squirrels passed down their knowledge to their children, and their children taught their friends. But still, the majority of the Commoners couldn’t read or write. Tamm was one of the lucky ones. His mother had found an old book about tales that had happened outside of Pinewood, and taught her children from that. Tamm’s mother also was an expert in what plants were good for what. She knew which ones were good to eat, which ones made good medicine, and which ones were toxic.

The Commoners shared their knowledge and helped each other get through life in any way they could. The squirrels of a higher ranking, however, prevented them from gathering together in large groups. Large groups were viewed as threats that could lead to rebellious behavior. So the Commoners were forced to find other ways, which were less effective, to help each other and spread what little knowledge they had.

Poor Tamm! You would think that life would be miserable for him, but at least he had a home and a family. *When I’m older, I’ll make things right.* Tamm vowed. *I’ll do my best to stop this unfair treatment. Furthermore, I’ll reunite the tribes.* He didn’t know how he would do it at the time, but he would do it. For he truly believed anything was possible with the Creator at his side. Tamm knew right then and there that he was destined for greatness.

Noelle Moonlight didn’t like how badly the commoners had it. She never did.

Noelle was a princess, next in line for the leadership of the Moonlight tribe. She had always been treated kindly, and with respect. Noelle never had to go out, scrounging for nuts and berries. Someone always did it for her. Noelle never had to do any work. Someone always did it for her. That was how life was for her, and she hated it.

You had everything if you lived as a royal in Pinewood Forest. You had access to the library, where all the history books, and more, were kept. Noelle loved reading, so she spent a lot of time in the library. She received the finest education and could write beautifully. As a royal, you also had the opportunity to learn an instrument. Noelle played the harmonica. She loved its high, silvery sound. Also as a royal, you had the finest food, clothing, and softest bed. Noelle’s father made sure his daughter had the best life, but little did he know how miserable his daughter actually was.

Ever since she learned about Pinewood Forest’s history, and how life was different then than it was now, Noelle longed to reunite Pinewood and the three tribes. She knew she could make a good effort when she became queen of the Moonlight Tribe, but it would be almost impossible to reunite the tribes without the power of the Sword. Her only comfort was spending time with her best friend and personal maidservant, Ilene. Noelle didn’t have any siblings, so Ilene was the only playmate she had growing up. She also found joy in playing her beloved harmonica. Whenever she played, a warm and welcoming peace flowed over her. She felt the Creator’s presence and was reminded that he was in control and he knew what was going on in Penetralia.

 Noelle also knew that many squirrels in her tribe and the other tribes were suffering. The high and important squirrels were taking all the good stuff first, and Noelle didn’t like it. Not one bit. She longed to go out and help the commoners, to be with them. But when she brought the subject up to her father, it didn’t go so well…

“Father,” said Noelle, “I want to go out and help the poor commoners. I think the way they are treated is terrible. The Creator didn’t create creatures to treat other creatures like dirt! It’s not fair! I want to help them!”

“Noelle!” her father scolded, “I don’t ever want to hear you talk like that! They are nothing but dirty scum! You don’t ever associate yourself with the likes of them, do you hear me, young lady!?”

“But father…”

“Noelle listen, imagine what the tribe would think if they saw you with them? It would bring disgrace to our family name! Moonlight, ruined forever!”

Here Noelle just lowered her eyes and walked away. After that, she learned never to bring that subject up again. But it never left Noelle’s heart. Every day she longed more and more to help the poor, and unite the tribes. *When I’m queen, I’ll make things right.* Noelle vowed. *I’ll do my best to stop this unfair treatment. Furthermore, I’ll reunite the tribes.* Noelle knew right then and there that she was destined for greatness.

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 Asa Ember was destined for greatness. After all, he was the son of a respected warlord. Asa’s father, Jasper Ember, was dedicated to serving the king of the Ember tribe. And so was Asa. Jasper was a warlord, he had fought in many great battles. And he had the scars to prove it.

 Jasper was training his son with the bow and arrow, a squirrel’s best weapon. He had hopes that his son would succeed him and rise up to be the general of the entire Ember army. Asa liked that idea, but he also wanted to help the poor and common. He felt miserable when he saw a high-ranking general beat a commoner. Because of this, Asa found it hard to hang out with most of the squirrels of his age and ranking. They themselves treated commoners terribly or saw no problem with it. Asa couldn’t stand being around other creatures like that, so he didn’t have any friends. His father was confused by that, and Asa wanted to talk about it with his father, but Jasper would probably scold him and say, “Your duty is to protect and serve your king, you should not worry about the lowly and common!”

Asa didn’t want to disappoint his father, so he kept his mouth shut. But that didn’t stop him from glaring at an officer when he beat or mistreated a commoner. And it also didn’t stop him from offering a nut or berry to a commoner when no one was watching. His heart melted when the squirrel smiled back at him. *When I’m a general, I’ll make things right.* Asa vowed. *I’ll do my best to stop this unfair treatment. Furthermore, I want to reunite the tribes.* He knew right then and there that he was destined for more than just to serve the king.

2

A Friendship is Formed

T

amm Bushtail decided he had enough. He could not, would not, bow and scrape to the “high and mighty”. Tamm knew that if he did, he would be in big trouble, no, more than big trouble. He could lose his life. But it was a risk Tamm was willing to take.

 As he expected, it didn’t go so well. When Tamm was out as usual, scrounging for nuts, the king of the Bushtail tribe came by, surrounded by his royal guards. The other squirrels nearby scampered out of the way and bowed their heads. But Tamm totally ignored the king, he just kept on scrounging as if no one was there.

 “Disrespectful scum!” one of the officers shouted at Tamm. “Get out of the way and bow before your king!”

Tamm ignored him.

 The officer knocked an arrow. “Last chance, scum! Get out of the way and bow before your king! Or lose your life!”

At this, Tamm stopped and made eye contact with the officer. “Are you talking to me?”

All the squirrels around gasped. The officer looked shocked. Never before had a commoner dared make eye contact or acted so boldly before. But he soon recovered and said, “Yes, I am talking to you! Now move before I let loose this arrow!”

Tamm looked as calm as ever. Still making eye contact, he simply said “No,” and continued his search for nuts.

The king absolutely had enough from this young upstart. “Fire!” he ordered his officer.

The officer let loose the arrow. With lightning speed, Tamm moved out of the arrow’s path. The king was outraged, he ordered all his guards to fire at Tamm, who was again casually searching for nuts. When the guards fired at him, Tamm grabbed a nut he had just found and scampered up a tree. When he was up there, Tamm threw the nut strait at the king. It was a direct hit. All the guards fired up at the tree, but Tamm had already fled, thanking the Creator that he was still alive to defy the king once more.

Noelle Moonlight decided she couldn’t just sit around and wait to be queen before helping her fellow squirrels. She came to a decision. Noelle would dress as a commoner, sneak out of the palace, and visit her fellow squirrels. It was risky, but possible. But Noelle couldn’t do it alone. Besides, how would she get a commoner’s dress? There were none in the palace. So, she decided to ask her trusted maidservant, Ilene, to sneak out and find a commoner’s dress.

Ilene didn’t like that idea. “Your highness,” she said, “It’s too risky. I want to help the common just as much as you do, but you must wait till you’re queen!”

 “Ilene, you know I can’t wait that long. I can’t bear to see my squirrels suffering. I must see and help them, no matter how small the impact. And if I get caught, at least I can say that I tried. Please help me Ilene, I can’t do this without you,” Noelle said.

 So, Ilene reluctantly agreed to help her princess. She admired Noelle’s courage and determination. And Ilene wished she had them.

 That night, Ilene snuck out and brought back a commoner’s dress. Noelle thanked her and was gone early the next morning.

 Noelle was heartbroken. She knew her squirrels had it bad, but not this bad. But she was glad she was among them, even if they didn’t know it. She got the true experience as a commoner. For her food that day, she actually had to find it. And she got yelled at and chased after by climbing up the wrong tree! But her most frightening experience was when a fat, noble squirrel accidently spilled all his nuts, and Noelle stepped in. They were big, round, beautiful nuts. And Noelle saw a poor, starving squirrel eye the nuts hungrily. So, she grabbed a nut and handed it to the poor squirrel.

 “Hey, you! Thief!” the noble squirrel shouted at Noelle.

 “That poor squirrel was hungry, and you had plenty in that sack of yours! That’s why you spilled it!” Noelle shouted back.

 The noble squirrel became outraged. “How dare you scum talk back to me! Get out of here! Scram!!”

He began throwing stones at her. No one dared throw anything at Noelle, much less call her a thief and scum. She suddenly felt lowly and miserable. Noelle burst into tears and scampered up a tree.

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At the end of every day’s practice, Asa liked to go to a special tree to have some precious moments of peace and quiet. He often thought deep and hard during those afternoons alone. It was peaceful and relaxing. The tree was right at the border of the three tribes. No one ever used it, for no one liked to be that close to the border. And that was why he was shocked to find another squirrel there, and it wasn’t just any squirrel. It was a Bushtail.

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Tamm had run off after defying the king. He had run to his favorite spot in all of Pinewood. The old castle. The old castle was a perfect place to hide. It was right at the border of the three tribes, so no creature went near. Tamm would spend hours, wandering the ruins of the castle, longing to live in Pinewood in its glory days.

 Just as Tamm was about to leave, he found himself face to face with another squirrel that was obviously the son of a great warlord! But that wasn’t the most frightening thing, the squirrel was an Ember! There was no doubt about it, the squirrel had bright red fur and the Ember emblem on his tunic. Tamm jumped with surprise and braced himself for a beating. He absolutely would not bow and plea for mercy. But to his surprise, the Ember squirrel only spluttered and stared, eyes wide with surprise. It was a very awkward moment for both squirrels.

 Finally, the Ember squirrel spoke rather timidly, “Hi?”

 “Uh, hi?” said Tamm, shocked that the other squirrel spoke a nice word to him. There was another awkward silence.

 “My name is Asa,” the Ember squirrel blurted.

 “I’m…Tamm,” whispered Tamm hesitantly.

 Another awkward silence.

 “Uh, it’s nice to meet you, Tamm. Do you want to be friends? I mean, it’s okay if you don’t. But I would like to be friends if you want to,” said Asa quickly.

 “Um…sure? I…don’t have any friends. So, sure. We can be friends.”

 “Well, congratulations! You just made your very first friend!”

 Tamm smiled. “I think I’ll like having a friend!”

 “I’m sure you will! I don’t have very many friends either.”

 “Really? I just assumed that you had lots of friends because…well…because you’re not a commoner.”

 Asa shrugged. “I could make more friends, but…well…let’s just say that I don’t particularly like to hang out with most of the squirrels my age and rank in the Ember tribe.”

 “How come?” Tamm immediately felt nosy as soon as those words were out of his mouth and wished he could take them back. “I…I’m sorry. It’s okay if you don’t want to tell me.”

 Asa hesitated. Could he trust this squirrel enough to tell him his beliefs? Since he was one of the commoners, he decided he could. “It’s okay. I don’t like the way the commoners in the Ember tribe are being treated. And the squirrels my age and rank treat the commoners poorly. So, I don’t like to hang out with them. I believe the Creator made all creatures to treat each other fairly.”

 Tamm’s eyes grew wide with excitement. He knew he would be best friends with this squirrel. “Oh! Yeah, commoners in the Bushtail tribe are being treated horribly too. I’m glad there’s at least one squirrel in all of Pinewood who cares!”

 A huge smile spread across Asa’s face. “We’re going to be great friends, Tamm!”

3

Another Friendship is Formed

N

oelle Moonlight was out again. This time, she brought a few nuts with her which she kept safely tucked in her dress. They weren’t for her, but for the poor squirrels. She spent the day helping whomever she could. Including cuddling and feeding an abandoned baby squirrel.

 “How can any creature tolerate this? Why doesn’t the Creator do something about this?” she quietly asked herself every time she saw a squirrel in need. “It seems I’m the only one out here who cares.”

 Noelle wished she could play her harmonica for her squirrels, for she was sure it would bring comfort to them. But she knew better. If any high or important squirrel heard her, they would surely find out who she truly was. For only high and noble squirrels played an instrument of any kind.

 After a whole afternoon of wandering around, Noelle soon found herself near the border of the three tribes. Then she thought she would explore the old castle ruins. She was sure nobody would be there. No one like to be near the border.

 Asa and Tamm jumped with surprise when a Moonlight squirrel intruded on their conversation. The Moonlight squeaked with surprise, and as she stumbled back, her footpaw snagged a small tree twig and she tumbled down a tree that the castle was built around. Asa and Tamm jumped up and scrambled down the tree as fast as they could. They found the Moonlight lying at the bottom of the tree, unconscious.

 “Is she okay?” asked Tamm anxiously as Asa quickly examined the Moonlight for serious injuries.

 “She’ll be fine. She just hit her head on a root and there’s a good-sized bump, but she’ll wake up in a few minutes. Help me get her up this tree and get her comfortable,” Asa replied.

 Asa and Tamm managed to get the Moonlight up the tree with some difficulty. They propped her up against the large trunk and anxiously waited for her to wake up.

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 Noelle groaned softly as she slowly regained consciousness. She had recklessly climbed up a tree, only to find herself face to face with two strange squirrels. She had tripped with surprise and had found herself falling through the branches of the tree. Now that Noelle was awake again, she didn’t know where she was. As her mind cleared from the intense throbbing in her head, she was able to make out the anxious faces of two squirrels peering down on her. For a moment, she thought she was safely back at the castle. Noelle suddenly came fully awake and sat up when she realized the squirrels staring at her were an Ember and a Bushtail.

 “Oh! I-I…” Noelle wasn’t able to say anything more. She was terribly confused, frightened, and dizzy with pain.

 “Hey, calm down. You’re going to be okay. We’re not going to hurt you,” said Asa. Noelle relaxed a bit and tenderly touched the bump on her head. She winced.

 “You had a bad fall. But you’re going to be all right. What’s your name?” said Tamm.

 Noelle hesitated. She must not reveal her true identity. She didn’t trust these squirrels. “I’m…Heather. Why are you helping me? You’re not from the Moonlight tribe.”

 Asa smiled kindly. “It’s nice to meet you, Heather.” Then he hesitated, he didn’t know this squirrel and therefore decided not to let her know too much about his beliefs. “We just…happened to see you fall and we couldn’t just let you lie there without any help.”

 “Thank you. Much appreciated. Who are you both and what are you doing together? It’s not every day you see a Bushtail and an Ember together!” said Noelle.

 Asa and Tamm suddenly looked panicked. This Heather squirrel could report on them! “I’m Asa and this is Tamm. We…uh…”

 Noelle noticed the look of panic that swept across Asa and Tamm’s faces. “It’s okay. I promise I won’t tell on you. I’m just curious…that’s all.”

 “We don’t see a problem with squirrels from different tribes being friends. So, we’re friends. Um, you’re welcome to be our friend too, if you want. Just please, don’t tell on us!” begged Tamm.

 Noelle nodded. “It’s okay, I won’t tell on you. I would love to be friends! I’ve never really had many friends.”

 “Believe me, I know. It’s not easy being a commoner like we are,” said Tamm.

 Noelle nodded, but she hated lying like this.

 “We believe the Creator made all creatures equal. We should all be treated with kindness and with respect, without any unnecessary killing or poor treatment,” said Asa.

 Noelle nodded again. She felt bad keeping her true identity from her new friends. She decided she would trust them. She took a deep breath and said, “I feel exactly the same way. So, when I’m queen, I’m going to do the best I can to reunite the tribes. But I don’t know how that’s possible without the power of the Sword or unless the Creator himself comes down to make things right!”

 Asa and Tamm were perplexed. This squirrel was dressed like a commoner, so what did she mean by “when I’m Queen”?

 Tamm wasn’t afraid to ask. “What do you mean by “when I’m Queen”? Who are you, really? It’s okay, you can trust us as we are trusting you.”

 “Promise you won’t tell any creature what I’m about to tell you?” said Noelle.

 “We promise. We’re friends now, so we can trust each other and not keep secrets from each other,” said Asa.

 “All right then. I’m sorry, but I lied to you. My name isn’t Heather. I’m Princess Noelle Moonlight, heir to the throne of the Moonlight tribe.”

 That left Tamm and Asa speechless. They didn’t know what to say. They had just made friends with the heir to the Moonlight throne? This was most unexpected.

 “I-I…I don’t know what to say! This is really…um…just wow!” stammered Tamm. “My parents would be in a fit if they found out who I just made friends with!”

 “Yeah, I totally did not expect we had just made friends with the heir to the Moonlight throne when I first saw you!” said Asa.

 “I know, it must be quite a shock. My parents would have an even greater fit if they found out, I’m sure. Oh, I’m sorry, you must have a thousand questions!”

 “Yes, we do! First off, what are you doing out here all alone in those clothes!” asked Tamm.

 “I’m going undercover! These clothes are just a disguise. I am sneaking out of the palace every day to do what I can to help the commoners. It isn’t much, but I am at least doing something! Please, don’t tell anybody! No one must know!” said Noelle.

 “Wow, that’s incredibly brave! I don’t think I would have worked up the nerve to do that!” said Asa.

 Noelle smiled at the ground modestly. “It isn’t much. I just wish I could do something to reunite the tribes. I pray to the Creator every day for a chance to do something!”

 “Me too. But I really don’t see a way to do it without getting the Sword, which is out of the question!” said Tamm.

 “Is it?” asked Asa.

 “Of course it is! You aren’t seriously considering leaving Pinewood and wandering aimlessly until you find Zodamere? And if you so happen to do find him, how in Penetralia are you going to get the Sword back?” asked Noelle.

 Asa looked down, embarrassed. “Well…uh…it was just a thought.”

 “Let’s just forget about his whole going after Zodamere idea! There’s got to be another way to reunite the tribes!”

4

The Journey Begins

T

he next day Tamm, Noelle, and Asa met again in the old castle. It was decided that, if possible, they would try to meet there every day.

 “Last night, I thought so hard that my head was killing me! The only way to reunite the tribes is to get the Sword back,” said Asa.

 Noelle looked down. “I know what we have to do, but I’m afraid to do it,” she said.

 Tamm nodded. “I agree,” he said.

 “Listen, we can do this! If we stick together and have determination, nothing is impossible!” said Asa.

 “It’s not only that, but it’s also leaving Pinewood Forest. It’s the only home I’ve ever known, and I don’t know what the outside world will be like,” said Tamm.

 Noelle nodded. “He’s right. It’s always been our ancestor’s home,” she said.

 “I know, I know. I don’t like the thought of leaving either, but we’re doing this for Pinewood and Penetralia. I’ve got my bow and arrows. We won’t be totally helpless,” said Asa.

 “I’ve got my slingshot! And I’m pretty good at it too!” Tamm chimed in.

 “And my father taught me self-defense with a long and thick stick with beautiful carvings in it! I can bring that!” Noelle chimed in.

 “Perfect!” said Asa. “Now, we should be ready to leave by tonight. We’ll slip out by cover of darkness.”

 “Wait, tonight? Are we really going to do this?” asked Noelle.

 “Of course! The sooner we leave the better!” said Asa.

 “But once we’re out of Pinewood, where do we go? We have no clue of the outside world!” said Tamm.

 “Easy. I have a map and a compass that my father taught me to use. The Penetralian Coast is south of here, I believe. From there, we’ll search for the hideout, lair, or whatever.” said Asa.

 “And, what makes you think Zodamere has a hideout by the Penetralian Coast?” asked Noelle, who was very skeptical.

 “Well, my father is an officer in the Ember Army. After the Powerseekers retreat from attacking us, he tracks the direction they head. And after every time they attack, the Powerseekers retreat to the Penetralian Coast. So I’m pretty sure Zodamere has a hideout or something down there,” said Asa.

 Noelle and Tamm were silent. They knew this choice would affect their lives forever, for good or bad. And all three of them were little more than younglings. But they also knew this was the only way to unite the tribes and stop the poor treatment of commoners.

 “Are you two with me?” asked Asa.

 That night, the three friends met again by the same tree. They were going to leave Pinewood Forest, find Zodamere, and reunite the tribes. The night was clear and crisp, a perfect start on their journey.

The three friends said very little as they jumped from tree to tree by the border of the three tribes. There wasn’t much need to, they were all thinking the same thing. *Are we sure we know what we’re doing? I don’t think we do.* But they didn’t even think to stop and discuss or consider their thoughts. For they knew if they stopped or even looked back, they would immediately change their mind. That could not, would not happen. The future of Pinewood Forest lay in their paws, and they were determined to make it a good future or die trying.

 By dawn, they reached the border of Pinewood Forest without much trouble. They decided it would be too risky to light a fire, so they ate a cold breakfast and got a few hours of sleep.

5

Rescue and a Captive

T

amm was up first. He didn’t get much sleep anyway because he was too excited. Asa wasn’t much trouble to get up, for his father sometimes woke him up early unexpectedly for bow practice. Asa’s father said it’s good to expect the unexpected, that way, nothing is unexpected. Noelle, however, was still tired. So, when And Tamm woke her up, she was a hot mess.

 “Do we really have to wake up now? I’m still tired. And besides, I’m sore and cramped,” Noelle complained.

 Tamm rolled his eyes. “Why did we bring her along? I should have known she would be like this. She’s only slept in the finest beds all her life!” he whispered to Asa.

 Asa shrugged. “She’ll get used to it.”

 “I certainly hope so,” Tamm muttered.

 “Can we at least get a fire going? I’m chilled to the bone,” asked Noelle.

 “No, too risky. We’re too close to Pinewood Forest and someone might see us. We don’t want to attract attention,” said Asa.

Tamm prepared himself for more of Noelle’s complaining, but to his surprise, Noelle just shrugged and began packing up.

 “Come on boys, help me! I’m not packing up all by myself,” she said.

 A few minutes after they set off again, Noelle took out her harmonica and played a catchy, marching tune. She danced and skipped in time with the music and her heart felt light and cheerful. The sun was just rising and its light made the dew sparkle on the grass. The birds were singing and a cool breeze swept through Noelle’s fur. Tamm began dancing alongside Noelle and soon Asa joined them. It was a beautiful morning and a great start to their journey.

 Not one hour after their journey had officially begun, they met their first obstacle. They first heard loud and gruff voices.

 “Be still yew puny little mouse! We’re gonna tie stones around yer paws and drop yew into the river! Hahaha!”

 “That’s right! And then we’re gonna have mouse for supper!”

“Aye matey, when was the last time we had a nice mouse for supper?”

“Hoho, I don’t know, Seaweed. But I can almost taste it!”

Asa, Tamm, and Noelle instinctively dove into the nearest hedge of bushes. It wasn’t long before they saw where the voices came from. Two creatures, a hideous hedgehog and a wicked-looking raccoon, were dragging a very young and very fat mouse in a large net. The poor little mouse was bound and gagged, but that didn’t stop him from thrashing and kicking. The hedgehog and the raccoon were mercilessly dragging and bumping him against roots and stumps on the path. But that wasn’t the most terrifying thing, the hedgehog and the raccoon were obviously under Zodamere’s power. They were Powerseekers. There was no doubt about it. If any creature were this nasty and mean, there had to be a strong power controlling their minds. A power that could only come from the Sword.

“Oh! We must do something! We can’t let those creatures eat that poor mouse. He’s just a baby!” said Noelle.

“But…they’re Powerseekers!” Tamm gulped.

“But we still must help that poor mouse!”

“Agreed. On three, we attack. Tamm and I will take the Powerseekers while you untie the mouse, ready?” said Asa.

Noelle and Tamm nodded. “One, two, three, GO!!”

The last thing the Powerseekers expected at that moment was three young squirrels to leap out of the hedge and start attacking them. Asa knocked an arrow, fired, and the first hedgehog fell. Tamm whirled his sling around and around, but before he let the stone fly, Noelle expertly tripped the raccoon with her stick. Tamm’s stone just narrowly missed Noelle’s head and sunk deep into a tree.

“Noelle! What was that for? I could have hit you!” said Tamm, who was clearly angry.

“Hurry and help me keep him down! This raccoon is as strong and ferocious as a badger!” said Noelle, sitting on the raccoon.

Tamm and Asa did the same.

“I thought we could question this one and see if we could get any information out of him about Zodamere,” said Noelle.

Asa nodded. “Good thinking. Tamm and I will hold him down while you go untie the mouse.”

Noelle got the mouse unbound in no time, but he began crying. “Waaaaaagh!! I wanna go home! Waaaaaaa!”

Noelle cuddled the mouse on her lap. “Shhhh, it’s okay. We’ll protect you and get you home. What’s your name?”

The fat little mouse choked back a sob. “My name’s \*hic\* Bobo. I want to go home. \*hic\*” he said.

“It’s okay, we’ll get you home, Bobo. Where do you live?” said Noelle.

“I live in a big wagon! I have a big family! We travel a lot! My mommy’s name is Dawn. Basil is da leader, he’s a wabbit. Then dere’s Kelsey and Rosemary da squirrels. Durgan is a mole. Hank is an otter. Tommy is a hedgehog. And Thor is a border collie, he mainly pulls the wagon. We all do plays and tricks!” explained Bobo.

“That’s wonderful! Can you lead us to them?” asked Noelle.

Bobo thought for a moment. “Maybe, but we travel a lot, so dey could be far away.”

Then he began crying. Noelle cuddled him. Asa and Tamm had just finished tying up the raccoon when they turned their attention to Bobo and Noelle.

“Bobo,” said Noelle when she got the fat little mouse to quiet down. “Meet Asa and Tamm. They’re my friends and will help you get back to your family. Asa and Tamm, meet Bobo, our new friend.”

“Hello Bobo!” said Tamm.

“Hi, little guy! How did the bad raccoon get you?” asked Asa.

“Well, I was playing and I must have wandered off. Den those two nasty creatures came and tied me up. Dey was going to eat me!” said Bobo.

Asa turned to the raccoon they had captured. “Is that true?”

The raccoon growled menacingly. “Ye won’t anything outta me!”

Asa knocked another arrow. “Oh, we’ll see about that,” he said, leveling the arrow at the raccoon’s head.

The raccoon’s attitude suddenly changed. “Waaaah! Doan killa me! Tis true! Me and my matey were gonna eat da liddle mousie! We weres hungry yew see! Please doan killa me!”

Asa was getting excited. “What’s your name?”

The raccoon scowled again. “Me called Seaweed,” he muttered.

 Asa, Tamm, and Noelle looked at each other.

“Well, Seaweed, you’re in luck. We’re going to let you live. After we bring little Bobo back to his home, you’re taking us to Zodamere,” said Asa.

“No, no! I couldn’t go back! Me chief would kill me!”

“We could kill you right here, you know,” said Asa, pulling back his bowstring.

Seaweed hung his head. “All right, I’ll take ye to me chief.”

Bobo looked scared. “I don’t wants to see Zodamere! I heard he be a vurry bad mousie! I be vurry frightened!”

“Don’t worry, young’un. You won’t be seeing Zodamere,” said Noelle.

Chapter 6

Camping and Music

S

eaweed was bound and Asa held the end of the rope like a leash. The raccoon was going to lead them back to where he had captured Bobo. The fat little mouse could not keep his mouth shut, he was excited to be going home and to have new friends.

 “Did you know dat we like to shoot off lotsa fireworks? Dey be vurry pwetty! Have you seen fireworks? Did you know dat my mommy, Honeydew, and Durgan are vurry good cookers? Dey make lotsa yummy food! I like cranberry tarts! Dey be vurry ‘licious! Have you had cranberry tarts? What’s your favorite food?”

 Asa and Tamm almost had enough with Bobo after one hour, but Noelle kept on smiling and listening. Seaweed scowled, sulked, and kept muttering under his breath. Once, he tried to silence the little mouse. But a quick whack from Noelle’s staff got the raccoon back in line.

 That night, they made camp. Bobo appointed himself as the camp leader. “All right, we’re gonna do dis da right way! Asa, I want you to go find wood. Dry wood, not wet wood. Tamm, I want you to clear a place for da fire. Noelle, I want you to cook da food! I be da camp guard and I’ll make sure da bad ‘coon doan ‘scape.”

Asa, Tamm, and Noelle each threw him a smart salute. “Don’t worry Chief Bobo! We won’t let you down!”

Bobo failed to notice the giggles and snickers that came afterward. Unfortunately, Noelle was totally hopeless when it came to cooking.

“All right den, me and Tamm cook da food!” announced Bobo.

“Please Bobo, could you teach me to cook? I would love to learn how,” said Noelle.

Bobo thought for a moment. “Okay. Pay close h‘ttention.”

Tamm and Bobo were a great team. Bobo knew what tasted good together and what herbs were needed to make the perfect stew. It was absolutely delicious. Asa even found some wild mushrooms and Noelle learned a few cooking tips.

“Bobo and Tamm, you really did yourselves proud! Where did you learn to cook, Bobo?” asked Asa.

“My mommy and Durgan taught me! Dey is da best cookers in da world! You should try Durgan’s fried fish and blueberry pudding! Apple pies, raspberry scones, and cranberry tarts! Durgan and my Mommy make the best of everything!” said Bobo.

“Wow! Maybe they could teach me when I meet them!” said Noelle.

“Oh dey will! Dey would luv to teach you to be a cooker!” said Bobo.

Asa turned to Seaweed, who was tied to a tree. “How far away are we from Bobo’s camp?”

Seaweed scowled and muttered, “’Bout a day’s march.”

Asa nodded. “Right. Bobo, tomorrow you should be with your family again.”

Bobo began jumping up and down with excitement. “Yippee! Me gonna go home! Me gonna go home! Yippee!”

Noelle smiled at the little mouse. She already knew she would miss him.

“We should probably keep watch tonight. There could be more Powerseekers or other nasty creatures out there. I’ll take the first watch, then Tamm, then Noelle,” said Asa.

“Good idea. I’ve never kept watch or anything like that before,” said Tamm.

“Neither have I. But my father used to make me stay awake super late into the night. He said he was preparing me for the future. And he was absolutely right!” said Asa. Everyone except Seaweed laughed.

Noelle then took out her beloved harmonica and played a soft, sweet, melodious tune. Asa and Tamm closed their eyes and focused on the music. A moment of peace then washed over the travelers. They felt the Creator’s presence right then and it was relaxing and comforting. The birds in the trees fell silent at the sound of Noelle’s beautiful music. Soon, the music was the only sound to be heard in the night forest. Even Seaweed stopped scowling and muttering.

