The Dragonspeaker

Legends of Penetralia: Book 2

Ocean Claire

“Be brave, trust the Creator, and never, ever give up hope. I know what real fear and hopelessness feel like. And it is a feeling you must do everything possible to prevent. The Creator will help you; He is strong in your weakness and the light in your darkest moments.”

-Noelle Omaha

1

Dragons and Fosses

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ell me about the dragons, Father.”

 “Again, Serena? I tell you that story every night!”

 “Yeah, why don’t we play a board game or something? We’ve heard that story a hundred times!”

 Prince Nicholas Omaha of Pinewood Forest was sure he would scream if he heard the story about the dragons one more time. His little sister, Princess Serena Omaha, however, simply couldn’t get enough of it. Ever since she heard the story for the first time, Serena had been absolutely obsessed with dragons for a reason neither her brother nor her parents could figure out. Nicholas’s and Serena’s parents were King Tamm and Queen Noelle Omaha of Pinewood Forest, and the family was gathered in a comfortable living quarter of their tree castle. They liked to gather there every evening before bed to have some quality family time.

 Nicholas, or Nick as he was more commonly called, was much like his father, Tamm. He had his excessively bushy tail and grayish brown fur, but he also had his mother’s rare, stunning deep blue eyes. Nick was not exactly a youngling anymore, but not quite an adult yet either. He was excited to become king of Pinewood Forest someday and was determined to learn all he could about his forest and Penetralia.

 Serena, however, wasn’t much like her older brother. She looked almost exactly like her mother, with grayish silver fur that shimmered in the moonlight, and deep blue eyes. She also had her father’s overly bushy tail. Unlike Nick, Serena wasn’t much interested in being a princess. She was obsessed with dragons and was determined to see and touch one herself before she died. But her parents didn’t push the life of a princess too hard on her yet. Serena was only just a little youngling, and she had time to grow up and change her mind.

 Tamm caved into Serena’s pleading. “Oh, all right dear. But just once, do you hear me, young lady?”

 Serena cheered. “Thank you, father!”

 Nick groaned. “Not again! Why do we always have to do what SHE wants?”

 Serena crossed her arms and said in an as a matter-of-fact voice, “Because I’m the youngest *and* the princess.”

 “Come, Nick. I’ll play chess with you,” said Noelle graciously.

 Nick liked that idea much better than listening to a story he already knew by heart, but Serena made herself comfortable on her father’s lap and waited for the story to begin.

 Tamm sighed and began the story the same way he had done so many times. “Once upon a time, long ago, there were three kings living here in Pinewood. Their names were Bushtail, Moonlight, and Ember. It was a great time to live in Pinewood, for all was well under their rule. Now there was an island off the Penetralian Coast called Veradoom, and on that island lived a race of dragons called Firewings. This race is considered the most beautiful and terrible of all dragons, although very few are known to us in Penetralia. Firewings are huge and have fire red scales with orange flecks. Their wings are larger than their body, but they are mostly known for one feature: fire. Yes, many dragons breathe fire of some sort, but after a while, most dragons’ fire runs out, and they have to wait before new fire is formed. But that is not the case for Firewings. They always have an unlimited source of fire, and their scales are also highly flammable, so they can set themselves aflame. When they do that and fly through the night sky, they look like shooting stars, or burning balls of fire. That’s how they got their name: Firewings. Not only do they have amazing skills regarding fire, but their scales are impenetrable, and they have the strength of a hundred of the strongest creatures, making them the only invincible dragon species.

 “Penetralia used to have an alliance with the Firewings. Bushtail, Moonlight, and Ember sealed that unity. If Penetralia were ever under attack, the Firewings would come to their aid, and in exchange, we would give them our pine sap, which they desperately need to fertilize their eggs. But that alliance was broken when Zodamere stole the Sword and Pinewood fell. Since then, the Firewings have abandoned us and stayed in Veradoom. But it wasn’t their fault. I wish desperately now that we could somehow reunite our friendship with the Firewings, but I’m afraid they won’t trust us anymore. I don’t blame them one bit.”

 “I’ll mend our alliance with the Firewings, father,” said little Serena, her eyes huge with wonder.

 Tamm smiled. “I have no doubt you will, my little dragon.”

 Serena giggled. She loved it when her parents called her “little dragon”. “Show me the picture, Father!”

 Tamm pulled a large, thick book of all Pinewoodian history off the bookshelf. He opened it and turned to the marked pages. His little girl giggled in wonder when she saw the majestic orange flaming creature, a Firewing. Serena’s eyes widened with love and wonder. She feebly touched the picture that took up a whole page of the book. It was beautifully water colored, and it looked as real as it could get. But the artist took it a step further and glued beautiful, fire-red gems on the picture. It made it smooth and glistening. The carefully done art appeared as if it could leap out of the page at any given moment. Serena loved that picture more than any other she had seen. She could look at and feel it all day.

 “Who did that picture, father?” Serena asked.

 “I don’t know, dear. It’s strange, though. It’s a beautiful picture and whoever did it should get high credit for it.”

 “Father, do we really need to mend our alliance with the Firewings? I mean, Penetralia has been doing great for a long time now. At least, ever since you and Mother took care of Zodamere, and the Powerseekers are not a threat anymore,” said Nick from the table where he was in the middle of his chess game with his mother.

 “You’re correct that Penetralia has been doing wonderfully lately, son. But peace won’t last forever. It’s good to be friends with your neighbors now when things are good, then rush a friendship when things get bad. Do you understand?” said Tamm.

 “Yes father,” said Nick.

 “And you know, things aren’t exactly like a meadow picnic in Penetralia,” said Noelle.

 “That’s right,” said Tamm, a dark shadow coming over his face.

 “What is it?” asked Serena.

 “Yeah, is something wrong?” echoed Nick.

 Tamm and Noelle had an unspoken conversation just by exchanging a few looks and nods. Tamm sighed. “For about a month now, we’ve been hearing rumors of strange, new creatures lurking about Penetralia near the Dark Mountains…”

 “The Dark Mountains?” interrupted Serena.

 “Serena, princesses do not interrupt,” scolded Noelle.

 “Sorry. But what are the Dark Mountains?” questioned Serena.

 “The Dark Mountains are a line of large, dangerous mountains right at the northern border of Penetralia and the rest of the world,” explained Tamm.

 “If you’d been listening to your geography studies, you would have known that,” said Nick.

 “I was listening! I just forgot!” said the stubborn princess.

 “Children, please!” boomed Tamm.

 Nick and Serena exchanged a sour look but didn’t say anything more.

 “Ahem, as I was saying, there are rumors of strange creatures lurking near the Dark Mountains. Now we’ve been hearing about these creatures for a while now, but now they’re getting more frequent and I’ve been hearing that they’re getting deeper and deeper into Penetralia,” said Tamm.

 “What’s wrong with letting creatures in Penetralia if they aren’t doing any harm?” questioned Nick.

 “There is nothing wrong with that, son, and I’m glad you thought of that. But the rumors say that they have been destroying homes and crops. That cannot be tolerated,”

 “Shouldn’t you send some scouts out to investigate and find out if these rumors are true?” asked Nick.

 “I sent them last week. Hopefully, they’ll return any day now. I pray to the Creator that we’ll be able to take care of this quickly and without bloodshed,” said Tamm.

 “What do these creatures look like, father? Are they big, bad, and scary? Do we know what they’re called?” asked Serena, eyes wide with curiosity and fright.

 “They’re big and a dark brown color. They apparently are oversized cat-like rodents. I don’t know for sure what kind of creatures they are, but judging from an encyclopedia, I believe they’re called Fosses,” said Tamm.

 “Fosses,” echoed Nick.

 Serena shivered. “I don’t like it. They sound scary.”

 Noelle put an arm around her daughter. “I don’t like it either, dear. Penetralia has been at peace for years now, and I hate to see it disturbed.”

 “Do you think the Fosses will attack Pinewood? Do you think they’ll kill us?” asked the worried Serena.

 “I don’t think so. Pinewood Forrest is deep in Penetralia. The Fosses have a long way to go,” assured Noelle.

 “And I’ll always be here to protect my little dragon! Don’t worry, even if I’m not around, the Creator will always be with you!” said Tamm, scooping up the giggling Serena and rumpling the smiling Nick’s fur. “Now into bed with you both!” he roared, chasing his laughing children into their bedrooms.

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 Nick found it hard to get to sleep that night. He knew he should just calm down and trust the Creator, but something inside him told him that something was wrong. Dreadfully wrong. Nick had a feeling that the happiness of his childhood and the peace in Penetralia was slowly coming to an end. And Serena… *She’s only a youngling, and I have a feeling she’ll have to grow up long before it’s time.*

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 Tamm and Noelle returned to the cozy family room after putting their children to bed.

 “Tamm?” asked Noelle.

 “Yes, dear?”

 “I…I have a feeling something horrible is going to happen very soon.”

 Tamm put on a brave face. “Everything’s going to be all right. I won’t let anything happen to you or the kids. The Creator is in control.”

2

The Scouts Return

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ose Omaha lay across a large branch of a pine tree. She closed her eyes, and her lips curved in a contented smile. She loved Pinewood Forest. The smell, the trees, and the squirrels. Everyone here inside Pinewood was so nice. There hasn’t been any fighting since Noelle and Tamm became king and queen of Pinewood, she was told. In fact, she didn’t remember a time when Noelle and Tamm weren’t the leaders. Rose had been told by her best friend about how life was when the Sword was stolen and Pinewood fell. If she had lived then, she would have been a commoner, who had the worst life possible in Pinewood. She had been told how Asa, Tamm, and Noelle befriended each other and set out to find the Sword and destroy Zodamere. Asa had given his life to end Zodamere’s, and Noelle and Tamm destroyed the Sword. It was only by a miracle from the Creator that the squirrels of Pinewood chose to get along with each other. And now, Pinewood was united under one tribe, The Omaha Tribe. Rose was proud to be one.

 Rose was a descendant of the Ember tribe, so she had the reddest fur a squirrel could ever hope to have. Asa, who was Pinewood’s most adored hero, was also from the Ember tribe. That made Rose a proud Ember as well as an Omaha, even though there was no such thing as the Ember tribe now.

 But Rose’s life wasn’t all a meadow picnic. She was also an orphan. Her parents had died in a fire accident when she was only a youngling. Kind neighbors had taken her in for a few years, but Rose had found her own tree and lived on her own before she was an adult. She still wasn’t quite an adult now. But Rose enjoyed the solitude. She liked quiet, and the freedom she possessed. Besides, she wasn’t ever really alone. She had plenty of friends. Her best friend was Prince Nicholas. They had met when they were very young. They had played together, went on adventures together, and got in trouble together. Pretty much did everything true friends do together. Tamm and Noelle had offered her a place to live in the palace, but Rose had politely refused. She preferred living in a regular tree all by herself. But who knew? She might change her mind someday.

 Rose’s eyes suddenly flashed open. She sat up and peered up at the sky. *Oh no! I’m so late!* Rose gracefully slid down the pine tree and took off towards the tree palace. She was supposed to meet Nick for a friendly archery match. She was late, again. That was something she had to work on.

 Rose dashed into the palace grounds. The guards let her through without question. Everyone knew Rose was Nick’s best friend. Rose passed Serena in the garden, chasing a butterfly. She skidded to a halt. “Is Nick in the archery grounds?” she called to Serena.

 Serena looked up. “Yes, he’s over there! You’d better hurry, he’s getting very worried you forgot about him!”

 Rose rolled her eyes and took off again. She and Nick had learned by now to ignore Serena’s teasing. Arguing with Serena did get you anywhere. Getting teased constantly was the only problem with being the prince of Pinewood’s best friend.

 Sure enough, Rose found Nick on the archery grounds.

 “Hey, sorry I’m late!” panted Rose, picking up a bow and a quiver full of arrows.

 “It’s all right. Gives me more time to practice,” said Nick, giving Rose a playful nudge.

 “I’m still pretty sure I can beat you today,” laughed Rose.

 “We’ll see about that. Go ahead.”

 Rose fitted an arrow on the bow, took careful aim, and fired. It hit the center circle of the target.

 Rose turned to Nick and raised her eyebrows as if to say, “*beat that!”* Nick didn’t say anything. He was staring at the target, a distant look in his eyes.

 “Nick?”

 Nick jumped a little. “Oh, sorry. I was just thinking. That’s a good shot!”

 “Are you okay? You don’t seem yourself currently.”

 “I’m fine. It’s just…” Nick trailed off.

 “It’s just what?” pressed Rose.

 Nick shook his head. “It’s probably nothing.”

 “Something tells me it’s definitely something. But if you don’t want to tell me, that’s your business.”

 “It’s not that I don’t want to tell you, it’s that, well, I don’t want you to worry.”

 “Nick, when have you ever known me to worry?”

 Nick smiled a little at that. Rose was right. He had never known her to worry. Rose was always calm under pressure.

 “And besides, you’d probably feel better if you tell me,” continued Rose.

 Nick sighed. She was right, again. “All right, but don’t tell anyone else. I don’t want the squirrels of Pinewood to worry for no reason here.”

 “Don’t worry, you can trust me. Go on,” said Rose.

 “We’ve been hearing rumors of strange creatures, Fosses, lurking throughout Penetralia. They have been burning homes and such. My father sent some scouts to find out if these rumors are true.”

 Rose was quiet. Then she spoke. “I’m sure everything will be fine. Penetralia has been at peace for a long time, and these rumors could be false.”

 “True, but I can’t shake off this horrible feeling.”

 “But the Creator is still in control. Even if these fossa rumors are true,” said Rose optimistically.

 “Right. We need to remember that and not lose hope.”

 Just then, Serena ran panting up to Nick and Rose. She obviously ran a long way to get them.

 “Serena, what’s going on? You know you’re not allowed on the archery grounds without letting us know first!” said Nick.

 It took a minute for Serena to catch her breath. “Nick! You have to come quick! The scouts Father sent are back! They’ve got big news!”

 “Well, that was timely,” Rose whispered.

 Nick’s eyes widened. “What? Really? What did they say?”

 “I don’t know! But they looked worried, so whatever it is, it can’t be good!”

 Nick turned to Rose. “I’ve got to go! Sorry we can’t finish our round here. I’ll let you know what’s up as soon as possible!”

 Rose nodded. “Sure, I understand! See you tomorrow, if the Creator wills?”

 Nick nodded and Rose took off back to her tree.

“Come on! We’ve got to get back to the palace!” said Nick before taking off to the palace.

Serena ran after him. “Hey, wait up!”

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The huffing and puffing Serena finally caught up with Nick in the palace. He stood in front of the large doors that lead into the meeting room where Tamm, Noelle, and the scouts were talking. He tugged at the wooden door latch, looking very frustrated and disappointed.

“It’s locked!” he groaned.

Serena took a moment to catch her breath. When she finally did, she said, “Follow me.” Then she took off down the hall. Nick followed. Serena ran to the kitchen entrance, stopped, and peered in.

“What are we…” Nick began.

“Shh! Just follow me, but don’t tell anyone about this!” whispered Serena.

Nick sighed. He should have known. Serena was leading him to a place where they weren’t supposed to be. Now he would probably get in trouble if caught. To make things worse, Serena would probably come up with an excuse that made it sound like it was all Nick’s fault.

There was no one in the kitchen, so Serena, followed by Nick, quietly went in and slipped into the pantry.

“What are we doing in the pantry?” whispered Nick, very confused.

“Shh! They probably can hear us if we’re not quiet,” hissed Serena.

Nick brought his voice to a very low whisper. “Who?”

“Father, Mother, and the scouts, of course!”

Nick’s blank look lingered for a bit more, then realization dawned on him. *Of course! The pantry is right against the meeting room wall! But I still don’t see how we can hear them well enough to understand them.*

As if reading Nick’s thoughts, Serena squeezed under a low shelf and disappeared. Nick stooped down and peered under the shelf. It was just black. No Serena.

“Serena!” Nick hissed.

“Shh! I’m here, follow!” Serena’s voice sounded distant.

Nick hesitantly squeezed under the shelf. He barely fit. He expected to only feel the back wall of the pantry, but instead, he found a short, narrow passage. He could see light at the end. *What is this? A secret tunnel?* Nick squirmed down the passage and suddenly found himself crouching next to Serena in a tight, box-like compartment. Nick realized that he could hear his parent’s conversation with the scouts as if he were in the same room.

“Wait, where are we?” he asked in a barely audible whisper.

“In the meeting room. You know that large, weird plant on a big platform in the meeting room? Well, we’re in that platform,” answered Serena.

Nick’s eyes grew wide. *I had no idea!* He would have asked Serena how she found it, but he began listening to the conversation that was going on in the meeting room.

“My king, it’s not good. The rumors are true, and worse,” said a scout.

There was silence.

“Do you have any idea what they want? Or anything?” asked Tamm.

“I don’t know for sure, but judging from what I have seen, the burning of villages and slaughtering of families, I believe their intentions are to take over Penetralia.”

Another silence.

“How organized are they? Do they have a leader?”

“Unfortunately, they are very organized. They even have uniforms. They move swiftly and expertly. They are obviously trained for this. No creature knows their leader’s true name. He is only known as The Conqueror.”

Tamm spoke. “We must put a stop to them if they’re taking innocent lives. How close are they to Pinewood?”

“Not very close. They are mainly staying near the Dark Mountains. But it’s only a matter of time before they decide to move closer inland. I got the impression that they are planning a large attack.”

Tamm and Noelle exchanged a knowing look. “Pinewood Forest.”

“My queen?”

“They’re planning to attack Pinewood Forest,” said Noelle, almost as if she were in a haze.

“Creator help us,” murmured Tamm in a low, menacing tone.

“What will we do, my king?”

Tamm stood up straight and looked the scout in the eye. “We’ll be ready. May the Creator be with us.”

3

The Conqueror

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he rest of that day felt like a haze for Nick. He had never known the feeling of true life-threatening foreboding. He had grown up in a life of peace and comfort. Nick’s fears from the night before were about to come true, he realized. It was time to grow up. His childhood was over, and so was Serena’s. They might have to do and face things younglings should not do and face. *Oh Creator, please be with us! Give us strength!*

Tamm called a meeting of all his counselors to discuss the issue at hand in the meeting room. Nick would have loved to listen in by hiding in the large plant platform, but he felt bad enough for doing it earlier. He also made sure Serena didn’t listen in either. To accomplish that, he brought her to his room to discuss the information they had just heard.

 “Nick, I’m scared!” whimpered Serena.

 Nick sighed. He was equally frightened. “We’ve got to be brave for mother and father. They have a lot on their shoulders right now, and they don’t need to know that we’re scared to death. We’ve got to be helpful and brave. The Creator has not left us.”

 Serena began taking slow, even breaths.

 “That’s more like it. We mustn’t lose our heads here.”

 “What are we going to do?”

 “We’ll do whatever mother and father want us to do, and we’ll do it without question.”

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 Nick and Serena spent the rest of that day in Nick’s bedroom, waiting. They weren’t sure what they were waiting for, but they waited anyway. Finally, after what seemed like hours, there came a knock on the door. Nick and Serena jumped, then looked at each other. Nick walked over and opened the door. It was Noelle. She looked firm and brave. Nick knew that couldn’t be a good sign. Noelle only looked like that when she was trying to hide her worry.

 “Children, we’ve got to talk,” said Noelle.

 Nick and Serena made themselves comfortable. Noelle looked both of them in the eye. “The scouts your father sent out to find out about the Fosses returned. It’s not good news, I’m afraid. All the rumors are true and worse. It sounds like the Fosses are planning to take over Penetralia. They…they plan to start with Pinewood Forest, I believe.”

 Nick and Serena were silent. They already knew all this, of course. But they did their best to look scared.

Noelle narrowed her eyes. “All right, tell me how you found out about this before I told you.”

Nick and Serena looked at each other. Nick ever-so-slightly jerked his head toward Noelle as if to say *“You’re the one who found that hiding place. You do the talking.”*

Serena lowered her eyes and murmured, “Sorry, mother. We listened in. We won’t do it again.”

Noelle turned her piercing gaze to Nick. He looked down. “I’m sorry. We should have known better.”

“I should give you two a good whooping. But there are more pressing matters currently, so I’ll let you go this time. But mind you, if I catch either of you doing that one more time, you will get a much-deserved spanking,” scolded Noelle.

“It won’t happen again,” promised Nick, nudging Serena. Serena bobbed her head vigorously.

“See that it doesn’t. Anyway, your father just had a gathering of the council to discuss what to do about these Fosses. We’ve decided to fortify Pinewood before the Fosses attack. We will build barriers, post all the guards we can spare, and ready the Scurry.”

Nick gulped. Serena crawled on her mother’s lap and shivered.

“Things are going to be different now. We will need you two to trust us and the Creator. We will always be here to protect you. Just please trust and obey, and things will turn out all right in the end.”

Nick and Serena wished desperately that that would be so.

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Later that afternoon, Nick found Rose amusing some younglings by playing a game of kickball with them. He signaled to her that they needed to talk. Rose nodded, excused herself from the game, and walked over to Nick.

“The Fosses?” was only what Rose asked.

“Yes. We believe that their plan is to attack Pinewood as a starter for conquering Penetralia.”

“I know. Creatures here are already heading towards the borders to build barriers. Every squirrel in Pinewood knows this by now. I can’t believe how fast word can travel!”

Nick sighed. “You don’t happen to have any bright ideas we can do to help? I know we’re supposed to trust our leaders and not ask questions, but I feel like we can do more to help.”

Rose was quiet, deep in thought. Then she spoke. “Nothing comes to mind at the moment.”

“But you’re always great at coming up with great ideas! Surely you could come up with something!”

“I’m sure I could, but I’m still in shock of the whole situation. I’ll clear my head, sleep on this, and maybe I’ll have an idea tomorrow.”

Nick nodded. “Thanks, Rose. I’m sure you’ll come up with something. You always come up with the best ideas.”

Rose playfully jabbed him, her voice dripping with sarcasm. “Like how to sneak into the palace treasury, get caught, and get our hides tanned? Or to jump from the tops of tree to tree when we were younger than Serena, then you ending up with a broken leg? Yeah, those were GREAT ideas!”

The two friends laughed at those memories. Rose always had ideas. Some were good, others were not. Most just got them in trouble. But Nick never failed to put the blame on himself, taking the worst of the punishment off of Rose. (Even when it was mostly Rose to blame.)

After the laughter had died down, Rose said soberly, “Things are going to be different now, for sure.”

Nick turned his gaze west where the sun was setting. He had an awful feeling Rose was right.

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That night, Tamm couldn’t sleep. He paced his room, praying and trying to calm down.

Noelle sat up from where she was lying in bed. “Dear, you really must try to get some sleep.”

Tamm sat on a cushioned bench in front of the large canopy bed and put his head in his hands. “I can’t. I’m just so anxious and worried. I know the Creator is in control, and I really shouldn’t be anxious. It’s just…I…I don’t want to lose Pinewood. I want to keep every creature here and in Penetralia safe. But most of all, I don’t want to lose you or the kids.”

Noelle got up and sat next to Tamm. “I know it’s hard. I’m nervous too. But you can’t protect every single creature out there. Only the Creator can do that. They’re all in His hands. The most you can do is pray, and do everything in your power to protect the squirrels here in Pinewood.”

Suddenly, loud, urgent knocks began sounding at the door. “My king! This is urgent!”

Tamm was at the door in a flash with Noelle peering over his shoulder. “What is it?” he asked the guard who was standing outside their door.

The guard was pale with fear. “My king, uh…I…the Fosses’ head commander wants to speak to you. Now!”

Noelle gasped. Tamm turned pale for a second, then put a brave and kingly face on. He spoke. “Thank you, soldier. I will be there in a minute. Also prepare a royal presentation!”

Tamm closed the door and turned to Noelle. “Go wake the kids and stay with them in here.”

Noelle nodded bravely, put on her red velvet robe, tucked a small dagger in a hidden pocket in her robe, and ran out the bedroom door. Tamm put on his best robes and ran a brush through his fur and extremely bushy tail. Then he took his crown, a small, beautiful, golden crown, and placed it on his head. Then he took a large sword with a black leather hilt and shiny silver, placed it in its scabbard, and snapped it on its belt. Tamm took a quick glance at his reflection in the mirror. He looked like a true, regal king, but didn’t quite feel like one. He had never seen a real fossa before, so he wasn’t absolutely sure what he was up against. Then Tamm remembered the time he had defied the king of the Bushtail Tribe all those years ago when Pinewood was still divided. The Creator had given him the courage to do that, and He would give him the courage to do it again. Tamm took one last look at himself and nodded with satisfaction. “Time to be a king.” Then he left the room.

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“Nick, wake up!” Noelle hissed in her son’s ear while she gently shook him awake.

“Huh? What’s going on?” asked the sleepy Nick with a huge yawn.

“Don’t ask questions. Just do what I say,” whispered Noelle.

A dozen questions peppered Nick’s mind at that moment. But he knew better than to ask. He followed his mother wordlessly out of his room and into Serena’s. Serena was equally confused as Nick when her mother woke her up. Noelle made it clear to her not to ask questions just yet and to just do exactly what she told her.

Noelle picked up the wide-eyed and frightened Serena and carried her to Noelle and Tamm’s room with Nick by her side. Once in the bedroom, Noelle set Serena gently down on her bed. It was very quiet for a few more minutes.

Finally, Nick couldn’t hold his questions in any longer. “What’s going on? Where’s Father?”

“It sounds like the Fossa commander has come already,” was all Noelle said.

“The Conqueror?”

“That’s right.”

“What’s he doing here, mother?” asked the frightened Serena.

Noelle only sighed. “Things are going to be all right, dear. Trust the Creator.”

“Father has gone to meet him, I suppose?”

“Yes.”

“But our defenses aren’t complete. We’re not ready for an attack.”

“I know. But we don’t get to choose that sort of thing. We can only do our best.”

Nick shivered and wrapped his overly bushy tail around himself. He prayed to the Creator for the protection of Pinewood, Rose, and most of all, his father.

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Monsters aren’t born; they’re created, and The Conqueror was no exception. The Conqueror was no creature to be messed with. He was cunning, swift, sly, evil, and completely inevitable if he set his mind on something. He was very large for a fossa. Muscles rippled underneath his thick, sleek, dark brown fur. His face and body were covered with gruesome scars, which proved he was an experienced fighter. A long, jagged scar ran through where his left eye should have been.

No creature knew The Conqueror’s real name. It was rumored he was born to a poor, needy family of fosses. He had turned violent with rage and grief after his parents had been killed when attempting to break into a badger’s home to get food. He had sworn to take over as much land as he could someday, and rule it himself in any way he pleased. At first, he wanted to make sure every creature got equal in everything, so no creature could get more food than another, no creature could work harder and make more than another, and no creature could get ahead and better in life. But he soon became so obsessed with power and might, that he soon forgot his original intentions. Now, he just wanted more. More power, more honor, more fame. He simply couldn’t get enough of it. He wanted…everything.

Now, this stubborn, single-minded squirrel was standing before him with his head held high, blocking his path to controlling Penetralia. Yes, this squirrel was scared, but he was equally determined to protect his land and country. He insulted the proud Fossa, deeply. That made The Conqueror even more determined to be rid of him.

It was only the Creator Himself that kept Tamm from quaking before The Conqueror. Tamm stood his ground firmly and stared deep into the Fossa’s one eye. It was cold, cruel, and matched the color of his fur. Behind The Conqueror was a whole host of Fosses, snarling and armed to the teeth. They were all in uniform, obviously organized. They were ready to kill. *Please keep my family and Pinewood safe!* Tamm prayed desperately. Tamm himself was flanked by a portion of his own army, Pinewood’s Scurry. They stood up straight and in neat rows. They also held torches, casting light in the dark woods. Tamm was proud of his squirrels. They were so brave in the face of great evil.

King Tamm Omaha and The Conqueror stood defiantly facing each other in the moonlight. Neither blinked, neither flinched. It was all dead quiet.

Finally, Tamm spoke in the bravest and deepest voice he could muster. “You’re not welcome here in Pinewood, or anywhere else in Penetralia.”

“You disgust me, little squirrel,” snarled The Conqueror.

“You’re not exactly the most pleasant creature, either,” said Tamm with a slight smile.

The Conqueror showed no sign of humor. “Your impudence will soon be vanquished, puny creature,” he spat. “As will your precious little forest. We have an iron will. We are inevitable.”

“You will only find our will to protect our home is equally strong. We may be small in size compared to you, but we are just as stubborn and defiant as you. Don’t think this will be easy.”

“Your resistance will only cost you more lives than are necessary.”

Tamm didn’t say anything. He stared hard, trying to keep his face expressionless.

The Conqueror continued. “If you surrender now without any struggle, we will deal lightly with you. Show any resistance, and you will be swiftly dealt with. And when we are finished, not one creature will be alive to tell the tale.”

Tamm quickly dismissed that option. He would never, not under any circumstances, simply surrender without a fight. He looked straight into the fossa’s eye are said in a low, even tone, “Then come and get us.”

The Conqueror snarled and reeled back. “You will regret this!” he roared. Then, with an angry swish of his tail, disappeared in the night followed by the Fosses that were with him.

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There was a knock at the door. Noelle, Serena, and Nick jumped. Noelle gently placed Serena on the bed, then, reaching over to where her dagger was concealed in her robe, cautiously walked to the door and opened it. She sighed and nearly collapsed with relief when she saw it was only Tamm.

“Oh thank the Creator you’re alive! What happened?” questioned Noelle as Tamm entered the room.

Tamm wearily sat on the bed, looking very downcast. Serena crawled on his lap, Nick sat at his footpaws, and Noelle sat next to him.

“My dears, I’m afraid it’s not good,” sighed Tamm.

“We are under attack?” asked Nick.

“Not quite yet, but we will be by tomorrow for sure.”

“What did he say, dear?” asked Noelle.

“He said if we give up without any resistance, he would deal lightly with us.”

“But we can’t do that without a fight!” burst Nick.

“No son, we can’t. That’s what I told him.”

There was a long silence before Tamm spoke again. “I’m going to need you kids to be very brave. Trust us and the Creator. Can you do that, please?”

“Of course, father!” promised Nick.

“Serena?”

“I’ll try. But I’m very scared!” whimpered Serena.

“I know, little dragon. I know.”

4

Pinewood attacked

T

he next day was anything but cheerful. Nick woke up in a panicked frenzy, sweating and shaking uncontrollably. It took him a minute to calm down, and to realize that he had only had a nightmare and that Pinewood Forest wasn’t attacked, yet. He stared blankly out the window and only saw gray skies and rain falling. An overwhelming feeling of dread threatened to overcome him, but he took a deep breath and asked the Creator for courage and protection.

 Nick entered the small breakfast room where Noelle and Serena were already present. Noelle looked very tired and worried, but she managed a “Good morning!” Nick achieved a weak smile and sat in a chair where his breakfast was already prepared before him. But he didn’t have much of an appetite. He glanced over at Serena, who was only poking at her food. It was clear that she was worried too. Nick sighed. It was going to be a long day.

 “Where’s Father?” asked Nick.

 “He’s out preparing defenses and organizing the Scurry. He didn’t get any sleep at all last night.”

 There was a long silence.

 Finally, Noelle spoke. “Children, I’m going to need you to stay within the palace grounds for a while. We can’t take any risks here.”

 Nick’s head shot up. “But, what about Rose? Will I not be able to see her?”

 Serena snickered. Nick ignored her.

 “You may go out just this morning to tell her that she is welcome to stay here with us for protection if she wishes. But after you tell her, you won’t be allowed to leave. It really won’t be safe,” said Noelle firmly.

 Nick hopped out of the chair and scrambled out the door. He ran down the hall, down a long, spiral staircase, and out a side door leading into the gardens. He ran through the sopping wet grass and pine needles all the way to Rose’s tree where she was sharpening a stick. She stopped and hopped down the tree when she saw Nick.

 “Nick! Things are getting really intense!” she exclaimed.

 “I know! My mother won’t let us out of the palace grounds anymore!”

 “That’s understandable. But, why are you here then?”

 “She let me out just to tell you that. She said you’re welcome to stay in the palace with us for protection.”

 Rose nodded and thought for a moment. “I really appreciate the offer, but I’ll remain in my tree. I’ll spend most of the day in the palace since you won’t be able to leave.”

 “All right then. Let’s head back, my mother won’t want me out for too long.”

 “Just a moment,” said Rose as she climbed back into the tree. She returned a minute later with a satchel slung over her shoulder. “All right, let’s go.”

 On the way back, Nick remembered the conversation he had with Rose the other day. “Say, you wouldn’t happen to think of any good ideas that would help our situation here?”

 Rose sighed and shook her head. “No. I tried. I really did.”

 “It’s okay. We might think of something later once we know more.”

 Rose nodded, then suddenly smiled. She took off running as fast as she could. “Race you to the palace!”

\*\*\*

 In the palace, Nick, Rose, and Serena gathered in the family living room. It was a cozy room, perfect for discussions on a rainy day. A blaze roared in the fireplace, and the soft pitter-pat of the rain was soothing. Serena stared into the fire and thought of the Firewings and how she longed to see one. She seemed to be in a daze.

 “Serena,” said Nick.

 Serena didn’t seem to hear him.

 “Serena!” said Nick a little louder.

 Serena jumped a little. “Huh?”

 “Why are you staring at the fire like that?”

 Serena shrugged. “I was just thinking.”

 “You were thinking about the Firewings, weren’t you?”

 “Yes. I…oh!”

 “What is it?”

 “I just had the best idea ever! This might work!”

 Rose perked up in an instant. “What?”

 “I can’t believe I didn’t think of this before!”

 “What is it, Serena?” Nick was getting impatient.

 “What if we got the Firewings to help us!”

 “Serena, are you crazy? We can’t do that!”

 Serena crossed her arms stubbornly. “Well, why not?”

 “Because we don’t have an alliance with them anymore. It was broken, remember? And besides, they’re so far away! We also going to need every creature here in Pinewood to help fight!”

 “But we can…”

 Serena was suddenly cut short by a loud blast of a distant battle horn. Nick jumped up, his fur standing on one end and his tail appearing even bushier than it already was.

 “What was that?” whimpered the frightened Serena.

 “Shh!” hissed Nick. The three squirrels strained their ears. Then they faintly made out the sound of a battle cry. “For Pinewood! And for Penetralia!”

 Pinewood Forest was under attack.

 “Oh no,” was all Rose said.

 Serena looked like she was about to cry.

 Nick whispered. “Creator help us!”

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 Nick and Serena spent the rest of that long, awful day in the living room. They would have loved to go out and find out what exactly was going on, but Noelle insisted that they stay in the living room and out of the way. Rose left, saying she would be back with all the information she could get.

 “Good news, and bad news. Which do you want first?” Rose asked after returning to the palace. Since she was the only one allowed to leave, gathering information fell on her shoulders.

 Serena said “good news”, but at the same time Nick said “bad news.” They glared at each other.

 “How about I start with the bad news, that way when I say the good news, it’ll be like a happy ending. Sort of,” Rose said to Serena.

 Serena thought for a moment. “Good point.”

 “All right. Bad news is, we aren’t faring very well. We’re taking heavy casualties. Good news is, we are holding back the Fosses for now. They aren’t getting very far into Pinewood.”

 Silence. Then Nick spoke. “I wish we could do something! So many squirrels are risking their lives out there, and what are we doing? Sitting on the couch! It’s…it’s…it’s just not fair!”

 “We could go get the Firewings as I suggested earlier?” said Serena.

 “Serena, forget it! We aren’t going to get the Firewings!” said Nick rather sharply.

 Serena scowled at him.

 Rose wearily sat on the couch. Serena crawled from sitting in front of the fire to sitting next to Rose. “Are many creatures dying?” she asked innocently.

 Rose didn’t answer. She turned her head to the window so Nick and Serena couldn’t see her eyes brimming up with tears.

 “Where’s Mother?” asked Serena.

 “I believe she’s in the infirmary, seeing to the wounded,” answered Rose after a deep breath.

 “That seems like something she would be doing right now. Always helping other creatures,” murmured Nick.

 “Well, I really should be down in the infirmary. They need my help. Hate to leave you guys, though,” said Rose.

 “We understand. You should go. We’re going to need every pair of paws we can get,” said Nick.

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 Noelle didn’t get back to the palace until late that night. She had been working in the infirmary all day and was completely spent. She was reminded of the time so many years ago when she was working in the infirmary in Florence when the Powerseekers had attacked there. That felt like ages ago. Almost like it happened in a completely different life. Her head throbbed and she pressed her paw against the scar that was perfectly in the center of her forehead. The old wound still ached occasionally.

 Noelle entered the living room to see if her children had gone to bed. Nick was curled up on the couch, his tail wrapped around his body. He looked up when Noelle entered.

 “I made Serena go to bed. She wanted to wait for you, though. But it got so late,” said Nick.

 “I’m sorry I left you and your sister here all alone today. So many creatures needed my help,” sighed Noelle, sitting next to Nick.

 “Rose went to help in the infirmary. Did you see her?”

 “Yes. She was a huge help.”

 “Is Father okay?”

 “I think so. I pray the Creator will be with him out there. And the others.”

 Silence.

 “Is it really bad?” asked Nick, already knowing the answer.

 “I’m afraid so, dear. But we’re keeping the Fosses out of Pinewood for now. Let’s pray it stays that way. And, Nick?”

 “Yes, mother?”

 “Thank you so much for being brave, and remaining calm.”

 “I don’t feel very brave right now.”

 “I don’t think any of us do at this moment. But that doesn’t mean we cower in fear.”

5

A Fossa in Pinewood

t

he next few days were only a blur for Nick. It all felt the same, and it was hard to tell one day from another. Wake up to a dreadful feeling in his gut, and spend the day roaming the castle with Serena tagging along. Rose tried to spend all the time she could with Nick and Serena, but she was needed much more urgently in other places. Such as the infirmary, or delivering meals to the squirrels who were fighting so bravely.

 The Pinewood Scurry was keeping the Fosses out of Pinewood so far, but just barely. It was only a matter of time before the Fosses broke past the defense line and entered Pinewood.

 Nick wanted to do something to help Pinewood’s situation desperately. He knew his mother was only trying to keep him and Serena safe by ordering them to stay on palace grounds. Nick respected his mother very much and he didn’t want to disobey, but he felt useless. Utterly and completely useless. He felt as if he would go mad if he had to spend the rest of the war in the castle. Everyone else was helping Pinewood but Nick. And Serena of course.

 Nick brought this up to his mother one night. “Mother, I feel so useless! I’m sure I could do something. I could sharpen swords, string bows, and even work in the infirmary! Please, just let me do something!”

 Noelle sighed and put her head in her hands. “Nick, you are helping. Greatly. You’re being brave, keeping your chin up, and watching your sister for me. Don’t ever say you’re useless. That’s absolutely not true. You are being such a big help to me.”

 Nick was quiet for a moment. He never thought he was helping in that way. He felt a little better, but not much. “But…but…I want to do more! To actually help Pinewood!”

 “I know, dear. I know. Just, let me think…”

 Nick brightened up. So maybe he was going to get to help after all!

 “Tell you what. Maybe I could arrange for the broken bowstrings to be brought here to the palace, for you to replace. That way you, won’t have to leave the palace grounds. And you can also keep an eye on Serena. You can do bowstrings, right?”

 “Oh yes! I’m sure I could do that! Thank you, Mother!”

 “All right then. Tomorrow will be your first day of work.”

 “Great! But, oh…”

 “Is something wrong?”

 “Is there a whole lot of broken bowstrings?”

 “Oh, I hadn’t thought of that. Maybe I could get Rose to help you?”

 “Yes! I’d love that! Thank you, mother!” cried Nick happily. Then, after giving Noelle a big kiss on the cheek, he skipped off to bed. He was happier than he had ever been in a while now. He could help his forest and fellow squirrels now!

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 Nick was up before dawn the next morning. He had a job to do. Nick set up his workspace in an unoccupied room on the lower floor. It had a side door that led straight out of the palace. The squirrels would be able to walk right in, drop off their broken bowstrings, and pick the new ones later that day.

 Nick cleared off the large wooden table in the room and set a huge container of durable, stretchy string in the center. Then he found a barrel of a thick liquid called String Wax. Once the stretchy strings were woven, you would dip them in String Wax, set them to dry, then fit them on the bows. String Wax made the strings much more durable and reliable. Without it, you couldn’t pull the string on the bow back very far, and they’d snap much more easily.

 Rose showed up not long later. “Your mother told me you’d need a lot of help with this.”

 “Yes, I really do. You can weave the strings. I’ll wax them, and hang them up to dry. Then I guess I can put them on the bows. That’s the really hard part.”

 “I’d imagine so. Let’s get to work. We don’t have any time to lose here.”

 The broken bowstrings began coming in. Nick couldn’t believe how many there were. They must be firing them like crazy for them to break that quickly. He began to feel overwhelmed. But he took a deep breath and got to work. Rose took some of the stretchy string and, using a special tool, weaved them together. One string took about five minutes to weave with the tool. Nick took the strings, dipped them in the String Wax, then hung them to dry. Once dried, he tested them, then fitted them on the bows. That part was no easy task. It required a good amount of strength. But Nick had been working with bows since he was very young, so he was able to get the job done properly. Once a bow was complete, Nick would pile them in a large wooden wheelbarrow. Once the wheelbarrow was full, a hurried soldier would come and take the bows.

 Nick and Rose worked all day with very few, short breaks. It was exhausting and tedious work, but they didn’t dare stop for long. The broken bows kept coming and coming with no sign of stopping. Serena actually made herself useful by bringing water to the tired squirrels and refilling Rose’s container of the stretchy string. She seemed to understand that they were doing something important, so she stayed out of their way and out of trouble.

 There was only one problem. The fighting didn’t stop at night, meaning the broken bowstrings didn’t stop coming even after dark. Nick and Rose couldn’t do the job day and night. Noelle wouldn’t hear of it. So she found two eager young squirrels, Kyle and Jesse, to work the night shift. Nick was glad for their assistance in the job. He and Rose never could have worked through the night.

 Rose also began spending the nights in the palace. She and Nick were finishing up so late, that it really didn’t make much sense for her to walk all the way home in the dark when there could be fosses lurking about. Serena insisted that Rose shared her room, that way they could protect each other in case something happened. Rose laughed and agreed.

 So a new routine began for Nick and Rose. Wake up before dawn, eat a cold, hurried breakfast, begin work, work all day, and go to bed long after the sun had gone down. Nick soon found himself working automatically, not giving much thought to the job. He was amazed at how quickly the days would fly by. It all was a blur.

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 Pinewood wasn’t doing so well against The Conqueror and his fosses. A lone fossa had been seen numerous times, snooping around Pinewood and attacking an unfortunate squirrel who wasn’t in the safety of a tree. Noelle now ordered Nick to carry a small dagger with him wherever he went, and ordered Serena to stick close to Nick no matter what happened. But even that wasn’t the worst of their problems. Pinewood’s Scurry was slowly shrinking. The fosses were slowly picking them off day by day. If this kept up much longer, Pinewood wouldn’t have any scurry. Nick often pondered this problem while he worked. He brought it up with Rose. She agreed that something had to be done and that she would be thinking with all her might about what might be done.

 “Or…” blurted Serena, who was sitting nearby watching them work, “we could get the dragons as I suggested!”

 Rose sighed and shook her head. Nick pretended he didn’t hear his sister. Serena brought up that idea almost every day now, and he had just learned to ignore it without giving it any real thought.

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 Nick had never thought a fossa could get to the palace. After all, it was in the dead center of Pinewood and was heavily guarded. The palace was definitely the safest place in Pinewood, so surely a fossa would be seen long before it reached it, right? Nick never would have admitted it, but that thought weakened his guard. He was still wary, but not as wary as he probably should.

 Unfortunately, Nick was dead wrong. It started when Serena came down to Nick’s and Rose’s “workshop” late one morning. She looked very nervous and rather pale.

 Rose was so busy she didn’t notice how Serena looked. “Serena, would you please go back up and get more bowstrings? I’m getting low here.”

 Serena glanced nervously back up the stairs and blurted, “I think something might be up there!”

 Nick stopped what he was doing. “What are you talking about?”

 “I think there might be a creature upstairs who’s not supposed to be up there.”

 Nick resumed his work. “What makes you think so?”

 “I heard noises. Like someone was sneaking. Besides, I…I have a strange feeling something’s not right.”

 “I’m sure it’s nothing. No creature could get into the palace without someone noticing,” Nick carelessly said. Serena often imagined things that weren’t really there. She had a wild imagination, and sometimes it went out of hand. Nick assumed this was just one of those times.

 “Well, I noticed!” cried the defiant Serena. She was angry at being ignored and terrified of whatever was lurking in the palace.

 “Serena, dear, Nick’s right. No creature could sneak past the guards,” said Rose gently. “Now please, I need more string.”

 Serena looked timidly up the stairs that she had to go up. She took a deep breath, then ran up the stairs as fast as she could. Serena was back down in less than a minute with the string, looking even paler than before.

 “Okay, now I KNOW that there’s something up there!” whimpered Serena.

 “Did you see something?” asked Rose.