When Noelle stopped, everyone else couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed that the peacefulness was gone. The forest resumed its natural sounds.

After a lengthy silence, Tamm asked, “That was beautiful, Noelle. Where did you learn it?”

Noelle modestly lowered her eyes to the ground. “I made came up with it myself. It’s a song of praise to the Creator. It’s really nice to listen to, especially when you’re feeling down in the dumps.”

“You need to play that harmonica more often. It’s the most beautiful thing I’ve ever heard,” said Asa.

“My family would love it! You need to play it for dem!” squeaked Bobo.

Noelle smiled. “Then I most certainly will!”

 That night after they had all gone to sleep, Noelle dreamed. *Noelle was back in Pinewood Forest, playing happily as a baby in her father’s palace. She saw Ilene, her best friend, pouring imaginary tea. “Would you like some more, Princess Noelle?” “Please.” The two friends sipped their imaginary tea and giggled. Then something went wrong. Noelle heard screams and evil laughter. “Papa! Mama!” she called. Then all she ever knew and loved began slowly fading, gone, forever. It was dark, cold, and empty. Then Noelle saw him, Zodamere. He was standing there, laughing that evil laugh. Then she saw Asa, beaten and worn, plunging down a waterfall into darkness. She saw Tamm, desperately fighting his way to something. Noelle couldn’t see what it was, then she could! It was a magnificent sword, with a gleaming emerald in its hilt. It was the Sword. When it was just within reach, it was gone, along with everything else. Noelle then felt a sharp pain in her head. Then she plunged into darkness…*

7

More Friends

W

e be almost there!!” squeaked Bobo. They had been traveling all day with only a few short breaks. Now it was evening and the sun was at the western horizon. Bobo suddenly found more energy when he realized they were almost to the place where he had been taken.

 “I jus hope dat dey didn’t leave wivout me,” said Bobo.

 “Oh, I don’t think they did. It’s only been a few days since you’ve been taken. Surely, they would still be there,” said Noelle.

 “You fink so?” asked Bobo.

Noelle smiled. She would miss the little rascal when they had to say goodbye. She loved the way Bobo spoke, toddled, and smiled. Asa would miss Bobo too. He admired his spunk and determination. Tamm would miss Bobo as well. There was something Tamm saw in him that reminded him of himself. Just like Bobo, Tamm had always dreamed of being a hero and a great warrior.

Not an hour later they were in a small clearing.

“We be here,” muttered Seaweed.

“Is this where Seaweed took you, Bobo?” asked Asa.

There was no reply.

“Bobo?”

No reply.

Noelle was whirling around in a panic. “Where’s Bobo? He was just here a minute ago!”

“Bobo! BOBO!” called Tamm.

“Somebody surely must have seen something! Seaweed?!” said Asa.

“I didn’t see nothin! I swear it!” said Seaweed. He seemed just as worried as the rest.

“Wait! Everybody be quiet!” said Noelle.

 After everyone had quieted down, the very faint sound of voices could be heard.

“Everybody follow me! And not a sound!” hissed Asa.

They began creeping through the forest toward the voices. As they got closer, they could begin to make out what they were saying.

“Oh my sweet Bobo!! Where have you been all this time!? Mommy was so worried about you!”

“Young sir, you have some explaining to do!”

Tamm, Noelle, and Asa looked at each other and smiled. They leapt up and charged through the forest. They ran straight into a tall, lanky rabbit. Then there was nothing but chaos and confusion. Then a huge border collie began banging a spoon and a pot together. “Everybody calm down!”

Everybody froze.

The collie pointed at Tamm, Asa, Noelle, and Seaweed. “Explain yourselves!”

Before they got the chance to say a word, Bobo stepped up. “Dese are my friends! Dey saved me from dat bad ‘coon! Anybody who has a problem wif dem have a problem wif me!”

Asa nodded. “It’s true sir.”

The collie nodded. “Let’s start this over, shall we? Hello, my is Thor.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you, Thor. I’m Asa Ember. This is Noelle Moonlight and Tamm Bushtail,” said Asa, gesturing to Noelle and Tamm.

The lanky rabbit stepped up. “I’m Basilbob Willowbranch. You can call me Basil. I’m the leader of this lot. We’re the Wandering Willowbranches. We roam the land of Penetralia and are perfectly happy with each other’s company!”

“And I’m Honeydew Willowbranch, Basil’s wife,” said a pretty young rabbit.

“Hello! I’m Hankshire Streammaster. You can call me Hank,” said a large otter.

“I’m Durgan. It’s a pleasure to meet you!” said a mole.

“Hi! We’re Rosemary and Kelsey Lightpaw!” said two pretty squirrels.

“I’m Thomas Bramble, but you can Tommy,” said a hedgehog.

“And I’m Dawn Springfold, Bobo’s mother. Thank you so much for saving my sweetie! We were so worried about him!” said a pretty young mouse.

“Well, it’s good to finally meet you all! Bobo has told us so much about you,” said Noelle.

“Would you young squirrels like to stay for supper? There’s plenty for all, and you can tell us all about yourselves, eh?” said Durgan.

“Oh yes, please! We would love to have you three for supper!” said Dawn.

“I’ve just started cooking up fried trout with steamed apples!” said Honeydew.

Tamm, Noelle, and Asa needed no more bidding. “Why thank you very much! We would be honored!” said Noelle.

“Noelle wants to be a cooker! Can you, Durgan, and Honeydew teach her, mommy?” asked Bobo.

 Dawn looked at Noelle, who nodded eagerly. “Of course, dear! You just come by the fire and I’ll teach you all you need to know about cooking!”

 “Thank you so much,” said Noelle, following Dawn, Durgan, and Honeydew to the fire.

 Thor turned to Asa and Tamm. “What’s the deal with that raccoon? He looks an awful lot like a Powerseeker!”

 “Don’t worry, he’s with us. His name is Seaweed. We’ll explain everything later,” said Asa.

Thor nodded. But Hank seemed tense and uneasy. He kept a hand near a spear that was slung over his shoulder. It was clear that he had a bad history with Powerseekers.

 “It’s okay. If we just leave him tied up to a tree, he won’t be a problem,” said Tamm.

Under the careful and patient instructions of Durgan, Honeydew, and Dawn, Noelle was able to fry trout and steam apples. She enjoyed cooking immensely.

 Meanwhile, Hank showed Asa how to handle and throw a spear. Tommy showed Tamm how to make some blue power that produced blue smoke and a lot of noise when thrown. The blue power was called Isocane. Bobo was everywhere, showing Noelle, Asa, and Tamm his little toy bow and arrow. He even shot a little toy arrow right at Basil’s tail.

 “Yowch!! Young sir, you should better than shoot anyone down there!” he scolded.

 Bobo giggled. “Wasn’t me! Tamm did it!”

Tamm, who was nearby, put on a shocked and innocent face. “Me? Never!”

 “Don’t go blaming other chaps for something they didn’t do! I know very well it was you!” scolded Basil.

 “Are you yelling at my sweet Bobo? Give him a break, he’s had a long and hard week, haven’t you sweetie?” said Dawn, giving Bobo a smothering hug.

 “Give him a break indeed! That young rascal shot my poor tail!” said Basil.

 Asa, Tamm, and Noelle soon found out that one of Bobo’s favorite things to do was to get into mischief and pull off pranks. And when Bobo got scolded, his mother was always there to defend her “sweet Bobo”.

 Before long, supper was served. It was one of the best things the three Pinewood squirrels had ever tasted. They had never tasted apples; none grew in Pinewood Forest. During supper, the three Pinewood squirrels told them about where they were from and where they were going.

 “We need to take back the Sword if there is any hope of reuniting the tribes of Pinewood. We know Zodamere has it and we will stop at nothing to get it back. With the help of the Creator, we can do this, we will do this,” said Asa after they had explained everything.

The Wandering Willowbranches looked at each other in stunned silence. Never before have they ever met anyone with this much courage and determination. But there was more…

 “You three are probably the bravest, most daring, stupidest, and most determined creatures I have ever met,” said Thor. “We will gladly help you with your quest. Each and every one of us has had a history of some sort with Zodamere and his Powerseekers and will gladly help put an end to his reign. When I was just a young ‘un, Zodamere and his Powerseekers attacked my home and killed my father and nearly my mother. We barely made it out alive. My mother died soon afterward, leaving me to fend for myself. It was only by the mercy of the Creator Himself that I am here today.”

 “Actually, that is pretty much our story. Zodamere attacked our homes, killed loved ones, and left us to fend for ourselves. We would love to help bring justice!” said Basil.

Everyone nodded in agreement. Kelsey and Rosemary were clinging to each other and weeping softly.

 “We’ll gladly help you younglings break into Zodamere’s hideout and return the Sword,” said Hank.

 “Thanks guys. We would greatly appreciate any help offered,” said Noelle.

 “But how will we find Zodamere’s hideout?” asked Durgan.

 “That’s not a problem,” said Asa, nodding to Seaweed who scowled. “We’ve got one of his Powerseekers, and I believe he’s down by the Penetralian Coast.”

 Tamm jumped up in excitement. “Hurrah!! I didn’t want to say goodbye right after we just met!”

 “Now that’s settled, can we now put on a firework show for you?” asked Kelsey. Rosemary bobbed her head in eagerness.

 “Why not? I haven’t ever seen fireworks! Bobo says they’re gorgeous but loud!” said Noelle.

 “They really are! You’ll love them!” said Rosemary, grabbing Noelle’s paw.

 “Noelle is really good at the harmonica! You should hear her play!” said Tamm.

 “We’d love to hear you play after the fireworks!” said Honeydew.

 “And I’d love to play for you!” responded Noelle.

8

 Fireworks and Garret Chase

A

sa, Tamm, Noelle, Dawn, Bobo, Honeydew, Kelsey, and Rosemary made themselves comfortable on a log while the others prepared the fireworks. When the first one went up and exploded in the night sky, the three Pinewood squirrels jumped in surprise. They were not prepared for the great beauty and tremendous noise of a firework. It was amazing. Noelle was amazed at how the fireworks could be so many different colors or shapes. Blue, pink, red, orange, green, and so much more. Even a combination of colors sometimes! It was an experience the Pinewood squirrels weren’t ever going to forget.

 It was over all too soon. The three Pinewood squirrels could watch fireworks all night.

 “That was amazing! How do you make such beautiful fireworks? I haven’t ever seen anything like it!” said Noelle.

 “Oh, you don’t want me to explain how they work! I’d be talking all night!” said Basil.

Tamm was about to say something when a cheeky-looking rabbit bounded into the clearing. “I say, jolly good show! Bravo! Won’t you introduce me to your new friends?” said the new rabbit.

“I was wondering when you would show up! These are three squirrels from Pinewood Forest, Asa Ember, Noelle Moonlight, and Tamm Bushtail. Asa, Noelle, and Tamm, this is our wandering friend, Garret Chase,” said Basil.

“It’s a pleasure to meet your acquaintance,” said Garret, throwing a neat bow.

“The pleasure is ours, Garret. Are you Wandering Willowbranch?” asked Noelle.

“Good heavens, no! I am a wanderer, but I prefer to wander alone. I just pop up here and there,” said Garret. “What’s your story, friends?”

“Well, as Basil said, we’re from Pinewood Forest. Do you know anything about what’s happened in Pinewood?” asked Asa.

“Listen lad, everyone knows about Pinewood. If someone didn’t, they would have to be living in a hut cut off from all civilization,” said Garret.

“We didn’t know, you rouge!” scolded Honeydew.

“My apologies, madam! Didn’t mean no offense,” said Garret.

Honeydew stalked off muttering something about young rabbits and manners.

“Ahem, anyway, what I meant was yes, I do know about the fall of Pinewood. By the way, I smell trout. Any leftovers?” said Garret.

“Good, that means less explaining. Anyway, we’re on a quest to take back the Sword and put an end to Zodamere,” said Asa.

“Uh-huh. And do you have any idea where Zodamere’s hideout is?” asked Garret, eyeing the leftover fish over the fire.

Asa hesitated, then said, “Well, not exactly. We do know it’s by the Penetralian Coast somewhere. But we captured a Powerseeker and he’ll lead us there.”

Garret was leaning over the fire to help himself to leftover fish when Asa said they had captured a Powerseeker. And he nearly burned himself with surprise. “What! You younglings captured a Powerseeker? You must be crazy to attempt to do that!” cried Garret.

“Nobody asked your opinion, you little imp! And besides, if they hadn’t, Bobo would be dead by now!” scolded Honeydew.

“Er, my apologies. I tend to say the first thing that comes to mind. It was a noble and brave thing to do,” said Garret.

“It’s all right. I guess we are kinda crazy,” said Tamm.

“What makes you think the Powerseeker will lead you to Zodamere, and not on a wild goose chase?” asked Garret.

“Uh, well, we don’t know. But if we find out he’s not leading us to the right place, he’s in a heap of trouble.”

Garret was about to say how much Powerseekers are smarter than younglings but Honeydew gave him a sharp look that clearly said: *nobody asked for your opinion.* He thought better of it, and instead said, “Okay then, I wish you all good luck!”

“And we’re gonna help dem!” came Bobo’s shrill and squeaky voice.

Garret looked at Basil. “You folks gonna help these younglings on their quest?” he asked.

“Of course we are! It’s the noble and right thing to do,” said Basil.

“Indeed, it is! Asa, Noelle, Tamm? Please allow me to assist you as well on your courageous quest! It would be my pleasure to do so,” said Garret, throwing a neat bow.

Before Asa could say anything, Noelle said, “Of course you may join us, Garret!”

 “Whoa, whoa! Just a few minutes ago you said this whole quest was just plain crazy! And now you want to go with us?” said Asa

“Of course! My life is just plain crazy so it couldn’t hurt anything!” said Garret.

Despite himself, Tamm giggled. He liked Garret.

“Fine, you can come. Just please note that there is a high chance of you never coming back,” said Asa.

Garret let out a loud “Whoop!!” and did a little jig. Noelle smiled; Garret would be excellent company. There certainly wouldn’t be a dull moment for the rest of their journey!

“Um, Noelle? You said you’d play your harmonica for us after the fireworks,” said Kelsey.

“Oh yes! That’s right!” said Noelle. She pulled out her harmonica, put it to her lips, and played the beautiful tune she had played the night before. The same feeling of comfort washed over every creature who heard the music. The forest grew silent and the breeze swept up the harmonica’s music and carried it through the night.

8

A Forest of Great Danger

T

he next morning Asa Ember, Noelle Moonlight, Tamm Bushtail, Garret Chase, Seaweed, and The Wandering Willowbranches headed for the Penetralian Coast. Thor pulled the wagon while everybody but Bobo walked. Bobo wanted to walk, but Dawn wouldn’t hear of it.

“You might trip and the wagon wheels might run over you! And you couldn’t keep up with us anyway,” she said.

Bobo had scowled and reluctantly hopped into the wagon. But he soon forgot his sorrows when he realized they were actually going to the Penetralian Coast. Bobo had never seen the ocean and he was super excited. Seaweed lead the party from up front with his nose in the air, sniffing. He could smell the ocean from miles away and was sure they were headed in the right direction. Hank always kept a wary eye on Seaweed. Asa was sure Hank wouldn’t hesitate to put his spear through Seaweed’s back with one wrong move.

 Noelle took out her harmonica and played a marching tune, lifting everyone’s spirits. Noelle never failed to be amazed at how uplifting and comforting her music was.

About midday, the Pinewood squirrels were weary and their paws sore.

 “Oh my! How do you do this?” panted Noelle.

“Do what?” asked Kelsey who was skipping happily beside her.

“Walk all the time! I can barely take another step!” said Noelle.

“Oh, you’ll get used to it! Try skipping! It’s a lot better and it makes you feel happy for some reason!” said Kelsey.

“Come on!” said Rosemary, grabbing Noelle’s arm. Kelsey grabbed her other arm and soon the trio was skipping along with linked arms.

“Oh my! You’re right! Skipping is a whole lot better!” laughed Noelle.

Tamm and Asa, who were struggling as well, saw them and looked at each other. They linked arms and began skipping alongside the girls.

“Whoahaha! I want a piece of that action!” laughed Garret, who ran to catch up with them. “Hey fellas! Wait up!”

Soon Tommy began skipping alongside them as well, then Durgan, then Hank, then Dawn, then Honeydew, then finally Basil. They all linked arms and began skipping along in a line so long it blocked the whole path.

But their happiness didn’t last long when they came to a dense forest. All the trees were leafless and dead. A chill swept through everyone. Seaweed put his snout to the air and sniffed. “Oi don’t likes the smell of dis forest. There be great danger here,” he said.

Thor sniffed as well. “I don’t like it either. Is there any way around this forest?”

“’Ow should I know? I don’t know nothin ‘bout dis land,” snapped Seaweed.

“Sir, you’re talkin to the wrong creature. I know Penetralia like I know the back of my own paw!” said Garret.

“Well then, answer the question! Is there a way around this forest?” snapped Honeydew.

“Now, now, there’s no reason to get your feathers ruffled, madam. I’ll answer the question. And the answer is yes and no. Yes, there is a way around this forest. And no, there is not a way around this forest if we want to bring the wagon. It’s impossible,” said Garret.

“Well then, that settles it! We go through this forest! I am absolutely not leaving my precious wagon behind!” said Basil.

“We could hide the wagon on the side of the road and go around the forest,” said Garret.

“That is out of the question! I absolutely am not leaving behind my wagon! Do you know how hard it was for me to get this thing? I will not leave behind my most prized possession for some other creature to come along and steal it! Is that clear to everybody?” thundered Basil.

“Ahem, yes. You made your point very clear. Right-o! Through the forest we go!” said Garret, who began strutting into the forest.

The three Pinewood squirrels looked at each other, shrugged, and began following Garret. The Wandering Willowbranches began following as well.

The forest was quiet. Too quiet. The only sound to be heard was the creak of the wagon wheels and the occasional cawing sound.

“I don’t like this,” whimpered Rosemary. Kelsey clung to her arm, looking nervous as well. Hank always kept his eyes open and his paw dangerously close to his spear. Bobo clung to his mother, his eyes huge with excitement and fright. They were all on high alert, their ears perked up.

“Up there,” whispered Tommy. They all looked where he pointed. A massive crow perched on a tree, staring at them. As they looked around more, they could make out the faint forms of crows. There were hundreds of them, all staring at the travelers. Suddenly, there was a loud caw, and the birds swooped at the travelers.

“Go! Run for it!” barked Thor. And that is what they did. The travelers broke off in a dead run. But the crows were on them. Asa let loose an arrow and a bird fell. Tamm began firing his sling in random directions, not really aiming at any specific bird. Then they heard Bobo cry out and Dawn’s scream. A bird had gotten Bobo. Then Tamm took action. Finishing the bird he was just fighting with, Tamm leaped up on the top of the wagon and began whirling his sling. But instead of aiming the stone at the bird’s head, he aimed it at the bird’s wing. As soon as the stone was loose, Tamm jumped down and grabbed Hank’s spear. He ran to where the bird had awkwardly glided to the ground and drove the spear into the bird’s heart. Tamm grabbed Bobo, stuffed him under his arm, and continued running.

Garret was struggling as well. He knew they wouldn’t leave this forest alive. But then, he got a brilliant idea. Garret knew the only thing these birds feared was fire and loud explosions, and luckily, that was the Wandering Willowbranches’s specialty. He dove into the wagon and began franticly searching through it. Garret knew the Wandering Willowbranches always kept sacks of blue power called isocane that exploded when dropped. It wasn’t harmful, but it made a loud noise and created a lot of smoke. Finally, he found them. Garret grabbed all the sacks of the isocane he could, a bunch of firecrackers, and a lighter. He jumped out of the wagon, shouting to Asa and Hank to cover him. Asa and Hank had no idea what Garret was up to, but they provided cover for him anyway. Garret took all his firecrackers and put them in a large heap. And threw the lit lighter into the pile while shouting, “Okay! Run!” Asa, Hank, and Garret ran as fast as they could. Suddenly there was a loud explosion and bright, colorful lights lit the sky. Then Garret began throwing the sacks of isocane everywhere, adding to the noise and chaos. The birds screeched with fright and began flapping away, hiding in the trees. But the travelers didn’t stop. They kept running and didn’t stop till they were clear of the forest.

“Wha-what just happened?” panted Durgan as soon as they were clear of the forest.

“We were just attacked by birds! That’s what just happened!” said Garret.

“No, I mean the explosions. What was that? And I’m pretty sure some of it was our isocane too,” said Durgan.

“Oh, nothing much. Just a little idea that just popped into my head that I put to action,” said Garret. Everyone glared at him.

“Oh all right! I always keep a bunch of firecrackers handy. And so I just thought right then would be a good time to use them. I grabbed all your isocane while I was at it. I’m sorry, should have gotten your permission first,” said Garret. Everyone burst into laughter.

“Garret Chase, don’t you ever feel sorry! You saved our lives and we will never forget it!” said Basil.

“Hey, what are you doing?” asked Tamm in surprise. He looked down to see Bobo hugging his incredibly bushy tail.

“You saved me from dat nasty big bird. You be my hero! I be just like you when I grow up!” said Bobo, hugging Tamm’s tail.

Tamm rolled his eyes but looked pleased. Kelsey and Rosemary began to feel faint, so Durgan got the brilliant idea to make camp and rest for the rest of the day.

“We all had a terrible fright and it would be wise to rest till morning. Thank the Creator we’re still alive!” said Durgan.

“That’s the most sensible idea I’ve heard all day,” said Honeydew. The Wandering Willowbranches immediately got to work. Before long, a fire was built and everyone began to calm down. All except Bobo, it had been one of the most eventful and exciting days of his life and he would not sit still.

“And den just as da big bad bird was gonna eat me, Tamm jumped from da wagon and landed on da bird’s back! Den he killed da bird! He was so brave I wanna be jus like Tamm when I grow up!”

Bobo was telling the story about how Tamm saved him for the tenth time. And each time, Bobo exaggerated it more and more. At first, it had been cute and funny, but now it was getting annoying.

“Bobo, please sit down and eat! You need to recover your strength for a long day tomorrow!” said Dawn for the fifth time.

Each time, Bobo sat down, ate a little bit, and began running around again.

“Bobo,” said Thor with sternness and a bit of humor, “You can never be a warrior like Tamm if you don’t eat when your mother says so. You need plenty of good food if you want to be a strong mouse someday.”

Bobo looked at Tamm, who was desperately trying to hide a smile. But he managed a somewhat solemn nod. Bobo sat down and began eating. This time, he did not get up. Dawn nodded thanks to Thor and everyone looked relieved.

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The next morning, they were off again. Hank was telling Asa about some good friends of his who lived down by the Penetralian Coast.

“I think it would be a wise decision to visit ‘ol Steelrudder. He’s got a little island called Majara down by the Penetralian Coast. He would gladly take us in for a few days’ rest. Besides, his otters are good fun and they make the best food you would ever hope to eat!” said Hank.

“That sounds great, Hank! I would love to meet your friend Steelrudder and his otters!” said Asa.

“And I’m sure he would love to meet you too!” said Hank.

“Hey! I know this place!” Garret suddenly shouted.

“You do?” asked Noelle.

“Sure! A good family of hedgehogs lives around here someplace! Very nice family! Let’s pay ‘em a visit, shall we?” said Garret.

“I don’t know about that, there’s a whole lot of us and…” began Honeydew.

“Oh pish posh! The Spikes loves a good bit of company every once and a while. They would be more than happy to meet you!” said Garret carelessly.

That evening just as the sun was setting, they came upon a cozy-looking cottage.

“Well, this certainly looks pleasant enough!” said Dawn. She adjusted the strap that held Bobo on her back and was anxious for rest.

Suddenly, a shrill voice called out, “Mommy! Garret Chase be here!”

A tiny hedgehog burst from a bush and ran straight for the cottage. Then a homely female hedgehog came out of the house. The little hedgehog hid behind her mother’s skirt.

“Oh my! Garret Chase? This is a pleasant surprise! It’s been too long! Now, you must excuse my messy house, I haven’t…”

“Oh never mind, Missus Spike! We just thought we’d drop by and say hello while we’re on our way to the shore. These are some good friends of mine, The Wandering Willowbranches, which include Basilbob Willowbranch, Honeydew Willowbranch, Hankshire Streammaster, Thomas Bramble, Durgan, Kelsey and Rosemary Lightpaw, Dawn Springfold, and her son Bobo Springfold. These three Pinewood squirrels are Asa Ember, Noelle Moonlight, and Tamm Bushtail,” said Garret.

“Oh my! What a lot of names to remember! I do apologize if I get your names wrong. It’s a pleasure to meet all of you and you are most welcome here! I’m Missus Pansy Spike and this little ‘un is Julie Spike,” said Missus Spike, pulling the tiny hedgehog (who was sucking her paw) from behind her skirt. “Mister Andy Spike should be back from the pond very soon with my son, Jude. Jude and Julie are twins. Oh, and please do stay for supper!”

That evening was a pleasant one. The Wandering Willowbranches and the Pinewood squirrels immediately grew very fond of the Spike family. Even Bobo made fast friends with twins, Jude and Julie. After a good supper, the Pinewood squirrels decided to tell Andy and Pansy Spike about their journey. The Spikes listened in awe.

“Why, I can’t believe you would actually do this. You three are the bravest creatures I have ever met. I hope you get the Sword back and put an end to the nasty villain. But how do you propose to find Zodamere’s hideout?” asked Andy after the story had been told.

“That’s what the raccoon is for. He’s a Powerseeker,” said Asa.

“And you’re going with them, Garret? Do be careful! All of you be careful, and may the Creator be with you!” warned Pansy.

“Oh, don’t worry about us, madam! We’ll be back as fit as a fiddle, isn’t that right chaps?” said Garret.

“Oh, Garret! I wish you wouldn’t act like this thing is a big joke! Don’t you realize you are going straight into Zodamere’s hideout? That is very serious!” said Pansy.

“Don’t worry madam, I know exactly what I’m getting into,” said Garret seriously.

Before anyone could say anything else, Dawn suddenly looked up and around. “Where’s Bobo, Rosemary, and the twins?” she asked.

“Yes, where are my babies?” asked Pansy with an edge of worry to her voice.

“Don’t worry, they wanted to go outside for a bit, so Rosemary volunteered to watch them,” said Honeydew.

“Oh good. Uh, how long ago was this?” asked Dawn.

“About when Asa started telling you about their journey. Why?” said Honeydew.

“That’s an awful long time, I think I better go check on them,” said Kelsey.

Pansy nodded, “Please do,” she said. Then the conversation about the Pinewood squirrel’s journey continued. Not five minutes later, they heard Kelsey’s scream.

10

A Terrible Night

K

elsey!” Asa shouted as he leaped up and dashed for the door with everyone at his heels. They found Kelsey kneeling on the grass the hedgehog twins lying unconsciously on her lap. Pansy screamed, scooped up her babies, and hugged them tight. Kelsey crumpled onto the grass, weeping hysterically.

“Where’s Rosemary and Bobo?” asked Dawn. Everyone looked to Kelsey.

“G-g-gone!” Kelsey barely said between sobs. Everyone immediately had a terrible felling. Then it was Dawn who crumpled onto the grass, weeping hysterically. Seaweed then lifted his nose and sniffed.

Asa looked at him and said with a warning in his voice: “If you smell anything that might give us a clue to Rosemary and Bobo’s whereabouts, you’d better tell us.”

Seaweed scowled stubbornly. It was clear that he smelled something important and would not tell what it was.

Hank was in no mood for dilly-dallying. He rushed at Seaweed and slammed him into a tree. “If you value your life, you’d better loosen up your tongue this very instant!”

“All wight all wight! I’ll talk! Me smells Powerseekers!” said Seaweed.

Hank let him go. “Powerseekers, you say? Where?”

 Seaweed got up and sniffed some more, “Ow should I know where dey are? But me does know the scent is still pretty fresh,” he snapped.

“Well then, what are we waiting for? Let’s go get them!” said Asa.

Seaweed then began investigating the ground. He stopped at a curious pair of tracks. “It’s me ‘ol matey Wartnose! Me would know ‘dem tracks anywhere!”

Asa was by his side in a flash. “You know the Powerseeker who made these tracks?”

“Yeah. Only Wartnose makes tracks like dese. Da tracks disappear in over dere, see? Dey could only be going to me master’s hideout,” said Seaweed.

“Right. We leave immediately,” said Asa.

After saying goodbye to the Spike family (the twins had regained consciousness and were recovering remarkably), they were on the road again, traveling through the night. They kept up a quick pace at first, but they couldn’t keep it up for long. They were bone-weary, but they didn’t dare stop. More than once, Noelle stumbled with weariness and Kelsey had to help her up. They had to be cautious when traveling in the dark. There were tree roots everywhere and they could easily trip and fall, or stub their toe. That was exactly what happened to Tamm. He jammed his footpaw into a root and just barely caught himself before he fell. Tamm had to stuff his paw into his mouth to keep from crying out.

Onward they pressed, nonstop. All night they stumbled blindly through the dark. The moon was full and bright, but it wasn’t enough to reveal the hidden roots and such. It was, however, enough to make Noelle’s fur shimmer and shine. Despite her urgency and weariness, Kelsey admired Noelle’s fur and wished she had grayish silver fur that shimmered in the moonlight. Everybody else couldn’t help but admire Noelle’s fur as well. And if they had known what was about to happen, they wouldn’t have been moving at such a fast pace.

Then it happened. Noelle’s foot jammed into a root. She franticly searched for a way to stabilize herself, but there was nothing. She fell…right onto a rock.

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*Noelle was alone. No one was there for her. She was standing on an empty, desolate shore. The sun was a strange color and the wind was bitter. She had never seen this shore, yet it all seemed so familiar. Noelle turned and faced the ocean. What she saw then took her breath. It was a wave. A giant wave. It had come to destroy her, and everything she ever knew and loved. It coming…closer…closer…closer. Noelle tried to run, she tried to scream. But she couldn’t move, she could barely breathe. Her voice sounded strange and distant as she croaked out “No! Oh, Creator, help me!” Then she saw them. Faces, in the wave. There was Asa, but he looked so different. He looked older, about middle-aged. A long scar ran from his left ear down to the right side of his chin. There was a patch over his right eye where the scar ran through. Failure and defeat were written all over his face. Then Noelle saw Tamm in the wave. He too was middle-aged and looked weary and defeated. His dark, hopeless eyes pierced her heart. She then collapsed.*

When she first regained consciousness, Noelle didn’t know where she was. She kept hearing voices and seeing familiar faces. But it was all hazy. She was painfully aware of the intense throbbing in her head. Noelle forced herself to concentrate on the faces. Then she came tearing back to consciousness. She sat up.