 “I’m pretty sure I saw a creature dash around the corner just as I got up there!”

 Nick sighed and dropped his work. “Come on, Serena. I’ll go take a look,” he said as he drew his dagger while hopping up the stairs. Serena timidly followed.

 Nick quickly ran through the main halls, kitchen, and other rooms with Serena at his heels. Nothing. He ran up the wide staircase and scoured the upper levels. Nothing. He even went up to the attic and searched in the most unlikely of places. Still, he saw nothing. Even Serena didn’t claim she saw something.

 “Serena, there’s nothing here,” said Nick, annoyed, once they completed the quick search.

 “But I know I saw something!” cried Serena.

 Nick knew it was pointless to argue any further. “Let’s get back to work.”

 Serena still kept a wary eye and followed Nick closely back to the workshop. Once they were there, Rose raised her eyebrows as if to ask what happened. Nick shook his head. Serena was only seeing things. Nick picked up a bowstring and got back to work. Serena sat in a corner, looking angry, frustrated, and scared.

 The rest of the day went by uneventfully. Nick and Rose would have all but forgotten Serena’s claims to have seen a creature in the palace if Serena hadn’t made a big deal about going upstairs. Every time Nick or Rose tried to send her up there, she would shake her head and cower. Rose finally gave up and abandoned her work to get whatever she needed upstairs. Rose would return and shake her head. There was nothing up there.

 When Kyle and Jesse came late that night, Serena hopped out of her little corner and huddled behind Nick as they headed up the stairs. Rose and Serena immediately went to bed, but Nick entered the family room, hoping that his mother had returned from the infirmary. He sighed with disappointment when he saw she hadn’t returned yet. It must have been an extra busy day. Nick yawned as he dragged his feet to bed. *Got to get some rest before tomorrow. Hopefully, Serena will be over this whole intruder in the palace stuff.*

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“I’m glad you’ll be with me here tonight. I’m scared,” whispered Serena to Rose as they got in bed.

 “Serena, it’s okay. There’s nothing here,” whispered Rose.

 Serena shivered and wrapped the thick blanket more tightly around her. “But I know I saw something.”

 Rose put an arm around the silver squirrel. “It’ll be okay. I’m here, and the Creator will protect you. You don’t need to be afraid.”

 Serena nodded bravely, but the fear didn’t quite leave her deep blue eyes. Rose blew out the candle and darkness enveloped the room. Then, from a corner of the room, they heard a low growl.

 Serena squealed and threw her arms around Rose. “Did you hear that?” she whispered.

 Rose gulped. “Yes. Stay down.”

 As quietly as she could, Rose carefully relit the candle, dreading what her eyes would see. She slipped out of bed with Serena huddled behind her. Then she took a few steps to the corner where she had heard the growl. What she saw made her blood run cold. A fossa, fangs bared, crouched low in a dark corner of the room. It stared at the two squirrels with gleaming evil eyes. It looked ready to pounce. Serena let out an ear-piercing scream. The fossa pounced.

 “RUN!!” cried Rose.

 Serena dashed and made it out of the room, but Rose wasn’t so fortunate. The fossa sank his teeth in her dress right before she got to the door. Rose fell to the floor. She recovered herself and yanked hard. Her dress ripped, releasing Rose. The fossa was now blocking her only way out, so Rose ran to the nightstand and grabbed an empty brass candlestick. It wasn’t much of a weapon, but it was better than nothing. *Creator help me!* Rose took a deep breath and faced the approaching fossa.

 Nick was jerked out of restful sleep by a scream. He sat up groggily, confused. He listened, and didn’t hear it again. *Must have been a dream…* though Nick as he lay back down again. Just as he closed his eyes, the door to his room banged open and Serena charged in, her face as pale as a ghost.

 “What is the meaning of...” began Nick.

 Serena cut him off. “THERE’S A FOSSA IN MY ROOM THERE’S A FOSSA IN MY ROOM ROSE IS IN THERE SHE’S GOING TO DIE OH SAVE HER NICK!”

 Nick could barely understand what his sister was saying, but he got enough to understand that Rose was in trouble and it had something to do with a fossa. He leaped out of bed and grabbed a sword he always kept under his bed. Nick charged down the hall and burst into Serena’s room. He took in the situation in less than a second. Rose was backed up against a wall, bravely holding up a brass candlestick. The fossa was right on top of her, its claws raised to strike. Nick didn’t hesitate. He dashed across the room and sunk his blade in the fossa’s middle. The fossa fell dead with a surprised growl.

 Nick was breathing heavily when he pulled his sword from the fossa’s middle. Rose slowly rose to her footpaws and stood in front of Nick.

 “Thank you.”

 “It’s what any decent creature should have done.”

 “No, I mean it. Thank you. You saved my life, and I’ll never forget it.”

 Nick blushed a little and looked awkwardly at the ground. Then he remembered himself. “Are you hurt at all?”

 “No, only a little shaken. You?”

 “I’m rattled too. I…I’ve never killed a creature before. Can’t say I like it.”

 Rose glanced over at the dead fossa and shuddered. “Well, you acted when you were supposed to without hesitation, and that takes courage.”

 “Thanks, Rose.”

 “Is it dead?” came Serena’s timid little voice from the doorway. Nick and Rose turned to her.

 “Yes, the bad fossa is dead,” said Rose reassuringly.

 Serena timidly entered the room, eyeing the body of the fossa warily.

 “Serena, we’re sorry for doubting you. We should have listened to you and looked harder,” murmured Nick.

 Serena looked down. “I forgive you. But maybe next time take me a little more seriously?”

 Rose got down on her knees and wrapped her arms around Serena. “We will. I think we’ve learned our lesson here. Right, Nick?”

 “I believe so.”

6

Serena’s Plan

T

he weeks flew by in a blur. Every day was the same after the excitement of the fossa in the palace died down. Noelle had been absolutely stressed and terrified when she heard what happened. She would have doubled the palace guards, but no squirrel could be spared to do the job. So, Noelle simply trusted the Creator to keep her children safe. And indeed, no more incidents like that happened.

 But Pinewood Forest was growing desperate. They still had a grip on the forest, but that grip was slowly loosening. The fosses were picking the squirrels off one by one, and it was only a matter of time before the squirrel’s grip was all but gone. Nick knew he had to do something. Something more, something bigger than what he was already doing. Something that would almost guarantee Pinewood’s victory.

 Rose felt the exact same way Nick did. She felt as if she could be doing more. The two of them got to talking one night.

 “It’s only a matter of time before Pinewood falls, and I feel totally helpless!” said Nick.

 “Nick, don’t ever think that. You’re not helpless. You’re repairing a great deal of bowstrings and that’s more that’s helping us greatly. I know it probably won’t save us, but it’s the best we can do. But don’t ever think you’re doing nothing of value!” said Rose.

 “You’re right, as always. But I…I…” stammered Nick.

 “You want to actually save Pinewood, don’t you?”

 “Yes, I do. With all my heart.”

 “So do I Nick, so do I.”

 Just then Serena skipped into the room. She went straight up to Nick and put on her “puppy dog” face, a knowing and pleading look in her eyes.

 “Oh no you don’t! I thought I made this very clear! We are absolutely NOT going to get the dragons. It’s absolutely ridiculous! Right Rose?” said Nick, turning to Rose.

 Rose was quiet. She looked very thoughtful.

 “Rose?”

 “You know, Nick, Serena may be on to something here,” said Rose calmly and quietly.

 Serena suddenly sat up, a hopeful look in her eyes.

 “Oh no! Don’t tell me you’re siding with Serena now!” spluttered Nick, flabbergasted.

 “Think about it, Nick! If we pull this off, Pinewood will be saved! We’ll be heroes!” said Rose.

 “But we CAN’T pull it off! It’s practically impossible!”

 “Anything is possible with the Creator!” Serena chimed in.

 “Yes! And your parents did something very similar to this when they were our age!” reasoned Rose.

 “It took them five whole years to do it! Asa Ember went, and he didn’t even make it back! We’re rather rushed here and I can’t afford to lose either of you!”

 Rose and Serena crossed their arms stubbornly. “Nick, just a few minutes ago you were desperate to guarantee Pinewood’s victory here. Now you have a chance, and you are turning it down?”

 “I want a chance that doesn’t have a ninety-nine percent chance of failure!” said Nick rather lamely.

 “Okay, two things. Number one, you can’t get picky on options when creatures are dying. Number two, we have a chance of success. Let’s make sure we get that one percent.”

 “But…but…we can’t just go!”

 Rose stood up straight and tall. “You don’t have to go, Nick. I will,” she said in a quiet, queenly voice.

 “I can’t just let you go all by yourself!”

 “You aren’t my boss, Nick,” said Rose quietly. “The Creator alone is.”

 Nick spluttered. He hated to admit it, but Rose had good points. Pinewood desperately needed help, and he had a way to save it. Besides, Rose would go anyway, with or without him. Nick groaned; he knew he had a tough choice ahead of him. He needed solitude.

 “Please, just give me a few minutes,” said Nick as he left the living room and went to his own room.

 Rose and Serena exchanged a hopeful and excited look. Then Rose grew serious again. “We really need to pray about this, Serena. This is no light situation.”

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 The girls didn’t see Nick for the rest of the day. Rose didn’t blame him one bit and was determined to let him have all the time he could get. Serena, however, wasn’t as patient.

 “Nick’s been in there for hours! His time is up!”

 “Serena, I know your impatient, and time is against us, but you’ve got to understand this is probably the biggest decision he’s ever made.”

 “Will you actually go even if he won’t?”

 Rose sighed. She didn’t want to go all alone. She prayed it wouldn’t come to that. “I…I don’t know.”

 Serena was silent for a moment. Then she spoke in a quiet and rather firm voice. “I would go even if no one else did.”

 Rose chuckled and playfully ruffled Serena’s fur on the top of her head. She assumed Serena was only joking around to keep the mood light. When Serena didn’t say anything, Rose noticed that her face was humorless. Serena was dead serious.

 “You’re…you would go all by yourself?” stammered Rose.

 “Yes. I’m not afraid of the dragons. And besides, I’m going to see them someday anyway.”

 Rose was quiet. She had a strange feeling in her gut that she couldn’t quite explain.

\*\*\*

 Rose and Serena were up early the next morning. They entered the little workshop, hoping to find Nick there. He wasn’t, to their disappointment. Rose knew he would be down soon. He couldn’t just skip a whole day of work and stay in his room all day. So Rose got to work and waited patiently for Nick to come down.

 Soon enough, Nick came to the workshop. Serena jumped up and stood before him, her eyes filled with hope and excitement. Rose only looked up. Her eyes asked a question. Nick looked at his sister and his best friend rather painfully for a moment. Then he spoke.

 “All right. We go.”

 Serena squealed with glee. Rose suddenly felt cold. She exchanged a nervous glance with Nick, then nodded bravely.

 “We have a chance to save Pinewood. We may not get another, and time is running out,” said Nick.

 Rose nodded bravely again.

 “We’re gonna see the dragons! We’re gonna see the dragons!” sang Serena as she danced in circles.

 Rose opened her mouth to speak, but Nick gestured for silence. Rose frowned, confused. Nick whispered in her ear.

 “Serena can’t come, of course. But we can’t tell her that.”

 Rose’s eyes widened and she nodded understandingly. They would have to sneak off without telling Serena. She’d pitch a fit. Traveling through territory they hadn’t been through before was far too dangerous to bring a youngling. Especially with fosses lurking about. Rose felt rather sorry for Serena, she knew how disappointed and crushed she would be when she found out they had left without her.

 “When do we leave when do we leave?” questioned Serena.

 Nick exchanged a look with Rose and didn’t answer the question. He wouldn’t lie if he could avoid it. Serena didn’t seem to notice. She went on dancing and talking about the Firewing dragons.

 “Besides, she doesn’t fully understand what we’re doing here,” continued Nick.

 “I think she does understand, but her head is so full of dragon ideas that she doesn’t understand the gravity of it all,” whispered Rose.

 “Right. If she did, she wouldn’t be this excited.” Nick paused and shook his head. “Her ambition and stubbornness are going to get her in trouble someday.”

 “The Creator gave those to her for a reason, I believe. He’s got big plans for her. I just know it.”

 “You’re probably right. But she can’t come with us. She’s too young and I’d never forgive myself if something happened to her. And mother…” Nick trailed off.

 Rose looked thoughtful. “Your mother wouldn’t approve of this. Nor your father.”

 “I know. But this is the only way, and I believe the Creator has given us this idea for a reason.”

 “What if…” Rose trailed off.

 “What if what?”

 “Why did the Creator give that idea to Serena specifically? Why did he give it to her and not one of us?”

 “I…I don’t know. What’s your point?”

 “Maybe we should bring Serena.”

 “Absolutely not. The unknown is no place for a youngling. Especially with fosses lurking about.”

 “I just think we should think carefully here…”

 “I have been thinking carefully about this, Rose. Serena absolutely can’t come,” said Nick in a firm tone. It wasn’t rude and he didn’t raise his voice, but it was firm.

 Rose still wasn’t convinced, but she dropped the idea of Serena coming. “So when are we leaving? For real?”

 “Tonight. We leave tonight.”

7

The Mission begins

R

ose was a little hesitant to leave that very night. She wanted another day to plan things out carefully in detail and become more prepared. But time was of the essence and Nick had already done a little planning. They would head south, then west of the Penetralian Coast. There Veradoom lay, teeming with the red beauties, the Firewings. So Rose reluctantly agreed to leave that night, taking small comfort that Nick somewhat knew what he was doing.

 Thankfully, Kyle and Jesse came early that evening, and Noelle stayed late at the infirmary, so Nick and Rose had a little extra time to prepare. There was one problem though. Serena wouldn’t leave them to pack. If she saw them doing that, she would definitely get suspicious. Serena was young, but she had a brain and could use it. That’s when Rose stepped in with one of her brilliant ideas.

 “Come, Serena, since we got off work a little early today, let’s play a game of checkers before bed!” said Rose in a happy tone.

 Serena greeted that idea with enthusiasm. She loved checkers, especially if Rose was playing. Serena was very good at that game, and Rose was a worthy opponent. Just as the two girls headed down the hall, Rose winked at Nick and exchanged a knowing look. After a split second of confusion, Nick slightly smiled and winked back. *Good ol’ Rose! Always has a plan!* Nick would have to pack most of their supplies all by himself, then when Serena had gone to sleep, Rose would gather her things and the two of them would slip off undetected if all went according to plan.

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 Rose lay awake in the darkness of Serena’s room, doing her best to breathe slowly and evenly so Serena would think she was asleep. Rose also listened to Serena’s breathing. She could tell she wasn’t quite asleep yet. She hoped she would get to sleep soon. Rose planned on leaving for an extremely important mission that very night, and the sooner they left, the better. But in the meantime, Rose thought of Pinewood Forest, the only home she had ever known. She loved everything about Pinewood. The smell, the trees, the pine needles, and the creatures. It was under attack and was threatened to be completely wiped out if she and Nick didn’t do something. Rose closed her eyes and prayed like she never had before to the Creator that her beloved forest would remain strong and that she and Nick would remain strong on their mission. And that the Firewings would agree to renew their alliance and come to their aid.

 Finally, after what seemed like hours, Serena’s breathing slowed and became even. Rose knew it was time. As quietly as possible, she slipped out of bed and gathered a few necessities in a small knapsack. It wasn’t easy to find the things she needed in the dark, but she managed to do it. Then Rose slowly opened the bedroom door and stepped out into the dark hall. She quietly closed the door behind her and turned around. She jumped with surprise when she saw Nick standing in front of her, waiting. He had his sword, bow and arrows, and a large knapsack.

 “You startled me!” whispered Rose.

 “Sorry. Are you ready?” whispered Nick.

 “Almost. We just need to get my bow and arrows. I think they’re down by the archery field. You?”

 “Yes. We’ve got to get going. Serena’s asleep?”

 “Yes. Nick, I really think we should consider bringing her. After all, this was her idea, and I believe the Creator gave that idea to her, and not us, for a reason.”

 Nick only shook his head. Rose knew he had already made up his mind. There would be no swaying him. Then Nick slightly jerked his head down the hall. Rose peered in that direction. She saw a dim light.

 “We might have a small problem. Mother’s back.”

 “We’ll just be extra careful not to be seen or heard.”

 “If only it was that simple. Mother has a way of knowing if something is happening.”

 Rose had known the royal family long enough to know that Nick was correct. “Maybe she’s too tired to notice?”

 “I hope that’s so.”

 Nick and Rose began silently creeping down the hall. They stopped when they got to the living room door. Nick peered in. Noelle was there, reading the report of the battle that day. She looked completely spent and worried. All the liveliness Nick had known to be in her was gone. She looked, well, old and defeated. It scared Nick to see her like that. Noelle was always calm around her children. Nick felt very sorry to leave. It would only add to Noelle’s burdens.

 Suddenly, without warning, Noelle looked up towards the doorway. Nick gasped and pulled his head from the doorway as quickly as possible. He prayed Noelle didn’t see him.

 Noelle did see him. “Nick?”

 “Quick, hide!” hissed Nick.

 Nick and Rose ran down the hall as quietly as possible, but it was too late. Noelle stepped into the hall and saw them. “Nick? Rose?”

 The two friends stopped dead in their tracks. It was over. They had been caught. Rose and Nick slowly turned around and faced Noelle. Noelle didn’t say anything. She only calmly walked over to the young squirrels and eyed the packed bags, weapons, and traveling clothes. Then she slightly jerked her head towards the living room and began walking in that direction. Nick and Rose exchanged a nervous and defeated look. They had no choice but to follow.

 In the living room, Noelle sat down and gestured for Nick and Rose to do so as well. They took their time in doing so, and when they did, they nervously fidgeted and glanced around awkwardly and nervously. They wilted under Noelle’s stern gaze.

 Nick couldn’t stand the silence any longer. “I’m sorry.” He hated how high and squeaky his voice sounded.

 “I certainly hope you are,” said Noelle quietly, but her voice somehow shook the room.

 “This is all my doing. I organized all this. Don’t be mad at Rose.”

 “No, ma’am, I had a great deal to do with this too. Don’t take all your rath on Nick.”

 Noelle’s stern gaze softened a little. She leaned back in her chair. “Why don’t you tell me exactly what you were going to do before I deal out any punishment?”

 So, Nick and Rose spluttered out the entire story with some hesitancy. Noelle didn’t interrupt once. She sat there listening intently, the whole time her expression getting softer and softer.

 When Nick and Rose had finished, Noelle rose and stood in front of the young squirrels. She took a deep breath and spoke. “If the Creator has called you to do this, who am I to stop you?”

 Nick couldn’t believe his ears. “What?”

 “Go. I shouldn’t and can’t stop you if the Creator has called you.”

 “You…you mean, you’re not mad at us?”

 “I didn’t say that. But what I am saying is that if the Creator has called you, you should go.”

 “Are…are you serious?”

 “Nick, do I look like I’m kidding?”

 Nick shook his head. “What will Father say?”

 “I’m sure he’ll understand.”

 “Thank… thank you, Mother!”

 Noelle smiled a teary smile, then gathered Nick in a smothering hug. And for once, he didn’t object. Rose smiled to herself, then slowly backed off to not intrude on the moment. But Noelle reached out and pulled Rose in the embrace too. After a bittersweet moment, the hug ended. Noelle looked each of them in the eye seriously.

 “Be brave, trust the Creator, and never, ever give up hope. I know what real fear and hopelessness feel like, and it is a feeling you must do everything possible to prevent. The Creator will help you; He is strong in your weakness and is the light in your darkest moments.”

 “Yes Mother, we will. Thank you,” said Nick in the bravest voice he could muster.

 Just then Serena entered the room, rubbing her eyes and dragging her blanket behind her. “What is going on?”

 “Serena dear, go back to bed. It’s late,” said Noelle, crossing the room to her daughter.

 “What are Nick and Rose doing up?” pressed Serena.

 “Never…” began Noelle.

 Serena cut her off. “And WHAT are they doing all packed up?”

 “Serena…”

 Realization dawned on Serena. She ran to Nick and Rose. “You’re leaving without me, aren’t you? YOU’RE going to get the dragons without ME! And it was MY idea!”

 “Serena…” Nick tried to reason with his little sister, but Serena was only getting warmed up.

 “This was MY idea! I have a RIGHT to go! HOW DARE YOU LEAVE WITHOUT ME!” Serena was screaming with rage now, and she burst into tears.

 “Serena, we can’t take you! You’re too young!” argued Nick.

 Serena was too upset for words. Her crying only hardened and she buried her face in her mother’s skirt. Noelle gave one of those “*Really?*” looks to Nick.

 “Aw c’mon! I can’t take her! If something happens to her, it’ll probably be my fault and I’m going to feel terrible!”

 Rose still had that feeling in her gut that they should take Serena.

 Serena found her words. “I *hic* just want to *hic* see the dragons!”

 Noelle smoothed the fur on Serena’s head comfortingly. “I understand dear. But Nick’s, right. This mission is no business for little younglings.”

 Everyone prepared themselves for more of Serena’s wailing, but to their surprise, she didn’t cry anymore. She only sat on the couch and hiccupped, but there was still that stubborn and determined look in her eye.

 Noelle looked Nick and Rose squarely in the eye before giving both of them one last hug. “May the Creator be with you.”

 Nick and Rose knew it was time to go.

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 Nick and Rose had little trouble getting past the guards around the palace. The guards knew Nick and Rose, so they didn’t question them. Once a good distance from the palace and the guards, Nick stopped and looked back at the home he had ever known. Rose waited patiently a little way in front of him. As he looked back at his beloved home in the moonlight, he prayed it would still be standing when he returned.

 *If I return.* Nick quickly dismissed that thought. He had to return with the dragons. All of Pinewood and Penetralia depended on him and Rose. They would not, could not, fail. It was not an option. Nick took a deep breath and took a minute to mentally prepare himself for the mission that lay ahead. Then he turned back to Rose, who was still waiting patiently. She was doing her best to look brave. Nick stepped closer to her and put a paw on her shoulder.

 “May the Creator be with us.”

 Rose nodded, shouldered her knapsack, and began walking towards the border of Pinewood Forest. Nick took one last glance at his home, then followed Rose. They were on their way to Veradoom, the island where the feared Firewings dwelt.