“What happened?” she asked.

Dawn gently forced her to lie down. “Hush, now. You need rest. You had a bad fall and hit your head on a rock. Don’t worry, you’re going to be fine very soon. You just need to rest.”

Noelle was overcome with weariness and her head swam but she wanted to know what was happening. “What about Rosemary and Bobo? We need to catch up with their captors!”

Dawn shushed her. “Shh, it’s all right. We know where Rosemary and Bobo are going and we’ll get them back soon enough. We were fools to give chase in the dark. Thank the Creator Kelsey heard your fall and told us to stop. If she hadn’t, who knows how long you would have lain there bleeding before we found you.”

Noelle nodded then winced as she felt the bandage on her head. “Thank the Creator Kelsey was right next to me! Where is everyone? Where are we?”

“We’re continuing our journey! You’re in the wagon and everyone else is walking.” Dawn looked tired and there were dark rings around her eyes.

“Dawn, have you been up all night caring for me?”

Dawn gave a weak smile. “Now don’t you worry about me. I’m fine.”

“Please, may I get up and look around outside? Maybe I can walk a bit…”

“You may get up and look outside, but you are absolutely not walking for the rest of today or tomorrow. Maybe a bit the next day after tomorrow. But absolutely not today!”

Dawn helped Noelle sit up and inch forward to the front of the wagon. Noelle immediately felt dizzy and light-headed, but she had to see her friends.

The cool morning air felt good as Noelle peeped out of the wagon. It was a beautiful morning; the sun was bright and it was pleasantly cool outside. The air felt so refreshing. The birds twittered and the sky was cloudless.

“Ah! Good to see you up again!” Thor’s voice was welcoming to Noelle.

“Oh Noelle! Thank the Creator you’re awake! We were so worried about you! I feared you would never wake up! You were out most of the night and this morning!” said Kelsey, a huge smile on her face and relief in her eyes.

“You okay there, silverfur? You are looking pretty pale!” said Garret, jogging up beside the wagon.

Noelle smiled. “I’m doing all right. I hate to be a burden and slow us down!”

“Tut tut! It wasn’t your fault! You couldn’t see the root! And besides, we know where Rosemary and Bobo are being taken,” said Honeydew.

Everybody else was happy to see Noelle awake and tried to talk to her, but Dawn shooed her back into the wagon again.

“All right, all right! Don’t wear her out! You’ll get plenty of time with her in a few days! Now she needs rest or she’ll never recover properly!”

Noelle was about to protest, but her head was throbbing painfully and she felt dizzy and weak. So, it didn’t take long for her to drift back to sleep.

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When Noelle woke again, they weren’t moving and it was dark out. Dawn wasn’t anywhere to be seen. She felt much better and felt like eating. She sat up and slowly made her way to the front of the wagon and looked out. Everyone was eating around a small fire. Noelle cautiously climbed out of the wagon and made her way to the fire. Nobody noticed her till she sat down.

“Hey Noelle! Glad you decided to join us! Feeling okay?” said Tamm.

Noelle smiled and took a bowl of stew Durgan handed to her. “Yes, Tamm. I’m feeling much better after that long nap. I didn’t mean to sleep all day, but it was refreshing.”

“That’s good! You need plenty of sleep. Maybe we can take that bandage off tomorrow!” said Dawn.

“Think you’ll be able to cope with the rest of the journey? And the fighting?” asked Asa.

“Of course! I’ll be as fit as a fiddle before you know it!” said Noelle.

If it hadn’t been for Rosemary and Bobo’s capture, that evening would have been a pleasant one. The moon was full and bright, and the fire was cozy.

“Are we traveling through the night?” asked Noelle. Everyone looked around at each other. The same question had been looming in their minds all day. They had to make haste lest harm come to Rosemary and Bobo. But traveling through the night was dangerous, as they learned the previous night.

Thor cleared his throat. “I was thinking, what if we did travel through the night? Except this time, we do it *carefully*. We have plenty of rope in the wagon, so everyone, with the exception of Dawn and Noelle, could tie some around their waist and tie the other end to the wagon. That way no one will fall behind and we’ll know if someone falls. But we’ll be moving at a slower pace so that shouldn’t be a problem.”

Asa nodded. “Good idea. Any objections?”

There were none.

“Good. Let’s clean up and get moving!” said Thor.

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The next few days were miserable and tiring. They walked nonstop with only a few hours of rest every day. They didn’t even stop for the night. Even Noelle, who traveled in the wagon most of the time, was sore and bruised from being jostled all day. Finally, she had enough. Noelle convinced Dawn that she felt good enough to move out of the wagon and walk. Dawn reluctantly agreed. But before she got out, Noelle removed her bandage and looked at herself in the small mirror. What she saw surprised her, she didn’t know how much she had changed since the start of their journey. Her former soft and delicate features had hardened, giving her a tough, warrior-like look. And the scar didn’t help anything either. The scar was perfectly vertical, in the exact center at the top of her forehead. Noelle knew she would have to bear it for the rest of her life. But she didn’t care. It was a mark of where she had been, and the struggle she went through to save Pinewood. She was thankful the Creator had kept her alive so far. The only physical part of Noelle that didn’t change was her grayish silver fur and her stunning deep blue eyes. She then thought about the dream she had a few nights ago and the one she had the night they found Bobo. She didn’t know what they meant, and they frightened her. She wasn’t sure, but she somehow knew her visions in her dreams were visions of the future. She prayed they weren’t. Noelle never wanted to scare the others, so she kept her dreams to herself.

Noelle turned away from the mirror, hopped out of the wagon, and fell in step next to Kelsey.

“Oh Noelle! I’m so sorry you’ll have to carry that scar with you for the rest of your life!”

“Oh, I really don’t mind. The Creator made me fall for a good reason. Though I don’t know why, yet. It’s a mark of where I have been, and the struggle I went through to save Pinewood. And Rosemary and Bobo.”

“I can’t stop thinking about Rosemary and Bobo. Rosemary and I were sisters, you know. We were best friends. We did everything together, and we were always there for each other. But now that she’s gone, I feel like a part of me is missing! I-I miss her so much!” said Kelsey, her eyes filling up with tears. Noelle put an arm around her.

“I’m so sorry, Kelsey! But don’t worry, we’ll get them back! I’m sure of it! With the Creator, all things are possible!”

Kelsey looked at her with tear-filled eyes. “Are you sure?”

“Of course!”

 Kelsey sniffed, wiped her eyes, and managed a weak smile. “Thank you, Noelle. I don’t know what I would do without you!”

11

The Penetralian Coast

A

sa couldn’t ever remember being this tired and sore. He had been walking for two straight days with only an hour’s rest once a day. They didn’t stop for the night. They only tied ropes to their waists and tied the other end to the wagon at night. It was all they could do to put one foot in front of the other. Thor was having the hardest of it, pulling the wagon and all. The load was lightened when Noelle moved out, but it still was a tedious task. And no one was more grateful than Thor when Seaweed said:

 “Me smells da ocean! We should be there tomorrow.”

Everyone gave a huge sigh of relief and suddenly found more energy. They stopped for supper that evening and everyone took a breather.

 “Whew! Back in Pinewood, I never would have believed I could have made this journey at this rate! I’m totally spent!” said Tamm.

Noelle was aching and her head was hurting. She didn’t even feel like playing her harmonica. But she didn’t say anything, she didn’t want to get back in the wagon and she didn’t want anyone to worry about her.

 “Cheer up gang! We’ll be at the Penetralian Coast tomorrow! The fresh sea air would do us all good, isn’t that right, Seaweed?” said Garret, playfully nudging Seaweed. Seaweed scowled. He was still fuming at being captured and having to lead these travelers to his master’s hideout.

 “And then we can have a good rest at Steelrudder’s island! They make the best food ever, and it’s only about a day’s journey down the Penetralian Coast!” said Hank.

 “But don’t we need to make haste? We don’t have time to rest for a few days at your friend’s island! Majara, wasn’t that the island’s name?” said Asa.

 “Listen lad, we aren’t faring very well ourselves. We’ve been traveling with hardly any rest for about three straight days. And if we try to storm Zodamere’s hideout, rescue Rosemary and Bobo, and retrieve the Sword when we’re still in this shape, it’s going to be a disaster! So, if we want any chance to get this to work, we’ve got to rest! And besides, we need careful planning, and I’m sure Steelrudder’s otters would be more than happy to help us!” said Hank.

 Asa nodded. “Of course. You’re right, as always.”

All too soon, they had to continue their journey through the dark. Noelle tied the other end of her rope to the wagon and prepared herself for a long, tiring night.

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 Tamm jerked his head up for the fifth time. Had he fallen asleep while walking again? He felt Asa’s head bump into his shoulder and then jerk up again. *Good.* Tamm thought. *At least I’m not the only one who’s fallen asleep while walking!* Tamm wondered how Thor managed to stay awake throughout the whole night without drifting off. The wood was very quiet, even the crickets were silent. Tamm felt his head bobbing and then suddenly he jerked his head up again. Had he heard something? Tamm listened again. Yes, there it was again! A faint chewing and tugging sound came from the other side of the wagon. Tamm’s ears perked up and sleepiness was all but forgotten. He had to investigate. Tamm untied himself and silently jogged in front of Thor. He was dozing and walking at the same time, so he didn’t see him. Tamm turned and crept to the other side of the wagon. He then saw a dark shape bolt from the side of the wagon into the forest. Seaweed!

 “Hey! Come back here!” shouted Tamm, bringing everyone back to attention. The wagon stopped and everyone was asking questions at once.

 “Wha? What happened?”

 “Is something wrong?”

 “Did someone get hurt?”

 “Are we under attack?”

 “Hey!” Asa shouted. “Where’s Seaweed?”

 “Gone! He ran off!” said Tamm.

 “What do you mean ‘he ran off’?” said Asa, digging the sleepiness out of his eyes.

 “He chewed through the rope that was holding him! Then I saw him bolt into the forest! He’s gone! We can’t catch up with him in the dark!” said Tamm.

 Asa let out a loud groan. “Well, there goes our ticket into Zodamere’s hideout!”

 “Don’t despair! Maybe Steelrudder knows where the hideout is!” said Hank.

 “I certainly hope so,” Asa muttered under his breath. He was tired and cross. And Seaweed’s escape didn’t help anything either.

 There was nothing to do but to continue towards the ocean. So, they retied themselves to the wagon and traveled on through the night.

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 Things only got worse that morning. It started out okay, they could smell the ocean and everyone was in reasonably high spirits. After breakfast, however, was when things started going downhill. A large marsh lay in front of the shore. And there was no way around it.

 Tommy sat down gloomily. “Well, this is peachy!”

 Garret, as usual, looked on the bright side. “Come on chaps! We’re not that far from the Penetralian Coast! We can smell it! I can even hear the waves! Besides, maybe this marsh isn’t as bad as it looks!”

Everyone stared at him with blank, hopeless eyes.

 Garret decided niceness wasn’t going to get them moving, so he changed methods. “All right! Listen up you sad lot! We aren’t going anywhere just sitt’in around and looking like the world is coming to an end! Everyone up on your feet! We’re gonna do this! Thor will pull, and everybody else but Hank, Tommy, Basil, and Asa are gonna push! Hank, Tommy, Basil, and Asa will push on the wheels and try to keep it from sink’in! Think you sad lot can handle that?”

 Everyone immediately shouted out in unison: “Yes sir!” They all hopped up and got to work. Thor pulled the wagon while everyone pushed. The going started out not terribly awful, but by midday, the going was agonizingly slow. And the occasional pestering frog here or there only made things worse. They were all caked in swamp mud and their limbs were aching from all the pushing. They were currently trying to get the wagon up a steep slope of dried mud. Kelsey wasn’t prepared when the wagon suddenly made a lurch. Kelsey stumbled and fell…right into a deep crater filled with mud. She began sinking rapidly.

 “Kelsey! No!” Noelle immediately took action. Calling for help, she grabbed a long piece of rope and tossed it to Kelsey. Kelsey grabbed the rope and hung on for dear life. Noelle tied the other end of the rope to the wagon and began pulling. Everyone else ran to help her. It took a large amount of heaving and pulling before they managed to pull Kelsey out. Noelle wrapped her arms around her friend.

 “Are you okay? Thank the Creator you’re alive! You scared me for a moment!”

 Kelsey sniffed. “I-I’ll be okay. I was so scared!”

 Finally, just as the sun was about to set that evening, they came to the edge of the swamp. There was now no more grass, only sand. And they could see the ocean in the distance. They had made it to the Penetralian Coast. All the travelers collapsed with weariness on the sand.

 “Fellas, we made it! The Penetralian Coast!” panted Garret. “See? That wasn’t so bad now was it?”

 Kelsey threw a clump of sand at him. “Easy for you to say! You didn’t nearly get sucked into a mud pit!”

 “Please say we can rest for the night here!” panted Noelle.

 “We can rest tomorrow when we get to Steelrudder’s island, Majara,” said Thor. Everyone groaned.

 “At least let us wash all this muck off in the ocean!” said Tamm.

 “Yes, of course!”

 Words couldn’t describe how good the seawater felt on Noelle’s muddy, sweaty fur. She tried to take a long, good drink of the cool water, but she failed to realize how salty ocean water tasted before it was too late. Garret couldn’t help but smile when she began spluttering and coughing.

 “Don’t you know never to drink ocean water? It’ll only make you thirstier!”

 Noelle scowled at him. “How could I have known? I’ve never been to the ocean before! And besides, I…” Noelle didn’t get to finish. At that moment, a large wave knocked her under. Garret pulled up the sopping wet squirrel.

 “You all right there, miss? You gotta watch out for those waves, they can sneak up on you at any time!”

 “Haha! I’m fine! That was actually pretty fun!” laughed Noelle, playfully splashing Garret. Garret splashed her back.

 “Oh no you don’t!” said Noelle, lunging at Garret and dunking him under. Asa and Tamm saw and soon joined the friendly fight. Hank soon joined, along with everybody else except for Durgan. (Moles hate water). Everyone was very disappointed when it was time to continue. But it wasn’t so bad because everyone felt better after a bit of fun.

 That night was oddly one of the best nights since they started their journey. Perhaps it was the fresh salty sea air and the soft sand beneath their feet. Noelle didn’t feel beaten and tired, she felt…alive. The moon was bright and seemed even brighter reflecting off the ocean. A calm, cool breeze rustled her fur and Noelle felt like running and dancing like a little youngling.

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 The next morning’s sunrise was truly a sight to behold. The brilliant yellow and orange peeked from the east, reflecting of the vast ocean. To add to everyone’s happiness, Hank remarked that they were only a couple of hour’s walk from Majara. Tamm whooped with joy and started spinning and dancing, causing a whirlwind of sand to form around him.

 Asa laughed and playfully punched his arm. “Why you’re just a big baby! Real warriors don’t dance and spin!”

 Tamm grinned childishly at him. “Admit it, you would like to do that as well! I know you do! We’re still technically younglings, you know!”

Asa just rolled his eyes, but he couldn’t help a smile. Tamm was right, they still were younglings, doing an adult’s job. Then Asa’s smile faded. They shouldn’t be doing this. If Zodamere had just simply left Pinewood alone, Asa, Noelle, and Tamm could be real younglings. They shouldn’t have had their childhood cut short with this mission they had to carry out.

 As the sun rose, so did the temperature. By mid-morning, it was so hot the sand burned their feet and their fur was damp with sweat.

 “What I would give for a dip in the ocean right now!” panted Kelsey, staring longingly at the cool, blue ocean. It looked more tempting than ever.

 “Come on, buckos! We’re almost there! We can’t stop to rest now!” said Hank.

 “Oh please! Our destination isn’t anywhere in sight! Besides, it’ll only be a few minutes!” Garret pleaded. He looked pitiful, ears drooping, tongue lolling out of his mouth, and feet dragging.

Hank was about to say something when two huge female otters suddenly popped up from behind the sand dune they were climbing.

 “Oi, travelers! Stop and state yer business!” said the otters.

 Hank stepped up and held up his paws. “We’re looking for Steelrudder! Might you be from Majara?”

 “Oi, that we are! Whom might ye be? And what’s yer business with Steelrudder?”

 “I’m Hankshire Streammaster. And these are The Wandering Willowbranches and friends. We only ask for a few days rest at Majara.”

The two otters approached. They were big, sleek, and black with silver flecks in their oily fur. They each had long spear slung over their backs. Their stern expression softened and one of them said with a smile: “Come on. We’ll take ye to Majara. I’m Gwendolyn and this is Bronwen. We’re twins, and Steelrudder is our father.”

12

Majara

H

ere we are!” said Bronwen proudly. The weary travelers looked around. All but Hank were shocked at what they saw. There was a stream leading from the ocean, which looped in a circle that surrounded a small island. Huts and caves made from mud, sticks, and wet sand dotted the island. There was one large hut shaped like a rectangle in the center of the island. Smoke curled out othe f chimney and already the travelers could smell the delicious aromas that came from the large house. They had reached Majara.

“What’s that big hut for?” asked Tamm, his stomach growling.

Gwendolyn smiled. “That’s basically the dining hall. We use it for other things as well. Like meetings. There’s one huge table in there, large enough to seat the whole gang and some.”

“Oh jolly good! I do certainly hope we’re invited to dinner tonight!” said Garret, rubbing his paws together gleefully.

Honeydew looked horrified. “Why Garret! It isn’t polite to invite ourselves to dinner!”

Garret looked hurt. “I never invited us to dinner! I was only speaking a thought that crossed my mind!”

Gwendolyn and Bronwen burst out laughing. “Of course, you’re invited to dinner! What kind of creatures would we be if we didn’t?”

Huge smiles spread across the weary traveler’s faces. They hadn’t slept in a comfortable bed with their bellies full in what seemed like forever. Tonight was going to be good. If only Rosemary and Bobo were here to take part in it.

The travelers and otters came to the stream’s edge. They look around, expecting to find a bridge or a ferry. There was nothing.

“Uh, how are we going to cross?” asked Durgan nervously. Everyone felt sorry for him, for they knew he hated water.

“We swim, silly! How else would we cross? Ye aren’t scared of a little water, are ye?” said Bronwen. Durgan went pale.

“Uh, actually, he is scared of water. Might there be another way to cross that doesn’t involve getting wet?” said Basil.

Gwendolyn looked at Durgan sympathetically. “Sorry, no other way unless ye can fly. I feel sorry for ye, not liking water. Water is the best!”

Durgan approached the water’s edge and timidly stuck this footpaw in. “Youch! It’s cold and wet!”

Suddenly, Bronwen’s eyes lit up. “Hey, I’ve got an idea! Why don’t one of ye ride on Gwendolyn and me with Durgan on his shoulders! If we do that, I don’t think Durgan has to get wet!”

 “Bronwen, you’re a genius! That might actually work!” said Gwendolyn.

 “I think one of the Wandering Willowbranches should have Durgan on his shoulders. They’re better at balancing than the rest of us,” said Asa.

 “I volunteer!” said Hank. “I can balance on my rudder with Kelsey and Rosemary on my shoulders!” So, Durgan clambered onto Hank’s shoulders and Hank carefully climbed on the otters’ backs.

 “Ye ready?” Gwendolyn asked. Durgan nodded, closed his eyes, and hung on for dear life. Hank smiled with pleasure and nodded. The two otters shot off. In no time they were on the island.

 “Anybody need help to cross?” Bronwen called out from the island. The three Pinewood squirrels didn’t know how to swim very well so Gwendolyn and Bronwen had to make several trips there and back with them on their backs.

 As the travelers walked through Majara, curious otters peeked out of huts that dotted the island. They were all large and powerful beasts with kind yet tough faces. Once, a little otter scurried out of a hut, ran up to Noelle, and said:

 “What be yer name? Me called Sam. I never seen a squirrel wiv silver fur!”

 Noelle smiled at the little otter. “I’m Noelle Moonlight. It’s nice to meet you, Sam.” Just then Sam’s mother ran out of the hut he had come out of.

 “Why there ye are ye little imp! Let’s leave these poor travelers alone,” Sam’s mother said. Then turning to Noelle, she said: “I’m so sorry if he’s bothering you!”

 Noelle smiled kindly at Sam’s mother. “Oh he wasn’t bothering us at all!”

 Soon they came to the Dining Hall (the large hut in the center of Majara). Just beside the meeting hall, was a hut a bit larger than the rest. The largest otter any of them had ever seen came out of the large hut next to the Dining Hall. The otter was huge, burly, sleek, and black with silver flecks. He looked a lot like Gwendolyn and Bronwen. It was Steelrudder.

 “Ahoy there! Is that Hankshire Streammaster I see?” he said.

 “Aye, it is! And is that my old friend Steelrudder?” asked Hank. The two otters ran forward, embraced, slapped backs, and punched each other.

 “Tis’ good to see ye, old friend,” said Steelrudder, giving Hank a slap in the back so hard it nearly toppled him to the ground.

 “Aye, and you too,” said Hank, wincing and rubbing his back.

 “I see you’ve already met my daughters. Where have ye been all these years? Who are yer friends?” asked Steelrudder. Introductions were made and Steelrudder and his daughters wanted to know what brought them here. But Asa said it was a long story that would be told later.

 “Aye, understood. What am I doing? Ye must be exhausted! Follow me and I’ll find ye a place to stay,” said Steelrudder.

He led them to some vacant huts near the Dining Hall. The huts were small, yet cozy and comfortable. Each of them was made to hold about four animals. Kelsey, Noelle, Dawn, and Honeydew shared one hut. Noelle immediately collapsed on her bed and was about to drift off to sleep when Honeydew pulled her up.

 “Come on,” she said. “Your fur is filthy and it wouldn’t do to get these clean beds spoiled with your filth, now would it? We’re going to the stream to get ourselves somewhat presentable.”

Noelle grudgingly got out of bed and followed Honeydew to the stream with Kelsey and Dawn, only half awake.

 When Noelle woke again, Gwendolyn was standing over her, smiling. “You’re pretty hard to wake when you’re in deep sleep!” she said.

 Noelle sat up groggily and tried to wake up her brain. “How long have I been asleep?” she asked.

 Gwendolyn chuckled. “Ye plopped off as soon as ye got back from the stream! That was late this morning. Ye’ve been asleep ever since, and it’s dinnertime! We’re all waiting on ye in the Dining Hall. Bronwen took Honeydew, Kelsey, and Dawn there a few minutes ago. Everyone else is there too, I think.”

 Noelle nodded and hopped out of bed. “Thank you so much for giving us a few days’ rest, Gwendolyn. We needed it bad.”

 Gwendolyn smiled. “That’s what friends are for! And since we’re officially friends now, ye can call me Gwen. Oh, and I also brought ye a clean dress. Yer old one is right out ruined.”

 Noelle took the dress with a grateful smile. “Thanks, Gwen. I’ll never forget you or your otters’ kindness.”

She then put on the dress and followed Gwendolyn out of the hut to the Dining Hall, where she could already hear loud chatter.

 The Dining Hall was a scene of happiness and coziness. A warm glow from a great fire spread through the huge room. In the center of the room, there was the largest rectangular table Noelle had ever seen. Large otters sat at the table, eating, laughing, and talking. Everyone looked so happy. Gwendolyn led Noelle to the other end of the table where Steelrudder sat. The Wandering Willowbranches, Garret Chase, Asa Ember, Tamm Bushtail, and Bronwen sat nearby. There were two vacant seats and Noelle and Gwendolyn took them.

 “Ah, I see you’re finally up! You’ve been missing out on the food! I’ve never tasted anything better!” said Garret with his mouth full of vegetable pie.

 “You bet! You’ve got to try their stuffed nuts! And their honeybread! And their pasties! And their apple and peanut butter tarts! And their shrimp ‘n seaweed soup!” said Tamm, loading a plate with food for Noelle.

Noelle, eyes wide, took the plate from Tamm and attacked the food, forgetting to eat like the princess she was. She was famished and she vowed never to take food for granted again.

 After everyone had eaten their fill, the friends sat alone in the dining hall, telling Steelrudder, Gwendolyn, and Bronwen about their mission. They told about how Asa, Noelle, and Tamm met, how they had rescued Bobo and captured Seaweed, how they met the Wandering Willowbranches, their narrow escape from the birds, Rosemary and Bobo’s capture, Seaweed’s escape, traveling through the swamp, reaching the shore, and finally reaching Steelrudder’s holt. When it was all told, the three black otters were silent, obviously in deep thought.

 “Well,” said Steelrudder finally. “I’d say ye had enough action to fill out a lifetime. The Creator has truly been with ye. And ye haven’t even gotten to the truly dangerous part! Invading Zodamere’s hideout and killing him! Now let me ask ye a question, do ye know where Zodamere’s hideout is?”

 Asa gulped and looked down, embarrassed. “Well, sir. That was where Seaweed was supposed to come in. But now that he’s escaped, well…”

 Steelrudder looked at him with a steady gaze. Asa looked into his eyes. Was that admiration he saw in Steelrudder’s eyes? Maybe even humor? Asa saw Steelrudder, Gwendolyn, and Bronwen exchange looks that said “this is it” and “I’ve got a plan”.

 Steelrudder returned his gaze to Asa and said: “All right then. Let me tell ye a story. When I was younger, I was the happiest otter ever to live! I had a large holt, and we were livin’ in a large cave right in a cove near a waterfall. I tell ye, no otter was happier than I. I had a beautiful wife, two lovely daughters, and five fierce sons. But my happiness died when Zodamere came. He was looking for a new hideout. And he must have thought my cave and cove were perfect for him. So he slaughtered the lot of us. My sons and I fought with all our might, but there were too many sea vermin. I managed to escape with my two daughters. But my wife and sons were brutally slaughtered. I lead what little of my holt that survived to this island here. I named this island Majara, after my dead wife. We made our new home here and we got along as best we could. Ye may ask why my holt seems so happy when we have lost so much. And I tell ye, they aren’t happy. They just seem that way to keep surviving. But we’ll never be truly happy ever again. The lot of us would be more than happy to put an end to Zodamere. That’s why we’ve been watching him, waiting for the right moment to strike. And when ye came along, I saw the opportunity to strike. I have a plan in my mind right now, crafted to destroy Zodamere. Aye, we’re coming with ye.”

 The travelers were speechless. They had not expected help from a whole bunch of otters. This changed everything!

 Tamm was the first to break the silence. “So, you know where Zodamere’s hideout is?”

 “Aye, I do, young Tamm. In fact, he’s just over that giant sand dune in the distance. Only a few hours’ walk from here. And he’s in my old cave, Arabia, which I know like the back of my own paw.” said Steelrudder. Again, the travelers were speechless. Zodamere’s hideout just a few hours’ walk away? It was hard to comprehend.

 Since no one could say anything, Steelrudder continued. “Would ye like to hear my plan for bustin’ in?”

 Noelle recovered her voice. “Y-yes! Please do tell us!”

 “Okay then. This is only the basic idea for bustin’ in, so we need to do more careful planning at the cave. I was thinkin’ that the Wandering Willowbranches could put cause a distraction or something for Zodamere and his Powerseekers and then we could suddenly attack. Catch ‘em off guard, we will! There is a secret entrance in the back of the cave, which we could use,” said Steelrudder.

 Basil was hesitant about that plan. “That’s a great plan! But a terrible one as well! Suppose ol’ Zodamere finds us and slaughters us right then and there! Now you tell me, what we’ll do then?”

 “Now, now there’s no need to get your feathers ruffled! I told ye, that was only the basic idea! We’ll plan this more carefully! But it would work best if we were actually at the cave, scouting and spying. We’ll watch and wait for a few days, waiting for an opportunity. And when it comes, we strike!” said Steelrudder. Basil still looked skeptical but he kept quiet.

 Asa cleared his throat. “Um, you said there was a secret entrance in the back of the cave? Could we use that?”

 Steelrudder looked down. “Well, er, yes we could. But the thing is, I don’t know if Zodamere found the entrance or not. It’s a good idea to use it, but it could also be a very bad idea. The attack could be put to an end before it barely even began! Are we willing to take the risk?” Everyone was silent.

 Thor spoke up. “Why don’t we just wait till we actually see the cave, and maybe we can find out if the secret entrance is occupied.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

 “Aye, sensible idea. Now that that’s settled, why don’t ye get a good night’s sleep and we can set off for Arabia tomorrow afternoon,” said Steelrudder. Everyone dispersed and went to their huts.

 That night was peaceful and quiet. The only sound to be heard was the steady breathing of Noelle’s hut mates and the crash of the ocean waves. Noelle should have been relaxed and at ease. After all, she was in good company and she was on an island with a whole bunch of huge and fierce otters. But Noelle was uneasy and worried. Just the thought of Zodamere nearby sent shivers up her spine. She couldn’t believe it was actually going to happen. They were nearing the conclusion of their journey and the most dangerous part. Noelle had prepared herself for what the next few days would bring, but now that it was here, she felt totally scared and unprepared. At that moment, Noelle didn’t want anything more than to leap out of bed and run straight back to the safety of Pinewood Forest, where she could forget their whole mission and life could go back to normal. *No!* thought Noelle. *I can’t back out of this! Pinewood needs me! All of Penetralia is counting on me to help destroy Zodamere! I can’t back out of this! I can do this; I can do this! The Creator is on our side and he has chosen me for this!* Finally, Noelle drifted off to sleep. And she dreamed.