8

“Farewell, Pinewood”

T

hat night was probably the craziest and most hectic night in Nick’s entire life. The two squirrels literally spent all night hopping from tree to tree, their senses on high alert. The closer they got to the border, the more and more guards they spotted. They were guards everywhere, patrolling and keeping the fosses that broke through the main defenses from getting too deep into Pinewood. Nick and Rose only saw a few Fosses, but it was enough to keep them in the trees. Even up in the heights wasn’t completely safe. Nick and Rose almost learned that fosses were excellent climbers the hard way! Nick was just about to leap into the next tree when Rose suddenly pulled him back and urgently signaled him to be quiet. Nick was confused for a moment, then Rose pointed to the tree Nick had just about jumped into. There was a fossa, crouching on a branch, waiting to spring. He hadn’t seen the squirrels, yet. Nick and Rose had to bypass that tree. From then on, they not only looked for fosses on the ground but also in the trees.

 It wasn’t until they were nearly to the border that they realized that they would have to get through the thick defense of Pinewood’s Scurry. They were only expecting to deal with fosses and guards, not the actual Scurry.

 Nick turned to Rose. “What are we going to do? It’s going to be almost impossible to slip by through without being noticed! I mean, I know a fossa did it once, but they won’t make that mistake again, I’m sure!”

 Rose shrugged. “I don’t know why you’re so worried about this. We’re not their enemies, and the Queen approves of our mission. This shouldn’t be a problem.”

 Nick thought for a moment. He quickly realized that Rose was right. He was overreacting, a lot. “You’re right. What do you suggest we do?”

 “Well, I’d recommend we go see your father. He should know what is going on here. And besides, you really should say goodbye to him. He’d want you to.”

 Nick felt rather dumb. He wished he thought of that. “Then that’s what we’ll do. Thanks, Rose. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

 Rose was glad it was dark so Nick couldn’t see her blushing.

\*\*\*

 Not an hour later, Nick and Rose were standing outside on the small platform of a hastily built hutch. That hutch served as a meeting and conference room during that war that was going on. Tamm Omaha was inside, discussing a defense plan with a few of his generals and military advisors.

 Outside on the platform, Nick turned to Rose. “I really want to say goodbye, but I also hate to interrupt. He sounds pretty busy.”

 “Nick, there is a chance you might not ever see him again. You’ve got to say goodbye.”

 Nick nodded. Rose was right, as always. He turned to enter the Hutch, then, realizing that Rose wasn’t following, he said, “Aren’t you coming?”

 “Of course not. This is between you and your father, and I don’t want to intrude or ruin the moment. I’ll be out here.”

 Nick hesitantly turned back to the door and entered.

 At first, Nick wasn’t noticed. Every creature in that room but him was planning and focused on a map that lay on a large table in the center of the room. Tamm stood at the head of the table, listening carefully to what his generals and advisors had to say. The other squirrels surrounded the table. Nick once again felt bad for intruding, but he needed to be going and he couldn’t just stand around and wait to be noticed. So Nick quietly walked up to his father, hoping to be noticed. He wasn’t. Nick quietly sighed to himself, then gently tapped his father’s shoulder.

 “Hold on a moment, Aspen,” mumbled Tamm, holding up a finger to Nick and not even taking his eyes off the map.

 The urgent discussion ceased for a second, then resumed. Nick inwardly groaned. His father truly was preoccupied if he thought he was one of his scouts named Aspen.

 Nick tried again. “Father, it’s me.”

 Tamm turned to Nick, looking rather annoyed. “Can’t you…” Tamm stopped mid-sentence when he realized his son was there, not Aspen. “Nick? What are you doing here? It’s not safe! Is everything okay?”

 “I’m fine. Father, we…we need to talk. Just for a minute, please?”

 Sensing the urgency and seriousness in his son’s voice, Tamm turned to the other squirrels in the room. “Please, excuse us for a moment.”

 The squirrels nodded respectfully and left the hutch.

 Tamm turned back to his son and gave him a big hug. “Oh how I’ve missed you, my boy! I’m so sorry I can’t be with you more often. Are your mother and sister okay? Is there something wrong?”

 “They’re all fine, nothing’s wrong. It’s just, well, I know things aren’t going very well for us now, and Rose and I decided to do something that would completely turn the tide of this war in our favor. And I thought you would like to know what we’re doing.”

 A worried expression appeared on Tamm’s face. “What are you and Rose doing?”

 “Mother approves of all of this, so don’t be mad or send us back.”

 “If your mother approves, I’ll more than likely approve. Now please, tell me.”

 “Well, Rose and I…well…we’re going to mend our alliance with the Firewings and get them to help us here.” Nick slightly cringed when those words were out. He didn’t know what his father would do.

 Tamm didn’t say anything. He looked like he wanted to, but no words came out. He looked furious, puzzled, thoughtful, and proud all at the same time. Finally, after a long moment, Tamm spoke. “And, Mother approves of this?”

 Nick nodded.

 Tamm began pacing the room, looking very thoughtful. Then he stopped. “And, Rose is going with you?”

 Nick nodded again.

 Tamm continued pacing. Then he put his paws on his son’s shoulders and look him squarely in the eye. “Are you sure you know what you’re doing, son?”

 “Not really. We’re trusting the Creator to guide us.”

 “That was the honest answer I wanted to hear!” said Tamm, his voice showing a hint of emotion. Then he wrapped his arms around Nick, and the two of them shared a precious moment. “I’m so proud of you!”

 “You be brave and trust the Creator, you hear?” said Tamm when they broke the embrace.

 “Yes, father. I will,” promised Nick.

\*\*\*

 Not half an hour later, Nick and Rose huddled under a large thick bush right outside Pinewood Forest. Fosses were everywhere now, so they lay low until it was clear to dodge to a tree about 10 feet from the bush they were in. As they waited, Nick thought of the little “prep-talk” his father had given him right before he and Rose left. Then Tamm had personally escorted Nick and Rose with a few of his guards to the very border of Pinewood. Then Tamm had said his last farewell to Nick and Rose. After that, the two young squirrels were finally off on their mission. It was a very tedious start, however nerve-racking.

 Nick jumped a little when Rose nudged him. “Coast is clear,” she whispered.

 Nick nodded and, after quickly glancing around, darted as silently and as quickly as possible to the tree and scrambled to its heights. Once in the tree, he took a quick survey of the tree just to make sure there were no fosses. Rose was at his side in a flash. She didn’t hesitate to find a branch that was a good place to jump from to the next tree. Nick took one last glance at his beloved forest. “Farewell, Pinewood.”

 As Nick followed Rose, he prayed with all his heart that that wasn’t the last time he would see his home.

9

Followed

N

ick awoke the next morning and squinted against the blinding morning light. He slowly sat up, taking great care to keep his balance. He and Rose had caught a few hours sleep that night in a tree. Rose was sitting on a branch not far from Nick and leaning against the trunk of the tree.

 “Ah, finally the great prince who certainly loves his sleep is awake! I was just about to wake you up,” said Rose in a teasing tone.

 “Sorry I slept so late,” mumbled Nick, rubbing the sleep out of his eyes.

 “It’s all right, I only woke up a few minutes ago anyway. You aren’t the only sleepy one around here.”

 “Well, let’s get going. We have a big day ahead of us,” said Nick, scanning the area below for fosses.

 “Shouldn’t we stay in the trees?” asked Rose. “It’s safer up there.”

 “The trees are getting less dense out of Pinewood and more dangerous to jump from. Besides, fosses are everywhere. Even the trees aren’t safe.”

 Rose shrugged and followed Nick down the tree. Nick got out a cold breakfast and the two of them ate as they headed south to the Penetralian Coast and Veradoom.

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 Not an hour later, Rose suddenly stopped and looked behind her in the direction they had come. A strange look came upon her face.

 “What is it?” questioned Nick.

 “I have a strange feeling we’re being followed.”

 “What? Fosses?”

 “I don’t know. It’s not a feeling someone is following you and there’s danger. It’s, well, oh I don’t know! It’s weird, that’s what it is.”

 Nick stared at Rose, confused. “I don’t sense anything.”

 Rose shook her head. “Forget it. It’s probably nothing.”

 Nick shrugged and continued walking. Rose took one last uneasy glance behind her, then followed Nick, that sense of being followed never leaving her.

\*\*\*

 That night, Rose lay bundled up in her bedroll, eyes wide open. That sense of being followed was still looming over her. It didn’t frighten her; it only annoyed her and made her uneasy. Rose listened to the sound of Nick’s slow and even breathing a few yards away. He had fallen asleep almost immediately, but not Rose. She squeezed her eyes shut and forced herself to think of other things. She thought of the first day of their quest. It was surprisingly and rather disappointingly uneventful. Rose knew she should be grateful and happy that nothing had really happened, but she had prepared herself for a grand adventure, and it was off to a rather dull start aside from the sense of being followed. *But no matter, adventure was sure to come soon*, Rose told herself.

 Finally, all worn out from the day’s journey, Rose drifted off to sleep.

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 The next day, the sense of being followed was only stronger. As the two friends continued their journey at a brisk pace, they kept hearing twigs snap and bushes rustle behind them. Even Nick decided that something was amiss. More than once, the two squirrels stopped and looked all along the sides of the path for a sign of who or what could be following them. They did find a few snapped twigs and faint, small paw prints in the soft ground, but didn’t find who the creature was. They also noticed that the faster they moved, the more often they heard their follower. It was getting more and more mysterious.

 It turned out that Nick and Rose didn’t have to wait much longer to find out who was following them. That evening, Nick decided that he had had enough. He declared he was going out and finding that creature.

 “Let me go with you!” insisted Rose.

 “No, you need to stay here and watch our things. I could move faster without carrying any bags.”
 So Rose reluctantly sat with their belongings in the dark while Nick ran off. Rose sighed. She wished she could go with Nick. He would probably need her help, as he always seemed to. Rose also wished she could start a fire, but with fosses lurking about, that was out of the question. The moonlight would have to do for light, even though it gave off no warmth. So she sat quietly and listened for any signs of a fight or something.

 Not five minutes later, Rose heard a surprised, high-pitched yelp. She sprang to her feet and knocked an arrow on her bow. There came the sound of a struggle. Rose braced herself for trouble and was just about to find Nick when he came back dragging a struggling and absolutely furious Serena. Rose let out a sigh of relief and lowered her bow.

 “Well who would have guessed SHE was following us for two whole days!” said Nick, who was furious and annoyed.

 Despite herself, Rose couldn’t help but smile. There was no doubt about it. She was sure the Creator had given the mission idea to Serena and Serena specifically. If He hadn’t, Serena probably wouldn’t have come. It took courage and guts to follow someone on a dangerous journey like this. Rose was glad that Serena had come, but she wasn’t so sure how Serena would fare. It was a long walk to the Penetralian Coast. *Oh well.* thought Rose. *She made it this far all by herself.*

 Nick, however, was not proud and happy Serena had come. “Serena! What were you thinking? There’s a good reason why we said you couldn’t come! Why did you come? WHY?”

 “Nick,” began Rose. But Serena decided to speak for herself.

 “It was MY idea! The Creator put the idea in MY head! He told me to go! So I obeyed Him! I’m NOT going back! You can’t make me! I’m going to see the dragons with or without you!”

 Nick groaned and put his face in his paws.

 “Nick, Serena’s right,” said Rose calmly and quietly.

 Nick’s head suddenly whipped up. “What?”

 “I said Serena is right.”

 “You’re siding with her again?”

 “She was right before.”

 “Seriously? You think it’s a good idea to let her go with us?”

 “Nick, the Creator gave this idea to Serena and Serena only. I believe the Creator intends for us to take her. If He didn’t, do you really think she would have followed us for two whole days all by herself?”

 Nick looked agitated, but he seemed to be pondering the topic.

 Then Serena did something that neither Nick nor Rose expected her to do. Serena went up to Nick, took his paws in hers, and looked in his eyes innocently. “Please Nick, the Creator told me to do this. I have to obey Him. Please, don’t send me back. We would be wasting precious time and I would still find a way to go anyway. So please, Nick. Let me go.”

 Nick looked down into the little sister’s dark, large, deep blue innocent eyes. That did it. He knew she was right, and that the Creator had intended for her to come all along.

 “You’re right. I’m sorry, Serena. I should have listened to you and the Creator more closely. And you too, Rose. You were right all along. Please, forgive me.”

 Serena squealed with delight and wrapped her small arms around her brother. Nick returned the gesture. Rose smiled. It was a sweet moment, so she stood back a bit. Once again, she felt like she was intruding.

 Nick looked up. “Rose, I’m sorry. I should have listened to you.”

 “It’s okay, Nick. All is forgiven.”

 Nick turned to Serena. “This isn’t going to be easy, Serena. You understand that?”

 Serena nodded seriously.

 “Are you sure you can make the journey? It’s a long way.”

 “I know. I can do it,” said Serena bravely.

 “All right then. You’re coming with us across Penetralia with fosses lurking about and into the very heart of a mountain filled with ferocious dragons!”

 Serena smiled a daring, confident smile. “Sounds fun!”

 Rose laughed. “It sure does!”

 Nick only grinned sheepishly. His job got a whole lot harder with having to watch his little sister. He wasn’t sure if he could bear it if something happened to her because he had failed to protect her. But no matter, if the Creator wanted her to come, Nick had no say in the matter.

 That night, just when the three squirrels closed their eyes to sleep, Nick’s senses suddenly became alert and his ears straightened up. Did he just hear something? He lay motionless, barely breathing, hoping that what he had just heard was all in his head. Then, to Nick’s dismay, he heard it again. There was no doubt about it now. There was a soft crunching of leaves. Some creature was nearby, and it was getting closer.

 Nick sprang up and drew his sword, determined to protect Rose and Serena with all he had in him. Rose, who was only half asleep, was awakened. She heard the sound and saw his sword draw, so she leaped up and knocked an arrow to her bow. Serena still slept as soundly as ever. Nick and Rose were back-to-back, weapons poised and slowly rotating as the noises got louder and louder. Suddenly, all was quiet. Nick and Rose barely breathed. The suspense was nearly driving them crazy. Then, without warning, a large fossa leaped out of a bush that was not five yards from where the two squirrels stood poised. Rose didn’t hesitate. She let loose her arrow and it found home. The fossa fell dead with an audible thump. Not a second later, another fossa sprang for the sleeping Serena. Nick leaped up and met the fossa mid-air, driving it sideways when it was just a hair away from Serena. Nick finished the abominable creature with his sword. Nick and Rose froze, waiting for any other fosses that might come. There were none, and Serena still slept soundly. Rose nearly collapsed with relief, and Nick was absolutely speechless. He couldn’t believe they were still alive.

10

Under the ground

N

ick and Rose decided it was best that they didn’t tell Serena of last night’s events. There was no use frightening the youngling more than she probably already was. So, Nick and Rose cleared away the bodies of the fosses and pretended nothing happened the next morning. Serena never found out about the fosses, and Nick and Rose kept it that way.

 The journey only got harder from then on. The three squirrels seemed to meet fosses every day now. Luckily, they heard them coming most of the time and were able to scramble up a tree. Even though fosses were excellent climbers, hiding up in the treetops kept the squirrels out of view. But once in a while, the squirrels wouldn’t hear a fossa coming, and they would have to fight. Some battles were easy wins and others not so much. Nick got a bad gash on his arm from a difficult fight with an unusually strong fossa. But he was able to bandage it and it didn’t get infected.

 Serena handled the journey and the attacks surprisingly well. She remained calm and did what she was told when Nick and Rose were forced to fight. One time, she actually helped in a fight. She brought a big branch down hard on a fossa’s head, giving Rose time to knock another arrow to finish it off. It was the long, hard trek across rough ground itself where she wasn’t so great. She became tired near the end of the day, and although she didn’t complain, she lagged behind and Nick and Rose had to take turns carrying her.

 The three squirrels learned to get along by themselves alone in the woods. They were no longer in Pinewood, where they were under protection constantly. Out here, they were forced to fended for themselves. Rose was somewhat used to that, but there had not been any real danger in Pinewood. Out here, danger was everywhere with the fosses. So as the days went by, they learned to adapt and to take care of themselves.

 But soon, the attacks began to wear off. The further the squirrels got from Pinewood, the fewer and fewer fosses they saw. Most of the fosses were busy with Pinewood, so there were fewer away from Pinewood. In fact, the attacks became so less and less frequent that the squirrels were easing down their guard.

 One evening, they completely let it slip. It was getting late, and the three of them were completely spent. Serena had fallen asleep on Rose’s back, and the sound of Serena’s snoring made Rose even more tired than she already was. Nick dragged his feet, trying not to think of his soft bed back in Pinewood Forest. The warm evening sun didn’t do much to help either.

 “Can we stop for the night early today? I don’t know why but I’m extra tired today,” pleaded Rose.

 That idea sounded fantastic to Nick, but they needed to get to Veradoom as soon as possible. So he begrudgingly said, “I’m tired too, but we’ve got to keep going.”

 Rose sighed, adjusted the sleeping Serena on her back, and continued walking. She forced herself to think of nothing but putting one footpaw in front of another. She was so focused on walking, however, that she didn’t hear the faint sound of leaves crunching. Nick was so exhausted that he didn’t hear anything either. They had let their guard completely slip. That would prove to be a dreadful mistake.

 Four fosses, all big and snarling, were on the squirrels before they knew it. They had no time to ready their weapons much less set up a defensive position. They were completely unprepared. Nick’s mind snapped into reality in a second. He saw an opening where they had a chance to escape. Rose must have seen it too, for she was off in a flash with Serena on her back. Nick was after her in a heartbeat. The fosses stood surprised for a second, then they charged after the fleeing squirrels. The chase was on.

 Rose quickly glanced behind her to make sure Nick was all right. He was right behind her, with four fosses right after him. They were getting closer and closer. Rose knew they could never outrun a fossa, much less four. *Oh Creator, please help us!*

 Rose knew she couldn’t continue much longer with Serena (who had woken up when Rose started running) on her back. So she risked a second to stop, drop Serena off her back, grab her paw, and start running again. Serena couldn’t keep up with Rose, so Rose was practically dragging her behind her. That second when Rose had stopped had cost them precious time. The fosses had gained a good bit of ground when she stopped.

 The fosses were nearly upon them now. Rose saw a small leaf pile on the forest floor and didn’t think at all about it. She and Serena ran straight into it and then plummeted down a large hole that the leaves had been covering. Nick tried to skid to a stop, but it was too late. He fell down the hole just as a fossa had lunged for him.

 Nick fell for a few terrifying seconds, then his head hit something hard. His vision blurred and then he slipped into a sea of darkness.

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 Searing pain brought Nick back to consciousness. He groaned and tried to sit up, but firm yet gentle paws held him down.

 “Don’t try to get up just yet.”

 Nick tried desperately to clear his vision so he could see who the speaker was. The voice sounded very familiar.

 “Nick! Nick are you okay? Please wake up!” came a shrill, familiar voice.

 Nick’s vision finally cleared and he realized who was speaking. *Rose and Serena! Of course!*

 “Nick, are you okay?” asked Rose.

 Nick slowly sat up, trying to ignore the intense dizziness. “I’ll be all right. What about you two?”

 “We’re fine. Serena just has a scratched elbow.”

 Serena wrapped her arms around her brother. “I’m glad you’re okay. I was so scared!”

 Nick gingerly touched to throbbing head. He winced.

 “You have a good-sized bump there. Thank the Creator there wasn’t any bleeding,” said Rose.

 Nick nodded gratefully. Then he surveyed their surroundings. With the help of a few blazing torches Rose had lit, Nick could see that they were in a vast, underground cavern. There were a few tunnels leading out of the cavern to who knew where. Nick looked up and saw the hole where they had just fallen through. It was high up. There was no way they could escape that way. They would have to find another way.

 “We’ve got to find a way out,” said Nick after a lengthy silence. “We’re losing precious time.”

 “We’ll have to follow one of those passages and hope it leads out. I don’t see any other way,” said Rose.

 “Well then, we should get going,” said Nick, rising and grabbing a torch.

 “Are you sure you’re up for this?” asked Rose.

 “I’ll be fine. We need to get out of here,” assured Nick, gathering up the knapsacks before heading off to a passage.

 Rose shrugged, grabbed the other torch, and followed Nick with Serena holding her paw. The three squirrels entered the passage off to the right, which seemed to be leading up. While he walked, Nick held the torch high and investigated the walls. They were made of solid stone. And so were the walls and ceiling. Then after a while, Nick noticed something that chilled his blood. There were large scratches in the wall, and there wasn’t any dust or dirt that would have been there if no creature had ever went through the passage. Nick, Serena, and Rose weren’t the only creatures alive down there. Nick glanced back at Rose. She seemed to realize what he had just discovered. Serena, however, was totally oblivious to the danger. She simply held Rose’s paw and walked on, not really paying attention to her surroundings.

 Soon, the passage began a steep descent. The squirrels had to slowly inch their way to keep from sliding. Nick began wondering if choosing this passage was the right choice. But no matter, it was too late to turn back now. They had to keep going.

 Suddenly, without warning, Serena lost her balance and slipped with a startled cry. Since she was holding Rose’s paw, she took her down with her. And since Rose and Serena were behind Nick, they slid and took him down as well. All three squirrels were sliding uncontrollably down a very steep passage. They tried frantically to stop themselves, but the rock was too slick.

 After a heart-pounding minute of slipping and sliding, the squirrels shot out of the end of the passage and plunged into a small, dark, freezing cold lake. It was by the Creator’s goodness that the squirrels landed in the shallow part of the lake, and not the middle. None of them knew how to swim, and if they had been any further out, they would have drowned.

 Nick gaped then spluttered from the sudden shock of being nearly submerged under freezing cold water. He jumped to his feet, searching franticly for Rose and Serena. To his great relief, they were all right, however cold. The three of them didn’t say anything, but they made their way to the shore. They had lost their torches in the water, so it was nearly pitch-black. However, the rocks at the bottom of the lake were eerily glowing, casting off a dim light. Nick had never seen rocks do that before, but he was too cold to investigate. There were more urgent matters at hand.

 The squirrels managed to spread out all their belongings to dry. Then they sat huddled together, shivering violently. The three of them wished that they could get a fire going, but all their stuff was soaked, so that was impossible. The fear and dread over the creature down in the caverns were momentarily gone.

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 Serena awoke about an hour later. She, Rose, and Nick had fallen asleep, completely worn out. Serena sat up and stared into the tiny lake. It was beautiful with the glowing blue rocks at the bottom. After sitting a few minutes, she decided she should wake up Rose and Nick. Their stuff was dry now, and they should get going. But before she was about to do that, Serena heard a faint, scratching and clacking sound. She froze, not wanting to look behind her. She did it anyway. At first, she didn’t see anything, but as the noise steadily grew louder, she began to make out a large, dark form. It was unlike anything she had ever seen. Serena held her breath, praying that the creature would not notice them and turn around. An agonizing minute passed. Then the Creator answered Serena’s prayer. The creature slowly turned around and left through a different passage, making that terrible scratching and clacking noise. Serena didn’t move or release her breath until the creature was far down the passage. Then she jumped on Nick.

 “Wake up wake up!” she hissed. “We’ve got to go right now!”

 Nick groaned rather loudly. “Wha…what’s going on?”

 “Shhh! It might hear you! We’ve got to go! Now!”

 “Who?”

 “I’ll tell you once we get going! We’ve got to go! Please!”

 Rose, who was awake by now, sat up. “I think we’d better listen to Serena.”

 “All right all right. I’m coming.”

 Nick and Rose groggily packed up and lit two torches with Serena nervously glancing everywhere and urging them to hurry. Nick and Rose were perplexed by Serena’s behavior. But they knew she probably was acting like that for a reason, so they packed up as quickly as possible, ate a quick meal, then started again. Nick headed for the passage that the creature had gone into, but Serena quickly stopped him.

 “No! Not that way!”

 Nick glanced at Rose, and then shrugged and took a different passage that seemed to be leading up. Once they got into the passage, Rose questioned Serena.

 “What did you see?”

 Serena gulped and looked behind her. “I don’t know what it was. But it was big and black. It looked like it had a lot of long legs, and it had a long, thick tail that arched over its back. It made a terrible scratching and clacking sound.”

 Still walking, Nick pondered the information. Rose did too.

 “It didn’t see you, did it?”

 “I don’t think so.”

 “Did it look like it had fur, or was it hard?”

 “I couldn’t tell. But judging from the sound it was making, it sounded hard.”

 Rose thought for a moment. Then she was quiet.

 Nick was silent. He had a pretty good guess at what the creature was, and he was certain he was right. He didn’t want to believe it, but he could think of no other explanation. The creature Serena saw had to be a scorpion. And not an ordinary scorpion, it was a giant scorpion. It fit her description perfectly. Nick had read about them in the big encyclopedia he had back in Pinewood. They were extremely rare and lived underground in caverns. One sting of a giant scorpion’s tail would inject so much venom that you only had a few agonizing seconds to live. Giant scorpions also were afraid of sunlight. They could handle any other light, but not sunlight. It burned their skin for some reason Nick couldn’t understand. Nick decided not to tell the girls about the scorpion. It would only frighten them even more than they already were. To be honest with himself, Nick couldn’t believe Rose hadn’t thought of the creature by now. *Maybe she knows but just doesn’t want to scare Serena. Or she could have never heard of them. They are very rare, after all.* Whether she knew or not, Rose remained silent. Serena stuck close to her, always nervously glancing behind her. Nick held a torch high and led the way, praying that they would find a way out and not have any more encounters with the giant scorpion.

 Then it occurred to him. *Of course! Those scratches I saw in the walls and floor earlier! They’re probably from the scorpion!* Then another thought struck him. *What if there is more than just one scorpion down here?! What if we run into a whole nest of them?* As soon as he thought about a whole nest of scorpions, Nick immediately regretted it. Now that thought would linger with him for the entire time they were down here.

 Not ten minutes later of steadily climbing upward, the three squirrels began to notice the change in the air. It was getting fresher and fresher. The squirrels steadily picked up the pace, eager to get out of the underground passages and caverns.

 But their joy and relief were short-lived.

 Nick suddenly came to a halt. Rose and Serena bumped into him, causing him to nearly drop the torch he was holding.

 “Why have we stopped? We’re almost there!” asked Rose, slightly agitated.

 “Shh! Do you hear that?” hissed Nick.

 The squirrels barely breathed. At first, they heard nothing. But then they could make out the faint sound of scratching and clacking. Serena gasped. It sounded exactly like the creature she had seen in the cavern with the lake.

 “That’s the creature I saw! Let’s go!”

 The squirrels didn’t wait another second. They took off at a dead run, eager to be rid of the scorpion’s presence.

 “Do you know what that creature could be?” panted Serena as they ran, eyes wide with fright.

 “I think it’s a giant scorpion,” panted Nick, not moving his eyes from the dark passage ahead.

 Serena nervously glanced behind her and sped up.

 “What’s a giant scorpion?” asked Rose.

 “It’s big, ugly, dangerous, and you most definitely don’t want to meet it,” said Nick, completely out of breath.

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 Even though the squirrel’s lungs were on fire, they didn’t slow. In fact, they only sped up. The scorpion was getting closer and closer, and they knew it. Soon, they were sure that if they stopped for even a few seconds, the scorpion would be in view. In fact, Serena was sure that she could sometimes see its faint outline in the dark, winding passage. She knew if they didn’t find a way within the next few minutes, they would be gone for sure. They couldn’t go on running like this forever.

 Then the squirrels saw something that filled their hearts with joy and hope. The air was almost completely fresh now, and they could just make out daylight ahead. Using the last of their energy, the squirrels managed to put on a burst of speed.

 Then, to their dismay, the passage abruptly ended. A pile of huge rocks blocked their way from safety. Sunlight streamed through between several rocks. Nick immediately tore at the rocks, desperate to find a way out. He got a few rocks loose, but they were packed together too tight. Rose and Serena attempted to help him, but they didn’t fare any better. It just couldn’t be done in a short amount of time. The squirrels looked at each other in dismay. It was over. They were trapped. No way out. They turned around and drew their weapons, ready to fight to the end.

11

Nothing less than a miracle

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he scorpion rounded the corner and saw the three squirrels. It let out a shrill screech and charged. Nick and Rose shouted in unison and charged as well, ready for the end and to meet their Creator if that was His will. Just as the squirrels and scorpion met, Nick swerved off to the side and slashed at one of the scorpion’s many legs. Rose ducked and rolled under the scorpion. She attempted to drive her sword into the hideous creature’s belly, but the scorpion’s protective armor was too thick and the sword glanced off without doing serious damage. The fight was on.

 Meanwhile, Serena stood back against the pile of rocks that was blocking their way out, absolutely terrified out of her wits. She didn’t know what to do, or even what to think. Serena never felt more helpless and scared at that moment.

 Then something inside her told her not to give up. It was almost like a voice, but not quite. Serena immediately relaxed when that happened. Her brother and friend needed her help, and she couldn’t just stand there and watch them die without doing something. Not knowing what she was doing and not even realizing she was doing it; she began scraping rocks out of the way blindly. That voice or feeling encouraged her and gave her the strength she needed. Serena fully submitted to it, knowing it was the Creator. She never slowed down or tired. She only grew faster and more determined. Then she came in contact with a fairly large rock. Serena tugged furiously at it, and it gave way. Then the entire wall of rocks came crashing down. Serena jumped out of the way of the tumbling rocks in the nick of time. Sunlight came streaming in and flooded the passage. The giant scorpion gave an ear-piercing screech and scrambled backward as fast as it could back down the passage, trying to get away from the sunlight.

 Nick and Rose slowly stood and covered their eyes as they adjusted to the blinding light. It took them a minute to realize exactly what had happened. Serena had saved their lives. The sunlight had driven the scorpion away. The squirrels were quiet for a moment, then they let out a loud cheer. They were alive!

 “Serena! You saved us! How did you do it?” asked Nick.

 “It wasn’t me! I’m not sure what came over me, but it had to be from the Creator! He’s the one who really saved us!” exclaimed Serena.

 “Of course! This was nothing less than a miracle!” laughed Nick.

 The squirrels stepped outside onto real grass and into the fresh air for the first time in what felt like forever. They closed their eyes and inhaled deeply. Never had it felt so good to be alive and outside. The sunlight streamed down and warmed their faces. Relief and joy flooded their hearts, and for that moment, all their troubles were forgotten.

 Nick turned to Rose. She looked deathly pale from their narrow escape.

 “Rose, are you okay?”

 “I’m fine.”

 “Are you sure? Because you look like you’re about to faint.”

 “Yeah… you might want to catch me.”

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 The next few days were only mildly eventful. There were fosses here and there, but they had gotten used to that long ago so they didn’t really call that super eventful. They had a routine that would do when they detected a fossa nearby. Hide in the bushes or behind trees. The trees themselves weren’t safe because fosses were excellent climbers. The bushes were their best bet at hiding. They had a few close calls, but they got better and better at detecting fosses and hiding quickly. Soon it almost became an instinct for them.

 One evening, just as the sun was setting, they came to an old, small, worn-down house. It looked abandoned.

 “What if we stayed the night in there?” asked Serena.

 “Why not?” said Rose.

 “We can go investigate,” answered Nick.

 The three squirrels cautiously approached the house. Nick pressed his ear against the door and Rose peeked through a broken window. Nobody was home. Nick slowly opened the door and crept in. The squirrels found themselves in a small living area with beaten-down furniture and broken shelves. There was a fairly large fireplace with a few missing stones. A few floorboards were missing as well. Everything was covered with dust and dirt. Cobwebs were everywhere. Debris was scattered all over the place. They could tell it was once a very cozy house before it had been ransacked. Rose walked across the living room to a door that had a large crack in it and was loosely hanging on its hinges. She carefully pulled it open. It made a very loud creak. Rose winced and entered the next room. It was the kitchen and dining area. Rose slowly circled around the small island in the kitchen, wondering what had happened here. Nick came into the room and looked around. Then Rose noticed something that deepened her question even more. She opened the oven and noticed that there were three loaves of bread still in there. She gasped and lightly tapped them. They were hard and stale.

 “Nick, come see this,” said Rose.

 Nick was by her side in a moment. “Did you find something?”

 Rose gestured to the loaves. “What do you make of this?”

 Nick investigated the bread. “It’s a chilling discovery, that’s for sure.”

 “It certainly is. What do you think happened?”

 “Probably the Fosses.”

 Rose gulped and nodded. Of course. She should have known that. She could tell that this was once a cozy home to a small family of creatures. Rose wasn’t sure what kind of creatures they were, but she was all the same heartbroken. *This must be stopped. The Fosses can’t be allowed to go on like this. If Pinewood falls, then so does Penetralia. This mission has got to be a success. Oh Creator! Help us!*

 Nick interrupted Rose’s thoughts. “Where’s Serena?”

 Rose glanced around. She wasn’t in the kitchen or dining room. Nick and Rose entered the living room. No Serena.

 “Serena!” Nick called. He was getting worried. Serena was his responsibility and if something happened to her, he would carry the guilt of it for the rest of his life.

 “Nick, come here,” said Rose, looking up at the ceiling.

 “What is it?”

 “Do you suppose she went up there?” asked Rose, pointing up.

 Nick looked up. There was a wooden ladder leading up to a small square hole in the ceiling. They could only guess that that was the attic. The bottom half of the ladder was broken off, so you had to jump in order to climb up there.

 “Serena! Are you up there?” Nick called up to the hole.

 No answer.

 Nick then took a few steps back, ran, and jumped. He gripped the upper part of the ladder. It creaked. Nick froze, praying that it wouldn’t break. It held. Nick slowly began climbing up. Then he squeezed through the small square hole.

 It took a minute for Nick’s eyes to adjust to the dim light. The only light was some coming up from the hole he had just squeezed through and a small crack in the roof. He found himself if a large, empty attic. There wasn’t much to see. Then, he made out a very dim red glow in a corner.

 “Serena?” he hissed. Then he slowly and carefully began crawling towards the glow. The boards creaked under him.

 As Nick got closer to the red glow, a wave of relief washed over him. Serena was crouched there, holding a tiny, red glowing object on a delicate golden chain. She was staring intently at it, like she was entranced by it.

 “Serena! What’s going on?” asked Nick sitting beside her.

 Serena jumped. “Oh! I didn’t see you coming.”

 “I called but you didn’t answer.”

 “I didn’t hear you.”

 “What is that you’re holding?”

 “I don’t know. But I feel like it belongs to me somehow.”

 “What?”

 “When we entered this house, I felt something calling me, or whatever. I felt drawn to the attic, so I came up here and found this. I really think this belongs to me.”

 Nick’s head was swimming. He had no clue what Serena was talking about, but he didn’t ask because he was sure Serena didn’t know either. Instead, he only asked, “May I see it?”

 Serena handed Nick the glowing object. Nick took a good look at it. He realized it wasn’t just a red color. It was fire red. But it wasn’t like any fire red color he had ever seen. The color seemed almost alive. There were tiny flecks of orange in it too. Nick looked even closer. Beautiful designs and swirls were just barely visible on the object. Nick was in awe. He had never seen anything like it before. It was truly beautiful. “What is it?”

 “I’m not sure. But I think it’s a Firewing scale,” said Serena calmly.

 Nick’s head shot up. “What?”

 “You heard me.”

 “How on earth would a Firewing scale end up here!”

 “No idea.”

 Nick pondered this in his head for a minute. He came to the conclusion that Serena was right, again. “This thing must be ancient.”

 Serena nodded. “I know this sounds weird, but I feel drawn to it. Like I was meant to find it.”

 At that moment, Nick began to wonder if Serena’s obsession with dragons was more than just an obsession. Maybe it was her destiny.

 “Nick! Serena!” came Rose’s worried voice.

 Nick turned to Serena and gave her the Firewing scale. “We’d better go.”

 Serena nodded and put the tiny golden chain with the scale around her neck. Then the two of them slowly made their way across the attic and down the ladder. A wave of relief washed over Rose when she saw that Nick and Serena were both unharmed. Serena quickly showed Rose the Firewing scale. Rose was intrigued, she had never seen anything like it before.

 “How did you find it all the way up there?” questioned Rose.

 “I don’t know. It’s almost like I was drawn to it,” answered Serena.

 “You’d better hold on to that, Serena. I have a feeling the Creator wants you to have it for a very good reason.”

 Serena clutched the scale tight and promised she would.

12

Tampa

H

ey! Good news!” exclaimed Nick the next afternoon when they stopped for a minute’s break. He had his face buried in a large map.

Rose and Serena looked up from where they had been picking up fallen hazelnuts. “Yes?”

 “We should reach a large town called Tampa tomorrow!”

 “That’s great, but we really can’t spend too much time there,” Rose pointed out.

 “Yeah, but we should still get fresh supplies,” said Nick.

 “Isn’t Tampa the town that Mother and Father found Asa Ember in when they got separated?” Serena asked.

 Nick looked confused, then thoughtful. “Oh yeah! I think that’s right, Serena!”

 “Really? We’re going to the town where the King and Queen of Pinewood Forest found Asa Ember? The legendary Asa Ember?” asked Rose, highly interested.

 “That’s right!”

 “How interesting!”

 “I wonder what it’s like!” exclaimed Serena. “I’ve never seen a real town before! All Pinewood has is small markets and stores here and there.”

 “I bet it’s just like the markets at Pinewood, except a whole lot bigger and busier,” said Nick.

 “But as much as I want to, we can’t stick around too long. We’ve got to hurry,” remarked Rose.

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 The three squirrels moved at a faster pace that afternoon and throughout the next day. They were eager to get to Tampa and wanted to spend as much time as possible in it.

 The next afternoon, the three squirrels stood before the main entrance to Tampa. They were awestruck. This place was huge! It was far bigger than any of them had ever imagined it to be. The three of them stood here for a minute, taking it all in.

 Then Nick spoke. “Well, here we are!”

 Serena didn’t say anything but only continued to stare.

 “We’ve got to stick together. This place is huge so it’s very easy to get lost,” said Rose. “Serena, are you listening?”

 Serena snapped out of her daze. “Huh?”

 “We’ve got to stick together. It will be very easy to get lost in there,” Rose repeated.

 “Hold on to my paw. Don’t let go,” said Rose.

 Serena obeyed without question. She looked rather frightened.

 Nick adjusted the knapsack on his back, took a deep breath, and entered Tampa with Rose and Serena following right behind.

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 The squirrels jumped to avoid a rumbling cart for what felt like the tenth time that afternoon. Tampa was an extremely busy town, and the squirrels were forced to stay focused at all times. Carts filled with barrels and hay rumbled along the cobblestone streets. There were tall three to four-story buildings all around. Small shops selling pretty much anything were everywhere as well. Every few streets led off to a neat row of houses. The squirrels figured they were on the main street of Tampa. It was the widest and most crowded. Crowds of every kind of creature moved every which way, so there was no certain flow of traffic. It was all very loud and chaotic. The squirrels didn’t like it. They were used to the quiet of Pinewood Forest. City life obviously wasn’t for them.

 Nick managed to lead Rose and Serena through and off the main street and off to a quieter one, where they found a hedgehog selling supplies that they would need for the rest of their journey. Rose and Serena waited patiently back a few paces away.

 “I don’t like this so much,” said Serena.

 “Me neither. As soon as Nick is done, we’ll be out of here,” said Rose.

 “Do we have to go back the way we came?”

 “Yes. We don’t want to risk getting lost on the back roads. This place is huge.”

 Just then Rose noticed an elderly mouse trip on a jutting rock and stumble. And in the process, she spilled some of the nuts in a basket that she was carrying.

 “Oh! Serena, stay here with Nick. I’m going to go help that mouse over there.”

 Without waiting for a response, Rose crossed to the old mouse and began helping her pick up the spilled nuts.

 “Bless you, dear,” said the old mouse when all the nuts were picked up.

 “It’s my pleasure,” replied Rose. Then she turned and walked back to where she had left Nick and Serena. She found Nick standing there alone, looking pale and frightened.

 “Rose! Where’s Serena?”

 “I left her here with you. I just went over there to help an old mouse.”

 “Well she’s not here anymore!”

 Rose whirled around. Sure enough, Serena was nowhere in sight. “Serena!”

 A dreadful feeling clutched her stomach. “Oh no! I’ve lost her! It’s all my fault!”

 “Don’t worry, we’ll find her. She can’t have gone far,” said Nick, sounding much braver than he felt. He too was terrified for his little sister. He would carry the guilt and sorrow for the rest of his life if something happened to Serena.

 “Do we want to split up or stick together?” asked Rose hurriedly.

 Nick gritted his teeth as he thought. He hated making decisions like this. After a long moment, he said, “We’ve got to stick together. I don’t want to lose you too.”

 Rose looked out onto the busy street while Nick grabbed their knapsacks filled with fresh supplies. It would be nearly impossible to find Serena if she were out there. Like finding a needle in a haystack.

 “Let’s go! We don’t have much time,” said Nick grabbing Rose’s paw. The search for Serena had begun.

 Nick and Rose first started searching on that street. They looked in the little indoor shops, outdoor shops, and pretty much anywhere you can look. No Serena. They asked as many other creatures as possible if they had seen a little silver squirrel with an extremely bushy tail. No one had seen her. And if they did, they didn’t remember her anyway. Everyone saw a lot of creatures every day. Nick and Rose reluctantly headed towards the main street where the traffic was the heaviest, praying that they would find Serena soon and unharmed.

 Minutes slowly turned into hours. Before Nick and Rose knew it, the sun was setting. Shops began to close one by one and creatures left the streets to return to their homes. No Serena. They had looked for her all afternoon and had asked countless creatures if they had seen her, but to no avail. It was like she had just disappeared.

 Rose collapsed wearily on the deserted cobblestone street. It had been one of the most frustrating afternoons of her life. “Nick what are we going to do? We can’t leave Serena here, but we’re running out of time!”

 Nick sat next to her and buried his face in his paws. “I don’t know, Rose. I just don’t know.”

 Rose looked up to the starry night, her eyes brimming with tears. She prayed with all her heart that Serena would be found unharmed. Then a peace settled over her as she looked to the sky. There had to be trillions of them up there, and the Creator knew each and every one of them by name. If He created all of those stars and knew them all by name, He had to know exactly where Serena was, and it’s all going to turn out for His glory in the end.

 Nick sat on the cobblestone street, feeling completely empty and lost. Just then, the words of his mother, Noelle Omaha, echoed through his mind as if she were right there saying it out loud:

 “Be brave, trust the Creator, and never, ever give up hope. I know what real fear and hopelessness feel like. And it is a feeling you must do everything possible to prevent. The Creator will help you; He is strong in your weakness and light in your darkest moments.”

 For some reason he couldn’t quite grasp, those words comforted and brought him hope. He looked to Rose. She was looking up to the sky, a brave and determined look on her face.

 “We’d better find someplace other than the street to rest. Then I’ll guess we’ll continue looking, even in the dark,” said Nick, standing and reaching out his paw to help Rose up.

 Rose took Nick’s paw and he pulled her up. “You’re right. We’d get nowhere just moping around.”

 “Why don’t we go in that tavern, clear our heads, and make a plan?” asked Nick, gesturing to a tavern a little way down the street.

 Rose glanced to where Nick gestured. It didn’t seem as loud and rowdy as some others they had seen. “All right. We need to come up with a plan of some sort.”

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 Nick and Rose entered the tavern. To their relief, only a few creatures looked up, and then continued whatever they were doing. Nobody seemed to take any notice of them. The tavern was rather small, but it was cozy and not rowdy at all. A fire burned in a large stone fireplace on the other side of the room, adding the warmth and cozy feeling of the place. The tavern was made of pine wood, reminding the squirrels of home. Suddenly, Nick wanted nothing more than to be back in Pinewood before The Conqueror and his fosses came. He missed his home terribly. Glancing at Rose, he was sure she was thinking the same thing.

 After studying the room for a minute, Nick and Rose found an unoccupied table in a dark corner of the room. A pretty young rabbit came up and asked if she could get them anything. Nick and Rose politely said that they had just come in for a breather. The rabbit nodded understandably and left them to their discussion.

 “We’ve got to decide something, Rose. We can’t just leave Serena, but if we don’t hurry with this quest, The Conqueror will take over Pinewood, and then all hope is lost,” said Nick.

 Rose sighed, put her face in her paws, and thought. She thought long and hard about any alternative solution. She thought so hard her head began to hurt. Then she knew. She knew what they had to do. Rose looked up at Nick. She could tell he knew what they had to do too. Rose didn’t want to do it. Far from it. It was one of the hardest decisions she had to make. She didn’t like the solution, but it had to be done.

 “We have to continue with this quest, Nick.”

 “I know.”

 “I…I don’t want to.” Rose was on the verge of tears.

 “Me neither. But we really don’t have much of a choice.” Nick was struggling to fight back tears himself.

 “Pinewood and Penetralia are in great danger. We’ve got to save this country,” said Rose bravely.

 “You’re right. Serena is in the Creator’s hands. He’ll watch over her.”

 It was just then when Rose noticed him. The strange squirrel with jet black fur and a hooded cloak, carefully watching them not two tables away. Rose immediately was on her guard. The squirrel was shifty looking, and he made her very uncomfortable with the way he was staring. She had never seen any squirrel like him before.

 “Nick,” Rose whispered, then slightly jerked her head in the direction of the strange black squirrel.

 Nick nodded slowly but didn’t look in that direction. “I know,” he whispered barely audibly.

 “What do we do? He’s creeping me out!”

 “Just ignore him. If he wants something, he’ll come talk to us. We don’t want any trouble.”