 *Noelle was running. Something, or someone, was chasing her. She didn’t know what it was, or what it wanted. But Noelle knew this thing that was chasing her was evil, and the thing chasing her had something she wanted. Noelle felt the instinct to spin around, face her pursuer, and take what she wanted. But fear drove her on. Noelle felt like a coward, running like this. But she couldn’t stop. Voices rang in her ears, coward; traitor; turn around and face him. But still, she ran on. Then something snagged her foot, and she tumbled and fell into a dark, deep cavern. She blacked out. When she awoke, she didn’t know where she was, or how she had gotten where she was. When she slowly regained her senses, she gasped and sat up with fright. Who was chasing her? Where was he? Why hadn’t he killed her already? Why does he have something she desperately wants? “Oh, Creator help me!” she whimpered. Noelle took in her surroundings. She was in a cavern, and the only way out was too high up for her to reach. Noelle stood up, the stones were slick and covered with moss. There was a dark, bottomless pool nearby. And on the other side of the pool, was what Noelle wanted. The Sword. Without thinking, Noelle ran and plunged into the icy pool. She came out on the other side, shivering. She approached the Sword and reached out to grab it, but then the thing that was chasing her stepped out of the shadows. Noelle gasped and jumped back. It was Zodamere. She couldn’t see him well, for a black cape was covering his body and face, but Noelle knew it was him. She tried to cry out, but her voice was caught in her throat. Zodamere grinned wickedly and pounced.*

13

Arabia

T

hat morning, Asa was awakened rudely by Garret and Tamm. Tamm jumped on him and began tugging on his ears while Garret yelled in his face.

 “Come on chap! Breakfast is gettin’ cold and we’re waitin’ on you!”

 “And I so happen to know it apple pancakes and whipped cream with fruit!” said Tamm.

 Asa groaned and said, “I would love to get up but it’s hard when a huge furball is on your back pulling on your ears!”

 Tamm jumped off Asa’s back. “Come on, come on! I’m famished!” Asa sat up and would have loved to take a moment to fully wake up, but Garret gave him not such pleasure. He yanked Asa up and practically dragged him out of the hut.

 “Don’t be mad at us for waking you up! You told us to wake you up for breakfast last night!” said Garret.

 Asa’s sleepiness immediately went away when he stepped into the dining hall. The delicious aroma of apple pancakes was almost overwhelming. Asa inhaled and breathed out a sigh of happiness. What better way to start the day than having apple pancakes for breakfast? Garret bolted to the other end of the table where his friends were sitting with Gwendolyn, Bronwen, and Steelrudder. Asa followed with Tamm; whose mouth was watering. When they reached the other end of the table, Garret was already stuffing pancakes covered in whipped cream into his mouth. After Tamm and Asa were seated, Noelle asked when they would be leaving for Arabia. Steelrudder said that afternoon would be best. Then they would spend the night a safe distance from the cave and would plan for the next few days. Everyone nodded their approval, except for Garret, who was too busy polishing off a bowl that had contained whipped cream.

 Bronwen turned to Noelle and Kelsey. “I can’t wait to show ye Majara! And I also can’t wait to show ye the great waterfall near Arabia! It’s called Arabia Falls! I remember a little bit of the cave itself, but I mostly remember the waterfall. It was beautiful and I loved to swim in the pool at the bottom! Do ye remember the tiny cave we found on the other side of Arabia Falls, Gwen?”

 Gwendolyn smiled. “Of course! I remember that! I remember one time we accidentally broke one of Mother’s favorite armbands by playing with it when we knew we weren’t supposed to! We hid out in the tiny cave for hours, hiding from mother! But we got so hungry so we went back to the big cave! We got a terrible whipping!”

 Noelle looked shocked. “Did you really hide from your mother!”

 “Getting a whipping served you right! That was awfully naughty!” said Kelsey.

 Bronwen laughed. “Ye bet we did! That seemed so long ago! But that was only a few weeks before Zodamere attacked.”

The friends then grew quiet at the mention of Zodamere. Just the name itself seemed to bring an eerie silence whenever spoken. Noelle thought of her dream last night and the sounds of the dining hall seemed to grow faint and distant. She shuddered when she realized she was actually going to confront the monster of her nightmares within a few days.

 That morning, Gwendolyn and Bronwen showed Asa, Tamm, Noelle, Kelsey, and Garret around Majara. There was a small freshwater pond with crystal-clear water on the island which the otters used to wash clothes and bathe. There was also a steep sand dune right at the edge of the pond where little baby otters slid down into the water. Gwendolyn insisted that they teach the three Pinewood squirrels to swim. The squirrels happily agreed, and while they were being taught, Garret and Kelsey swam over to the little otters sliding down the dune. They immediately became fast friends with them.

 After the swimming lesson, Gwendolyn and Bronwen took their new-found friends to the stream. They all swam down the stream towards the ocean, where Bronwen pointed out something in the distance. It looked like someone had taken a bite out of the shoreline. It was very far away, so they had to squint to see it.

 “Do ye know what that is?” asked Gwendolyn.

 “It looks like someone took a bite out of the shoreline. What is it?” asked Kelsey.

 “That’s Arabia Cove. The cave is right in there. And so is Zodamere,” said Bronwen. Again, an eerie silence fell over them.

 Asa was the first to speak. “Doesn’t it worry you to be this close to him?”

 Gwendolyn shrugged. “Either he doesn’t know we’re here or he just decided to leave us alone. Either way, he hasn’t attacked us yet. But if he ever does, we’ll be ready this time. We won’t get caught off guard again.”

 “I know it’d make me nervous,” said Kelsey, shuddering. “But he’s got my sister and a friend trapped in that cove, and I’m going to get them back.”

 “Speaking of which, I think we should head back to Majara now. Father is probably about ready to go,” said Bronwen, looking up. They then swam back to Majara, an awful feeling of dread looming in their stomachs.

 When the friends returned to Majara, they found all the otters gathered right outside the Dining Hall. They pushed through the crowd and found Steelrudder and the others gathered inside the Dining Hall.

 “There ye are! We’ve been waitin’! I’m gonna give a little speech before we set out to Arabia, and I’d like ye to hear it, so I waited,” said Steelrudder.

 “Sorry we kept ye waiting, Father. We would have been back sooner if we had known…” said Gwendolyn. Steelrudder nodded and stepped outside the Dining Hall. Every eye of the otters outside was on him. Asa saw that they no more looked jolly and cheerful, but looked tense and ready to fight. Steelrudder stood there for a moment, gazing into their eyes. Then he spoke:

 “Friends, ye all know what’s about to happen. I’m not going to pretend that what we’re about to do isn’t dangerous and reckless. Some of ye won’t make it out alive, and I just want ye to know yer deaths won’t be in vain. But the Creator is on our side, and he will help us! We fight for our home, our true home! We fight to avenge the deaths of our loved ones! We fight to make the land of Penetralia a safer place! We fight to destroy the evil tyrant Zodamere! We’ve been waiting and watching for the perfect chance to take action for years, and I tell ye, the chance is now. When I first heard these traveler’s story, I immediately got a plan in my mind that could only be pulled off with these good beasts. I’m confident this plan will work if we stick together, and fight as we have never fought before. I have confidence in the lot of ye…”

 At this, Steelrudder paused and seemed to look every otter in the eye. Then he continued… “I see strength and determination in yer eyes, but I also see fear. I know some of ye are scared and I don’t blame ye for it. Truth is, I’m a little nervous myself. But that’s not stopping me from striking a blow against evil. We can’t live in fear, can we? As I said, the Creator is on our side! But ye don’t have to do this, ye know. No creature is forcing ye to come. And no creature is going to blame ye if you won’t come. If ye want out, now’s yer chance. After this, there’s no turning back.”

 Steelrudder paused and looked around. No one dropped out. Everyone stayed put, now more determined than ever to fight.

 “Are ye ready to fight for our true home!” Steelrudder shouted.

 “Aye!” everyone answered, raising their weapons.

 “Are ye ready to avenge the death of your loved ones!”

 “Aye!”

 “Are ye ready to fight to make the land of Penetralia a safer place!”

 “Aye!”

 “Are ye ready to destroy the evil tyrant Zodamere!”

 “Aye!”

 “Then let’s get to it!” shouted Steelrudder. Everyone dispersed to say goodbye to their families and get ready for the next few days.

 “A perfectly rousing speech!” said Basil.

 “Ye were incredible, Father!” said Bronwen, giving her father a hug.

 “Thank ye, daughter. I hope ye and yer sister survive this attack,” said Steelrudder.

 That afternoon, Steelrudder’s otters, Gwendolyn, Bronwen, The Wandering Willowbranches, Garret Chase, Asa Ember, Noelle Moonlight, and Tamm Bushtail set out to Arabia, where Zodamere himself dwelt. They would lie low, wait, and plan once they got there. Then, when the time was right, they would strike. The three Pinewood squirrels had an awful feeling that things weren’t going to turn out as expected…

 They reached a small clearing near Arabia at dusk. The others made camp while Steelrudder and his daughters showed the Wandering Willowbranches and the Pinewood squirrels Arabia. The friends perched on the top of a steep bank, and when Noelle peeked over, she gasped. The steep bank they were perched upon sloped down into a large cove of crystal-clear waters, and at the other end of the cove, was a cave. The only way in or out Noelle could see was the wide mouth of the cave, which lead out to a small beach covered with pebbles. But the most truly awesome sight was the waterfall some distance from the cave. Arabia Falls. It was large and spectacular. Noelle found it hard to believe great evil dwelled in a place of great beauty.

 Steelrudder let the sight settle into the friends’ minds before speaking, “Aye, beautiful ain’t she? That’s our rightful home, and I intend to dwell there once again, or die trying.”

 “It’s been so long since I’ve been here, and it looks the same. Maybe not as well kept, but it still the same,” said Bronwen. Gwendolyn nodded.

 “It’s beautiful, but I shudder to think of Rosemary and Bobo trapped in that cave. They’re so near, yet so far!” said Kelsey.

 “I pray that no harm has come to my sweet Bobo down there! It’s hard to know your only baby is only a few yards away, but you can’t get to him!” sobbed Dawn. Noelle put a comforting arm around her.

 “Don’t cry, miss. We’ll get your babe back soon enough,” said Steelrudder. Immediately after he said that the same thought crossed everyone’s mind: *assuming he’s not dead.* Nobody dared speak their thoughts aloud.

 Just then a large rabbit strolled out of the cave onto the pebble shore and looked around. The friends ducked. After waiting a minute, Steelrudder cautiously peeped over the slope again and spat. “Powerseekers!” he muttered.

 “It’s not…him, is it?” asked Kelsey nervously.

 “No. Just a Powerseeker. Zodamere’s a mouse,” hissed Steelrudder.

 “What if we captured him and got him to talk?” asked Asa.

 “I like the way ye think, lad. But it’s too risky. Other Powerseekers might come out of the cave at any moment. Besides, he would see us before we reached the bottom,” said Steelrudder.

 “I could knock him out with a stone from my sling!” suggested Tamm hopefully.

 “No, lad. How could ye be sure ye wouldn’t kill him at this distance?” said Steelrudder. Tamm looked crestfallen.

 “Don’t worry, lad. Ye’ll get your fair share of action soon enough.” Steelrudder patted Tamm’s head.

 “I wish there were a way to do this without fighting,” said Noelle.

 “Aye, I do to,” said Gwendolyn.

 “I think we all do,” said Bronwen.

 “I don’t,” muttered Tamm under his breath. “I wanna kill some Powerseekers. I just don’t want anyone to get hurt,” he added, louder.

 “Tamm, whenever there’s fighting, creatures are going to get hurt whether you like it or not,” said Asa.

 “Aye, that’s the sad truth of it,” said Steelrudder. The friends watched the rabbit for a while, then the rabbit went back into the cave. They reluctantly left their post on the slope and went back to their camp.

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 That night as she was lying on her bedroll, Noelle thought of the days ahead. That seemed the only thing she thought about the past day. One question had loomed in her mind all day and now it was driving Noelle crazy. *What if we fail?* Noelle buried her face in her pillow. *No! I must not cave in to fear!* But no matter how hard Noelle fought, the question would not go away. She wished she could ignore it, but it was impossible. Noelle made a choice right then and there, she could not ignore the question, but it wouldn’t stop her from trying to reclaim the Sword. The Creator had chosen her for this job and she couldn’t back out of it. And even if she died during the fight and even if it ended in failure, Noelle could say she had tried. For Noelle, that was saying a lot.

 Just as Noelle was drifting off to sleep, Kelsey spoke: “Noelle?”

 “Mhm?”

 “Do you think we’ll succeed?”

 Noelle paused. “I don’t know, Kelsey.”

 “I’m scared. I want to see my sister and Bobo again. I want you to have the Sword, but I can’t stop thinking about what will happen if we fail.”

 “Kelsey, that same thought has been looming in my mind all day.”

 “Really?”

 “Mhm. And I can’t get it to go away. But I decided that I’m going to fight anyway. The Creator is on our side and we can’t give in to fear. And if all goes wrong, we can say that we tried.”

 Kelsey was silent.

 “Kelsey?”

 Noelle heard Kelsey sigh. “I suppose that’s what we’ll have to do. But it is good knowing that fear doesn’t have to be your master and the Creator is on our side.”

 “It really is. Good night, Kelsey.”

 “Good night, Noelle.”

14

“For Pinewood, and for Penetralia”

T

hat morning, Tamm woke up expecting to have a scrumptious breakfast. Then he quickly remembered he wasn’t at Majara anymore. Instead, they were only several blocks away from the evilest creature ever to walk the land of Penetralia. He sighed and got out of bed. He saw that Asa and Garret had already gotten up. *How long have I been asleep?* Tamm exited his tent and walked over to the large, main tent in the middle of the camp. *Sort of like the Dining Hall back at Majara.* That thought caused his stomach to rumble. Tamm entered the large tent and looked around. Otters were bustling about, busy with their various tasks. On the other end of the tent, Steelrudder and Tamm’s friends were gathered around a large desk that was covered with papers and maps. The friends appeared to be discussing plans and eating breakfast at the same time. Tamm made his way through the crowd of otters and approached the desk.

 “What’s up? You didn’t start discussing anything important without me, did you?”

 Before anyone could say anything, Garret piped up. “Actually, yes we were. We just figured out the perfect plan for busting into the cave!”

 Tamm looked shocked. “What!? You came up with a plan without consulting me!?”

 Garret doubled over with laughter. “Hahaha!! Did you really believe we would do that!? Did I really fool you!? Heeheehee!!”

Tamm’s face turned redder than Asa’s. Noelle shot him a look of sympathy. Asa was doing his best to hide a smile, and so was everyone else. Only Noelle and Honeydew weren’t smiling. Honeydew wheeled on Garret and gave him a look that immediately got him to stop laughing.

“Er, sorry laddie. That was just too good an opportunity to miss. Sorry,” said Garret.

Tamm sat down with a huff and muttered, “Apology accepted.”

“How ‘bout a bowl of porridge to make up? Nothing fancy, but it’s hot and fills a fella up!” said Garret.

Tamm perked up at the idea of food and gratefully accepted a bowl of porridge. “So, what were you guys talking about, really?” he said with his mouth full.

“Well, Garret’s little prank was half true. We were just coming up with a plan. But the plan isn’t complete, unlike what this boogery bouncer said,” said Noelle, nudging Garret with her elbow.

Garret did his best to look hurt. “Boogery bouncer! Now just wait one minute you furry-faced-nosy-nuisance! I just…”

“Hold it right there, Garret Chase! There will be no unnecessary arguing involving rude name-calling in this tent! We are about to launch an attack into a monster’s den and the last thing we need to be doing is arguing!” scolded Steelrudder.

Garret’s ears drooped as he murmured an apology to Noelle.

“No, I’m sorry Garret. I shouldn’t have called you a boogery bouncer,” said Noelle.

“Can someone please tell me the plan so far?” asked Tamm impatiently.

“Right! We were thinking the safest way to do this is not to be hasty. So, we are going to keep a close eye on Arabia for the next day or so. We’ll scout the perimeter and look for other ways in or weaknesses. Especially the secret entrance. We need to know if Zodamere knows about that or not. We also need to know how many are guarding the main entrance. Basically, we need to know everything we possibly can. So, we do nothing but watch and wait for the next few days,” said Steelrudder.

“You used to live in this cave. Do you have a good guess on where the Sword and Rosemary and Bobo might be?” asked Asa.

Steelrudder thought a moment and began sketching a map of the cave on a blank sheet of paper in front of him. “If I were Zodamere, I would be keepin’ Rosemary and Bobo in the cages which are right here,” he said, pointing to a place on the map he had drawn. “The best way to get there is through this passageway.”

“All right. But what about the Sword?” asked Asa.

Steelrudder sighed. “That’s the problem, lad. I don’t know if Zodamere has the Sword in the treasury, which is here, or if he carries the Sword with him wherever he goes. I hope it’s in the treasury, but there’s a good chance that Zodamere has it with him.”

Asa clenched his fists. “Either way, I’m not leaving Arabia without the Sword or Zodamere dead!”

“Me too!” echoed Tamm. Noelle bobbed her head.

 “And I’m not leaving without my baby!” Dawn said with a stubborn look.

Kelsey nodded her head vigorously. “And you can be certain I’m not leaving without my sister!”

“All right then! Let’s start with spying on ‘im!” said Steelrudder with a grim smile.
“Gwen, send for Shadow!”

“Aye, Father!” Gwendolyn was gone in a flash.

Tamm addressed the elephant in the room. “Who’s Shadow?”

Steelrudder and Bronwen exchanged a knowing smile. “Ye’ll find out soon enough, laddie.”

It wasn’t long before Gwendolyn returned with a tall, dark brown otter. The new otter had a loyal, yet sly and sneaky presence about him.

“Ah, Shadow! I have a very important job just for ye, so listen closely,” said Steelrudder. The brown otter stepped closer.

“But before I tell ye, I want ye to meet our friends. These are the Wandering Willowbranches, Asa Ember, Noelle Moonlight, Tamm Bushtail, and Garret Chase. Friends, this is the slyest otter in these parts, Shadow,” said Steelrudder. Shadow threw the friends a friendly smile and Asa immediately took a liking to him.

“And how may I be of service to ye?” asked Shadow.

“Listen closely. I want ye and your crew to sneak up to Arabia and spy. Also, if possible, I want ye to find the secret entrance and find out if it’s occupied or not. If possible, sneak inside the cave and give me all the information you can possibly get. Don’t go in the cave if ye feel it isn’t safe. You’re the expert, so I’m leaving the sneaking up to you. Don’t do anything reckless and foolhardy, and report back to me if ye see anything that might help our situation here. Understood?” said Steelrudder.

“Aye, sir! I won’t let ye down!” said Shadow, saluting smartly.

“Then get to work, and may the Creator go with ye!” said Steelrudder. Shadow was gone in a flash.

“So, what do we do now?” asked Kelsey after a lengthy pause.

“We wait and pray to the Creator for the best,” said Steelrudder.

“Come on, friends! Let’s go see if there’s something to do outside!” said Bronwen.

The three Pinewood squirrels braced themselves for some long next few days. They didn’t expect to attack for at least another two more days. So, they began making themselves comfortable and settling in for a bit. And so, no one was more surprised than they when Shadow came running back to camp totally out of breath and excited…

Asa watched wide-eyed as Shadow ran straight to Steelrudder’s tent. He immediately knew something was up.

“What’s going on? Why is Shadow back already?” Tamm asked.

“I don’t know. But I’m going to find out. Come on!”

Noelle joined Asa and Tamm as they ran to Steelrudder’s tent. Just as they were about to enter, Gwendolyn came busting out of the tent and they ran smack into each other.

“Oof! Oh, there ye are! Father just sent me to find ye! Shadow’s back and something’s up!” said Gwendolyn.

“I know! We saw him running to your father’s tent and we came as fast as we could!” panted Asa.

The friends entered the tent and saw Shadow out of breath and trying to tell Steelrudder something.

“What’s going on, Father?” asked Bronwen, who was standing nearby.

“Slow down and catch your breath, Shadow. Then explain what’s going on,” said Steelrudder.

It took a minute for Shadow to catch his breath. “Sir! I was scouting Arabia as ye said to when a whole gang of Powerseekers marched out of the cave and boarded a ship! Then they sailed away! They weren’t heavily provisioned so that means they’ll only be gone about a day or so! The time to strike is now!”

Steelrudder’s eyes grew wide with excitement. “How many Powerseekers went on the ship! Was Zodamere among them?”

“There were about fifty or so on the ship! And no, Zodamere was not with them as far as I could tell! I tell ye, the time to strike is now!”

“Gwen and Bronwen, get the Wandering Willowbranches over here now! We’ve got some serious planning to do because we’re attacking tonight if possible!”

“Tonight, Father?” asked Gwendolyn.

“Aye, tonight! Now get going!” Then turning to Shadow, Steelrudder said, “Good work, Shadow! Now I need ye to tell us all the information ye gathered at Arabia.”

Noelle’s head was spinning. *We’ll be attacking tonight?* She was so shocked she barely heard Tamm say,

“Are you okay, Noelle? You’re looking pretty pale!”

“Yes. I’m just shocked, that’s all,” Noelle softly whispered.

Gwendolyn and Bronwen were back in no time with the Wandering Willowbranches, who were all looking worried and excited.

“What’s all this about?” Basil asked Steelrudder.

Steelrudder let the silence linger for a few moments, carefully looking each and every one of them in the eye before saying, “Friends, Shadow just returned with some alarming yet good news. He says about fifty or so of Zodamere’s Powerseekers sailed away in a ship. Zodamere was not among them.”

A loud cheer went up from the Wandering Willowbranches.

Steelrudder held his paws up for silence. “But there’s more! Shadow says the vermin took very little provisions, which could only mean one thing. They will be back in another day at the least. If we are to strike, we have to do it now! And I mean NOW! This very evening! If we wait till tomorrow, the other fifty Powerseekers could come back and overrun us!”

The Wandering Willowbranches were stunned into silence. This was most unexpected and terrifying.
 Asa then stepped up and said, “Friends, all of you have been most kind to Tamm, Noelle, and myself since we left Pinewood to retrieve the Sword and bring an end to Zodamere. All of you are more than generous to accompany us, provide us with food and shelter, and even go with us to the very end if necessary. I am giving you a chance to back out of this. Nobody is going to blame you if you do. There is a very high chance that you will never leave Arabia once you enter it. Tamm, Noelle, and I will do everything we can to free Rosemary and Bobo while we’re at it. Please friends, don’t feel like you have to do this. This is all your decision.”

Basil planted himself in front of Asa and looked him in the eye for a long moment before speaking. “Asa Ember young sir, we know very well that this is our decision! And our decision is to follow you to the very end! Don’t think this is only your fight! Zodamere has hurt us all and we all have a score to settle with that monster! He has killed our loved ones and captured our own! We will never back out of this! We would be cowards and traitors if we do!”

Steelrudder put his paw on Asa’s shoulder and said, “Basil’s right, we know this is our decision. This fight belongs to all of us. And we’re with ye to the end, aren’t we girls?” Gwendolyn and Bronwen nodded.

Asa smiled. “Thank you all so much! I don’t know what we would do without all of you!”

“Right then! Now that’s settled, can we get a real plan going?” asked Hank.

Steelrudder clapped his paws together. “Right! Does anybody have any suggestions?”

Basil cleared his throat. “Ahem, I was just thinking about what you suggested a while ago about us Wandering Willowbranches causing a distraction for Zodamere. And the more I think about it, the more I think that idea might actually work! If we did that, how long do you need us to keep the monster distracted?”

Steelrudder thought a moment. “As long as ye can give us! Thirty minutes at the least. That should give us plenty of time to sneak inside through the secret entrance and attack. We’ll catch him off guard. Can ye buy us that amount of time?”

“Of course we can! Isn’t that right, Wandering Willowbranches? We could set off rounds of fireworks and throw the isocane all around Arabia! We could run circles around him!” said Basil.

“Yes!” said the Wandering Willowbranches in unison.

“Oh, we could have fun with this!” cried Kelsey, her eyes huge with excitement.

“Splendid! Shadow, were ye able to get inside the cave at all?” said Steelrudder.

“No, sir. Sorry,” said Shadow.

“It’s all right, Shadow. Ye did well,” said Steelrudder.

“How will we know if Zodamere has the Sword or not if we’ll be getting ready to attack while Zodamere’s out front watching the play?” asked Tamm. The friends pondered this question for a moment.

“We could send you some sort of signal, like a special kind of firework. We could send off a rainbow firework if Zodamere has the Sword with him, and a purple and blue swirl firework means he doesn’t,” suggested Tommy.

“Great idea! Don’t forget, the rainbow firework means Zodamere has the Sword, blue and purple swirl firework means he doesn’t. Now let’s plan the actual attack. If I remember correctly, the secret entrance splits off into two passages once entered. The one on the right leads down to the back of the dungeons where I expect Rosemary and Bobo to be. The passage on the left leads to a secret door with leads out to the main passageway. Shadow, I want ye to take your crew and about a fourth of my otters and go down the right passage to the dungeons. I’ll take the rest of my otters, these Pinewood squirrels, and Garret Chase down the left passage to the main passage. There, we kill any Powerseekers in our way and make our way to the front entrance. Wandering Willowbranches, once ye see us, ye attack. I will give ye daggers and slings to conceal in your clothes. Shadow, once ye’ve rescued Rosemary and Bobo, come and aid us immediately. Once the attack is over, we meet back here. Any questions?”

“What do we do if Zodamere finds us and decides to kill us right then and there? Or turn us into Powerseekers?” asked Durgan.

Steelrudder looked down. “Then ye make as much noise as possible to let us know something’s wrong. We’ll come and attack from the front, but we’ll be in a much worse position to attack if we do it from the front. Hopefully, it won’t come to that.”

“What if the other fifty Powerseekers return during the fight?” asked Garret.

Everyone looked to Steelrudder, who sighed and looked down. “Then we can either retreat or fight to the death. Is this a risk we’re willing to take?”

“Whatever we do, there’s always going to be a big risk we have to take. I truly believe by fighting now, our chances are as good as ever!” said Asa.

“Well spoken, young sir! Asa’s right, if we want any chance of winning an open attack, now is the best time!” said Basil.

“Any last objections or questions?” asked Steelrudder, carefully scanning the friends’ faces. Nobody said anything, everyone tried to look brave.

“All right then, let’s go put an end to this monster. And may the Creator be with us,” said Steelrudder smoothly and evenly.

Noelle left the tent and strolled to the shore to find a moment of peace and calm before the storm that would happen that very evening. She sat on a log, taking in the scenery. It was a beautiful afternoon. The sun was getting lower in the west, and it reflected off the brilliantly blue Penetralian Coast. Noelle closed her eyes and relaxed as the cool, salty ocean breeze swept through her fur and gently pushed back her whiskers. She savored these few moments of peace, not knowing if she will ever get to see the ocean again or feel its breeze on her face. Noelle thought of her journey that started not long ago. A lifetime’s worth of danger and excitement all had happened in a few short weeks, and it all began crashing down on Noelle at that very moment. And she knew the worst of their journey was about to happen. The injury on Noelle’s head began throbbing, and she felt like crying and running all the way to the safety of Pinewood.

“Are we interrupting something?”

Noelle nearly jumped out of her skin. She hadn’t heard Asa and Tamm approach. “Yes, you have, thankfully! I’m glad you’ve come.”

Asa and Tamm sat down on either side of her. The three Pinewood squirrels stared out into the deep blue ocean, savoring the moment and simply enjoying each other’s presence.

“I never knew the Penetralian Coast was this beautiful,” said Tamm.

“Yes, just like the calm before a storm,” said Noelle.

“Hey, I want you guys to promise me that no matter what happens tonight, we’ll stick together. We’ll fight side by side, and we’ll do whatever possible to get the Sword and end Zodamere, okay?”

“Right! We have more of a chance of winning this if we stick together!” said Tamm.

“Good idea!” said Noelle.

The friends then were quiet again, staring out to sea, lost in their own thoughts. And each of them thought about their life in Pinewood and how it would be different if they returned with the Sword.

Asa Ember thought of his father, Jasper Ember. He felt sad that his father had no idea where his only son was. Asa knew he would be deeply saddened if his son had suddenly disappeared, leaving absolutely no trace behind. *Would Father still be looking for me? Would the whole Ember tribe come looking for me? Probably not. I’m sure Father looked for me when I first left, but I’m sure he has given up by now. I hope he will be proud of me when I return with the Sword.* Then Asa suddenly knew he absolutely couldn’t return to Pinewood without the Sword. If he did, he would return in shame. That couldn’t happen. *And it won’t happen!*

Tamm Bushtail thought of his family, which included his parents, his big brother Benji, and his big sister Juniper. He missed them. *Well, I guess I don’t miss Benji so much. He wasn’t the nicest brother. But I still do kind of miss him. Sort of. Is Benji sad I disappeared? Maybe his is, a little. I’m pretty sure Juniper, Mother, and Father are sad. I wonder what they would say when I return to Pinewood with the Sword? Even Benji would be proud! Although I don’t want to know what he would say to me if I don’t return without the Sword.* Tamm then clenched his fists. *I won’t return without the Sword! I won’t be able to bring myself to do it!*

Noelle Moonlight of her family and friends. *Father would be absolutely furious if he knew what I am doing! So would Mother! I bet they’re in a panic right now! So is the whole Moonlight tribe! I can’t imagine what went on in that part of Pinewood when I left! I wonder what Father and Mother are going to say when I return with the Sword. They’ll probably be proud, and furious.* Noelle thought of her best friend, Ilene. She was sure Ilene was very worried about her. Noelle wished Ilene knew where she was and what she was doing. She wished she could have told Ilene everything.

The three friends had no idea how long they sat there on that log, staring out into the Penetralian Coast. It must have been a while because before they knew it, the sun was just at the western horizon. The friends knew it was time. Then they stood, joined paws, and whispered: “For Pinewood, and for Penetralia.”

15

The Attack

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ortunately for his attackers, Zodamere was in a good mood. The evil mouse had two new prisoners, a squirrel and a baby mouse, that would prove useful for him in the future. And part of his Powerseekers would soon be returning with some plunder and prisoners. So how could he not be in a good mood? Zodamere was truly a sight that would send every living creature quaking. He was extremely large for a mouse, and his perfectly straight, gleaming white teeth were nothing to be messed with. Muscles rippled through his body under his oily dark brown fur. His dark eyes were small yet they gleamed with wickedness.

Zodamere was pacing his chambers, happily toying with a beautiful sword that had amazing power (which was his most cherished possession) when a loud knock sounded at the door.

“Who is it? What do you want?” Zodamere snapped, annoyed.

“It’s me, Ringtail! There’s somethin’ goin’ on out ‘ere! Lottsa explosions and colorful lights!” came the response.

Zodamere was surprised, this had never happened before! Explosions and colorful lights? This was interesting! “Send out a crew and find out who’s causing this commotion!”

“We did, chief! The crew found where the fireworks were bein’ launched, but there wasn’t a creature in sight! They came back covered with blue powder, chief!” said Ringtail, who was a rabbit Powerseeker.

Zodamere thought a moment. If his highly trained Powerseekers couldn’t find out who was causing this commotion, it must be big. He would need most of his Powerseekes to solve this. “I’ll go see what’s going on myself if you morons can’t!”

“Right dis way, Chief!”

Ringtail lead Zodamere through the winding passages of a cave, which had once belonged to some otters, called Arabia. But Zodamere had quickly driven them out and made Arabia his new hideout. The two evil creatures walked out of the cave and onto a large, pebble shore that was in a large cove with a beautiful waterfall.

Zodamere’s keen eyes quickly surveyed the situation. It was not good, he quickly realized. All was chaos and confusion. Bright, colorful lights flew all around, dangerously close to the ground. The deafening booms made it impossible to think clearly. Zodamere didn’t know how he hadn’t heard all of this noise before. Small explosions of blue powder were happening all around the pebble shore, covering the Powerseekers with the blue powder. It didn’t seem to be hurting any creature, Zodamere realized with relief.

“Ringtail, get all the Poweseekres together and tell them to search around the front of this cove! Leave a few behind with me to guard this cave! Tell them not to return till they put an end to all this commotion!” Zodamere barked.

Ringtail scurried off to do his master’s bidding.

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From the right front side of the cove, Basil watched the commotion he was causing with glee. His plan was working. There was nothing but chaos and confusion in the cove below.

“Keep it up gang! This is working!” said Basil to his comrades. Basil, Honeydew, Durgan, and Thor were on the right front side of the cove, firing fireworks into the cove. They mainly kept to the trees, for Powerseekers were rampaging on the ground, desperately searching for them. Whenever they passed below, Basil, Honeydew, Durgan, and Thor bombarded them with sacks of isocane. All the Wandering Willowbranches were wearing cleverly designed costumes. They wore leafy green and brow clothing, covering every bit of exposed fur. So they were absolutely hidden from the confused Powerseekers.

From the front left side of the cove, Hank, Kelsey, Dawn, and Tommy were doing the same thing. And although she never would have admitted it, Kelsey was having the time of her life. It was extremely fun to bombard the Powerseekres below her with sacks of isocane and watch their confused and terrified faces, not knowing what hit them. Still, Kelsey couldn’t help but feel sad. For she knew these Powerseekers were once good creatures just like her. They didn’t have a choice in becoming a Powerseeker, but the power of the Sword had bent their minds to following Zodamere permanently.

“Can you see if Zodamere has the Sword with him or not?” asked Tommy to Hank. “I need to know whether to set off a rainbow firework or a purple and blue firework.”

Hank squinted through the haze of blue powder and smoke. He made out the form of Zodamere himself down below on the pebble beach in the cove. “Er, I think he has the Sword with him. Hard to tell, though.”

“All right then, rainbow firework it is. Help me to aim it up where the others can see it,” said Tommy.

Launching a firework from a tree was no easy task. But if you brace it right where the branch meets the trunk, it was possible. Hank helped Tommy brace the firework down and point it up. Tommy took the lighter and lit the fuse.

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 From the other end of Arabia, Asa watched Tommy’s rainbow firework explode into the sky. “That’s our signal, Zodamere has the Sword with him. Let’s go!”

 Steelrudder nodded to Shadow. “Right. Remember, take yer otters down the right passage to the dungeons. Release everyone ye find and get them to safety. Then come aid us in the fight out front. Kill any Powerseeker in your way, but do it without a sound.”

 Shadow saluted. “Aye sir! Understood!”

 “Good. Be off with ye, and may the Creator go with ye,” said Steelrudder.

 Shadow saluted once more, nodded to his otters, and they soon disappeared down the secret entrance.

Steelrudder turned and faced Asa, Tamm, Noelle, and Garret. “This is it, friends. There’s no turning back now.

Asa notched an arrow to his bow and looked at his friends beside him. “Whenever you’re ready, sir.”

Steelrudder nodded and pointed his long spear down towards the secret entrance. Asa Ember, Tamm Bushtail, Noelle Moonlight, Garret Chase, and a whole host of otters silently marched into the entrance.

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Rosemary Lightpaw shivered in a corner in a dark, damp dungeon cell. She and Bobo had been down there for about three days now, and it was about all they can take. Rosemary gently stroked Bobo’s fuzzy head, who was sleeping fitfully on her lap. *Poor dear,* she thought. *He hasn’t had a decent meal or a good rest for days! And neither have I! How long will we stay down here? How long will we survive down here? Will anyone come to rescue us? What does Zodamere want with us?* The flow of questions only increased as the days wore on. Just the previous week, Rosemary and Bobo had been captured by a small band of Zodamere’s Powerseekers at the Spikes’ home. Rosemary had gone outside just to check on Bobo, Jude Spike, and Julie Spike. She had found them and was just about to go back inside when a searing blow to her head had knocked her unconscious. Rosemary had awoken bound, gagged, and strapped to a smelly hedgehog’s back. Bobo was strapped to another weasel close by. She had fought, kicked, and struggled. But it had done little good. Finally, after days of being jostled and bumped on a hedgehog’s back, Rosemary and Bobo were thrown into this cell and had done little else since then but wait anxiously.

Bobo stirred in Rosemary’s lap and groggily sat up and began rubbing his eyes. “Is it morning yet?”

Rosemary picked up the fat baby mouse. “I don’t know dear.”

Bobo began sniffling. “I be vurry ‘ungry! When are dey gonna feed us?”

Rosemary began rocking Bobo. “Hush, little one. We should be getting food soon.”

Bobo was silent for a while. He knew better than to cry. He had cried a lot when they first got here, but it only annoyed the guards and they were extra nasty to him. So, he quickly learned to keep quiet. After a few minutes, Bobo asked, “Is anyone gonna come wescue us?”

As if answering his question, Rosemary heard a noise. It was very quiet and faint, but it brought hope flooding into her heart. “Shh!” she hissed.

The sound came again. This time Rosemary was certain of what she heard. It was voices, but the voices came from no Powerseeker. Rosemary heard the sound of a key being pushed into the lock on the dungeon door. Then the door opened. Rosemary had to pinch herself to make sure she wasn’t dreaming. Otters silently began swarming into the dungeons, unlocking cell doors and freeing shocked and dazed prisoners.

One otter who was obviously in charge came to Rosemary and Bobo’s cell, unlocked it, and said, “Hello there! Don’t worry, we’re here to rescue ye. I’m called Shadow. Might ye two be Rosemary Lightpaw and Bobo Springfold?”

Rosemary was shocked. How did this otter know who they were? “Uh, yes sir. I’m Rosemary and this is Bobo. How do you know who we are? How did you get down here? Do you know where The Wandering Willowbranches are?”

Shadow chuckled. “All of your questions will be answered in good time, lass. But for now, I’ve got to get ye are yer friend out of here before we’re found out.”

Rosemary nodded, picked up Bobo, and they both followed Shadow out of the dungeon, through the passageway, and out the secret entrance. Once outside, Rosemary took a long, grateful breath of fresh air. She vowed she would never take the wonderful outdoors and fresh air for granted again.

Shadow turned to Rosemary and said, “Listen, lass, yer friends are currently in front of this cave, creating a diversion for Zodamere and his crew. There is a large force of otters inside this cave right now, getting ready to bring an end to Zodamere while yer friends have got him distracted.”

Rosemary was shocked. “What? B-but I must help them!”

“Where’s my mommy?” asked Bobo who was on the verge of tears.

“No! Ye must stay here and out of danger! That is what yer friends wanted!” said Shadow.

“But I must help them!” insisted Rosemary.

“No! Rosemary, listen to me! Ye MUST stay here! Yer friends are risking their lives to see ye safe, and it wouldn’t do for ye to get yerself recaptured or killed! Do ye understand?” ordered Shadow.

Rosemary looked about ready to cry, but she put on a brave face, nodded, and said, “Yes sir, I understand and will obey. Bobo, we’re going to stay here for a bit, okay? You will see Mommy in a little bit.”

Bobo put on his stubborn face and said, “I want to see Mommy now!”

“No Bobo, you can’t see Mommy now. You have to wait here for a bit. Mommy would want you to stay here.”

Bobo’s stubborn expression only worsened and he sat down on a rock and pouted.

“Thank ye for yer cooperation, lass. I must go now and aid the attack,” said Shadow.

Rosemary nodded and thanked Shadow. Shadow nodded to his otters and they disappeared once more into the secret entrance.

“Rosemary?”

“Yes, Bobo?”

“Where’s Mommy?”

Rosemary was silent. She didn’t want to tell Bobo that Dawn was nearby. For if she did, she was scared Bobo might run off and try to find her. So, Rosemary only hugged Bobo and began humming a tune softly.

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Asa was running down a passage in Arabia with Noelle, Tamm, and Garret surrounded by Steelrudder’s otters. They had run into several Powerseekers on their way who didn’t look very happy, but the otters had made quick work of them. The passage they had entered from the secret entrance was narrow, steep, and didn’t look like it was used very often. The friends had constantly been pulling cobwebs from their fur. Now they were in a wider, more used passage than before. Lanterns hung from the walls. Otters swarmed into every doorway, room, and other passage they came across as silently as they could. But Asa, Tamm, Noelle, and Garret concentrated on the main passage, which they knew would lead to the main entrance of the cave. Where the Wandering Willowbranches were, and where Zodamere and the Sword were. As he ran, Asa reached back and doubled checked his bow and arrows. He then drew his sword when he saw a faint firelight ahead. He knew he was getting close. Tamm made sure his sling and pouch of stones were with him, then he, Garret, and Noelle drew their swords as Asa had done. As the firelight at the end of the passage grew, so did the four friend’s heartbeat and pace. They gripped their swords tighter and prepared themselves for the dreaded fight.

Then it happened. Asa, Tamm, and Noelle were the first ones out of the cave and onto the pebble shore. Under different circumstances, the three friends would have laughed at the look of surprise that came across the Powerseeker’s faces at the sight of three squirrels charging out of their cave followed by a rabbit and a whole host of otters.

“FOR PINEWOOOOOD!!! AND FOR PENETRALIAAAAA!!!” Asa, Tamm, and Noelle shouted at the top of their lungs.

“Have at ‘em, buckos!!” shouted Steelrudder. The battle had begun.

The Wandering Willowbranches dropped what they were doing, scrambled down the slope leading to the cove, and began hurling knives that were concealed in their disguises at the vermin.

Zodamere recovered from his shock when he saw the deadly glint in the eyes of three squirrels rushing at him. “Come on you worthless rabble!” he shouted at his Powerseekers. “Form up and attack!”

The Powerseekers quickly obeyed, followed their leader to form a line of defense, and began attacking the otters with ruthlessness and surprising order.

“Of course!” spat Tamm, “Zodamere’s no fool!” Then turning to Asa and Noelle said, “I think we might be in for a real fight. The advantage of surprise didn’t seem to help very much, did it?”

Asa put an end to a Powerseeker that was just about to remove his head and said, “It looks like you’re right. But at least we got the entrance blocked so he can’t retreat.”

“As long as the other Powerseekers aboard the ship stay away, we might have a chance,” panted Noelle. She was already sweating and gasping for breath.

 The battle seemed to drag on for hours. Slowly yet surely, the otters were winning the battle. And Zodamere knew it. Asa, Tamm, and Noelle had been trying to get at him since the battle had begun, but Zodamere was clever. He knew they were trying to get at him and he knew that the squirrels meant business. So, he had been cautiously avoiding them, dimly aware that he was being a coward.

Asa, Tamm, and Noelle were fighting back-to-back, giving each other support. Noelle didn’t know how she survived his long in the battle. But she was sure she wouldn’t be alive if the three squirrels had stuck together and supported each other, and if the Creator hadn’t been on their side. Noelle felt the Creator’s presence and it filled her with new energy and vigor.

“I don’t know how much longer we can keep at this!” said Tamm, narrowly dodging a curved sword thrusted at him by a Powerseeker.

“We can do this! We’re winning! Keep putting pressure on them!” cried Noelle, who was battered, bruised, and wounded dozen different places.

“Noelle’s right! As long as the…” Asa’s voice faltered and he spluttered.

“What is it? Is there a problem?” cried Tamm.

Asa pointed to the ocean. “Yeah, I’d say that’s a problem!”

Noelle and Tamm followed his gaze, dreading to know what he saw. A dark, massive ship was in the distance, and it was coming closer fast. It was the ship that part of Zodamere’s Powerseekers had sailed off in. The three friends suddenly felt their legs turn to jelly and their insides churn with dread. The attack would end in failure. Asa barely had the wits to reach for a small whistle in the pocket of his tunic and blow it. That whistle meant that the other Poweseekers were coming. The battle suddenly seemed to stop. Steelrudder saw the ship and began blowing his whistle franticly. The three squirrels expected the otters and Wandering Willowbranches to flee, but to his relief and dread, no creature retreated. The battle continued. They would make their last stand fighting for their home and their lost loved ones. The three squirrels’ hearts swelled with pride. They had never known more faithful friends than Steelrudder’s otters or the Wandering Willowbranches. Asa, Tamm, and Noelle looked into each other’s eyes and nodded. They would make their last stand here as well if need be.

The ship came steadily closer. The three squirrels knew that the crew on board knew something was up. Closer and closer it came. The ship was obviously built for speed. Before they knew it, the ship sailed right into the cove, coming right up to the pebble shore. Powerseekers poured out from the ship (which Tamm could see its name was *True Terror*), and they hit the army of otters like a steel wave. The tide had turned against the otters. Every good creature could see it wouldn’t end well for them. But on they fought. No creature surrendered; no creature fled. If they were to die that night, then they would die gloriously.

Noelle met the onslaught of Powerseekers with all the ferociousness she could muster from her tired and wounded body. She didn’t know she possessed this much energy in her whole body. With each swing of her sword or whack of her staff, she was sure she had spent the last of her strength. But each time, she felt the Creator give her more. And Noelle was sure Asa and Tamm felt the same way.

Throughout the whole battle, Asa had been trying desperately to get at Zodamere, and still stick with Tamm and Noelle. But Zodamere was crafty and clever, so the monster wisely kept his distance from the ferocious squirrels. It wasn’t till the Powerseekers aboard *The Terror* had arrived when Asa saw his chance. And he wasn’t about to lose it.

“Come on!” Asa shouted to Tamm and Noelle. “Zodamere’s slinking off over there next to the cave. I think he’s going up the slope to Arabia Falls! This is our chance to get at him!”

Tamm turned and saw what Asa had said was true. “I don’t like it! I think he’s leading us to a trap. We’ve got to do this carefully!”

“I think Tamm’s right! This very well could be a trap! I don’t think Zodamere’s retreating! He wouldn’t do that when he knows he’s going to win the battle! He’s no fool!” shouted Noelle over the clamor of battle.

“This may be our only chance to get at him! Come on! We’ve got to do this!” shouted Asa, fighting his way through the battle to chase after Zodamere.

Tamm and Noelle looked at each other, a look on their faces that said, *this is a bad idea!*

“We have to go after him! We’ve got to stay together!” said Tamm.

Noelle nodded, took a deep breath, gripped her sword tighter, said a quick prayer to the Creator, and charged after Asa with Tamm at her heels.

Asa chased after Zodamere, eyes glinting with hatred and determination. Zodamere saw all this and decided to use it all against him. So he climbed the rocky, sloping path on the side of the cave, which lead directly to a small, flat surface of the rock, right next to Arabia Falls. Asa, however, was totally heedless of all this. He simply saw Zodamere, saw the beautiful and powerful Sword at his side, and went after it. Noelle and Tamm were aware of where Zodamere was leading them. But they didn’t know his crafty plan. All they knew was Asa was giving chase after the mouse, and that they had to stick together, no matter what happened.

Zodamere reached the flat, stone surface right next to Arabia Falls and drew the Sword. Asa rushed blindly at him

“Asa! NO!” Tamm shouted.

But it was too late. Asa was totally unaware of the strength and speed of the hulking mouse. Zodamere swung the Sword, which slashed right across Asa’s face. Asa reeled back, a look of surprise and anguish on his now blood-covered face. Noelle let out a shriek, Asa’s face would be terrible to look at for the rest of his life. The red squirrel collapsed in a heap.

Zodamere turned his attention to Tamm and Noelle, who were both frozen with shock. He grinned wickedly and waited for them to either attack or retreat. Tamm managed to tear his eyes from Asa’s limp form to the terrifying sight of Zodamere. His eyes rested on the beautiful Sword in the mouse’s grimy paw. The Sword was truly the most beautiful sword Tamm had ever set his eyes on. Its hilt was wrapped with black, shiny leather. And it had a gleaming emerald that seemed to glow at the top of the hilt. Its double-edged blade was long and it reflected the moonlight. Tamm could feel its power pulsing, and he felt drawn to it.

“Th-that Sword, it belongs to Pinewood Forest!” Tamm squeaked. He hated how shrill and squeaky his voice sounded.

“Ah, does it now? Not anymore, you bushy-tailed nuisance. You want it? You better come and get it!” Zodamere taunted.

Tamm and Noelle then snapped out of their shock at the sound of the mouse’s voice. They brandished their swords and charged.

Zodamere only had time to defect Tamm’s blow and only soften Noelle’s blow. He wasn’t prepared for the speed of the squirrel’s charge. And there were two to watch out for, not just one. Noelle’s sword just scratched Zodamere’s side, but it wasn’t fatal in the least. Zodamere snarled with pain. The two squirrels circled the mouse, one in front of him and one behind him. Then they charged again, Tamm from the front and Noelle from the back. But Zodamere was crafty. He suddenly ducked and weaved to the side, throwing Noelle off balance. Noelle’s momentum carried her crashing into the rocks near Asa’s limp form. Zodamere quickly defected Tamm’s blow with the Sword and spun him to the ground. Noelle leaped up and hurled herself at Zodamere, landing on his back. Zodamere reared back and began clawing at Noelle, franticly trying to get her off his back. This left Zodamere completely open for Tamm. Tamm took the opportunity and swung his sword at Zodamere’s unprotected middle. Zodamere squealed with pain as he dropped to his knees. Noelle tumbled off his back and the Sword clattered to the ground.

Tamm lunged for the Sword and picked it up. Noelle was at his side in a flash, her deep blue eyes shining with wonder. The two of them sat there for a few minutes, enraptured in the Sword’s great power. They were oblivious to their surroundings. They wanted to cherish this moment, never wanting to forget it. They had gotten their paws on the Sword at last.

The two squirrels were too preoccupied with the Sword that they totally forgot about Zodamere, who was slowly standing up and making his way toward the squirrels. Before they realized what was happening, Zodamere was already on them. He dealt a savage punch to Tamm’s head and the squirrel fell back, unconscious.

“NO!!” screamed Noelle. And she made a lunge for the Sword.

But Zodamere was too quick despite his wound. He grabbed the Sword a split second before Noelle did. The mouse was about to cleave the squirrel’s head off a flash of red fur appeared and held the mouse’s arm back.

“Asa?” Noelle squeaked with surprise.

Asa gave a weak smile as he held Zodamere’s arm back. Noelle gasped at the sight of Asa’s face. A long, gaping wound started from his left ear, ran through his right eye (which Noelle was pretty sure was missing), and ended at the right side of his chin.

Zodamere jerked his arm free and brought the hilt of the Sword down on Asa’s forehead with a sickening crack. Asa collapsed to the ground, and Zodamere kick his limp form…right into Arabia Falls.

Everything after that seemed a haze for Noelle. She heard a scream. Her own scream. She was sure Asa was gone. She turned her head up just in him to see Zodamere’s wicked grin. Then she felt a searing pain in her head, right on her scar. Then everything went black and Noelle fell into darkness.

Part Two: The Sword

“There’s always hope, no matter what you think.”

16

Noelle and Tamm

N

oelle Moonlight closed her eyes and relaxed. She was perfectly content sitting on a tree branch, listening to the soothing sounds of the forest as a gentle breeze swept through her beautiful grayish silver fur. She had just finished playing her harmonica, which seemed to be her only source of comfort. Now, as she sat quietly with her eyes closed, she thought of her past life.

 Noelle was not quite middle aged yet, but enough adventure and excitement had already happened in her life to fill out another whole lifetime. She had been born in Pinewood Forest, into a life of luxury and misery. She was a princess, heir to the throne of the Moonlight tribe. She wanted to help her fellow squirrels, to bring equality to Pinewood, but since a corrupt and evil mouse named Zodamere stole the Sword, the only thing keeping the tribes of Pinewood united, everything had spiraled downwards. Noelle had befriended two squirrels, one from the Ember tribe named Asa, and one from the Bushtail tribe named Tamm. The three squirrels had gone on a fateful quest to take back the Sword and put an end to Zodamere and his minions called Powerseekers. On the journey, they had befriended a jolly group of travelers called the Wander Willowbranches and a cheeky rabbit named Garret Chase. The friends had traveled together to Majara, home a group of otters lead by Steelrudder. The otters helped the Pinewood squirrels and the Wandering Willowbranches attack Zodamere’s hideout called Arabia. The attack had ended in a disaster. The three Pinewood squirrels had tried with all their might, but Zodamere and his Powerseekers were too much. Even with Steelrudder’s otters and the Wandering Willowbranches helping. The last thing Noelle remembered about the attack was looking up into Zodamere’s wicked face…right before he struck her on the head with the hilt of the Sword. Noelle had blacked out. She was sure she was dead. That was why she was so surprised when she woke up, washed up on a shore. There was no creature in sight. Asa and Tamm were gone. Dead for all she knew. Her wounds had slowly healed, but her heart never did. She made herself a small, makeshift home in a tree and planned to live there for the rest of her life.

 That was all five years ago. Nothing had happened since then. Noelle had been living alone in a tree, filled with sadness and regret. A never-ceasing flow of questions bombarded her mind. *What went wrong? Why did the Creator let us fail? I thought he was with us! Why did this have to happen? What happened to Tamm and Asa? And the Wandering Willowbranches and Garret Chase? Are they dead? They probably are. I’d better forget everything and just live life the best I can under these circumstances.*

 There was a small village nearby, where Noelle sometimes ventured for food, but she never stayed long. She had first considered living in that village. She would have friends and would never be alone. But Noelle was much too sad and confused to care much about those things anymore. She just wanted to be alone. That way, no one would ever know how Noelle Moonlight had grievously failed them all by failing to kill Zodamere and retrieve the Sword. She didn’t want anyone to know her broken past. She just wanted to be alone and forget everything that had ever happened to her.

 But no matter how hard she tried; she could never forget. Terrifying nightmares about her past kept haunting her, calling her the names she believed herself to be. And worst of all, she couldn’t help arguing with herself.

*Coward. Failure. Weakling.*

 *But what could I have done? I did my best!*

*No, you didn’t! You should have been smart enough to finish Zodamere when you got him down! You shouldn’t have rushed at the Sword like that and get caught in its power! Idiot! What were you thinking!”*

*But I couldn’t help it!*

*You could have helped it!*

*Be quiet! The Creator let this happen for a reason!*

*But why did the Creator let this happen? Why? You’re ruined! You’re stuck here in this lonely tree somewhere in Penetralia! All your friends are gone, probably dead, all because you got a foolish notion to go take back the Sword against overwhelming odds! You failed and you’re a fool!*

Noelle couldn’t stop these arguments with herself. At first, she had prayed to the Creator, begging him to help her. But she eventually stopped praying. She felt as if the Creator had abandoned her. So, after every argument with herself, she would simply break down into tears, feeling lost and abandoned.

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It was right after she had had an awful argument with herself when she heard happy, cheerful whistling. Noelle quickly dried her tears and dove into the tree. She didn’t want to be seen or talk to any creature. But just as she was in the hollow tree, she stopped. The tune this creature was whistling sounded very familiar. Noelle frowned and thought hard. *I know I have heard that tune before, but where? Why does it sound so familiar?*

Then she remembered. It was a song she had composed herself. It was a song of praise to the Creator. She had played it to herself countless times when she was feeling sad back in Pinewood. Now hearing the song again brought a welcome feeling of joy rush into her heart. Noelle closed her eyes and focused on the sweet, rich melody.

Then a thought struck her. *Who is this creature who knows this tune I composed?* Then she remembered the only creatures to ever hear that song were Asa, Tamm, and the Wandering Willowbranches. Hope came flooding into her heart and brought tears to her eyes. *Could it be my friends are still alive?* Noelle peeked out of the hole in the hollow tree and caught a glimpse of the creature who was whistling the song. Her heart skipped a beat when she identified the whistler. It was none other than Tamm Bushtail. Noelle let out a loud shriek of delight and scrambled down the tree…right into Tamm’s arms.

“Tamm! Is it really you? I thought I lost you all those years ago!” said Noelle. She was laughing and crying at the same time.

Tamm was on the verge of tears of joy as well. “Noelle? I can’t believe it! Praise be to the Creator I found you!”

Noelle could hardly contain her excitement. “Oh you must have a thousand questions! And so do I! Come inside my home and we’re going to have a long talk!”

As Tamm made himself comfortable inside Noelle’s home, Noelle noticed he had changed a lot. The last time she had seen him, he was kind of small and scrawny with a childish look in his eyes. Now, he still wasn’t very large, but muscles were plainly visible in his arms and body. He had many scars and had the look of an experienced fighter. Only his extremely bushy tail that still looked too large for his body and the childish glint in his eyes were the same. Noelle realized she loved him as her best friend even more.

Noelle snapped out of her observation of Tamm when she realized Tamm was observing her. She blushed.

“You’re still just as beautiful as I remember you, Noelle.”

Noelle blushed even harder. “You don’t need to say that. The past has ruined me. Physically and emotionally. So, where have you been all these years?”

Tamm grinned. “Well, pretty much doing what you have been doing! I woke up, washed on a shore. I felt rejected and abandoned by the Creator. So, I isolated myself. I was miserable, and it was ruining me. I kept trying to believe, but my bitterness just wouldn’t leave. It took me five years to realize that I couldn’t get rid of the bitterness myself. So, I called out to the Creator and let him work in me, and he took away the bitterness and filled me with hope! He told me to go find you and Asa. I have been searching up and down the coast for about a month now. And here I finally found you! Praise be to the Creator! Have you heard anything from Asa?”

Noelle smiled a weak smile. “That’s great Tamm. I’m glad you have hope and joy. And I was hoping you would know something about Asa. I don’t know anything about his whereabouts. I assume he’s dead.”

“But you can’t give up hope! The Creator told me that you and Asa were still alive and you are! And I just know Asa is! I believe the Creator is telling me to find you both and try to take back the Sword again!”

Noelle frowned and lowered her eyes.

“Noelle, you’ve given up hope, haven’t you?”

“Tamm, it’s hopeless. We failed and Asa is probably dead. You didn’t see, but Asa regained consciousness after Zodamere inflicted that terrible wound on him. He saved my life by grabbing Zodamere’s arm and stopping him from killing me. But Zodamere struck him on the forehead and kicked him over Arabia Falls. He’s dead, Tamm. There’s no hope left.”

Tamm was silent for a minute. He didn’t realize Zodamere had sent Asa over a huge waterfall. Then he looked Noelle in the eye and said, “Noelle, there’s always hope. No matter what you think.”

17

There is Always Hope

N

oelle blinked. For a moment, the empty hopelessness that clouded her brilliant eyes left. But the cloud of despair returned and Noelle said, “I wish I could believe that Tamm. I really do.”

 “Then I’ll stay with you until you do believe it. The Creator didn’t guide me to you for me to just leave! No, I know He still has a great purpose for you.”

 Noelle shook her head and sighed. “You’re welcome to stay, Tamm. The tree next to this one is hollowed out and comfortable to live in. I’ll be glad for your company. But I wouldn’t stay if I were you. You’re just wasting your time.”

 Tamm grinned. “You just try to make me leave.”

 Noelle couldn’t help but smile back. “I’m not going to make you leave. It’s all your choice.”

 “And my choice is to stay. And I’ll come over and visit you every day and make you play your harmonica! You still have it, right?”

 “Of course. My harmonica is my only source of comfort nowadays.”

 “Well, I’m here now. And the Creator has never left you, you know.”

 “Thanks, Tamm.”

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 Tamm was true to his word. He made the tree next to Noelle’s his new home. He visited Noelle every day and made her play the song of praise to the Creator she had composed herself every day. And Noelle had to admit, the empty hopelessness was slowly creeping away. She especially felt it when Tamm visited and she played her harmonica. Her music never ceased to amaze her with how comforting it was, for whenever she played that song of praise, she felt the Creator’s presence.

 The days slowly crawled by. And Noelle began to believe deep down Tamm was right. She knew he was. She knew there is always hope and the Creator still had a great purpose for her. But something held her back. Noelle knew it was the hopelessness her memories brought. She soon realized she couldn’t get rid of the hopelessness by herself. Tamm had helped her realize that. Noelle knew the Creator had to do the work in her to rid her of hopelessness. And she desperately wanted to let the Creator do the work. But something held her back, and whatever it was, Noelle hated it, and couldn’t get rid of it herself. So, every day, she prayed desperately to the Creator that He would rid her of her hopelessness. And every day, she felt a little better, but the hopelessness was still there. She just knew she had to be patient and let the Creator work at His own timing.

 And of course, Tamm was always there for her. Every day, he brought hope and encouragement into Noelle’s life. He seemed to always know the appropriate time to say a word of encouragement and put a smile on Noelle’s face. She didn’t know what she’d do without Tamm.

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 It was about a month after Tamm had found Noelle when Tamm found Noelle absent from her tree. Tamm was going to visit her like he did every day. He was surprised when Noelle wasn’t there. She rarely left her tree. And she most likely would have told him if she were going anywhere.

*This is odd.* Thought Tamm. *I’d guess I’d better stay here and wait ‘till she returns.* Tamm said a quick prayer to the Creator, hoping no harm had come to Noelle. Then he did a quick search on the inside of the tree to see if Noelle had left him a note or something. She hadn’t. Tamm sighed, went back outside, perched on a branch, and waited patiently for Noelle to return.