 Rose shifted uncomfortably in her seat. The stranger’s eyes never left the squirrels. Rose could almost feel his gaze.

 “Can we please go now? I don’t like this at all,” Rose quietly begged Nick.

 “All right. I guess we’re done here anyway.”

 Rose took one last glance at the stranger before standing to go. What she saw made her heart skip a beat. The stranger got up and began walking towards them. Rose looked at Nick with wide, frightened eyes. Nick looked nervous as well. He swallowed a lump in his throat and turned to face the large, black squirrel.

13

Fury Shadowblade

N

ick stared helplessly at the huge, hulking squirrel before him. It took all the strength in him to keep his legs from quaking and giving way beneath him. He swallowed hard and managed to squeak out, “Can we help you, sir?”

 The black squirrel studied Rose and Nick closely for a moment, his black eyes seeming to penetrate their souls. Rose took this time to study the strange squirrel back. Her first impression of him was that he was a fighter. He was very well-built and tough. Muscles were plainly evident beneath his thick black fur. Rose definitely would not want any trouble with this creature, that was certain.

 Then the black squirrel spoke. “Are you two youngsters from Pinewood Forest?” His voice was deep, but it was also surprisingly quiet and soft.

 “Y-yes. We are,” answered Nick hesitantly.

 The black squirrel nodded slowly and looked at them in a peculiar way. Rose thought she even saw some anger in his eyes.

 Rose’s tongue finally loosened up. “Who might you be? And where are you from?”

 “I am called Fury Shadowblade. I am from the Shadowblade tribe up in the Dark Mountains. Have you two heard of the Shadowblade tribe?”

 All that Fury received from Nick and Rose were blank stares. Then they shook their heads.

 Fury only nodded slowly and said, “I see.”

 There was a long, awkward silence. Fury’s hard, cold eyes never left the squirrels. The more Rose looked, the more certain she was that she also saw deep anger in his eyes. She wished they could get away from this stranger.

 “Well...uh…if that is all, then we’d best be on our way,” said Nick, rising to leave.

 “Now hold on. I’ve got some more questions for you two,” said Fury.

 Nick and Rose shakily sat down again.

 “Who’s the king of Pinewood?”

 “Tamm Omaha,” answered Nick.

 “Omaha?” Fury looked slightly puzzled.

 “Yes. All the squirrels of Pinewood are in the Omaha Tribe.”

 “I see. Tell me, what are you two doing so far from home?”

 “We…uh…well,” Nick looked over to Rose for help. He wasn’t sure how much to tell Fury. He didn’t trust him one bit and didn’t want to risk this mission being jeopardized.

 Rose spoke up. “As you probably know, Fosses are rampaging through Penetralia. They’re attacking Pinewood Forest. We’re on a mission to save our home.”

 Nick winced, hoping they wouldn’t regret saying that.

 Anger flashed in Fury’s eyes for a moment. His voice rose. “*Your* home?”

 Nick and Rose were puzzled and frightened. “Y-yes. Pinewood has always been our home.”

 The hot rage in Fury’s eyes lingered for a bit more, then he seemed to calm down. “I see. And how, may I ask, do you two plan on saving Pinewood?”

 Nick and Rose looked at each other. They didn’t know this creature, and they didn’t trust him one bit. They decided it was better if he didn’t know where they were headed. “I’m sorry sir, but our business is our own.”

 Fury raised is eyebrows suspiciously, but he didn’t say anything.

 Then it occurred to Nick that this squirrel might have seen Serena. “My little sister is missing. She’s got silver fur, blue eyes, an unusually bushy tail, and very small. Have you seen her?”

 Fury shook his head. “I have not.”

 Nick sighed and looked down. He missed his sister terribly.

 “Now if you will excuse us, we’d best be going,” said Rose rather abruptly, seizing the opportunity. She took Nick’s paw and headed for the exit.

 Fury reached out and put a strong paw on Nick’s shoulder. Nick spun around and looked Fury in the eyes. He shrank back.

 “Just remember this, you two, Pinewood is not yours. We were there first, and we will get our homeland back. Do you understand?” growled Fury, anger flashing in his eyes.

 That did it. Rose didn’t want to spend another second in Fury’s presence. She grabbed the trembling Nick and practically dragged him out of the tavern. She had absolutely had it.

 Once outside and a safe distance from the tavern, Rose looked back to make sure they weren’t being followed, then stopped. Turning to Nick, she asked, “You good?”

 “Just a little shaken and confused, that’s all. You?”

 “I’m all right. I did not like him, not one bit.”

 “Same. But what do you think he meant when he said Pinewood wasn’t ours?”

 “I don’t know. I wouldn’t worry about it, it’s probably not true and we have other, more pressing matters.”

 “But…why would he lie about that?”

 “Listen, Pinewood’s history is well documented. We’ve been taught everything. I’m pretty sure if Pinewood didn’t belong to us, it would be somewhere in the old history books. And I have never seen anything about that in all the history books I’ve read. Have you?”

 Nick shook his head. “You’re probably right.” But right then a terrible feeling gripped his gut. A feeling that Pinewood had a dark past. A feeling that he missed something important, or that he wasn’t being told everything. That feeling would haunt him for as long as he lived, Nick knew.

 Rose looked down and sighed. “I…I guess we’d better leave and set up camp for the night.”

 Tears were brimming in Nick’s eyes as the weight of losing Serena came down on him. He didn’t want to leave his sister. He didn’t know what he’d tell Noelle and Tamm if he saw them again and Serena was still missing. But they didn’t have time. Pinewood was in danger, and he and Rose were the only ones able to save it. They had to continue their quest, with or without Serena.

 Rose put a paw on Nick’s shoulder. “I’m sorry, Nick. I don’t want to leave her either. Truly, I don’t. But we really don’t have much of a choice.”

 Nick quickly wiped his eyes and nodded. The quest must continue. Serena was in the Creator’s hands. He shouldered his knapsack and followed Rose as they made their way to the main entrance of Tampa.

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 Nick stopped right under the huge gateway of Tampa. Rose stopped too and waited patiently a few paces out of the gateway. Nick looked back in the town one last time. He sighed and was about to continue when he thought he saw a small form huddled beneath a lamppost a little way away. Nick gasped and bolted to the lamppost.

 “Nick?” Rose called after him. She hesitated a moment, then ran after him. What she saw when she reached him filled her with such relief she nearly collapsed. Serena!

 Nick scooped her up in his arms and Serena wrapped her arms around him. They stayed like that for a moment, Rose holding back, not wanting to intrude.

 “I thought I lost you!” cried Nick, setting Serena down.

 “Me too! I…I was so scared!” whimpered Serena, trying to hold back tears.

 Rose wrapped Serena in an embrace. “Shh. It’s okay, little dragon. We’re together now and nobody’s hurt. It’s going to be okay.”

 Serena nodded and buried her face in Rose’s shoulder. Nick joined the embrace, and the three of them sat there in the light of the lamppost.

14

Holding on

Q

ueen Noelle Omaha collapsed on her large bed late one night. It had been an exceptionally hard and busy day. The Conqueror had led a portion of his army in a sneak attack around the southern border, which was the least heavily guarded. The results were catastrophic, but Pinewood held, for now. Wounded were coming in so fast that Noelle barely had time to breathe in between caring for patients.

 Besides running the infirmary, the Queen of Pinewood organized soup kitchens and distributed meals to those who were starving. Food was getting scarce. The Conqueror’s siege was slowly working. Noelle had to do what she could and help whomever she was able to. Pinewood was looking up to her. The King was fighting on the front lines, defending his beloved homeland. Noelle was left in charge of matters happening inside of Pinewood, and she felt the weight of it all grow heavier day by day. Every day meant more wounded to take care of, more bandages to roll, more bows and slings to repair, and more soup to make for the hungry squirrels. Noelle knew she would never be able to keep at it day by day without the strength of the Creator. She had absolutely no choice but to trust Him. He was the one holding things together. He was the one giving her the strength to complete her tasks day by day. He was the one that kept Pinewood strong. And He also was the one watching over her beloved children.

 Yes, the Creator was watching over Noelle’s beloved children. Noelle had no idea where exactly they were, how they were faring, and if they were even alive. It was hard, but Noelle trusted the Creator to look after her children. He would do a better job than she could ever do, and what any other creature could ever do.

 Noelle knew that Nick and Rose were together, but she wasn’t sure about Serena. She had disappeared the night Nick and Rose left. Serena had been very upset that she couldn’t go with them, so Noelle guessed that she had gone off to follow them. Her biggest concern was that she had gotten lost and wasn’t able to catch up. Noelle had sent a small scouting group to find her and bring her back, but they weren’t able to locate her. She obviously wasn’t in Pinewood Forest. It wasn’t easy, but Noelle knew that the Creator was with her and would protect her.

 Noelle lay sprawled on her bed, half asleep already. She knew she should stay awake a little longer to plan for the next day, but her body and mind wouldn’t allow it. It had been a long day, and Noelle was at her strength’s end. Besides, the day would start early again tomorrow. Noelle gave up on holding sleep back and let the much-needed rest overtake her.

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 The Queen was up before the sun. After eating a light breakfast, she hurried down the elegant, winding wood staircase with beautiful carvings in it. Scurrying through more halls, she entered a narrow doorway and headed down the staircase into the room where the bows were being mended.

 “Ah, good morning boys! Hard at work already, I see!” said Noelle much more cheerfully than she felt.

 Kyle and Jesse looked up from their work of repairing bowstrings. “Good morning, your highness!”

 “Do you two know if Aspen is back at headquarters?”

 “I believe he is, my lady,” said Kyle.

 “Good. I wasn’t sure if he’d be back so early because of the battle…” Noelle trailed off.

 “No, my lady. He was back at his usual time,” remarked Jesse.

 Noelle smiled a little. “Good ol’ Aspen. A loyal squirrel and always on time!”

 “Yes ma’am, that’s Aspen!” exclaimed Jesse.

 Noelle forced a laugh. “Keep up the good work, boys! May the Creator be with you!”

 “May He be with you as well!” The boys answered in unison as Noelle headed out the door that led to the palace gardens.

 Despite her troubled heart, Noelle couldn’t help but smile. Kyle and Jesse were good lads. Very helpful and hard-working. She strolled slowly through the palace gardens, savoring the beauty of that morning. Noelle looked to the east where the sun was just beginning to peek through the horizon, its rays of light making the dew on the grass and flowers sparkle. Noelle closed her eyes and breathed in deeply. She savored the moment. It was like the calm right before a storm.

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 Noelle bounded up the steps winding up a large pine tree. At the top of the tree, there was a small, one-roomed hutch that Noelle used as their “headquarters”. She went there every morning and sometimes in the evening to hear the latest news from the front, and to meet with her advisors to help Pinewood’s squirrels in the best way possible. Noelle reached the top of the stairs and entered the hutch. The three squirrels that were present immediately stood at attention, then bowed.

 “Good morning, your highness!”

 Noelle motioned for them to return as they were. “Good morning, my friends. What news, Aspen?”

 Aspen, a messenger and scout, was a tall, lanky squirrel a little younger than Noelle herself. He descended from the Bushtail tribe, so he had the unusual and overly bushy tail. He ran messages back and forth from the front lines to the others in Pinewood. He also spied and scouted the enemy.

 “Not good, I’m afraid,” said Aspen, not meeting Noelle’s gaze. There was a pained look in his eyes.

 Noelle shook her head sadly. She hadn’t expected the news to be good.

 “We’re still holding them, but I’m not sure how many more blows we can take. Not very many, that’s for certain.”

 Noelle bit her lip and nodded. “How many casualties?” She dreaded the answer.

 “Several hundred, my lady,” said Aspen in a low, grim voice.

 Noelle winced. A grim silence hung about the room.

 “Wounded?”

 “The same. Among those…” Aspen trailed off. He glanced at the two other squirrels in the room.”

 “Yes? Aspen, what is it?” Noelle pressed.

 Aspen shook his head. There was a look in his eyes that told Noelle that it was something that he needed to tell her privately. Noelle slightly nodded. She understood, and Aspen looked relieved.

 Noelle turned to a young female squirrel in the room. “Jane, you may head on to the infirmary, I will join you very soon. We’re going to have a busy day today.”

 Jane, a descendant of the Moonlight tribe and Noelle’s personal assistant at the infirmary, bowed and hurried out of Headquarters. Then Noelle turned to the other squirrel, who was a descendant of the Ember tribe.

 “Commander Warren, how are our soldiers faring? Do we need to send more supplies and food?”

 Warren stepped up. “I’m afraid so, my lady. They’re strong lads, but I don’t know how much longer they’ll hold.”

 “Tell them I will send what supplies I can. Also, tell them to remain strong, and that I’m very proud of them. The Creator is on our side. He is with us.”

 “I will, my queen. Anything else?”

 “No, Commander. Thank you. May the Creator be with you.”

 “And with you as well, my queen,” said Warren, bowing low then leaving Headquarters.

 Noelle then turned to Aspen. He looked uncomfortably at the ground and shifted his feet nervously.

 “Aspen?”

 “My queen, I…” Aspen trailed off and swallowed hard.

 “Aspen,” began Noelle in a low, quiet voice. “You don’t need to be afraid of telling me anything. Please, what is it?”

 Aspen took a deep breath before speaking. “My queen, I…I’m so sorry. But it’s the king, your husband.”

 A terrible feeling sank in Noelle’s gut as soon as those words were out of Aspen’s mouth. She did her best to ask the next question calmly. “What is it?”

 “He… he’s wounded, my queen. Took an arrow to the shoulder.”

 “How bad is it? I must see him immediately!” Noelle fought to keep panic from taking control.

 “He should live, if given rest and if no infection sets in. But he’s not doing so great now. We’ve been trying to keep the news as quiet as possible. Don’t want to worry everyone, and we felt that you had a right to know before everyone else.”

 Noelle took a deep, shaky breath. “Thank you, Aspen. I must see the king immediately. Please, could you meet me here in a little less than half an hour?”

 “Of course, my queen. I’m very sorry you have to go through with this. I can’t be easy.”

 “No, Aspen, it’s not. It’s only the Creator’s strength that keeps me going. Mine ran out a long time ago…” Noelle drifted off, a distant look in her eye, memories flashing in her mind.

 Aspen cleared his throat. “I’ll get another trusted soldier and we’ll accompany you to the front lines.”

 Noelle snapped out of her little daze. “Thank you, Aspen. I don’t know what I’d do without you. Be here in less than half an hour.”

 “Thank you. I will, my queen,” said Aspen, bowing low, then leaving Headquarters. Noelle watched him go, fighting tears and a surge of weariness that threatened to overwhelm her. *I must not lose myself! I must remain strong. My husband needs me, my children need me, and Pinewood needs me. I don’t have time for tears or self-pity. I must remain calm and keep my head. I must…remain…calm!*

 Then, taking a deep breath, Queen Noelle Omaha gathered herself and headed out the door.

15

The wounded king

N

oelle, Aspen, and another young squirrel named Timo (who was from the Moonlight tribe) were slowly making their way through Pinewood Forest to the front lines. King Tamm Omaha was wounded in the previous night’s battle, and Noelle had to see him. Pinewood wasn’t very safe, for multiple fosses had made their way in, so the trio made their way as quickly and carefully as possible.

 Wearing a dark green cloak with a hood that covered much of her face, Noelle followed closely behind Aspen, who led the way, with Timo bringing up the rear. As they went at a brisk pace, Noelle went over the day’s events so far. A lot had happened, and it had not gone the way Noelle had thought it would. Of course though, nothing is predictable when you were at war. It just all happened so quickly that it left Noelle reeling. Her husband? Badly wounded?

 “My queen?” Aspen’s voice broke through Noelle’s thoughts.

 Noelle blinked. “I’m sorry. Yes?”

 “We’re almost there. Shall we take a few minutes rest, and then head straight to the king?”

 “No, we’re so close. I’ve got to get to him as soon as possible.”

 “As you wish.”

 “Please, at least take some water. We’ve been going non-stop for the past hour,” pleaded Timo.

 Noelle nodded and accepted the flask of water Timo offered her.

 “You sure you’re all right?” Aspen asked.

 Noelle nodded. “Yes, of course! Just… a little stressed and worried is all.”

 “You’ve been doing so much for Pinewood. I can’t imagine what you’re going through. I’m always here if you need me, my queen.”

 “Thank you, Aspen. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

 The trio continued their journey to the front lines. Once they drew nearer, they had to be more alert. Things weren’t safe this close to the battle, so Aspen and Timo had their weapons drawn. Noelle readied herself to quickly grab for a small dagger tucked in a belt wrapped around her waist. Suddenly, a loud voice rang out from a treetop. “Who goes there?”

 Noelle immediately tensed, but Aspen lowered his weapon and calmly called back. “It’s me, Aspen, with the queen and Timo! The queen wishes to see the king right away!”

 A large squirrel with bright red fur climbed down the treetop and came up to the trio. “Forgive me, my queen. I didn’t know it was you,” he said, bowing low.

 “All is forgiven, soldier. Now please, take me to my husband,” said Noelle.

 “Right this way, my lady.”

\*\*\*

 King Tamm Omaha always had dreams, but they were just ordinary kinds of dreams. Some creatures had dreams that felt so real and woke them up feeling shaken. Tamm was not one of those creatures. His wife was, but not him. That was why he was terribly confused and frightened when he had one of those dreams. It was so unlike any other dream he had ever had. It felt so real. It took his breath away.

 *Tamm blinked and opened his eyes. He was in a dark, cold place. He tried to get up, but to his horror, he found that he couldn’t move. Panic rose within him, but it died away when a scene began to unfold before his eyes. Pinewood: a free and beautiful wood filled with life. Every creature there lived in peace and happiness. It was a beautiful scene. It was all and more what Tamm wished for Pinewood. He wished he could savor it forever, but a large squirrel with jet black fur appeared in front of him, disrupting the scene. “Is this your forest? Is this what you long to see come true?”*

 *Tamm didn’t like the looks of this strange squirrel, but he said, “Yes.”*

 *The black squirrel sneered, then growled dangerously. “You little fool! Do you not know your history? Do you not know that this, all of this, do not, and never will, belong to you?”*

 *Tamm was taken aback. He tried to speak but could make no sound. The black squirrel came closer and towered over him. “As long as we are alive, there will never be peace in Pinewood! We will have our revenge!”*

 *Tamm gasped and fell back. His vision went black and the squirrel disappeared. Then another scene unfolded before his eyes. Pinewood was overrun by the fosses. Fires burned and cruel slaughters were taking place everywhere. He saw Noelle and Nick, bloody but alive, captive to The Conqueror. He wanted so desperately to run and help them, but he couldn’t move. He was helpless, and all he could do was watch. Then a flash of red appeared before his eyes. A giant fireball was heading straight towards Pinewood, sealing its doom. Tamm looked closer. It wasn’t a fireball. It was a dragon. A beautiful dragon with fire-red scales that were ablaze. Tamm choked and couldn’t believe his eyes when he saw what creature was riding on the dragon’s back. Serena.*

\*\*\*

 “Tamm?”

 Tamm blinked and tried to focus. His vision was blurry, but he could see a beautiful squirrel with silver fur and blue eyes sitting next to him and holding his paw.

 “Tamm?”

 Tamm’s vision cleared and he could see that it was Noelle next to him. “Noelle!”

 He tried to sit up, but a wave of pain from his shoulder made it hard to do so. Noelle gently forced him to lie down again. “Don’t try to get up, dear. You’re hurt and you need to rest.”

 “Noelle! Y-you’re here!” Tamm said weakly.

 “Yes, I’m here. I’m going to take care of you. You’re going to be all right.”

 “But, it’s not safe! We’re too close to the front lines!”

 “Hush, dear. I’m not leaving you,” said Noelle as she gently peeled back the bandages on Tamm’s shoulder. Tamm winced, and so did Noelle. Then she began cleaning the wound and re-dressing it.

 “Noelle,” Tamm said seriously.

 Noelle looked into his eyes. “Yes?”

 “Do you know where our children are?”

 Noelle bit her lip and struggled to keep back the tears. She missed them terribly. Noelle shook her head. “I only know they left to renew our alliance with the Firewings so they could come to help us.”

 “You know nothing more?”

 Noelle shook her head again. “I-I miss them so much,” she said, her voice cracking.

 “I know, dear. I know,” said Tamm in a quiet, soothing voice. He too, was struggling to fight back tears.

 “And Serena…” Noelle couldn’t finish.

 “Noelle, they’re in the Creator’s hands. They’ll be okay.”

 Noelle nodded and brushed away tears. “It’s…it’s just so, so hard.”

 “I know. Believe me, I am struggling too. But we must look to the Creator for our source of strength. We must endure to the end. No one said it would be easy, but we’re going to get through this, do you understand?”

 Noelle nodded again and took a deep breath. She looked Tamm in the eye. Then she collapsed and embraced him. “Oh Tamm! It’s really you! It’s been too long since we’ve been together!”

 Tamm embraced and held his wife. “I know dear. I’m so sorry I haven’t been there for you. I should have come back more often.”

 “It’s all right, dear. You have a great responsibility, and we’re getting along fine.”

 “Thank you so much for running things, Noelle. I couldn’t do this without you. I’m so proud of you, and I love you so much.”

 “I’m proud of you too, Tamm. I can’t imagine the responsibility you have. I don’t know how you do it.”

 “You are, dear.”

 Noelle broke the embrace and sat up. “What?”

 “I’m able to do this because of you and our children. You are the reason I keep fighting day by day. My family and Pinewood are worth the fight, no matter the cost. And the Creator is the source of my strength.”

 Noelle smiled and tears came to her eyes. She didn’t know what she did to deserve a husband like Tamm. She was truly grateful that the Creator brought him into her life. Noelle took Tamm’s paw and said: “I love you so much.”

\*\*\*

 In the days that followed, Tamm recovered miraculously and was getting stronger day by day, thanks to Noelle’s good care. Noelle had a lot on her hands. Taking care of Tamm was keeping her busy enough, but Pinewood still needed her to lead. Thankfully, Tamm was recovering quickly, so Noelle could focus more on Pinewood’s needs. Tamm was eager to get back to leading Pinewood’s army, but Noelle wouldn’t hear of it until he was fully recovered. So, Tamm appointed his most trusted general and a close friend in charge of Pinewood’s army for now. General Flynn Steele, a descendant from the Bushtail tribe.

 It was a cold and rainy afternoon when Tamm and Noelle met with General Flynn and Aspen to discuss some information that Flynn had learned. Flynn said that it was urgent, and that Tamm needed to hear it right away. Noelle insisted on going with him, and Tamm was more than happy to let her come. He liked having Noelle by his side, and besides, she always had the best advice. Noelle had a brain and she knew how to use it.

 Tamm sat on his cot, staring out the small window on the door to the small hutch. It was dark, dreary, and rainy outside. He didn’t want to go out, but he had to. “What do you think General Flynn has to tell us?” he said, only half paying attention, to Noelle who was rummaging through a chest looking for Tamm’s cloak.

 “I don’t know. But whatever it is, it’s urgent. He wouldn’t summon us like this if it weren’t.”

 “I can’t be good, whatever it is,” said Tamm quietly, still staring out the window.

 “Oh come now, don’t be so pessimistic. It could be a chance to win, or news of the kids.”

 “I pray that’s what this is all about, but most likely it’s not.”

 Noelle didn’t answer. She was afraid Tamm was right. Things had been looking so bleak lately that it was hard to believe that there could be any more good news. She found Tamm’s cloak, sat down next to him, and draped it over his shoulders. She looked Tamm square in the eyes. “We must go now.”

 Tamm nodded, buttoned his cloak, and stood.

16

Kidnapped

W

hat do you see up there?” Nick called.

 “Uh… A lot of things!” Serena answered.

 “Anything more specific? Do you know if we’re getting close?” called Rose, exasperated.

 “Hold on!”

 Nick rolled his eyes, and Rose groaned but smiled. “Well, chop-chop!”

 “Why are we so crabby today?” Serena called back.

 “We’re not crabby, just a little anxious to get where we need to go!” called Nick. Then he heard Serena’s laughter from up in the treetops.

 Nicholas, Rose, and Serena, had left Tampa five days ago, and those days had been rather boring and uneventful. Nick just estimated that they had been getting close to their destination, and since it was a clear day, Serena offered to climb a tree and see if she could see Veradoom or the Penetralian Coast. Now, Nick and Rose were waiting impatiently at the bottom of the tree, waiting to hear if Serena saw anything.

 Rose sighed and plopped on the ground and leaned back against the tree. It had been a long day of moving at a brisk pace, and she was ready for a break. At least they had been making great progress.

 “You good?” Nick asked.

 “Yeah. Just ready for this day to be over,” answered Rose. Nick nodded understandingly.

 “HEY!! HEEEYYY!!” shrieked Serena from above their heads.

 Rose was on her feet in an instant. “What is it? Do you see something?” she called.

 “YEAH!! IT’S VERADOOM!!”

 “Really? You can see it?” called Nick, excited.

 “IT’S SO BEAUTIFUL!! AND TERRIBLE!”

 Nick and Rose exchanged a look that said “what?” Then they remembered Serena was crazy about dragons, so of course she would be acting like this.

 “Is it super close or super far?” asked Rose.

 No answer.

 Rose sighed. Serena was probably too fascinated to have heard her. She called again; this time louder. “Serena?”

 “I don’t know! But I can just barely see water!” Serena finally answered.

 Rose looked at Nick and shrugged.

 “If she can see water, we’re pretty close,” said Nick.

 “Good. I feel like we’ve been on this journey forever!”

 Nick looked up in the direction they were headed towards Veradoom. “And the most terrifying and important part of the job hasn’t even been done yet.”

 Rose followed his gaze. “I just hope they will renew our alliance and come help us.”

 “Things will work out, I’m sure. The Creator is in control.”

 Rose turned her attention back to Serena, who was still up in the tree. She looked up and could just barely see her. “Serena! Are you coming back down? We’re ready to go now, and we’ll leave without you!”

 Nick shot her a confused look. “You’re kidding, right?”

 “Of course, I’m kidding! I thought that was pretty obvious.”

 “HEY NOOO!!! DON’T LEAVE WITHOUT ME!!” Serena shrieked, and she was down at their side in a flash.

 “Well, somebody thought you were dead serious,” said Nick.

 Rose chuckled. “Hey, it worked, didn’t it?”

 Nick laughed and shouldered his pack. “Let’s go. We’re wasting precious time.”

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 Nick slapped himself and shook his head. He had come so close to drifting off, again. Or had he fallen asleep? It was hard to tell, he was so tired. Nick silently groaned. He hated guard duty at night while everyone else slept. He was also really bad at it. Even back in Pinewood when he had tried to pull an all-nighter with Serena, he always failed. Nick had gotten better at it since their mission began, but it was still excruciatingly hard.

 Nick looked over to where Rose and Serena were peacefully sleeping. He longed to do the same. He tried to stay up by keeping his mind busy. He looked up to the moon, full and bright, and began to calculate how much longer the mission would take if everything went according to plan. Two to three days to get to Veradoom, and not even a day there if the dragons agreed to help them. He guessed that they would be coming back to Pinewood riding on a dragon, that wouldn’t take long at all. Maybe a day. Then Nick realized, he could be back home in less than a week! That idea suddenly made him excited and eager to get back to the road. The end was in sight! They were nearly done! Nick began to think of Pinewood and all the things he missed there. His parents, his home, the beautiful trees, the pine needles. Everything.

 Nick was so consumed by his thoughts of Pinewood that he didn’t hear the faint rustle in the bushes behind him. If he had been a bit more alert, he would have heard the silent whoosh of a slingshot being fired. A small, hard object hit Nick’s head and searing pain overwhelmed him and clogged his senses. He blacked out and fell to the ground before he even had time to realize what was happening. Short, dark, and stocky creatures shot out of the bushes and trees and swiftly tied up and muffled the three squirrels. Nick, Rose, and Serena were captured by the dreaded Razorbacks, a fierce group of hedgehogs that did what they pleased and terrorized smaller creatures.

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 Rose slowly came to consciousness and silently moaned. She opened her eyes, but couldn’t see much. Everything was so dark. She tried to focus and wake up, but she couldn’t. She couldn’t focus, she couldn’t think. It was like her senses were completely clogged by some powerful drug. She felt nothing. She wasn’t even scared. All Rose knew was that she wasn’t where she was supposed to be, and something was wrong. But she couldn’t think of what was wrong, or where she was supposed to be. There was absolutely nothing to do but lie there and wait until something happened, or her senses came back.

 Rose must have drifted off again, because someone, or something, was roughly probing her, urgently whispering her name. She opened her eyes; it was still dark. She noticed almost immediately that most of her senses had come back. Her brain did feel as foggy. Then she was probed again, and her name was whispered. Rose slowly and carefully rolled over and looked straight into a pair of frightened, deep blue eyes. “Rose!”

 Rose slowly sat up. “Serena?”

 “Rose! You’re awake!” Serena whispered excitedly.

 “Where are we? What happened? Where’s Nick?” murmured Rose, confused.

 “I don’t know where we are. I just woke up here. I think we’re in a prison of some kind. Nick won’t wake up! I think he’s hurt!”

 Rose shook her head and tried to process what Serena had just told her. Then it slowly came to her. They were so close to completing their mission, and now they’re somewhere trapped where they’re definitely not supposed to be. She sat up quickly. “Serena, are you okay?”

 Serena blinked, a little confused. “I’m not hurt, I don’t think. But it’s Nick, he won’t wake up!”

 “Where is he?” Rose asked urgently.

 Serena pointed to a corner where Nick lay motionless. Rose crawled over to him and quickly saw that he had a deep gash on the side of his head. It had been bleeding, bad, but Rose was relieved to see that it had stopped. She checked his pulse. It was weak but steady. Rose turned to Serena. “Is there anything here we can use to clean the wound?”

 “No. We’re in some sort of cell, and there’s absolutely nothing in here,” Serena whimpered, scared. “Is he going to be okay?”

 “I think so, but we need to clean and dress the wound.”

 Serena moved next to her brother and sat crouched in that corner, clutching her fire-red dragon scale around her neck. It seemed to be glowing. Rose looked around and investigated their surroundings. Sure enough, it did look like they were in some sort of cell. The ceiling was very high, and there was a small hole on the very top with bars across it. Faint light streamed in from that little window, and Rose could tell that the sun was just coming up. Rose turned her attention to what looked like the door to their cell. It looked like an ordinary prison door, with bars. She walked over and squeezed her head in between the bars. There was a long, dark passageway with torches lining the walls. There were many other cells in the passage. Rose was about to call out to see if anyone was there, but something told her to keep quiet and to not draw attention to themselves. She walked over to Nick and Serena and placed her paw on Nick’s forehead. “Please Nick, please wake up,” she silently whispered.

 As if he heard her, Nick slowly opened his eyes and groaned. “Rose? Serena?”

 “Yes, we’re here,” answered Rose, much relieved.

 “Nick are you okay?” asked Serena.

 Nick sat up slowly, his head throbbing painfully. “What happened? Where are we?”

 “I…I don’t know. I think we were drugged while sleeping and brought here. I don’t know where “here” is. We’re in a cell of some kind, that’s all I know,” said Rose.

 “Are you two hurt at all?” asked Nick.

 “No, we’re fine. Nick, you were on guard duty, did you see anything? Did something happen?”

 Nick blinked and thought. Then he groaned in frustration and shook his head. “Oh no! I’m so sorry!”

 “What? What happened?” pressed Serena.

 “I wasn’t paying attention last night. Some creatures must have snuck up on me. This is all my fault. I’m so, so sorry.”

 “Nick, it’s all right. We forgive you. We’ll find a way out of this mess, together.”

 Nick shook his head. “It’s all my fault…”

 Serena climbed on his lap and looked him dead in the eye. “We’re definitely not getting out of here if you continue to wallow in your regret! You’ll only make things worse!”

 Rose stifled a loud burst of laughter and clamped her paw over her mouth. Only a little squeak came out. The way Serena said it was so funny, her being little and all. Nick raised his eyebrows, then laughed. “You’re right, Serena. I’m sorry, please forgive me.”

 “Of course, we do!”

 “Now, let’s get a plan forming,” said Rose. “I feel like our best bet is to find a way to climb out of that hole up there.”

 The three squirrels looked up to the ceiling to the hole with bars across it.

 Serena gulped. “That’s a long way up.”

 “Getting up there is going to be a real problem,” Nick remarked.

 “I’m working on that part. I’m sure it’s not impossible,” said Rose optimistically.

 “I don’t know…” said Serena nervously.

 “And also, what about the bars?” asked Nick.

 “There’s no way to know for sure how far apart they are unless we’re actually up there. By the looks of it down here, I’m sure Serena could fit through it. I’m not so sure about Nick and I,” said Rose.

 Serena frowned. “If you think I’m just going to leave without you two, then think again!”

 “Serena…” Nick began.

 “Let’s not cross that bridge until we come to it. Hopefully, it won’t come to that.”

 Serena still had a frown on her face, but she didn’t say anything more.

 Nick turned and faced the cell door. “Where do you think we are?”

 “Only the Creator knows,” Rose sighed.

 Serena sat up straighter, sniffed the air, and thought hard. Then her eyes popped. “I can smell the ocean!”

 “What?” Rose sat up straight. Then she sniffed and thought hard. “Why, I believe you’re right!”

 Nick sniffed the air. “I don’t smell it. I only smell the dampness and filth of this place.”

 “Well, it’s there! I know it is!” exclaimed Serena.

 “Our kidnappers must have brought us closer to the Penetralian Coast. Why, if we manage to escape tonight, we could get to Veradoom before sunrise!” Rose was getting excited.

 Nick stood up, despite his throbbing headache. “What are we waiting for? Let’s find a way out of here!”

 But before anyone could say anything or move, the squirrels heard keys rattling in the cell door. Their blood turned cold ask the door slowly creaked open. Three bulky, massive hedgehogs busted in, armed to the teeth and wearing terrifying war paint. “On your feet, you lazy layabouts. Her Royal Highness will see you now.”

17

The Razorbacks

N

icholas, Serena, and Rose were struck hard from behind and fell to their knees. The three massive hedgehogs that had taken them from their cell stood behind them, spears pointed at their necks, and paws bound behind their backs. Nick peeked to his right. Serena, who was between Nick and Rose, had her eyes squeezed shut, trying hard not to cry. Rose’s expression was stone cold, she kept her eyes fixed on the dirty red velvet carpet flooring. Nick didn’t want to look up at the creature who was before him, but he did anyway.

 The Razorback Hedgehog Queen was small but had a sharp and merciless mind. She slouched on her stone throne lined with red velvet, her oversized crown crooked on her head. She gazed down at the three squirrels kneeling before her with piercing eyes. The squirrel on the far right lifted his head and tried to meet her gaze, but he quickly dropped his eyes to the floor. The Queen smiled one of her terrible smiles that all creatures had learned to fear. These three would make perfect slaves for her little underground kingdom. They didn’t appear as defiant as some others had been.

 Nick dropped his eyes to the floor. The hedgehog Queen before him had a gaze that could pierce through steel and turn your blood to ice. There was no hint of mercy or kindness in them. He tried to speak, but he didn’t know what to say, much less summon the courage to say them.

 Rose didn’t need to look at the Queen. She could feel her gaze and knew that it would do no good to look up. Instead, she took cautious peeks to the side, taking in her surroundings. Nick and Serena were on her left, so she looked to her right. Rose couldn’t see much, but she could tell they were in a good-sized, circular room. Torches circled the room, and there were only two passages leading out. The entire room had dirty red velvet carpet. There were guards everywhere, so they couldn’t make their escape from here.

 “You! Stand up!” the Queen suddenly barked, pointing at Nick. Her voice was high and shrill, and it carried throughout the entire room. It sounded beautiful and terrible at the same time.

 Nick flinched. He slowly rose to his feet, begging the Creator to give him strength.

 “Where are you three from?” the Queen asked, her unblinking eyes bearing down on Nick.

 At first, Nick kept his gaze on the floor, but he remembered and believed that the Creator was stronger than this Queen, and with Him, he had the strength to defy her and look up. And that was what he did. “We are from Pinewood Forrest,” he said, hating how high and squeaky his voice sounded. But at least he was able to stand and look her in the eyes, thanks to the Creator.

 “Ahh, I see,” was all the Queen said.

 Rose couldn’t hold back. Anger and frustration welled up in her. She rose to her feet and shouted. “Where are we and who are you? Why have you taken us? You have no right!”

 The Queen sharply turned to Rose and hissed. The guard from behind Rose struck her and she fell to her knees.

 “Silence, you impudent red-furred creature! You speak only when spoken to!” the Queen shrieked.

 Rose gritted her teeth against the pain in her back. She was seething inside. Someday, this Queen was going to get what she deserved.

 Nick had to restrain himself from yelling at the guards to not touch Rose. That would only make things worse. Instead, he squirmed a little and bit his lip.

 The Queen turned back to Nick. “What are you three younglings doing so far away from home?” she said in a sickeningly soft and soothing voice. It sent shivers up Nick’s spine.

 “We’re…” Nick began, then he caught himself. It’d be best if they didn’t tell the Queen where they were headed. “We’re merely traveling through. We mean to harm, and did not intend to trespass on your territory. Please, forgive us and let us go in peace.”

 The Queen cackled loudly, her voice no longer soft and soothing. “Fools! Do you not know where you are? Do you not know who I am?”

 Nick gulped and shook his head, not really wanting to know the answers.

 The Queen suddenly rose from her throne. She spoke in a voice that shook the room. “I am the Queen of the Razorbacks! The fiercest tribe of hedgehogs in all of Penetralia and beyond! No creature who trespasses into my domain ever sets paw out of this place ever again! You are now my slaves, you will live the rest of your lives and die right here, under the ground!”

 Rose and Nick didn’t know how to react for a second, and Serena burst into tears and made a leap for Nick. “Nick, don’t let them do this! I don’t want to stay here!” she cried. But before Serena could reach him, the guards ruthlessly yanked the rope that bound her, and dragged her out of the large throne room, followed by Nick and Rose.

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 Rose blinked and tried to see where the guards were leading her in the dim light. They were traveling down a tight passageway underground. It looked like the tunnel had only just been dug not a week ago. She could hear the sound of tools being used and digging ahead of them. Her wrists were bound behind her back, and a burly hedgehog held on firmly to her arm, leading her. Another guard was next to him, carrying a lantern that didn’t give off much light. Along their way, they passed a few other creatures that weren’t hedgehogs. They looked all to be slaves. They were pushing wheelbarrows full of dirt and rocks. They were covered in dirt, and kept their eyes to the ground. They all looked like they had given up hope. With every step they took closer to the sounds of digging, Rose’s dread became worse and worse.

 Rose had been separated from Nick and Serena when the guards had taken them from the throne room. They had taken Serena away first. She had fought, kicked, and even bit. Nick and Rose had tried to hold on to her, but the guards were too big and strong. They had dragged her away, and that was the last time Rose had seen Serena. Then they had grabbed Rose and pulled her away from Nick. Nick fought with all his might again, but it was no use. The guards had swiftly hauled her off without a word.

 Now, Rose stood with her mouth gaped open in horror. Before her, a nightmare was unfolding. Young creatures, some younger than Rose herself, were hard at work digging the tunnel even longer. The Razorback guards mercilessly cracked their whips over their heads, and sometimes on their backs, while the poor creatures struggled to keep up. Some collapsed with weariness, but the guards took no pity on them. There wasn’t much light, and the air was thin and filthy. Perfect for a deadly accident. Rose noticed that most of the creatures who were digging were males, while the females were the ones pushing wheelbarrows full of dirt down the tunnel. Everyone creature looked worn, weary, and in pain. But the scariest thing Rose saw was their eyes. They were cast down, and completely blank. There was no light or any glimmer of hope. They seemed to feel no sort of emotion whatsoever. They looked…dead. Chills ran down Rose’s spine, despite the hot, sweaty air. Would she, Nick, and Serena become like them? Dead on the inside with no hope? *Oh Creator, please, get us out of here!*

 Rose was given a wheelbarrow and a shovel. She was put with the females, shoveling dirt into the wheelbarrows and pushing them out of the tunnel. The shovel was far too large for her, and she handled it awkwardly. Her back and paws were already aching by the time she had her wheelbarrow full of rocks and dirt. Then, not sure where to go, she followed a young female rabbit with orange fur down the tunnel to dump it. The rabbit hauled her wheelbarrow down the tunnel and into a corridor. The rabbit went into a different tunnel, this one leading up. This was when things got really hard for Rose, pushing her heavy wheelbarrow up a good slope. But to her relief, the air got fresher, and she could see daylight at the end of the tunnel. They were going outside! When Rose stepped outside, she found herself in a large, fenced-in area with no grass. Huge mounds of dirt and rocks were everywhere, and so were other slaves, dumping their wheelbarrows, then returning back down the tunnel they had just come up. Razorback hedgehogs were shoveling the dirt around the tall fence, building something like a camouflaged fortress. Guards were everywhere, so escape out here would be difficult. Rose considered making a dash for it, but she couldn’t leave Nick and Serena. Besides, she probably wouldn’t make it far anyway.

 The orange-furred rabbit stopped at a dirt pile, turned her wheelbarrow on its side, and got to work shoveling the dirt out. Rose parked hers next to the rabbit and got to work, hoping to talk to this rabbit. The rabbit didn’t even notice Rose and continued shoveling dirt without looking up.

 “Hey,” Rose whispered, trying to get the rabbit’s attention. The rabbit acted as if she didn’t hear her.

 “I’m Rose, I’m new here. What’s your name?”

 No response from the rabbit.

 Rose tried again. “Can you hear me?”

 The rabbit finally spoke. “Shh!”

 Rose was not giving up. “What? Hey I’m…”

 “Be quiet, you’re going to get us both in trouble,” said the rabbit without looking up.

 Rose quickly glanced at the guards. They didn’t seem to notice them. “What’s your name? What happens here? I’ve got to know.”

 No answer.

 “Please, I must know. I’ve got to escape with my friends as soon as possible, and I need some help!”

 The rabbit silently snickered. “There’s no escape here.”

 “I’ve got to try. Will you help me?”

 The rabbit then looked up and met Rose’s eyes. Rose inhaled sharply. The rabbit had dark, forest-green eyes that were brimming with tears. Behind the dirt and grime, Rose could see that this creature was beautiful. “What is it?” she quietly asked.

 The rabbit spoke in a quiet voice with tears in her eyes. “My name is Clara. There’s no escaping here. There’s no hope. If I help you, I will be killed along with you and your friends. I’m sorry.”

 For a moment, Rose couldn’t say anything. Then she found her words. “But…we have to try. It’s very important that we make it out.”

 Clara shook her head. “You can’t. Creatures have tried it, and have all ended up dead.”

 “Just because no one has succeeded doesn’t always mean it’s impossible. And anything is possible with the Creator.”

 “Then why wasn’t the Creator with the others that had tried?” Clara whispered and continued shoveling dirt into the huge pile.

 Rose was about to answer, but a guard walked by and she quickly ducked her head and began shoveling rapidly. The guard passed with hardly a glance at them. Rose spoke again. “I don’t know why the Creator wasn’t with the others that tried, but I am going to try. I can’t stay here. My friends and I have some very urgent we need to get done.”

 Clara wiped her eyes and continued shoveling. Rose could see that she wasn’t to say any more about the matter. But she was still determined to get Clara to help her. All Rose needed to do was to convince her that there is always hope and that she can trust the Creator. The words of Noelle Omaha rung in her head. *“Be brave, trust the Creator, and never, ever give up hope. I know what real fear and hopelessness feel like. And it is a feeling you must do everything possible to prevent. The Creator will help you; He is strong in your weakness and light in your darkest moments.”* Clara, and every creature here, desperately needed to hear those words, Rose realized.

 Clara had emptied her wheelbarrow and abruptly began pushing it back down towards the tunnel. Rose quickly emptied hers and fell in step behind the rabbit. “Look, Clara. Is there any time of the day when we would have the chance to meet and talk?” she said in a quiet voice.

 Clara shook her head, and Rose genuinely believed her. The Razorbacks were probably smart enough to not let their slaves have the chance to be alone together. Rose sighed and prepared herself to take another load of dirt and rocks.

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 Nick collapsed on the cold, stone floor late that night. He hurt all over, and could barely keep his eyes open. All he could think about was his aching muscles, back, and blistered paws. After Rose and Serena had been taken away, he was led down a long, dirt tunnel where he was put to work alongside other poor creatures, making the tunnel longer and longer. It had been hard, tiring labor. The creatures never spoke. They did their work without question, and without even looking up. He closed his eyes and wished he could fall into a deep, restful sleep and wake up back in Pinewood Forest. He barely felt the cool, damp cloth that was placed on his forehead by gentle paws. “Nick?”

 Nick forced himself to open his eyes and look at who spoke. Rose and Serena were sitting on both sides of him, both looking very tired. Rose was covered in dirt, as he was. Serena, on the other hand, was almost spotless. Then he realized that the three of them were together in their cell. “Are you two all right?”

 “We’re fine. Are you?”

 “I’ll be alright. Just need to rest, that’s all.”