By midday, Tamm was getting rather alarmed. *What is going on? Why would Noelle leave for this long without telling me?* Just as he was debating whether to go search for her or not, Tamm saw Noelle happily skipping through the forest not far off. Tamm let out a huge sigh of relief, scrambled down the tree, and ran to meet Noelle. When he was able to see her face clearly, Tamm saw that she had just had a good cry, but her face was lit with joy. Tamm’s curiosity was aroused even more than it already was.

When they reached each other, Noelle gave Tamm a huge smile and a huge hug.

“Noelle! Where have you been?” questioned Tamm.

Noelle at that moment couldn’t keep a smile off her face to save her life. She also looked like she was going to cry again. “I woke up earlier than usual this morning, and I felt strange. I don’t know why, but I had the urge to see the ocean…”

“Is that where you’ve been all morning? The shore is a good two miles away!”
 “Yes, I’ve been at the shore. Now let me finish, please. I don’t know what happened, but I felt the Creator Himself with me. He kept asking me to let go. I wouldn’t. I wanted to, but I wouldn’t. But the Creator wouldn’t stop asking. I don’t know how long it lasted, but finally, I lost the little battle. The Creator won. I gave up and let Him take control. I felt something change inside me. I felt like laughing with joy and crying at the same time. It felt good. It felt so relieving. Like I was holding my breath or something.”

Tamm was nearly bursting with joy. “Noelle! That’s wonderful!! That’s…that’s just wonderful! I’m so happy!”

Noelle squealed with joy and said, “What are we waiting for? Let’s go find Asa and take back the Sword!

18

Searching

T

amm and Noelle set out to find Asa that very afternoon. They decided they should look deeper inland, away from the Penetralian Coast. If Asa was still alive, there was no reason why he should stay near the shore. Besides, Tamm had already looked up and down the shore without any sign of him. They would ask any creature they came across if they had seen a bright red squirrel with many scars. Asa wouldn’t be the type of creature that another creature would forget easily if seen, being so rare.

 That afternoon went by without any luck. They hadn’t seen many creatures, but the few ones they did meet didn’t know anything about a red squirrel with many scars. When Noelle and Tamm stopped for the night, Noelle did her best to not be too disappointed. They hadn’t been even traveling for a day, it was unlikely they would run into any creature who heard of Asa yet.

 Noelle turned her attention to Tamm. He didn’t seem downcast in the least. He seemed almost cheerful. *Of course! He has been spending the last five years looking for Asa and me! He must have a tremendous amount of patience and determination! I don’t know how he does it!*

 Tamm cocked his head sideways and peered at Noelle. “What is it, Noelle?”

 Noelle jumped a little. “Oh, I was just thinking about how much patience and determination you must have to be searching for Asa and me for a whole month all by yourself!”

 Tamm chuckled. “Thank the Creator, Noelle! That patience and determination didn’t come from me in the least! It was all the Creator. If I didn’t trust him, I would have given up a long time ago. And there were countless times I was on the verge of giving up, then each time I was reminded that the Creator does everything for a good purpose, and I believed he wanted me to find my friends.”

 Noelle smiled. “Well, I’m so glad we both trust the Creator to guide us.”

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 The next day went by without any word of Asa. Then the next, then the next, then the next. Three long and frustrating weeks went by. Noelle felt like giving up many times, but she remembered this was what the Creator wanted them to do. Asa was out there and they needed to find him. That knowledge kept her going.

 It was on one of those days that Noelle was feeling particularly frustrated when they saw their first glimmer of hope. They were walking along a path that looked like it was used very often when stoat came skipping along the path in the opposite direction, whistling happily.

 “Good day, sir! Do you have a minute? We have a question we would like to ask you,” said Tamm.

 The stoat stopped. “Of course! Just one question though, I’m kind of in a rush.”

 “Thank you. We won’t keep you long. Have you happened to hear about or see a bright red squirrel with many scars? You can’t miss him. He is from Pinewood Forest and his kind is extremely rare around these parts.”

 The stoat thought a moment. “Can’t say that I’ve seen your friend. But I was in a village called Tampa just down the road a few days ago. And I remember one of my friends saying he saw a squirrel with a hideous face but with beautiful red fur around. But I honestly wouldn’t take my friend’s word if I were you. He’s not really right in the head, you know. But you never know, your friend could be in that Tampa.”

 Tamm and Noelle’s eyes grew wide with excitement and hope. “Where did you say this Tampa was?”

 “Oh, about a day’s walk down this path. Can’t miss it. It’s a good-sized village.”

 “Thank you! Thank you so much!” Noelle and Tamm took off down the road as fast as their legs would carry them. Just the thought that they might see Asa the very next day made them feel like they could run all day and night.

 Noelle would have loved to travel through the night, but Tamm insisted that was a bad idea. He reminded her of her accident many years ago and traveling at night just wasn’t safe in general. So, they stopped at a small inn at the side of the path for the night.

 Noelle and Tamm hardly got any sleep that night. So no one was happier than they when the first rays of sunlight peeked from the eastern horizon. They ate a quick breakfast and started down the path again at a brisk pace.

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 They reached Tampa about midday. But as soon as Noelle saw the village, her hopes sank a bit. The stoat they had met the other day was right, Tampa was a good-sized village. It might take them a while before they found Asa.

 “Come on, we won’t find Asa any faster by just standing here!” said Tamm, who seemed to be reading Noelle’s thoughts.

 “I certainly hope he’s here,” answered Noelle.

 Tamm put a hand on Noelle’s shoulder. “He’s here, Noelle. I just know he is.”

 Noelle took a deep breath, said a quick prayer to the Creator, and entered Tampa.

Noelle and Tamm decided to split up. They would cover more ground that way. They would meet at the main entrance to Tampa at the end of the day. They said goodbye and wished each other good luck and began their search.

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 “Excuse me,” said Noelle to a hedgehog. “Might you know where a bright red squirrel with many scars is? He’s extremely rare, you can’t miss him.”

 The hedgehog thought for a moment. “Now, come to think of it, I have been hearing rumors of a red squirrel with a hideous face and beautiful fur around. Don’t know where he is though. But if he’s here in Tampa, you’re about to run into him eventually.”

 “Thank you, sir!” said Noelle politely. Then she continued her search. It was one of the longest and most frustrating afternoons of her life. Every creature she asked about Asa had either heard of him or seen him not long ago, but no one seemed to know where he was at the moment.

 By the end of the day, Noelle hadn’t found Asa. She was almost on the verge of tears of frustration. *He seems so close, yet so far!* But she bit back her tears and remembered that the Creator was in control and he knew exactly where Asa was. And he would reveal Asa to them when he thought fit. Besides, Tamm might have found Asa.

 Tamm didn’t find Asa, Noelle soon learned when she saw the frustrated look on his face when she met him at the main entrance to Tampa. Noelle didn’t even bother to ask, and instead let out a deep sigh.

 “I know. It’s been a very frustrating afternoon. But we can’t give up yet. We’ll continue looking tomorrow,” said Tamm.

 Noelle nodded and they both set off down one of the streets in Tampa leading to an inn. On the way, they decided to ask a passing mouse if he had seen Asa. The mouse’s answer surprised them.

 “Oh! You must be looking for Big Red! Yeah, I’ve seen ‘im. He’s at a tavern called The Royal Duckling down Main Street. He normally spends his evenings down there. Curious fellow, Big Red is.”

 Noelle and Tamm could hardly contain their excitement. They took off down Main Street as fast as they could without bothering to thank the mouse. They didn’t even hear the chuckle and snicker that came from the mouse.

 “Oh thank the Creator! I truly believe we found him, Tamm!” squealed Noelle as they ran.

 “Well, don’t get your hopes too high yet. But I believe we found him too!”

 As they got within earshot of The Royal Duckling, they realized something wasn’t quite right. Noelle and Tamm slowed to a halt. The sound of an off-tune piano and drunken laughter reached their ears. They also heard the sound of glass crashing and a scuffle. A dreaded thought entered Noelle and Tamm’s minds. *Why would Asa be in that horrible place? Something must be terribly wrong for Asa to be in there. I know he would never go into a place like that without a very good reason.* Noelle and Tamm exchanged a look.

 Tamm took Noelle’s paw. “Stay close beside me. Whatever happens in there, we must stay together.”

 Noelle nodded. “That tavern is the last place I want to be right now. But if Asa’s in there, we have to enter.”

 “Right. The Creator will be with us. We must trust him.”

 Noelle and Tamm said a quick prayer to the Creator and entered The Royal Duckling.

18

Asa

T

o be honest with herself, The Royal Duckling wasn’t as bad as Noelle had anticipated when she first saw it from the outside. It certainly wasn’t a good place to be, but Noelle imagined it’d be a lot worse. The tavern opened up into a very large and dirty room overcrowded with tables and chairs. Except for in the very center of the room, which was reserved for dancing. Noelle tightened her grip on Tamm’s paw as she took a careful survey of the room. Most of the creatures in the room were either drinking heavily on the tables and bars, gambling, or dancing in a way that would hardly be called dancing to Noelle. And it all smelled heavily of beer.

 Noelle had to shout to be heard over the ruckus. “I don’t see him, do you?”

 Tamm shook his head. “It’s so loud in here I can barely think!”

 “Why don’t we move to the back of the room? We should get a little better view and we’ll be less likely to be noticed.”

 Tamm led Noelle to the very back of the room. It wasn’t as easy as it looked. They had to wind through tables and shove past other creatures. And the whole time Noelle felt many eyes on her, which made her feel even more uncomfortable than she already was.

*Why are they staring at me like that? I’m not doing anything unusual, right?* Then Noelle remembered the creatures here probably had never seen a squirrel with grayish silver fur and deep blue eyes. For once, Noelle wished she looked like a normal squirrel.

They finally made it to the back of the room. As they had assumed, the view was a bit better. But unfortunately, they weren’t unnoticed. The stares didn’t cease. Noelle did her best to ignore them and once again scanned the room for Asa. Her concentration on finding Asa was cut short when an obviously drunk squirrel came up to her.

“How about a dance, my pretty? We could get to know each other,” said the drunk squirrel.

One look from Noelle’s piercing blue eyes sent him scurrying away. Any creature who saw what had just happened immediately knew the grayish silver squirrel wasn’t any creature to be messed with.

Noelle felt Tamm gently nudge her shoulder. She turned to face him. Tamm jerked his head ever so slightly towards the bar. Noelle put on a disgusted scowl and shook her head. The bar was the rowdiest part of The Royal Duckling and she would not be going anywhere near there.

Tamm jerked his head more urgently towards the bar. He had an excited look on his face. Noelle looked more carefully in that direction. She couldn’t be sure, but she thought she saw a creature with bright red fur hidden behind a huge hedgehog. *Asa!*

Noelle struggled to keep from laughing out loud with joy and shouting out his name. She didn’t want to attract unnecessary attention. Instead, she kept her face calm and nodded stiffly at Tamm. Then they both pushed their way through the crowd once again and made their way toward Asa.

Once at the bar, Noelle and Tamm stood right behind Asa. Something was definitely wrong. This red squirrel didn’t act like the Asa they knew. He was drunk and laughing at some joke with the large hedgehog beside him. Noelle and Tamm exchanged a worried look. They stood behind Asa to see if he would notice them. He didn’t. Tamm lightly tapped him on the shoulder. He didn’t seem to notice. Neither did the hedgehog beside him. Tamm tried again, this time a little harder. Asa turned around and faced them. Noelle inhaled sharply at the sight of her old friend.

Aside from his bright red fur, Asa was almost unrecognizable. A long, ugly scar ran from his left ear, through his right eye, and down to the right side of his chin. A black patch covered where his right eye had been. He had changed a lot since they had last seen him. Where Tamm was on the small side and not very muscular, Asa was very large for a squirrel and muscles were plainly visible underneath his fur. Noelle was sure that if he were standing up, he would be almost a whole head taller than she was. If it hadn’t been for the scar on his face and his missing eye, Asa would have been extremely attractive.

Noelle and Tamm didn’t know what to say. They stood there waiting in shock for Asa to say something. There was a long and awkward moment before he did say something, and what he said was both shocking and confusing.

“Well?”

Noelle was lost for words, but Tamm managed to splutter, “Asa, it’s us!”

“Who?”

“What?”

“Who’s Asa? And who are you guys?”

“Are you joking? Because if you are, this is a terrible time to be joking,” said Tamm.

“I don’t understand. I’m not joking. Who’s Asa? And who are you guys? I’m called Big Red around here.”

“Asa, stop! You’re scaring me here! You are Asa Ember, not Big Red!”

“I don’t know what you’re talking about. I don’t know any Asa Ember. Who are you guys?”

“Don’t you remember us? I’m Tamm Bushtail, and this is Noelle Moonlight! We set off on a quest together to take back the Sword Zodamere stole from Pinewood Forest, our home! Don’t you remember Pinewood, the Sword, Zodamere, us?”

All Tamm received from Asa was a blank stare.

Tamm was about to say something but Noelle shushed him. She stepped closer to Asa and took his paws in hers. Asa looked back at her with surprise.

“What’s the earliest thing you remember?” said Noelle calmly and quietly.

Asa thought a moment. “Waking up in terrible pain. I was in a house made out of sticks. A family of beavers lived there. We were right by a river very close to the ocean.”

“That’s the absolute earliest you can remember?”

“Yes.”

“How long ago was this?”

“I don’t know. Maybe…five years?”

“Now I want you to think very hard and carefully. Do you remember seeing me or Tamm before? In hazy visions or something?”

Asa was becoming annoyed. “No, I haven’t, okay? I don’t know who you guys are or what you want. Now I’d appreciate it if you’d leave me alone, thank you.”

Noelle’s face then was the perfect picture of sadness and anguish. She abruptly stood up and hurried to a dark corner in the back of the room, the crowd moving out of her way and Tamm at her heels.

Tamm expected Noelle to have a little cry right then. But to his surprise, Noelle didn’t shed a single tear. Her face was still sad, but firm and strong at the same time.

 “Are…you okay?” asked Tamm after some silence.

 “One of my best friends has lost his memory. Now he doesn’t remember me, you, or anything. So, no. I’m not okay,” said Noelle in a quiet, even tone.

 “Noelle, I’m very upset too. I don’t know what to do now. But we mustn’t give up hope. The Creator is still in control. He knows our situation. Besides, Asa was drunk. He probably wasn’t thinking clearly. We’ll try talking to him again when he’s soberer.”

 Noelle nodded bravely. “You’re right, Tamm.”

 Tamm suddenly inhaled sharply. *Why, this might actually work!*

 “What is it?” questioned Noelle.

 “I’m not sure if this is going to work, but I might help a little. Back in Pinewood, my mother was very good with herbs, plants, and such. She knew which herbs would cure almost any kind of physical problem you had. She was an absolute genius. Anyway, she had this mixture of herbs and hot water that would sharpen your memory. There was the elderly squirrel living near us who couldn’t remember simple things very well. My mother gave him some of that mixture, and his memory was as sharp as a blackberry thorn within several hours! It was incredible! I don’t know how that mixture worked, but it worked all right!”

 “So, do you think if Asa drank some of that mixture, he might regain his memory?”

 “He probably won’t fully regain it, but it’ll probably help a lot!”

 “Do you just so happen to remember the ingredients to this mixture?”

 Tamm smiled triumphantly. “As a matter of fact, I do!”

19

“I Remember.”

O

kay, so what’s this plant called again? And describe it to me again.”

Noelle and Tamm were deep in the woods the next morning around Tampa, looking for the key ingredient for Tamm’s mother’s memory-sharpening mixture. Tamm called it MM, for Memory Mixture.

 “The plant is called Purple’s Herb. It’s small and dark green with a purplish tint to it. It also has five leaves and is extremely juicy. You can’t miss it,” said Tamm, answering Noelle’s questions.

 “Right. I think I remember seeing some plants like that in Pinewood. And you think it grows around here? Or does it only grow in Pinewood?”

 “My mother said it grows throughout Penetralia. I’m not actually sure how she knew that, she’s never been outside of Pinewood.”

 “So, how do we know it grows around here?”

 “Because I thought I saw some a while back before we came to Tampa.”

 “Oh. What else do we need to make MM?”

 “Rosemary. Just a little, not much. And just a pinch of clove leaves.” Tamm’s voice sounded muffled. He was searching under a bush. Only his overly bushy tail was visible.

 “I see some rosemary over there. I’ll get a bit.”

 “Great,” Tamm grunted, pulling himself out of the bush. “There’s no Purple’s Herb under there.”

 Noelle picked some rosemary and sighed.

 “What’s wrong?” asked Tamm.

 “This rosemary reminds me of Rosemary Lightpaw. I wonder if Shadow was able to rescue her and Bobo. I wonder if the Wandering Willowbranches are still alive. And Garret Chase. Oh, here’s some clove!”

 Tamm didn’t say anything. He missed the Wandering Willowbranches just as much as Noelle did.

 They continued searching in silence. Then Noelle gasped, “Oh!”

 “Oh, what?”

 “How are we going to get Asa to drink MM if he continues to act as stubborn as he did last night?”

 “Well…uh…I don’t know. Let’s just hope that he doesn’t act that stubbornly. Remember, he was drunk. We’ve got to catch him when he’s sober.”

 Noelle sighed, and then let out a cheer. “Oh! I think I found some Purple’s Herb, Tamm!”

 Tamm was at her side in a flash. “That’s Purple’s Herb all right! Well spotted, Noelle!”

 Tamm took out his small stone knife and carefully cut the Purple’s Herb plant out by the roots. He placed it in a pouch alongside the rosemary and clove.

 “Great! Now let’s get back to Tampa, make MM, and find Asa. I hope this works!” said Noelle.

 Noelle and Tamm were back in their room at an inn in Tampa. Noelle chopped the Purple’s Herb and crushed the rosemary and clove while Tamm carefully stirred the herbs together in boiling hot water.

 Noelle sniffed the air. “Well, at least MM doesn’t smell bad. It has a sweet and sort of tangy aroma. It’s…interesting.”

 Tamm smiled. “The sweetness comes from the Purple’s Herb. And the tangy comes from the rosemary and clove.”

 “It’s amazing how these ingredients put together can improve memory. I wonder what it tastes like.”

 “I know, it’s incredible! I bet it tastes as it smells. Asa can tell us when he drinks it.”

 “I hope so! Is that almost done brewing?”

 “Just about.”

 Tamm waited a few more minutes before carefully pouring the mixture into a mug with a strainer on top. Noelle took the strainer off the mug after Tamm had poured and dumped the sopping wet herbs. Then she studied the liquid in the mug. It was dark green with a purplish tint, just like Purple’s Herb. Noelle wished desperately she knew what it tasted like.

 Tamm secured a lid on the mug and tucked it safely in a pouch that was slung over his shoulder. “All right, let’s go find Asa.”

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 It didn’t take long for Noelle and Tamm to find Asa. Well, to be accurate, Noelle and Tamm didn’t find Asa. Asa found them. Noelle and Tamm had just rounded a street corner when Asa they saw Asa himself running up to meet them.

 “Asa! We were just looking for you! We…” began Noelle.

 Asa held up a paw for silence. “I was just looking for both of you too. You’re Noelle and Tamm, right?”

 Noelle and Tamm bobbed their heads.

 “First, I want to apologize for my behavior last night. I was drunk and wasn’t thinking clearly. Please, forgive me.”

 “Oh, Asa! Of course we forgive you!” said Noelle.

 “Thank you. I came to find you because I believe what you told me last night. I have absolutely no memory whatsoever of my past. I only remember waking up in a family of beaver’s home. I have no idea where I came from, or who I am. Do you two really know me? Is my name really Asa Ember?”

 “Yes, your name is Asa Ember. Your father is Jasper Ember, warlord of the Ember tribe of Pinewood Forest. And you are his only son. And yes, we’re your best friends. We know who you really are.”

 “Then…could you please tell me everything? How I got here and everything? I wish I could remember.”

 Tamm gave a triumphant smile. “We have something that might just help with that!”

 Asa’s eyes grew wide with hope and excitement. “Really? What is it?”

 Tamm pulled the mug of MM out of its pouch. “We call this Memory Mixture. MM for short. My mother invented it herself. It’s proven to improve memory. It probably won’t fully restore your memory, but just enough that you know the big important things in your life.”

 Asa’s smile widened. “What is MM, really?”

 “Just a simple mixture of Purple’s Herb, rosemary, and clove all brewed in boiling water.”

 “Really? That’s it?”

 “Yes! It’s incredible!”

 Asa took the mug and said, “Thank you guys so much. I hope this works. I really wish I knew who you guys really are. And who I really am.”

 Noelle smiled. “Just drink it and wait a few hours. Then come to us and tell us if it worked or not. We’ll be at the inn down Main Street.”

 Then Noelle gave Asa a big hug, took Tamm’s paw, and they both strolled down the street, praying to the Creator that MM would improve Asa’s memory.

\*\*\*

 That afternoon was a long, boring one. Noelle and Tamm tied to make time go faster by finding something interesting to do. Noelle played her harmonica, and Tamm went to work repairing his sling. But no matter how hard they tried; they couldn’t make time seem to go any faster. They both wanted desperately to know if MM had worked on Asa.

 It wasn’t till late that evening when a soft knock sounded at their door. Tamm beat Noelle to answering it. It was Asa. Noelle and Tamm held their breaths and waited for Asa to speak.

 “I remember.”

20

The Journey Begins, Again.

N

oelle squealed with delight and jumped on Asa, wrapping him in a hug. “Oh, praise be to the Creator! You’re back, you’re back! The real Asa is back!”

 Tamm was hopping up and down, waiting for Noelle to back away from Asa so he could hug him.

 When Asa was finally able to sit down, he told them what he remembered. And as they had predicted, MM didn’t fully restore his memory.

 “I can only remember what I think are important memories. And the ones I do remember are hazy, and sort of unclear. I do remember you two, I remember a big red squirrel that looked similar to me. I think he was my father, you were talking about. Jasper Ember, right?”

 Noelle and Tamm nodded.

 “I remember some creatures called the Wandering Willowbranches, I think. And a rabbit, Garret something.”

 “Chase,” said Tamm.

 “Right. I also remember a bunch of otters, Zodamere, and Powerseekers. We were going on a quest; about some sword, I think.”

 “Yes, we were going to take back the Sword Zodamere stole from Pinewood. But it ended in failure, do you remember that?”

 “Yes, very vaguely, though. Do you know what happened to the Wandering Willowbranches?”

 Noelle and Tamm grew silent and shook their heads.

 “No, we don’t. Hopefully, they managed to escape Arabia with their lives,” said Tamm.

 “And Rosemary and Bobo,” said Noelle.

 “Is Arabia the name of Zodamere’s lair? And aren’t Rosemary and Bobo Wandering Willowbranches?”

 “Yes, that’s right. Rosemary and Bobo were captured by Powerseekers a while before we reached Arabia. I hope they were set free.”

 There was a long silence. Each squirrel was lost in their own thoughts.

 “So, what are we going to do? What’s the plan?”

 “What?” asked Noelle, pulling herself out of her thoughts.

 “What are we going to do? We’re together again, so now what?”

 “I’m going to take back the Sword. I’ve got nothing else to do, and we can’t just go back to Pinewood empty-pawed! It’d be an utter disgrace!” said Tamm.

 “Tamm’s right. That’s pretty much the only thing we can do.”

 “All right. I’ll come too. We leave at dawn?” said Noelle.

 “We leave at dawn.”

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 Asa, Tamm, and Noelle set out to take back the Sword, again. Only this time, they were more prepared. They knew what to expect, they had experience, and they came ready. They began traveling southwest, towards Arabia. They assumed Zodamere would still be there. Arabia was too nice and too much of a convenient place to just abandon because of a failed attack. Noelle tried not to get her hopes too high, but she couldn’t help but hope that they would run into some old friends, the Wandering Willowbranches and Garret Chase. Maybe even Steelrudder, Gwendolyn, and Bronwen. Noelle knew the chances of seeing them were pretty slim, if at all. But she couldn’t help it. After the Creator had pulled her out of her hermit life, Noelle had generally been a hopeful creature. She had always been. (Except those five awful years of her hermit life.)

 Noelle then took out her harmonica and played an upbeat, marching song. She danced to the music. Everyone’s spirits were lifted even higher than they already were. The perfect start for their second journey.

 Asa smiled. “I vaguely remember you playing that instrument once. It’s good to hear you play again.”

 “I think I played when we first started this journey so many years ago,” said Noelle.

 “I remember that! That was the first time we heard you play!” exclaimed Tamm.

 Asa’s smile disappeared. “I don’t remember that. I only remember you playing when we were around a campfire. There was a little mouse with us, I think. Don’t remember his name, though.”

 “That’d be Bobo. I remember that time too. It was…just wow!” said Tamm.

 “Hmm…Bobo. That’s an interesting name. Was Bobo just a nickname? What was his real name?” asked Asa.

 “I don’t know. I think Bobo might just be a nickname. But I never thought to ask,” said Noelle.

 The rest of the day passed uneventfully. Tamm was rather surprised that they didn’t run into any trouble with the Powerseekers yet, for they had seen some evidence of Powerseekers throughout the day. A couple of houses broken into and whatnot. So that night Tamm suggested that they take turns keeping watch.

 “We’ve seen evidence of Powerseekers, or a Powerseeker, throughout the day. And I feel a slight sense of danger right now,” said Tamm.

 “You’re right. There’s something not quite right. We should be on our guard,” said Noelle.

 Asa remained quiet.

 “Asa, do you feel anything?” asked Tamm.

 Asa blinked his one eye. “Yes,” he said in a deep, flat voice.

 Noelle shivered. It was chilly and the sense of danger didn’t help anything either.

 “Why don’t you play your harmonica, Noelle?” asked Tamm.

 Noelle reached for her harmonica.

 “No,” said Asa. “We don’t want to attract attention. Something dangerous is lurking about.”

21

The Return of Seaweed

N

oelle pinched herself and shook her head. *I mustn’t fall asleep! Oh, how I hate guard duty!* Noelle had relieved Tamm of guard duty about an hour ago, and she had constantly been forcing herself awake ever since.

 *Only two more hours, then it’s Asa’s turn.* But that knowledge brought her little joy. *Oh, Creator, please help me to stay awake!* Noelle tried to busy herself by using a stick to draw little pictures in the ashes of the fire. Without her realizing it, she began to drift off the sleep.

 Noelle woke to find herself lying face down on the ground, with a creature on her back tying her paws together. Noelle grunted and jerked her back, sending the creature on her back toppling to the ground. The creature drew out a knife and pressed it against Noelle’s throat with lightning speed.

 “Notta sound outta ye, out I’ll cut yer throat! My, have ye grown!”

 The creature’s voice was deep and husky. And it was oddly familiar. It sent shivers down Noelle’s spine. *Asa, Tamm! Please wake up! Oh, Creator help us!*

Then her fear slowly turned to anger. *How could I have fallen asleep? Oh, I am such a fur brain! Asa, Tamm, I am so sorry!*

 Noelle put aside her fear and anger. She needed to focus and the present situation. Noelle could tell that the creature was large, furry, and very strong. A raccoon? *Seaweed! But… I thought he escaped from us! Why would he be back?*

 Seaweed finished tying her paws together. And to Noelle’s relief, they were poorly done knots. Raccoons obviously weren’t the best at tying knots.

 Using his knife, Seaweed prodded Noelle to a log, which he tied her to. Again, the knots were poorly done. “Don’t ye even think ‘bout doin’ anything funny!”

 Then Seaweed crept to where Tamm and Asa slept. Noelle couldn’t see them very well, for they were under the shelter of a bush, but she heard sounds of a struggle. And she knew Seaweed was winning. Noelle franticly began undoing the knots that bound her. She needed to help her friends.

Noelle was able to get herself mostly untied by just using her paws, but there were a couple of knots that were out of reach. *Good thing Seaweed didn’t bother searching me! Or else he would have found this knife!*  Noelle worked her hands to the pocket of her tunic and pulled out her knife. She began cutting through the knots that were out of reach. It was slow progress, for the rope was thick and almost new.

It must have taken Noelle a good two minutes to get herself fully untied. Once freed, she brandished her knife and dove under the bush, where the fight still continued.

Under the bush, Noelle slammed into Seaweed and pinned him to the ground outside the bush with her knife pressed against the raccoon’s throat. “You ‘ought to learn to tie knots better!”

Asa and Tamm staggered out of the bush, bruised, sleepy, and very confused. They were otherwise unhurt besides the bruises.

 Asa stormed over to Seaweed, picked him up, and tied him to a tree. “State your name and business.”

 Seaweed grinned wickedly. “My my, ye sure have grown, big fella! Ye don’t remember me?”

 Asa blinked, obviously very confused.

 “Seaweed?” guessed Tamm.

 “That’s him all right,” said Noelle.

 “Aye, that’s me!” snickered Seaweed.

 “You know this creature?” asked Asa.

 “You don’t remember him, do you Asa?” said Noelle.

 “No.”

 “Ye don’t remember me, big fella? That’s a little disappointing!” said Seaweed.

 “Be quiet. You’re our captive so you should be begging for mercy instead of acting like we’re your captives,” said Tamm.

 Seaweed cackled, then scowled menacingly.

 “What are you doing here?” questioned Noelle.

 “Would somebody please explain who this creature is?” said Asa, who was getting annoyed.

 “Sorry. Back when we first started this journey, Seaweed here and his buddy captured Bobo. We rescued Bobo and took this Powerseeker captive. But he escaped later in the journey. And now, he’s back and I would like to know why!” said Noelle, glaring at Seaweed.

 Asa was quiet, obviously deep in thought. “I think I vaguely remember you now, Seaweed. What are you doing here?”

 Seaweed grinned wickedly. “I’ve been followin’ ye since I escaped. I’ve been waitin’ fer the perfect chance to get my revenge.”

 “Well, I don’t think you’ll be getting your revenge tonight,” said Tamm.

 Seaweed growled.

 “Oh dear. What are we going to do with him?” said Noelle.

 Asa shrugged. “Kill him. If we don’t, he’ll be tormenting us for the rest of our lives.”

 “But we can’t just kill a defenseless creature just like that!” exclaimed Noelle, horrified.

 “Noelle’s right. It just wouldn’t be right. You, Asa, of all creatures should know that. You’re the son of a warlord.”

 Asa sighed. “You’re right. I wouldn’t know. I’ve been, so lost, for five long years.”

 Noelle put her paw on Asa’s arm. “It’s all right, Asa. Just ask the Creator to help you, and let Him work at his own timing.”

 Asa gave a sad smile. “Thanks, Noelle.”

 Noelle turned to Tamm. “So, what are we going to do with him?”

 Seaweed growled again.

 “Nothing. Just leave him tied there. He’ll find a way to untie himself, eventually.”

 Noelle nodded. “All right. Well, it’s almost dawn. I guess we might as well get going.”

 Leaving Seaweed still tied to a tree, the three squirrels resumed their journey, hoping that night would be the last time they ever saw Seaweed. But little did they know that their troubles with Seaweed were far from over…

22

The Powerseekers Attack

L

ike yesterday, the next day went by uneventfully. But the signs of Powerseekers only grew. Asa, Tamm, and Noelle knew they would encounter more Powerseekers within the next few days. That knowledge kept them wary and on their guard constantly.

 “We should reach a little village called Florence by nightfall. So we don’t have to keep watch tonight,” said Tamm, looking at the map he had bought in Tampa.

 “Oh good. We should be getting a much-needed good night’s rest tonight!” said Noelle, brightening up at the news.

 “I hope the Powerseekers don’t plan to attack Florence tonight,” said Asa, who was still very wary.

 “We’ll be fine! I don’t think the Powerseekers will attack!” said Noelle.

 Asa didn’t say any more, but his expression remained the same.

 “We should still be on our guard, even in Florence,” said Tamm. “You never know with Powerseekers. They are unpredictable.”

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 As they had predicted, the three Pinewood squirrels reached Florence by nightfall and stayed at an inn.

 Asa found it hard to get to sleep that night. A strong sense of dread and danger kept him awake. He just knew something wrong would happen that night. Asa glanced over at Tamm, who was snoring softly and was almost completely covered by his overly bushy tail. *How come Tamm doesn’t sense anything? Maybe I’m just going crazy. I should just relax and rest up for tomorrow.*

 Asa eventually fell into a fitful sleep, but the overwhelming sense of danger never left him.

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 Noelle woke with a jerk in the middle of the night. An overwhelming stench of smoke filled the air, but there was no smoke in her small room. *What is going on? Is the building on fire?* Then she heard screaming coming from the streets outside. *Powerseekers! Asa was right, they are attacking!*

 Noelle sprang out of bed and burst into Asa and Tamm’s room. “Wake up! The Powerseekers are attacking! We need to help the creatures of Florence!”

 Asa and Tamm were out of bed in a flash with their weapons at the ready. The three Pinewood charged down the hall, down the stars, through the lobby, and out into the streets where a nightmare was only beginning.

 The first thing that Noelle noticed as soon as she stepped outside the inn was the thick smoke, making it hard to breathe. She tried to control her coughing enough to concentrate on the present situation. Buildings were up in flames, and the fire was quickly spreading. Creatures were dashing about, screaming hysterically. It was obvious they were confused and frightened enough that they had lost their minds. They were just screaming and running into each other, not even concentrating on the situation.

Noelle looked for the Powerseekers. To her surprise, she only saw a few here and there, laughing wickedly and doing whatever they pleased. *Good.* She thought. *At least we’re not up against a whole army. I hope.*

“Come on, Noelle!”

Noelle jumped. Tamm was pulling on her arm. She hadn’t seen Asa run off to help.

“We’ve got to help the creatures of Florence! Come on!” shouted Tamm, pulling harder on Noelle.

Noelle shook herself and followed Tamm. *Oooh, I am such a furbrain!*

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Several hours later, Noelle collapsed and leaned against the wall of a building, completely spent. It had been one of the most exhausting and terrifying nights of her life. Noelle looked to the east and saw the first rays of sunlight. She was grateful the night was over, and that she, Tamm, and Asa had survived. *Thank you, Creator.*

But not every creature in Florence had survived that night. Noelle, Tamm, and Asa were fortunate. The Poweseekers were brutal and unmerciful. They had truly demonstrated that last night. Asa, Tamm, and Noelle were some of the few creatures who actually fought and stood up against the Powerseekers. It was a struggle, but the Powerseekers were so few in number last night that the three Pinewood squirrels were able to diminish them. But the Powerseekers had one their job. Most of Florence lay in ruins, burned. After the Pinewood squirrels were finished with the Powerseekers, there were countless fires to put out. More than once, Tamm, Asa, and Noelle had to run into a burning building to save a terrified creature. They were constantly running back and forth, fetching water, soaking blankets, or beating on the fire.

And now Noelle was sure the last of her energy was spent. And being covered with soot and grime didn’t help her feel better at all. All she wanted to do was to forget the previous night’s terror, soak in warm water, and collapse into bed. She wanted to go home, to Pinewood.

“Noelle?”

“Mhm?” mumbled Noelle, not bothering to open her eyes. She knew it was Tamm.

“Are you okay?”

“Not really. You?”

“Nope. Asa’s pretty much the same, too. But he won’t admit it.”

Noelle couldn’t help a little smile.

“Hate to tell you this, but you’re desperately needed at the infirmary. Dozens of creatures are badly hurt and we need all the help we can get. Believe me, I’d love to let you rest, but creatures are dying, Noelle. They need you.”

Noelle sighed and got up. “You’re right Tamm. I really should be helping out. Where will you and Asa be?”

“We’ll be helping clean up the place. The creatures here are determined to start again. Their spirit isn’t broken, apparently.”

Noelle nodded. “That’s good. These are good creatures, Tamm. I hate to see them suffer.”

Tamm put his paw on her shoulder. “We all do, Noelle. We all do.”

23

An Old Friend

A

sa, Tamm, and Noelle spent the rest of the week in Florence, providing aid wherever and whenever they could. It was exhausting, physically, and emotionally. But with the help of the Creator, the three Pinewood squirrels were able to persevere and be a light in the darkness. Noelle spent most of the time in Florence in the infirmary, bandaging wounds, and helping out in every way she could. She didn’t like the job, not one bit. But she took some pleasure, however small, in the knowledge she was helping many creatures. Asa and Tamm, however, spent most of their time cleaning and rebuilding.

 Noelle felt rather bad for leaving. She still felt like she could help the creatures of Florence more. But they needed to get going on their journey if they were to be back in Pinewood before winter. And besides, the creatures of Florence were recovering remarkably. Tamm was right, these creatures were determined to rebuild. Their spirit was most definitely not broken.

 Asa and Tamm weren’t as reluctant to leave. They were eager to continue their journey, but they were still glad they stayed and helped.

 Asa, Tamm, and Noelle were back on the path leading south to the Penetralian Coast. Not one hour down the road, they heard a creature whistling a jolly, upbeat tune. The squirrels looked at each other and shrugged. At least this creature couldn’t be Seaweed. They soon saw who the whistler was. It was a rabbit, not very large and rather pudgy. He looked to be right between middle-aged and old. He also had many scars, and an ear was missing. He walked with a slight limp. And for a split second, Noelle thought she might know who he was. But that idea quickly vanished. It couldn’t be whom she thought he was. Noelle glanced at Asa and Tamm. Their faces were equally blank.

 The squirrels nodded their heads in polite acknowledgment to the passing rabbit. But to their surprise, the rabbit suddenly let out a loud whoop of joy.

 “Asa! Tamm! Noelle! Is it really you, my friends?”

 The three Pinewood squirrels whirled around to stare at the strange rabbit. Who was he? How did he know who they were?

 Tamm recognized him first. “Garret Chase? Am I seriously looking at *the* Garret Chase?”

 “You most certainly are! Who else did you think I was?” exclaimed the rabbit.

 Tamm whooped with delight and wrapped Garret in a big hug with Noelle right behind him.

 “Oh it’s so good to see you again! I’m so happy you’re still alive! Where have you been all these years? What happened to you after the attack?”

 “Hold the questions now, we’ll have plenty of time for that later, lass. Oh, I’m sorry! You aren’t really a lass anymore. You’re a fully grown squirrel, as beautiful and strong as ever! And Tamm, you look just as handsome and kind-hearted! My, my, Asa, how you have grown! Any creature in their right mind would think twice before picking on you!”

 Asa smiled and shook Garret’s paw. “It’s so great to see you again, but…well, something happened during the attack on Arabia, and now, I don’t remember my past very clearly. I still, remember you, just not in great detail.”

 “I’m sorry, my friend. But you will always be a special friend of mine, regardless of your past,” said Garret.

 “Thank you, Garret. So, where have you been all these years?” said Asa.

 “Take a wild guess!” laughed Garret, a mischievous twinkle in his eye.

 “In, out, and about?” guessed Noelle.

 “Wrong!” laughed Garret.

 “What? But I thought you were a wanderer!” said Tamm, confused.

 Garret laughed again. “I’ll explain everything if you come to my home for supper tonight.”

 “Why, of course we’ll come Garret! We’ve got to hear all about what you’ve been up to!” said Noelle.

 “Then follow me, my friends!”

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 It turned out that Garret Chase lived in a burrow under a tree, which Noelle thought was so unlike him. The Garret she knew was restless, always seeking adventure. Something must have happened during the attack on Arabia. Something big.

 Garret’s burrow wasn’t very large, but what it lacked in size was made up of coziness. He had his small cooking area in one corner, with herbs and vegetables hanging from the ceiling. His dining room was right next to the kitchen. Then in another corner was a fireplace with an overstuffed armchair next to it. There was a bookshelf on the other side of the fireplace, stuffed with books. Then there was a curtain in another corner of the burrow, which Noelle guessed Garret’s bedroom must be behind. It was all cozy and well laid out. The three squirrels loved it all.

 “So Garret, why don’t we start with your story, then we’ll tell you ours,” said Tamm once they had all sat down for a dinner of baked and seasoned potatoes with butter.

 So Garret began his story. He had fought through the battle with all the strength he could muster. But Zodamere had won and Garret barely managed to escape with his life. He had received terrible wounds and lost an ear, but he slowly recovered. After he recovered, Garret realized that his spirit of adventure and wandering was gone. He felt as if the Creator were telling him to settle down. So that’s what he did. He found the burrow and made it his home.

 “Wow, something really must have changed for you to actually want to settle down!” said Tamm after Garret was finished.

 “That is true, Tamm. Very true. So please, I’m eager to hear your story!” said Garret.

 So Asa, Tamm, and Noelle told their tale. Garret listened carefully, not interrupting even once. And when they were done, he said, “Well, I’d say you certainly had some pretty interesting last five years.”

 “Well, it seems to us like only the past few months were interesting. The other years we were just pretty much moping around,” said Tamm.

 “If you’re talking about the actual journey, then yes, the other years are pretty boring. But I meant that your spiritual life was fascinating for the past five years.”

 “That is very true,” said Noelle.

 “Hey, do have any clue about what happened to the Wandering Willowbranches and Steelrudder?” questioned Tamm.

 “Oh yes! We’re desperate for news of our friends!” said Noelle.

 Garret sighed and shook his head. A terrible feeling gripped Noelle’s stomach.

 “I saw Basilbob Willowbranch and Steelrudder fall. They died a hero’s death. There was not one bit of regret. I don’t know what happened to the others.”

 Noelle struggled to fight back a rush of tears that threatened to overwhelm her. Two of her friends, Basil and Steelrudder, dead. Gone forever. She felt a comforting arm around her shoulders. Noelle looked up and saw that it was Tamm through the blur of tears.

 That evening was bittersweet. Bitter from hearing the tragic news, and sweet from knowing Garret was alive and well. It was so good to be with an old friend again.

 Throughout the evening, Noelle noticed that Asa was rather quiet, and he hung back from engaging in conversation. She realized then that Asa would never be the same again. Losing his memory seemed to have crippled him deeply. Where he had been talkative and leader-like, he now was quiet and seemed to be rather melancholy. Noelle wondered if she would ever see the old Asa again.

 Noelle jerked awake in the middle of the night. It wasn’t a sound that woke her. Noelle strained her ears and listened carefully. It was all very quiet. Too quiet. Noelle crept out of bed, through Garret’s burrow, and into the entrance to the burrow. Tamm was here lying low and watching something.

 “What is it?” Noelle whispered.

 “Get down low and keep as quiet as possible,” whispered Tamm.

 Noelle did just that. “Is it Seaweed again?”

 “Yeah. He’s under that log right across the path.”

 “He doesn’t seem to see us.”

 “No, I don’t think he does.”

 “I wish he’d just leave us alone.”

 Tamm sighed. “So do I. I think we all do.”

 “Does Asa know?”

 “Yes.”

 “Why isn’t he out here, then?”

 “I don’t know. He woke up not long ago, felt something was wrong, saw Seaweed, and woke me. I got up to investigate and have been out here ever since. I don’t know why Asa’s not out here too.”

 “That’s so unlike him.”

 “I know. He’s changed, Noelle. A lot.”

 “I know. I miss the old Asa.”

 Tamm and Noelle grew silent then, contently watching Seaweed under the log. The moon was out, making Noelle’s fur dimly shimmer. Not for the first time, Tamm thought Noelle was absolutely beautiful.

24

Seaweed, Again

T

here was no sign of Seaweed the next morning, to everyone’s relief. But the squirrels didn’t dare let their guard down. They knew better than that by now. Seaweed wasn’t just going to leave them alone without a good fight.

Leaving Garret wasn’t easy. They had just found him, and now they had to leave him.

 “May the Creator be with you every step of the way, my friends. Be safe, and don’t die,” said Garret.

 “Thank you, Garret. I hope with all my heart that we’ll see each other again,” said Noelle.

 “I wish I could go with you. But I don’t feel the Creator calling me to do so this time,” said Garret.

 “That’s all right, Garret. We wouldn’t ask you to put your life at risk by coming with us, anyway,” said Tamm, giving his friend one last hug.

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 So the three Pinewood squirrels continued their journey to Arabia. And to their surprise, Seaweed did not show himself that day. That made the squirrels even more tense and nervous.

 They made camp that evening in a small clearing.

 “I wish Seaweed would just show himself and not drag it out like this. I know he’s nearby, spying on us. This is driving me nuts!” said Noelle, cautiously looking around, shivering, and moving a little closer to the campfire.

 “I know, I hate this too,” said Tamm.

 “We can’t continue like this. We’ve got to rid ourselves of that raccoon. The longer we wait, the longer we give him to plan out destruction. We’ve got to stop this once and for all,” said Asa softly with a dangerous tone in his voice.

 “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I agree with Asa. We should attack him before he attacks us,” sighed Noelle.

 “I’m afraid you’re right,” sighed Tamm.

 “Okay then. That settles it,” said Asa, rising up from the log he was sitting on and grabbing his sword.

 “Where are you going?” asked Noelle.

 “To kill Seaweed. You all coming with me?”

 “What? We’re doing this now?” asked Tamm.

 “Of course. No better time than the present.”

 “I really don’t feel like doing this now. I’m really tired. You can go, Tamm. I’ll be all right here,” said Noelle.

 “I’m not leaving you here alone. It’s not safe,” said Tamm firmly.

Noelle knew arguing the subject further would be pointless.

 “All right then. I guess I’ll just go by myself,” said Asa.

 “Wait! Can’t we just do this some other time? We’d have a better chance doing this together,” pleaded Tamm.

 “I’m going to do this now. We’ve got to rid ourselves of that raccoon,” said Asa firmly.

 Tamm looked at Asa and then Noelle. “All right, I guess you’re on your own. I don’t like this, not one bit.”

 Asa nodded and turned to go. “I’ll be back before morning. Don’t worry about me.”

 “Just the same, you be careful! Do you understand?” called Noelle after Asa.

 “I wouldn’t worry about him too much. He knows what he’s doing. He can take care of himself,” said Tamm after a long silence.

 “I don’t like this. Not one bit,” said Noelle.

 “We’ll just hope and pray that the Creator will keep him safe,” said Tamm.

 Just then, it began to rain. Hard.

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 Tamm didn’t know how long it was before he heard a loud mix between a hiss and a screech. He was on his feet in a flash with Noelle by his side.

 “What was that?” hissed Noelle.

 “Shh!” hissed Tamm.

 The squirrels strained their ears. They heard the faint sound of a scuffle and then Asa cry out.

 Noelle grabbed Tamm’s arm. “Asa could be in trouble!”

 Tamm grabbed his sword and sling and Noelle grabbed her sword and rod. Then they both ran into the woods to find Asa.

 After they had run for a minute or so, Noelle stopped. “I think we passed him, Tamm. His voice didn’t sound this far away,” she panted.

 “You’re right. Let’s retrace our steps,” said Tamm.

 The squirrels turned around and ran back to the campfire. And then back into the woods. And then back to the campfire. No sign of Asa.

 “We’ve got to cover more ground. He’s obviously moving,” said Noelle.

 “Right. This might take a while, and he might be hurt,” groaned Tamm.

 “Well, we’d cover more ground if we split up,” suggested Noelle.

 “I don’t want to leave you alone, Noelle.”

 “I know, I don’t really want to split up myself. But Asa’s out there and he could be seriously injured! We need to find him quickly, and keeping together would take too long.”

 Tamm still had that stubborn gleam in his eyes.

 “Please Tamm, I’ll be all right. I can take care of myself. Think about Asa.”

 The stubbornness in Tamm’s eyes lingered a bit more, then finally faded. “All right, let’s split up. We’ll meet back here. Please, be careful.”

 “I’ll be all right Tamm. You be careful as well.”

 So Noelle and Tamm set off in different directions to find Asa.

 Tamm struggled to see where he was headed. It was in the dead of night and the pouring rain didn’t help anything either. He wanted to call out for Asa, but he knew Seaweed was probably lurking about, so he kept silent. Tamm was reminded of the time when they were with the Wandering Willowbranches, pursuing Rosemary and Bobo through the dark. Noelle had received a terrible injury because of running in the dark. *Oh Creator, please keep us safe!* Tamm prayed.

 Just then Tamm’s slammed his foot paw hard on a jutting rock. He cried out in pain as he fell and rolled into a deep ditch. He landed on something large and fuzzy. The thing grunted with surprise, jumped up, and bolted away. Tamm groaned softly as he propped himself up. His ankle was sprained badly, if not broken. *What was that creature I landed on?*

 Suddenly, Tamm heard a voice call his name. “Tamm! Where are you? Are you okay?”

 *Noelle!* She had heard him when he had cried out. *No! It’s too dangerous to be yelling!* He had to let her know he was fine so she would stop calling. So he risked calling. “Noelle, I’m all right! Please, stop calling!”

 Noelle must have heard and understood because she stopped. Tamm turned his attention back to his ankle and inwardly moaned as he remembered all the bandages were back at the campfire.

 Just then, Tamm noticed a dark figure in the ditch slowly moving closer. At first, he thought it was Noelle, but as the creature got closer, he realized that it couldn’t be Noelle. This creature was large and burly while Noelle was slender. Then Tamm realized this must have been the creature he landed on when he fell in the ditch. *Seaweed!*

 “All right Seaweed, it’s just me and you now. Come on out,” said Tamm in the bravest voice he could muster.

 Seaweed stopped. Then he growled. Not like any other growl Tamm had heard coming from him. This one seemed somehow more dangerous, more menacing. It made Tamm’s blood run cold. He grabbed his sword and prepared himself for a fight.

 Suddenly Seaweed jumped in front of Tamm and rose to his full height. Then he did one of his loud hiss-like growls right in Tamm’s face. There was spittle and foam dripping from his mouth, and his eyes were blood-shot red. He was wild with rage. Tamm’s eyes widened with fright as he shouted. He tried to swing his sword, but Seaweed grabbed Tamm’s wrist before he could do so. He was now in the hands of a rabid raccoon. Tamm closed his eyes and prayed to the Creator that it would be over quickly and for Noelle and Asa’s protection.

 “FOR PINEWOOOD!!” came a loud, sweet cry that pierced the night.

 Tamm’s eyes flashed just in time to see Noelle slam into Seaweed and drive him to the ground. But Seaweed was soon up and facing Noelle. They began circling each other. Noelle, beautiful, brave, and fur glistening in the moonlight and rain, pointed her sword at Seaweed. And Seaweed, large, rabid, and terrible, bared his teeth at Noelle.

 Tamm didn’t wait another second. He leaped up and then fell back down again. His ankle throbbed horribly. He quickly got back up again, and this time lunged from his good foot paw.

By now, Seaweed was overpowering Noelle, driving her back against the side of the ditch. Tamm pressed his Sword against the back of Seaweed’s neck. “If you so much as scratch her, I shall not hesitate to end you!”

Seaweed froze, quickly glanced around, then took off before Tamm could tie him down.

“Are you okay? Are you hurt anywhere?” asked Tamm, quickly surveying Noelle for injuries.

Noelle shrugged. “I’m fine, don’t worry about me. What about you? I heard you shout and knew you had to have been in trouble!”

“I…I’m all right, don’t worry about me. I just…tripped a little and fell. I’m fine, really,” stammered Tamm, doing his best to hide the pain coming from his ankle.

Noelle raised an eyebrow as if to say: *I don’t believe that for one second*.

“Really, I’m fine.”

The skeptical look on Noelle’s face didn’t waver a bit, but she only said. “If you say so. Thanks a lot for saving me just now.”

“And thank you for saving me,” said Tamm.

 “Well, I guess then we should stick together from now on?” suggested Noelle.

 “Yeah, that probably would be best. No sign of Asa?”

 “None. Tamm, I’m getting very concerned.”

 “As am I. We need to find him and quick.”

 Noelle scrambled up the side of the ditch in one graceful movement. Tamm, however, found it very challenging because of his injured ankle.

Noelle peered at him from the top. “You know, it’s okay to ask for help, Tamm. You’re only making that ankle of yours worse by trying to do this yourself.”

Tamm sighed. “All right. Please help me.”

Noelle climbed back down and helped Tamm up. Then they began the long walk back to the camp, Tamm hobbling along as best he could.

Not long later, Tamm stopped.

“What’s wrong? Are you okay?” asked Noelle.

“I think I see firelight ahead!” exclaimed Tamm.

“Are you sure that’s not ours?”

“No. Ours would have been put out by all this rain long ago.”

“Well, maybe we should creep up and see if it’s friend or foe.”

“And maybe whoever’s there knows something about Asa.”

So, the two squirrels began making their way to the fire as fast as they could with Tamm’s ankle. Soon they were close enough now that they could make out the camp. Tamm rested under a tree while Noelle crept forward. There was a hastily built lean-to of some sort near a campfire. Noelle couldn’t see in the lean-to, but she could see a mouse by the fire, trying to keep it burning. The mouse looked oddly familiar. He was tall, muscular, and attractive. Noelle couldn’t remember where she had seen him before, but she knew she had at some point.

Noelle crept back to Tamm. “It’s a lean-to next to a campfire. There’s a mouse there that looks very familiar. But I can’t quite remember where I have seen him before. I didn’t get a good look at his face.”

“So, it’s safe to approach?”

“I think so. He looks friendly. And maybe he’ll recognize us.”

“All right. Let’s go.”

So Noelle and Tamm approached the mouse’s camp. “Excuse me, but could we just take a moment to rest by your fire? We’re making our way back to our own camp and we’re kind of lost.”

The mouse looked up and smiled. “Of course, my friends. Make yourself comfortable.”

“Thank you so much,” said Tamm, sitting by the fire.

“Have we met before? You look very familiar,” asked Noelle, extremely curious.

“I don’t know. It’s possible. You two look vaguely familiar as well,” said the mouse.

Suddenly, Noelle’s face lit up. “Is your name Bobo?”

The mouse raised his eyebrows in surprise. “Why, yes! At least, that’s what everyone called me when I was little. My real name is Boriny.”

Noelle squealed with delight! “Bobo! It’s so good to see you again! I’m Noelle Moonlight, and this is Tamm Bushtail.”

Boriny’s face lit up with recognition. “Oh! Yes, I remember you now. You two and another red squirrel were trying to get a sword from Zodamere!”

“Yes! You don’t happen to know where the red squirrel is, do you?” asked Tamm.

A huge grin spread across Boriny’s face. “As a matter of fact, I do!”

Tamm jumped up and then stumbled because of his ankle. Noelle steadied him. “Where is he?”

Boriny pulled back the flap that led into the lean-to. There lay Asa, sleeping and an arm bound up.

Noelle and Tamm scrambled inside. “Is he okay?”

“He’ll be fine. A raccoon and he were fighting. He only got a minor cut on his arm. I helped him fend off the raccoon. He’ll be all right. What about you, Tamm? Are you okay?”

Noelle beat Tamm to speak. “He had a bad fall and he did something to his ankle.”

“Allow me to wrap it up to keep it still. My mother taught me a lot in treating injuries.”

“Dawn?”

“Yes. She’s amazing when it comes to medical issues.”

Noelle absent-mindedly touched the scar on her forehead. “How is your mother? Did she survive the attack in Arabia? What about the other Wandering Willowbranches?”

“My mother, Kelsey, and Rosemary are alive and well. They are living together in a cottage here in Penetralia, not far away. I’m sorry to say that no other Wandering Willowbranches survived.”

25

Happy Reunions

A

sa?”

 Asa slowly came awake. When he opened his eyes, the first thing he saw was Noelle, peering at him with a worried expression on her face. Then he saw Tamm, then the mouse that had helped him. He slowly sat up.

 “Noelle, Tamm!”

 “We were worried when we heard sounds of a fight,” said Noelle.

 “I’m fine. Just a scratch.”

 “He’ll be all right,” said Boriny.

 Asa turned to Boriny. “Thank you for helping me, my friend. I…I thought I could take him myself.”

 “It’s all right. Neither could we. If we want to be rid of Seaweed, we’ve got to work together,” said Tamm.

 “Right,” agreed Noelle.

 “Who’s Seaweed? The raccoon?”

 “Yeah. We’ve got quite a history with him,” said Tamm.

 “He’s a Powerseeker, isn’t he?”

 “Yes,” Asa answered in a low, dangerous voice.

 Noelle quickly changed the subject. “Asa! Do you know who Boriny is?”

 Asa blinked. “What are you talking about?”

 “Boriny is Bobo, all grown up! You remember Bobo, don’t you!”

 Asa turned to Boriny with his mouth hung open. “What? Really? It’s…it’s so great to see you again!”

 Boriny smiled. “It’s great to see you again as well!”

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 When Asa, Tamm, and Noelle were about to set out the next morning, Boriny suggested they visit Dawn, Rosemary, and Kelsey. That idea was greeted with much enthusiasm. It would be so good to see old friends again. So Boriny lead the way through the forest followed by a limping Tamm (Boriny wrapped his foot paw so it was less painful to walk on), Noelle, and Asa.

 They reached a large clearing with a small cottage in the middle by midday. Rosemary was by a water pump, filling a bucket with water. She didn’t see the three squirrels and Boriny approach.

 “May I help you, Rosemary?” Noelle asked kindly.

 Rosemary jumped in surprise and dropped her bucket. She barely even looked at the squirrels before running to the house, screaming, “Dawn! Kelsey! There are three strange squirrels out here!”

 Kelsey burst out of the house, took one look at the “three strange squirrels”, and squealed with delight before embracing Noelle in a smothering hug. Rosemary quickly realized who the newcomers were and joined in the hug.

 “Oh thank the Creator you three are still alive! I can’t believe it! Boriny, how did you find them!” exclaimed Kelsey.

 “It’s so great to see you as well! I’m so happy you are alive!” laughed Noelle.

 “I’m so sorry I didn’t recognize you at first! It’s just, with the Powerseekers lurking about, you have to be very precautious,” apologized Rosemary. “I can’t thank you three enough for saving Boriny and me!”

 Dawn heard the commotion and came out. “Oh my goodness! Oh my goodness! It can’t be! You’re alive! All three of you! Boriny, please tell me I’m not dreaming!”

 “It’s real, mother. You’re not dreaming,” said Boriny.

 “No, you’re not,” said Noelle embracing Dawn.

 “Oh! Let me look at you, my dear! You’re all grown up now! And the same for you, Asa and Tamm! I can’t believe this!”

 “It’s great to see you too, Dawn!” said Tamm.

 “Oh what am I thinking? Come on in! You’re welcome to stay for supper and spend the night if you’d like!” said Dawn.

 “We’d love that! Thank you!” said Noelle.

 So the three Pinewood squirrels and Boriny spent that afternoon and evening at Dawn’s Kelsey’s, and Rosemary’s house. There was much to talk about and catch up on.

 “So please, tell us everything that happened since the attack on Arabia!” said Noelle.

 Dawn pulled up a chair and began talking. “Well, as you already know, the ship with the Poweseekers on it showed up and everything went bad. We decided not to give up and fight as long as there was some hope of getting the Sword. But Zodamere, and you three disappeared, and that’s when we began to give up. Kelsey and I managed to escape, but the others weren’t as fortunate. We found Rosemary and Boriny waiting anxiously by the secret entrance to Arabia. Then we left, found this cottage abandoned, cleaned it up, and settled in. It was hard at first, very hard. But by the Creator’s goodness, we got along.”

 Then the three Pinewood squirrels told their story as well. From Tamm finding Noelle and to the moment they stepped in the clearing. Dawn, Kelsey, Rosemary, and Boriny were deeply intrigued.

 “So, you’re trying this again?” asked Rosemary.

 “Yes. We can’t just give up,” said Tamm.

 “That’s very brave of you three. I would be terrified!” said Kelsey.

 “I never said I wasn’t scared,” said Noelle.

 “Um, Mother?” Boriny said rather hesitantly.

 “You want to go with them, don’t you son,” said Dawn.

 “Why, yes. How did you know?”

 “You have that look in your eyes. That look of ambition and restlessness. You father had that same look when he was about to do some heroic deed.”

 “Well, I think the Creator is telling me to go. And I can’t ignore Him.”

 “No son, you can’t. And even if He wasn’t calling you, I couldn’t stop you anyway. You’re a big boy now, capable of making his own decisions.”

 Later that evening, Noelle pulled Dawn aside to ask about Boriny’s father. “Who was he, may I ask?”

 “He was a warrior, tough and ready to jump to some creature’s defense. Boriny looks just like him. And he acts just like him too. I suppose that’s why we named him after his father. We’d wander Penetralia together as a family, his father jumping to the aid of the innocent. But one afternoon, he got in a squabble with some Powerseekers. Boriny and I managed to escape, but he wasn’t as fortunate.”

 “I’m so sorry! That’s awful!”

 “Yes. And that’s when we met the Wandering Willowbranches. They took us in and became our new family.”

 “Does Boriny miss his father terribly?”
 “I have no doubt that he wishes with all his heart that he could see him again. But he was very little when his father died, so I don’t think he really remembers him.”

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 The three squirrels didn’t want to depart the next morning. Noelle wished terribly that she could spend just a few more days with her friends. But winter was coming fast and they wanted to be back in Pinewood before the snow came. So the three Pinewood squirrels continued their journey to Arabia with Boriny accompanying them.

 About an hour or so later, Noelle asked how long it would be before they reached Arabia. Boriny pulled out his map.

 “Only a few more days if we continue at a brisk pace,” he said.

 Noelle was rather surprised. “I didn’t realize we were so close already. I guess I lost track of time.”

 “I figured we were getting close,” said Asa.

 “Why didn’t you tell us then?” asked Tamm.

 Asa shrugged. “You never asked, and I thought you figured so too.”

 Tamm lowered his ears in embarrassment. He should have checked his map more often. He hoped Noelle and Boriny didn’t notice his carelessness.

26

“It Must Be Destroyed.”

T

hat day passed uneventfully. There was no sign of Seaweed. Tamm wished they finally taught that raccoon to leave them alone. But something deep down told him to never let his guard down when it came to Seaweed. Powerseekers were ruthless, and would never cease to destroy anything that hurt their pride.

 “Ah, I just can’t wait to be back in Pinewood. It’s been five whole years since I’ve been home. I miss it terribly,” said Noelle.

 “I wouldn’t know. I haven’t really had a true solid home. I guess I lived in that cottage for a while, but I never really got attached to it,” said Boriny.

 “I miss Pinewood an awful lot too. I loved the feel of the soft pine needles. It was absolutely beautiful in the fall. I can’t wait to bring the Sword back and reunite the tribes. Then Pinewood would truly be a beautiful place. Right, Asa?” said Tamm.

 Asa only gave Tamm a look that said, *We need to have a talk about that.*

 Tamm was confused. What could he mean? What was there to talk about? He tried to ask Asa what was going on, but Asa only shrugged. It was clear that he would tell him only when he wanted to.

 It turned out that Asa was ready to tell Tamm when everyone had gone to bed that night. Asa gently shook Tamm awake in the middle of the night.

 “What is it?” Tamm muttered groggily.

 “We need to talk,” was all Asa said.

 “Now?”

 “Yes.”

 “About what?”

 Asa didn’t answer. He only turned and sat on a log, staring up at the moon. Tamm, even more perplexed, sat down beside him.

 “All right, I know you’re trying to be all mysterious and secretive, but would you please tell me what you want to talk about.”

 “The Sword.”

 “What about it?”

 Asa hesitated, then sighed. “It needs to be destroyed.”

 “What?” Tamm had to admit, that was the last thing he expected Asa to say.

 “We need to destroy the Sword once we’ve got our paws on it.”

 “What?”

 “You heard me.”

 “Uh, can you please explain why? I am totally shocked, so there must be a good reason why we must destroy it! And frankly, I can’t imagine why!” Tamm’s voice grew louder as he spoke those words.

 “Shh! We don’t want to wake the others!”

 “All right, why do we need to destroy the Sword?” whispered Tamm.

 “Tamm, those years the Sword actually was in Pinewood, there wasn’t real, true peace and prosperity.”

 “I don’t understand.”

 “What I’m saying is that the peace in Pinewood was fake, unnatural. It came from the Sword. Real peace and friendship are something much more. It can only come from the Creator and living creatures who decide on their own to get along. We need to destroy the Sword because as long as it’s around, creatures are always going to crave its power. And as long as creatures crave its power for their own selfish ambitions, there will always be fighting and bloodshed. I’m not saying that all killing will go away if the Sword goes away, but it will eliminate a lot of it.”

 Tamm was silent. He didn’t want to believe what he had just heard. But deep down inside, he knew Asa was right. It changed everything. “So, we can’t reunite the tribes?”

 “I didn’t say that. Pinewood needs to realize that true peace doesn’t come from the Sword, it’s a choice and a blessing from the Creator. The squirrels need to decide to get along and live like in the old days.”

 “They’re not going to be happy about that.”

 “No, they’re not. They’re probably going to be furious, even. But that is their decision. The best we can do is tell them the truth. The Creator will have to do the rest.”

 Tamm was silent. He wished that Asa was wrong. But he knew he wasn’t. Asa was right. In fact, Tamm didn’t know how he didn’t see it earlier.

 “Does Noelle or Boriny know?”

 “No, and don’t you tell them.”

 “What?”

 “You heard me. Don’t tell Noelle or Boriny just yet.”

 “But, why? Noelle has been with us since we were just younglings! We don’t keep secrets this important from each other!”

 “I know, it’s hard. But how do you think she’ll like the news?”

 Tamm thought for a moment. “She wouldn’t like it. But she’s smart, so she’ll understand.”

 “I know she would. But I don’t think we should tell her just yet. Or Boriny.”

 “Well, if you’re not going to tell Noelle, why did you tell me?”

 “Because it’s time you knew. We’ll know when it’s time for Noelle to know. So please, don’t tell.”

 Tamm scowled.

 “Please?”

 Tamm growled. “Oh all right. But I don’t like this, not one bit!”

 “I don’t like this either. But I’ve got a feeling we won’t have to keep this secret for very long.”

 “I certainly hope not!”

27

Before the Attack

I

t’s not easy keeping a very important secret from your best friend. And Tamm’s situation was no exception. Asa had said that he knew the Sword had to be destroyed not long after Tamm and Noelle had helped restore his memory. Tamm did know how he was able to keep it for so long.

 So, the next few days were just miserable for Tamm. Every time he looked at Noelle, he was reminded of what he was keeping from her. *She deserves to know, doesn’t she?* *We’ve been through so much together. I don’t know why we can’t tell her.* But as much as he hated it, Tamm managed to keep his mouth shut.

 It didn’t help that Tamm knew Noelle knew something was up. She kept staring at him and Asa in a funny way. Almost in an angry way. Tamm didn’t blame her one bit. Noelle was smart, and Tamm knew she’d find out sooner or later. But she didn’t ask. She didn’t even say one word about it. That made Tamm feel even worse. He wished she would just come right out and ask him what he was keeping from her. Then he would have to tell her.

 As for Boriny, well, it was hard to tell if he knew something was up. He was always calm and didn’t really let any emotion or thoughts visible through his facial expressions. But Tamm knew Boriny was not naïve. He had to have figured something was up. But like Noelle, he didn’t say anything about it.

 Tamm was actually relieved when Boriny announced that they would reach Arabia by nightfall. *Finally, a distraction from the secret! It might not be a good distraction, but at least it takes my mind off the secret!*

 “I can’t believe this. It feels like we just started this journey! Like we were just there in Arabia! And now we’re back again, already!” said Noelle.

 “Let’s pray to the Creator that we’ll be able to get our paws on the Sword this time,” said Asa.

 He and Tamm exchanged a look. Noelle noticed and gave both of them one of her strange looks. Tamm gulped and looked away. Boriny’s face didn’t show a hint of his thoughts.

 Asa broke the silence. “Anyway, let’s get moving! The sooner we reach Arabia, the better.”

 Tamm jogged up to Asa and whispered in his ear. “Did you see that? Noelle is on to something! And I think Boriny is too! They’re no fools!”

 “I know, I know. I don’t think we’ll have to keep quiet for much longer, though.”

 Tamm wished with all his heart that that would be so.

 That evening, Asa, Tamm, Noelle, and Boriny were on their stomachs, peering over the grassy and sandy slope that led down to Arabia. It didn’t look much different than it did five years ago. Just maybe a little more overgrown. It didn’t seem like it had been five years. In fact, it seemed like it was only yesterday when they were lying on this same slope with the Wandering Willowbranches and Steelrudder. Noelle sighed at that thought. She missed her friends terribly. She looked to her right and in the distance, she could just make out the faint island of Majara, home of Steelrudder and his otters. Noelle wondered if there were still otters living there. She doubted it, though.

 “Well, it looks like Zodamere is still here. I suppose that’s a good thing,” said Boriny as two Powerseekers walked out of the cave and onto the pebble shore.

 “Do you suppose he’ll be suspecting our return?” asked Noelle.

 “Not likely. I suppose he thinks we’re dead. And it’s been five years. But just the same, you never know,” said Tamm.

 “Always expect the unexpected. That way, nothing is unexpected,” said Asa, almost in a distant, dreamy voice.”

 “That’s a good motto for a warrior,” said Boriny. “Did you come up with that on your own?”

 “I don’t know. I have faint memories of someone constantly saying that,” said Asa.

 “So do we have a plan of some sort?” asked Noelle.

 “Uh, sort of. We learned last time that a full-on attack isn’t the best choice. Especially for us four,” said Tamm.

 “So that means we’ll have to do this secretly,” finished Boriny.

 “Right,” said Tamm.

 “Well that certainly makes things a lot easier,” said Noelle sarcastically.

 “But with the Creator, all things are possible,” said Asa.

 “Why don’t we sleep on this subject and maybe someone will wake up tomorrow with a bright idea,” suggested Noelle.

 “Great idea. Let’s find a place to sleep further away from Arabia. I don’t like being this close,” said Tamm.

 “Why don’t we stay at Majara? It’s a safe distance from here,” suggested Noelle. “And maybe, just maybe, Steelrudder’s clan recovered.”

 Asa, Tamm, Noelle, and Boriny reached Majara late that evening. And to their great disappointment, it was completely deserted. Noelle wandered around the tiny island. From what she could see from the dim moonlight, the huts had either collapsed or were overgrown with vegetation. A great sadness settled on Noelle. The last time she was here, the island had been full of life. And now it was completely deserted. No sounds of laughter from younglings. No delicious aromas coming from the Dining Hall. Just emptiness. She didn’t know if a plague had wiped them out if they had just left on their own, or what. She didn’t think Zodamere destroyed him. There would probably be burned huts and bones. *Unless… he turned them into Powerseekers.* Noelle quickly shoved aside that thought. She didn’t want to think of her friends turning into vicious beasts.

 Noelle sighed and returned to the small fire they had made.

 “No signs of life?” asked Tamm.

 “Nothing but vegetation,” sighed Noelle.

 “Well, let’s just hope that the otters left on their own,” said Boriny.

 Noelle wished with all her heart that that were so.

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 Noelle awoke the next morning with sunlight streaming through a crack in the abandoned hut into her eyes. She groaned softly and sat up. The previous night had not been a restful one. Vivid nightmares of the attack and the horrors that could have happened here in Majara had haunted her all night. She was glad morning had finally come. Then Noelle remembered what they had to do today and tomorrow. Plan and attack.

 “Sleep okay?” Tamm asked Noelle when she came to the fire for breakfast.

 “Not really. You?”

 “Me neither. I don’t think any of us did.”

 “Any bright ideas about the attack?”

 “Not really. You?”

 “Nothing. Hopefully, Asa or Boriny has something.”

 “As a matter of fact, I might have something,” said Boriny walking up to the fire.

 Boriny told Asa, Tamm, and Noelle the basic plan he had in mind for getting into Arabia. The squirrels added details to that plan and by midday, they had a risky, but possible plan. It went like this: they would get disguises from some Powerseekers, then Boriny would sneak into Arabia from the secret entrance and start a fire somewhere near the dungeon. While the Powerseekers would be busy putting out the fire, Asa, Tamm, and Noelle would try to find Zodamere. Boriny would stay near the fire to keep it going. Then they would meet back up at Majara if all went well.

 “Do we have a backup plan in case our disguises fail us and we’re found out?” asked Noelle.

 No answer. Everyone looked down nervously.

 “Once we’re in, there’s no turning back. May the Creator be with us,” murmured Asa.

 “All right. We should spend the rest of this day wisely. We should clear our heads, seek solitude, and most importantly, pray,” said Tamm.

 “The best idea I’ve heard all day!” agreed Boriny.

 The rest of that day didn’t feel real to Noelle. It all felt like a haze. It seemed like it was only yesterday when they were planning to attack Arabia for the first time. So much had happened since then, but it still felt like yesterday.

 “Hey, can I sit with you?”

 Noelle jumped a little and looked up. She hadn’t seen Tamm walk up behind her. “Huh?”

 “Oh sorry, am I interrupting something? You’ve been here all afternoon.”

 Noelle looked to the west and realized it was evening already. “Oh. I guess I lost track of time. I just feel like I’m in a haze.”

 Tamm sat down beside her. “Strange. Today has been dragging by for me.”

 “Doesn’t it feel like yesterday that we were just planning to attack Arabia for the first time?”

 “It does. But so much has happened since then.”

 “I was just thinking about that.”

 “But I bet that it feels like forever since he’s been here for Asa.”

 “It feels like what for me?” Asa cut in.

 “We were just talking about how it only feels like yesterday we were just here,” said Tamm.

 Asa shook his head and sat down. “It feels like a lifetime.”

 “We figured so,” said Noelle.

 The three squirrels sat in contented silence, watching the sunset. They prayed that they would live to see another, for who knew what tomorrow held.

28

The End

A

sa, Tamm, and Noelle crouched low behind a rock by the secret entrance to Arabia, waiting for Boriny to give them the signal to enter. They had killed the four guards by the secret entrance and took their clothes for disguises. Then Boriny had entered Arabia to start a fire. And as soon as he gave the signal, the squirrels would enter Arabia, find the Sword, and kill Zodamere. Noelle still did not know the Sword had to be destroyed.

 “I can’t believe those Powerseekers can stand to wear this all day!” whispered Noelle, fidgeting uncomfortably.

 “Their mind is poisoned, they probably don’t notice,” answered Tamm.

 “Shh! There’s Boriny!” hissed Asa.

 Boriny stood in the secret entrance and glanced around. Noelle barely recognized him, so great was his Powerseeker disguise. Then Boriny gave a quick thumbs up towards the direction of the squirrels, then disappeared inside Arabia.

 “That’s the signal. We should be hearing shouts of alarm very soon,” whispered Tamm.

 Noelle tensed and took deep breaths. Tamm looked tense as well, but Asa’s expressions were unreadable. A minute later, they began hearing shouts coming from Arabia. Smoke began pouring out of the secret entrance.

 “This is it, let’s go,” said Asa. “For Pinewood, and for Penetralia.”

 The squirrels stood and disappeared into the smoke coming from Arabia.

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 Noelle coughed. It was difficult to navigate much less breathe through all the smoke. But after they went down the passage a little way, it cleared a little. They were extremely grateful for their disguises, for just then, they got caught in the rush of Powerseekers heading towards the fire. Thankfully, no creature recognized them. The squirrels tried to fight the current of Powerseekers, and in the process, Noelle tripped and fell. Her helmet rolled off her head. The Powerseekers stopped and stared at Noelle. *Oh Creator, please get us out of this mess!*

 “Hey! Who are you?” exclaimed one Powerseeker.

 “Yeah, you ain’t wonna us!” said another.

 “Let’s get ‘er! She probably started the fire!”

 “HEY! Over here! I’m the one who started the fire!” Boriny shouted over the clamor. Every eye turned to him.

 “You want the creature who started the fire? Well, here I am! Come and get me!”

 The Powerseekers forgot all about the fire and charged after Boriny, who dashed out of the secret entrance. Tamm grabbed Noelle and pulled her out of the mad rush after Boriny.

 “This wasn’t part of the plan!” Noelle exclaimed once she, Tamm, and Asa were alone in the passage.

 “Are you okay?” asked Tamm.

 “I’m fine! But, Boriny!”

 “There’s nothing we can do about Boriny! He’s in the Creator’s hands! We have got complete this mission!” said Asa.

 Noelle looked hesitantly towards the secret entrance, said a quick prayer to the Creator for Boriny’s protection, then followed Tamm and Asa down the passage towards Zodamere.

 The squirrels met many Powerseekers while going down the main passage. But they seemed to be too preoccupied getting the fire out and wondering where all the other Powerseeker went. There disguises were working like a charm.

 “Where would Zodamere be? I don’t see any sign of him,” whispered Noelle.

 “He probably has his own chambers somewhere. But you’d think he’d be managing putting the fire out,” said Asa.

 “I don’t like this. I think he knows something,” said Noelle.

 “Hey, I think I found that chamber you were talking about,” hissed Tamm, peering around a corner.

 Asa and Noelle rushed to his side. Sure enough, a little down that passage, there were huge double doors that were slightly opened. You could just make out that the inside was a living quarter.

 “That’s got to be it,” said Tamm.

 “Right. Approach with caution. There’s something fishy going on around here,” said Asa.

 The squirrels crept up to the doors and peered in. The huge room looked empty. Asa squeezed through the slightly open doors. He gave a quick glance around and motioned for Tamm and Noelle to follow.

 Once inside, Noelle slowly looked around the room. It was large and luxurious. There was a massive overstuffed sofa near a huge stone fireplace where a blaze was roaring. Also near the fireplace, was a huge canopy bed. On the other side of the room, there was a large dining table with fancy candles. Tapestries and treasures were everywhere, reflecting the firelight. Noelle had to admit, it was absolutely beautiful. Even more beautiful than her home back in Pinewood.

 The squirrels were so preoccupied with admiring the room that they forgot the most chilling detail of all. Zodamere was nowhere to be seen. If they had looked a little harder, they might have noticed something behind a huge tapestry.

 “Beautiful, isn’t it?” came a low, smooth voice.

 The three squirrels spun around and brandished their weapons at the large brown mouse that stood by the doorway. The beautiful and terrible Sword was held in his paws.

 “I thought I taught you youngsters a lesson last time you were here. But here you are, five years late, still determined to get this Sword. Your foolishness is going to get all three of you killed,” said Zodamere, in his thick accent.

 The Pinewood squirrels didn’t say anything but began slowly circling the oversized mouse.

 Zodamere continued. “I must say, I admire your feeble attempt to get the Sword again. That fire distraction almost worked, but I know better. I’m no fool, unlike you three.”

 That did it. Asa charged. He lifted his sword and swung at Zodamere with all his might. But the mouse lifted the Sword, and when Asa’s sword impacted with it, a blast from the Sword sent him crashing into the large table. Noelle and Tamm advanced at the same time. Zodamere managed to defect their attacks, but just barely. Asa picked himself up and joined in the fight. The squirrels kept getting thrown back by blasts from the Sword. But as they fought, they were able to predict when the blasts were coming, giving them time to duck out of the way.

 The fight carried on towards the oversized bed. Noelle got an idea. She suddenly left the fight and jumped on the bed. Then, jumping high off the bed, Noelle flew through the air and crashed into Zodamere, bringing him down to the ground. The Sword clattered to the ground and slid under the bed, and Noelle lost her weapon as well. Asa dropped his weapon and leapt after the Sword, but Zodamere caught his foot paw in mid-leap, making him crash to the ground. Then Noelle did something she thought she’d never do. She sunk her teeth into Zodamere’s arm, releasing Asa from the mouse’s grasp. Zodamere kicked Noelle in the stomach. Tamm punched Zodamere. Asa made another attempt to dive under the bed. Zodamere stopped him. Noelle grabbed a fallen brass candle holder and brought it down hard on Zodamere’s head. That stunned him for a second. Tamm leaped on his back. Asa began squeezing under the bed again. Zodamere roared with anger, leaped up, grabbed Tamm, and literally threw him across the room. Then he grabbed a fallen sword and charged after Noelle. Noelle held up her brass candle holder and prepared for the end.

 Asa stopped halfway under the bed when he realized the danger Noelle was in. He quickly squeezed out, grabbed a sword, and rushed at Zodamere. He crashed into the brutal mouse and drove his sword into his heart, saving Noelle’s life and ending the tyrant Zodamere, who had killed so many innocent creatures.

 Tamm shakily got up and crawled to Noelle’s side. “Are you okay?”

 “I’m…I’m all right. Are you okay?”

 “I’ll be fine.” Then, turning to Asa, Tamm gasped. “Asa!”

Noelle was at the red squirrel’s side in a flash, a horrible feeling gripping her gut. Asa lay motionless on top of Zodamere.

Tamm and Noelle carefully rolled Asa off of Zodamere. Their worst fears were confirmed. Asa had plunged his sword into Zodamere’s heart, and at the same time, Zodamere had inflicted a mortal wound on Asa. Zodamere was definitely dead, and Asa was not far behind.

“Asa? Say something! Please don’t die!” pleaded Noelle, bandaging the wound as best she could.

Asa gritted his teeth. “I’ll…be okay.”

“Can you stand?” asked Tamm.

Asa tried, but couldn’t.

“Don’t move. You’re in no condition to do so,” said Noelle.

“Tamm, the Sword,” said Asa with much effort.

Tamm nodded and squeezed under the bed. He returned with the Sword in his paws. It was glowing brightly. He and Asa exchanged a subtle nod.

“Please, take me outside,” gasped Asa.

It took a lot of effort, but Tamm and Noelle managed to lift Asa and carry him through the passage. By now, the smoke was getting thicker and thicker. The fire obviously hadn’t been put out. Noelle wondered how Boriny was faring.

Noelle didn’t know how they did it, but she and Tamm managed to get Asa out of Arabia, through the main entrance, and up the grassy slope. They lay Asa down facing the ocean. The sun was setting, and the scenery was absolutely gorgeous.

Asa sighed and stared out into the ocean. He savored the moment, for he knew it would be his last.

“Asa?” Noelle was struggling to fight back tears now.

Asa then said with much effort, “My time has come. Don’t be sorrowful, for I am about to meet the Creator. I’m going to a better place. I just want you to know, that you two are very dear to me. I could never ask for better friends or companions.”

“No! Please! Don’t die!” cried Noelle.

Tamm was speechless. Tears were running down his furry cheeks.

“Please, just promise me these two things.”

 Tamm struggled to keep his voice even. “We’ll do anything for you, Asa.”

 “Please, tell my father everything. Tell him I love him very much, and I’m sorry I couldn’t see him one last time.”

 “Y-yes, we’ll do that,” sniffed Noelle.

 “And finally,” began Asa, closing his eyes. “Take me home.”

 Then there on a beach, facing the Penetralian coast, with the Sword in his paws, Asa Ember, son of Jasper Ember, died saving his country and his friend.

29

A New Beginning

N

oelle didn’t know how long she had been crying. All she knew was Asa was dead. Her best friend, her companion, dead. She couldn’t believe it. She had always seen Asa as a fierce warrior, always there for her and Tamm. But now he was gone. Noelle didn’t know if she’ll ever get used to that fact. No, she knew she would never get used to it. She knew she and Tamm had been scarred for life.

 “Noelle?”

 Noelle slowly raised her head. Tamm was standing beside her, his paw on her shoulder. Noelle expected him to ask if she was okay, if he could do anything for her. But he only sat down beside her with his arm around her shoulders. His silence and mere presence brought her ease and comfort. That did more than anything. Noelle relaxed in Tamm’s embrace.

 The sun was almost gone now. A cool ocean breeze gently swept through the squirrel’s fur. A peace, unexpected and delightful, swept over Noelle and Tamm just then. They knew it was the Creator’s presence. He was there with them. They didn’t know why He had allowed Asa to die, but they knew it would all turn out for His glory. Sure, no creature could ever take the place of Asa in their hearts, but they knew the Creator was more fulfilling than any other creature could ever be.

 After a while, Tamm stood, wiped the tears from his eyes, and said, “Noelle, there’s something I have to tell you and something we have to do.”

 “Yes?”

 “The Sword, well, we have to destroy it.”

 “I don’t understand.”

 “Real peace in prosperity doesn’t come from the Sword. It comes from the Creator. The squirrels of Pinewood need to realize this, trust Him, and learn that they can choose to get along. They haven’t done that yet because they thought they needed the Sword. But they don’t. That’s why it must be destroyed.”

 Noelle was silent. She stood up and looked behind her. The fire in Arabia must have burned itself out by all the stone corridors. Only whiffs of smoke were visible in the moonlight.

 “That makes so much sense. I can’t believe I didn’t think of that earlier,” she finally said.

 “Me too. Asa was the only one who figured it out.”

 “Well then, how do we get rid of it?”

 “I don’t think we can actually destroy it, so maybe we can toss it in the ocean.”

 “I saw a leaky boat back in the cove. It’ll get the Sword pretty far out before sinking.”

 So that is what Tamm and Noelle did. They tied the Sword to a leaky boat and pushed it into the ocean. Then they stood there, paw in paw, watching the boat drift off in the moonlight. Finally, when it was just a speck in the distance, the boat sunk with the Sword in it. The sword that had caused so much fake happiness, real pain, and real sorrow, was finally gone. The squirrels felt as if a great weight had been lifted off their shoulders. Their quest that had started five years ago was finally over. But a new quest, perhaps an even harder one, was just beginning. Pinewood still had to be reunited, and it was up to its squirrels to do so.

Epilogue

From the diary of Queen Noelle Omaha of Pinewood Forest:

 *Where to begin? So much has happened since the day Asa Ember died. That day was probably the worst day of my life. But it was different. I felt I had a whole new life and adventure ahead of me. A new beginning. You’d think I’d be thrilled or terrified, but I honestly didn’t much care at that moment. One of my best friends died! That was the only thing on my mind then. It wasn’t until a few days later that I actually began to feel curious about this new beginning I was about to face. Perhaps it was Tamm Bushtail who sparked my curiosity, for he asked me to marry him when we were about halfway back to Pinewood Forest. I accepted of course! I love him with all my heart, and I now realize I always had. We had been through so much together and I know that he’ll make the best husband and father for our kids when we have them.*

 *We reached Pinewood without any major events, surprisingly. As you might have expected, the squirrels of Pinewood were absolutely shocked to see us. They had long assumed us dead. We told them everything. How we met, our travels, everything. Asa’s father was devastated. I really do pity the squirrel; he really loved his only son. He immediately organized a team to bury Asa in Pinewood.*

 *As for my family, well, let’s just say they had mixed feelings about this whole situation. They were overjoyed to see me alive and well, but were absolutely furious about me leaving Pinewood and now marrying a Bushtail commoner. Only Ilene didn’t say anything about me leaving or marrying Tamm. She seemed to only care that I was back. If only my parents saw Tamm the way I saw him.*

 *All the other squirrels of Pinewood didn’t know what to think about this whole quest. They were naturally furious about the Sword being destroyed but deeply moved when told how Asa lay down his life to save me and end Zodamere. We told them why the Sword had to be destroyed, and I could tell that they didn’t want to believe it. They were downright stubborn about it! But Tamm and I didn’t give up. For a whole year, we stayed together in Pinewood in the old castle where we first met, spreading the truth and light to the squirrels of Pinewood.*

 *It was only by the Creator’s goodness that the squirrels finally accepted the truth. They realize that true peace and prosperity didn’t come from the Sword. It was a choice they could make themselves with the help of the Creator. But honestly, I truly believe that it was all the Creator when Pinewood finally accepted the truth. Even my father admitted his blindness and agreed to reunite the tribes into one united tribe of Pinewood. He even accepted Tamm as his son-in-law!*

 *So the three kings of Pinewood came together and officially said that Pinewood was no longer divided. All squirrels would be treated equally, and they could live wherever they want in Pinewood. It would be exactly like it was before. That was definitely one of the best days of my life. There was much rejoicing and feasting in Pinewood. For a whole week! I cannot put my joy and gratitude to the Creator in words.*

 *But perhaps the greatest surprise came a little later. The three kings of the former tribes stepped down and appointed Tamm and me as king and queen of Pinewood. I fully accepted, for I had been preparing for this moment my whole life! But Tamm, well, he didn’t know what to think! He had no experience as a king! But he did admit, he really did want to be king. I promised him I would teach him everything about royal life. He liked that idea, so he happily accepted the nomination.*

 *Tamm and mine’s coronation day was also our official wedding day! That was definitely the best day of my life. I can’t even begin to describe my joy! Tamm felt a little awkward, but I could tell he was more than overjoyed! This was all a dream come true for him! And me! The old castle was rebuilt and returned to its former glory. Tamm and I moved in as soon as possible, and I tell you, Pinewood was totally transformed. It was once again a symbol of beauty and tranquility.*

 *Asa Ember was buried in Pinewood Forest as requested. We made him an honored warrior’s tomb and even built a memorial statue of him. Pinewood would forever remember the noble squirrel that had saved his land and Penetralia.*

 *One rather large change Tamm and I immediately did was unite the three tribes of Pinewood under one tribe. The Omaha tribe. Beautiful and majestic name, isn’t it? It was Tamm’s idea. So now I’m no longer Noelle Moonlight, and Tamm is no longer Tamm Bushtail. Instead, we are Noelle and Tamm Omaha.*

 *You might be wondering about Boriny and Seaweed. Boriny was a true hero. He drew off many Powerseekers so Asa, Tamm, and I could get at Zodamere. He led them on a wild goose chase through the woods. He managed to get ahead and hide while the Powerseekers were going crazy looking for him. But they finally gave up and returned to Arabia, only to find it half-burned and their master dead. Then, the Powerseekers lost their dangerous atmosphere. They were lost, confused. Their master was dead, and the Sword gone. They are now wanderers, wandering aimlessly around Penetralia. They’re no threat, so we just leave them alone. I wish with all my heart that I could help them, but the power of the Sword had poisoned their minds, for good. But at least they aren’t killing any creatures.*

 *So Tamm and I have been king and queen of Pinewood for almost two years now. Life here is going splendidly. It’s not perfect, but as close as you can get. I’m expecting a little one any day now! I am nervous but extremely excited! This is going to be another adventure, so I pray the Creator will be with us! Tamm is excited as well; he really loves children.*

 *I just want to say one more thing before I close up here. One, trust the Creator. He will get you through any situation you are in, good or bad. Even though terrible things are happening, it’s all going to turn out for His glory. You just have to simply trust Him. There is always hope. Simply trust and obey the Creator. He is in control, and he knows best. I don’t know what the future holds, I have a feeling all this peace won’t last forever, but I know that the Creator holds the future. Trust and obey.*

-Queen Noelle Omaha of Pinewood Forest

The End