 Rose could see Nick needed more than just rest. His paws were covered with oozing blisters, and although she couldn’t see, she was sure he had been whipped and beaten. “Nick, what did they do to you?”

 “They put me to work digging the tunnels. It’s hard work, and all the other creatures look, well, dead,” answered Nick. “Where were you and Serena?”

 “I’m supposed to take the wheelbarrows of dirt and rocks and dump them. They have this huge area outside just filled with dirt piles. They’re using it to make an earth fortress, it looks like,” said Rose.

 “What about you, Serena?” Nick asked.

 Serena, who was sitting in a position where her arms were wrapped around her knees, spoke in a voice that was barely audible. “I think I’m supposed to serve the Queen and keep the place clean. I…I want to leave! The Queen scares me!”

 Rose put a comforting arm around Serena. “Shh, we’re going to get out. I’ll find a way, I promise.”

 “But how?”

 Rose was quiet for a moment. “Well, I get to go outside, so I’m sure there’s a way to escape that way. And I met a rabbit named Clara, who might help us. Besides, I still think we can escape that way,” she said, pointing up.

 The three squirrels looked up and were reminded of the hole at the very top of their cell. “I still don’t think we can escape that way,” remarked Serena.

 “You don’t know that,” defended Rose.

 Nick broke in. “You said you met a rabbit named Clara?”

 “Yes. She does the same job I do. She’s…reluctant to help us, but I’m sure I can persuade her. All the creatures seem lost and hopeless. It’s terrifying, really.”

 Nick nodded. “I know. I tried talking to them, but it’s as if they don’t hear me.”

 “They hear you, it’s just that they’re frightened. They’re completely broken, or mostly.”

 “Did you tell Clara our mission?”

 “No. I might if she absolutely won’t help us, but not before.”

 Nick turned to Serena. “Do you still have the Firewing scale?”

 Serena had it tucked under her dress. “Yes, it’s safe.”

 “Good,” said Rose. “All we need to do is to think up a plan. If only we had a long, strong rope…”

 Nick sighed and closed his eyes. “It’s going to take a miracle from the Creator to get us out of here.”

 “Don’t worry. I’ll think of something to get us out. The Creator is with us!”

18

Observing

T

he next morning, a guard paced up and down the hall where the cells were, loudly ringing a bell which woke the slaves in the cells. Nick wasn’t sure what it meant, but he was sure they wanted them to be awake. He slowly sat up, as did Rose and Serena. He had never felt so sore, and he was sure he would have to work all day today.

 Serena yawned. “Why are they ringing the bell?”

 “I don’t know,” said Rose, rubbing her eyes with her blistered paws.

 “They want us to be awake, that’s obvious,” said Nick.

 “I’m hungry,” remarked Serena.

 “I’m sure they’ll feed us,” said Rose. “If they want their slaves to be productive, they’ve got to feed them.”

 The guards did. They threw in a stale loaf of bread as hard as a rock, and a leather flask of water. Nick, Rose, and Serena shared. Rose had a hard time splitting the bread, it was so stale. The water had a funny taste to it, but it was wet and it quenched their thirst. The three squirrels ate in silence, dreading a whole day of back-breaking labor. Serena only nibbled at her bread before putting it down. “I can’t eat it, it’s too hard. And it tastes bad.”

 Serena was right, the bread did taste horrible. “You should eat it anyway. You don’t know when your next meal will be,” said Nick, who was himself barely able to eat.

 Rose remained silent. She seemed to be staring off into space, deep in thought. *And no wonder,* thought Nick. *She said she’d get us out of here, and getting Clara to help us is our best chance.*

 Then without warning, three guards loudly busted into the cell and roughly dragged the squirrels to the feet. “Come on, work begins now!”

\*\*\*

 Rose looked around for Clara once she got her wheelbarrow and began filling it up with dirt and rocks. She glanced up and around whenever she lifted her shovel up to her wheelbarrow. No sign of Clara. *Don’t worry. There’s a lot of creatures here working on this tunnel. She’s here. You just haven’t run into her yet. You have all day to find her.* Rose lifted up her load and began pushing it back up the tunnel, through the corridor, and out into the fenced-in area with the piles of dirt and rocks. Rose decided right then and there that she would call this area “The Way Out”, because she was absolutely convinced that this area was the key to escaping. There had to be a way out in this area.

 Rose strategically pushed her wheelbarrow past the nearest dirt mound, and to the furthest ones, looking around for any weaknesses. A gap or opening in the fortress walls. There was none that she could see, but she didn’t get to look everywhere on that trip. For the rest of that morning, Rose dumped her loads at different mounds, her eyes always up and keenly alert. She found a few places that might be possibilities of escape, but she couldn’t be sure. Besides, they would need a diversion of some sort. Guards were everywhere in The Way Out. She wouldn’t get far if she made a run for it.

 Finally, about midday, Rose spotted Clara. She was dumping her wheelbarrow and turned to head back down the passage. She still looked defeated and hopeless. Rose hastily dumped her load and caught up with Clara in the passage down to the tunnels that were being dug. There were no guards about at the moment, so Rose decided it was safe to talk.

 “I’m glad I found you. I’ve been looking all morning for you!” Rose whispered excitedly.

 Clara only glanced behind her shoulder at Rose and didn’t say anything.

 “Listen, I know I can find a way for me and my friends to escape. If you help us, you can escape here with us!” Rose continued.

 Clara shook her head. “It can’t be done. Believe me when I say that. Many others have tried and failed. Now hush before we’re heard.”

 “But that doesn’t mean that we won’t!” persisted Rose.

 Clara scoffed a little and was silent.

 A burly guard came around the bend without any warning. Rose quickly ducked her head. The guard passed them with hardly a glance.

 Rose continued. “Tell me, where and how did the others try to escape?”

 “Back there where we dump the load and rocks. But I told you, they were all caught!”

 “How did they attempt to escape?” Rose pressed.

 “I don’t know,” Clara whispered back.

 Rose was silent for a moment, suddenly feeling very sorry for Clara. She had given up all hope and had caved into fear. Then it dawned on her that no matter how hard she tried, Rose couldn’t ever convince Clara to help them. Only the Creator Himself could. Rose followed Clara down the long passages, wishing that she could wake Clara up and help her believe. But that must be left up to the Creator.

 “Clara,” Rose said softly. “I’m sorry. I’m sorry that you’ve given up hope and that you are living in fear. Truly, I am. I’ll be praying that the Creator helps you overcome whatever you’re going through.”

 Clara didn’t say anything, but Rose thought she saw her long furry ears perk up and back straighten up a little.

 Rose didn’t say anything else to Clara for the rest of that day. Only the Creator could help the young rabbit, so Rose let go of the idea of trying to convince Clara and left that up to the Creator. In the meantime, Rose’s eyes were everywhere, noticing everything. No possibility of escape was overlooked. She desperately wanted to know how the other creatures had tried to escape, so she would know what not to do. Clara said she didn’t know exactly how, but Rose wasn’t convinced that that was the truth. Each load she dumped in The Way Out, Rose looked for possibilities. Any possibilities, no matter how risky they were. She needed to know all her options, and then sort out the best ones.

 While she was in the tunnel filling up her wheelbarrow, Rose looked for Nick. He had said that his job was to actually dig the tunnels, but Rose never saw him when filling her wheelbarrow. True, there were many creatures digging and Nick could have easily been near the front where she couldn’t see him, but Rose had made many trips to where the diggers were, and she was certain she would have seen him by now. Serena was nowhere to be seen either. She had said that her job was to serve the Queen and keep the living sections clean. *At least she’s not out here doing this backbreaking labor*, thought Rose lifting the handles on the wheelbarrow, and made the tiresome journey up the passages and to The Way Out.

 When the day was nearing to a close, Rose was convinced that they couldn’t escape without a diversion of some sort. There were guards everywhere at all times, so making a mad run for it would only result in capture. Besides, Nick, Serena, and Clara needed to get out too. No, they needed a diversion. A big one. One large enough that it would distract the guards, even out here in The Way Out. Then it occurred to Rose that there had to be another entrance or exit to this underground dwelling of the Razorbacks. Maybe they could escape using one of those. But she had no idea how to get to them, and they would probably be heavily guarded. All the same, Rose kept that idea in mind. It was possible that Clara knew more about where the entrances and exits were. *Oh Clara, we can’t do this without you!*

 That night, when a guard roughly shoved Rose into her cell, Serena and Nick were already there. Nick was lying motionless on a mat, and Serena sprang to her feet. “Where were you? We got worried!”

 “The Razorbacks had us work a little longer till we got all the dirt moved from the tunnels. Are you okay?” asked Rose.

 “I’m fine, but I don’t think Nick is,” answered Serena, looking towards Nick, who was now trying to sit up. Pain was written all over his face.

 “What did they do to you?” cried Rose who was at his side in an instant.

 “I’m fine really. Just sore, that’s all,” Nick grimaced.

 Rose quickly surveyed him for obvious injuries. There were no signs of bleeding, which was good. She looked at the wound on Nick’s head where he had been hit the night they were captured. It didn’t look infected, and a scar was beginning to form.

 “Are you all right?” Nick said, looking into Rose’s eyes.

 Rose smiled back reassuringly. “I’m fine. Just sore and tired. They really work you hard.”

 “I guess we need to toughen up,” Nick said light-heartedly, but sadness crept into Rose’s heart.

 “Don’t worry, I’m going to get us out,” she said reassuringly.

 “Did you find a way?” asked Serena excitedly.

 “I don’t have a specific plan, but I do know we will probably need a diversion of some kind,” said Rose.

 “Did you get to talk to Clara?” asked Nick.

 Rose’s face fell. “Yes, but she’s beyond anything I can do. The Creator will have to reveal Himself to her.”

 A heavy silence followed. Serena hugged her knees and began rocking gently. *Poor Serena*, Rose thought. *She shouldn’t be going through with this. She’s far too young.* Then a thought struck her.

 “Serena, you said you were one of the Queen’s servants?” Rose said excitedly. She couldn’t believe she didn’t think of this earlier.

 Serena nodded, confused by Rose’s sudden excitement.

 “Where do you go? I mean, are you allowed anywhere near any exits or entrances?”

 Serena shook her head. “I’ve tried looking for them. They don’t let slaves anywhere near a chance of escape.”

 “But do you know where they are?”

 “No. I didn’t get far before a guard made me go back. There must be certain areas where slaves aren’t allowed, no matter their job.”

 Rose sighed. So, Serena hadn’t seen an exit. That means Clara probably didn’t either, but she had been here longer than they had, so who knew what Clara knew? Rose had a feeling the rabbit knew more than what she was letting on to.

19

Escape

T

he guards awoke Nick, Rose, and Serena the same way they had done the previous morning; by loudly ringing a bell just outside in the passageway. Nick and Rose sat up groggily and rubbed at their eyes. Today would be another day of hard labor, and for Rose, searching for possibilities of escape. Then they realized that they were lying in the middle of a large puddle. Their fur and mats were all wet. Rose looked up to the hole in the ceiling with the bars across it. It must have rained while they were asleep.

 Despite the loud clanging sound coming from the passageway and sleeping in a puddle of water, Serena was still snoring softly, her overly bushy tail almost covering her entire body.

 “Serena,” Nick whispered, gently nudging his little sister. “We’ve got to get up. The guards will come in any minute with breakfast.”

 Serena awoke, slowly sitting up and looking very disheveled. She looked around at the water, gave a little squeak with surprise, and dragged her mat away from the water. Nick and Rose did the same.

 Rose looked up at the hole in the ceiling again. She needed to get ahold of a rope or something so they could climb up there and see if Serena could squeeze through the bars.

 “Listen, Serena, can you be on the lookout for a rope, or something that could get us up there,” Rose said, pointing up to the hole.

 Serena eyed Rose in a funny way but nodded. “I’ll see what I can find.”

 “Thank you. You too, Nick?”

 Nick nodded. “I will, but I seriously doubt I’ll find anything. I’m digging the tunnels all day.”

 A guard came in with breakfast. It consisted of the same hard bread as the day before. Rose and Nick forced themselves to eat it, but Serena said, “You know, the Queen’s personal slaves do get the scraps after her meals. They’re much better than this bread. I’ll eat that.”

 “That’s good,” said Nick. “Eat as much as you can while you’re over there. You need to keep up your strength.”

 “For when WE bust out of here?” asked Serena, emphasizing “we.”

 Nick looked at Rose rather uncomfortably. Rose drew in a deep breath before speaking. “For when an opportunity of escape presents itself, yes. And to survive in this place.”

 Serena didn’t have time to say anything, for just then a Razorback guard busted in. “On your feet! Work begins now!”

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 Rose couldn’t believe what she was looking at. She just couldn’t; it was too good. Almost like a miracle. This “miracle” was a rope. A thin, but strong rope. Rose had been hauling a load of dirt and rocks up to The Way Out, and she had seen the rope just lying there. *It looks like it was just recently dropped. A guard most likely dropped it*, Rose thought. She quickly glanced up and down the tunnel. There was nobody in sight. Rose picked up the rope and examined it. I was a good length, thin, and didn’t look like it had much use. *Perfect,* she thought.

 Then the problem arose. *Oh no, how am I going to get this rope back to our cell?* Rose thought unhappily. She couldn’t just carry it around all day; that would look suspicious and the guards would probably take it away from her. She needed to keep it hidden somehow until the day was over…but no that wouldn’t work. The guards would see her carrying it on her way to her cell, and that would look even more suspicious. Rose thought hard, praying that no creature would come up the tunnel and catch her standing there with a rope. What if she had it with her all day, and concealed it somehow? *Now that could work*, thought Rose, looking down at the rope and then her clothes. She was only wearing a simple dull red dress that was pretty dirty. Then it struck her. *Why, I could wear this rope around my waist like a belt! Many of the other creatures wear one!* Rose quickly tied the rope in a loop around her waist and wrapped it around a few times so there was only a little bit of the rope just dangling. It didn’t look exactly like a normal belt, but as long as the guards didn’t look closely, it should go unnoticed. Besides, it was her only way of getting it back to the cell. Rose lifted up her wheelbarrow and continued up the tunnel to The Way Out, hope surging inside her.

 That day went from good to even better. Rose was just dumping a load of dirt and rocks in The Way Out when Clara showed up beside her and began dumping her load. Rose looked up and smiled at her. And to her surprise, Clara spoke.

 “Rose, can we talk? That is, if you want to. I understand if you don’t want to.”

 Rose gasped. Something had definitely happened for Clara to be acting like this! “Why, yes of course,” she said, a little too loudly.

 “Shh, not so loud,” Clara hissed, looking around and then continuing to work.

 “Sorry,” Rose whispered, pretending to ignore Clara and focusing on her load. “What is it?”

 “First, I just want to apologize for the way I’ve been acting. It’s just that being here for a while takes its toll on you.”

 “I understand. It’s okay, all is forgiven,” whispered Rose, finishing her load.

 “Thank you,” Clara whispered, not looking up and finishing her load. She began walking back to the tunnel. Rose was right beside her.

 “What I wanted to say was that I’ve been thinking about what you said yesterday about me living in fear and you praying for me. You’re absolutely right, I was, am, living in fear. Your words yesterday reminded me that the Creator is always in control, and if he’s in control, there’s always hope. Thank you, Rose,” said Clara in a barely audible whisper.

 For a moment, Rose didn’t know what to say. This was amazing! Then she spoke. “Don’t thank me, thank the Creator! I’m so glad you’ve come to realize there’s hope.”

 Clara stopped and looked up at Rose, and for the first time, Rose saw a smile spread across the pretty rabbit’s face. “I…I’d like to help you and your friends escape in any way I can.”

 “Thank you, Clara,” Rose breathed out heavily. “We’ll make sure you’ll get out with us.”

 Clara smiled again and continued down the tunnel with Rose right beside her. A Razorback hedgehog suddenly appeared out of nowhere, and Rose quickly moved behind Clara to give the hedgehog plenty of room. “Move faster, slaves!” was all he shouted at them before moving on. Rose sighed with relief that he didn’t notice the rope.

 Rose trotted back next to Clara. Not looking back up, Clara whispered. “What’s the plan?”

 “Well, I found a rope earlier, and I think one of my friends might be able to escape using it in our cell tonight,” answered Rose. “But I don’t know that for sure. We’ll see.”

 “Really? A rope? Where?”

 “I’m wearing it.”

 Clara looked over and noticed Rose’s large “belt” for the first time. Her eyes widened. “You’d better not let the Razorbacks catch you with that.”

 “Don’t worry, I don’t think they will. They haven’t noticed anything yet.”

 “What can I do to help if you’re going to escape from your cell?”

 “I only think one of us can, and I don’t even know that for sure. Now listen, do you know of any entrances or exits to this underground maze of tunnels?”

 Clara shook her head. “I’ve always been at this job, so I’ve never been able to get anywhere near any exits.”

 “Are you certain? Have you heard anything from other slaves?”

 “I’ve never really talked to the other slaves. It’s too dangerous. We’ll get in big trouble if we’re caught talking, Rose.”

 “I know, I know. That’s why we’ve got to be careful.”

 “We should only talk in hushed whispers when we’re in the tunnels and maybe sometimes when we dump our loads if we’re careful. Absolutely no talking when we’re filling up or wheelbarrows. Too many guards around. We also shouldn’t when other slaves are in earshot, just to be safe,” Clara whispered.

 Rose nodded. “Agreed. Now, do you know how the other creatures tried to escape but failed?”

 Clara thought hard. “I think most of them tried making a run for it. The others had worked as the Queen’s personal slaves and tried sneaking out. They all were caught and killed. The Razorbacks made examples out of them for the other slaves.”

 Rose gasped, horrified. Then she thought carefully. “Well, that means that we’re going to have to think this through every single detail. I was thinking maybe a diversion of some sort. I’m glad I know now how the other had tried to escape. Thank you, Clara.”

 “Doing a diversion may not be such a bad idea. I just hope it works.”

 “Any ideas on what the diversion could be?” asked Rose.

 “Not at the moment. I’ll have to sleep on it, but I’m not usually good with clever ideas like this,” answered Clara.

 “That’s okay. I’m pretty good at that sort of thing.”

 The two friends suddenly fell silent when they came to the corridor and went down the tunnel that was being dug. More slaves were here, and guards as well, so Rose and Clara didn’t say anything as they kept their heads down and filled their wheelbarrows. Rose quickly glanced around for Nick, but he wasn’t there. She was now convinced that he worked in another tunnel. One that she hadn’t been down before.

 Once she and Rose were back in the tunnels heading towards The Way Out, Clara whispered, “I’m sorry I’m not much help. About giving you information, I mean.”

 “Oh no, Clara, don’t be sorry! Once I think of a plan, I’ll more than likely need you! You’ve been and will be extremely helpful.”

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 Rose made it through that day without her rope being noticed by any guards, to her great relief. She and Clara had talked in hushed whispers whenever it was safe all day. Clara was naturally extremely curious about why Rose needed to escape so badly, and what the plan was for the rope. Rose, although somewhat hesitant, told her everything. *If she’s going to help us, she deserves to know these things,* Rose had thought as she had told Clara about their mission to save Pinewood and the possibility of Serena being able to escape that night.

 “You’re lucky that you got a cell with a hole in the ceiling. Most cells don’t, I’m afraid,” Clara had said.

 Clara had also told Rose all that she knew about the Razorbacks. There were morning shifts, and afternoon shifts of guard duty, with a few minutes in between about midday where the guards were coming on and off shifts. Rose concluded that that time would probably be the best time to cause a diversion, while the guards were somewhat distracted. She was incredibly grateful for Clara; she had been very helpful, and she was someone to talk to distract from the hard labor. She made the day easier to get through and go by quicker.

 Now, that evening, Rose stood before Nick holding the rope extended in her paws, smiling. “Nick, look what I found!”

 Nick, sitting up straighter on his still-soaked mat, looked at the rope, a look of excitement and hope flashing across his face. “Where, how did you get it?”

 “A Razorback must have dropped it; I found it lying around! I’ve been wearing it like a belt all day and no one noticed! And that’s not all! The Creator has helped Clara and now she wants to help us! She told me a great deal of information!”

 “Really? Like what?”

 “I’ll tell you later, but right now, we need to focus on this rope and climbing up there,” Rose said, pointing up towards the hole in the ceiling. Then she looked at the door the down at the rope in her paws. “I wonder what’s keeping Serena. Hopefully, everything’s all right.”

 Nick looked anxiously at the door. He was getting slightly concerned about Serena not returning yet. “Maybe the Queen just had some extra chores or something for her to do.” Then Nick looked at the rope and then back up at the hole. “If my calculations are correct, I don’t think that rope is going to be quite long enough.”

 “True…” Rose said thoughtfully. She suddenly felt really dumb, she couldn’t believe she didn’t think of that before. Her mind was just so clouded with the excitement of finding a rope and talking to Clara. “Don’t worry, we’ll find a way to make it work!” she said optimistically.

 Just then a guard opened the cell door and roughly shoved pushed Serena in, who was looking nervous and oddly suspicious.

 “Serena!” Nick said excitedly as soon as the guard closed the door. “You’ll never guess what Rose found!”

 “And you’ll never guess what I found! Look!” exclaimed Serena, unwinding a long, thick, tapestry rope that was wrapped around her body, sort of like a belt, but also went over her shoulder.

 Rose was at her side in an instant. She took the tapestry rope from Serena and looked it over. “Why, this is perfect! Where did you get it?”

 “The Queen had her slaves go through her old things to throw away. I found this tapestry, and since it was going to be thrown away anyway, I took this rope off of it!”

 “Serena, that’s great! I found an old rope too, and with both of these tied together, it can reach up there!” Rose said, pointing up to the hole.

 Serena’s face darkened, and she asked the question that Nick and Rose didn’t want to be asked. “What if you two can’t get through the bars?”

 “Serena…” Rose began.

 “We’ll worry about that later,” Nick interrupted. “For now, let’s just focus on getting this rope up there.”

 That was easier said than done. Rose tied one end of the rope she found to one end of the tapestry rope, and with the two of them together, it should be long enough to reach the ceiling. Rose tried swinging then throwing an end of the rope up at the bars, hoping it would catch, but nothing she tried worked.

 “I need something at the end I’m throwing so it will catch,” said Rose, frustrated. “If only I had a bow and arrow.”

 Nick’s eyes suddenly widened, and he suddenly began digging through his pockets. Then he pulled out a smooth rock about the size of his paw. “Rose, give me the rope. I have an idea. I found this rock while digging, and I thought we might need it in the future.”

 Puzzled, Rose handed the rope over to Nick. He quickly tied the rope around the rock and began swinging it around and around, like a sling. Then he suddenly let it fly. The rock with the rope sped up towards the bars, and the weight of the rock caused the rope to catch and spin around the bars, securing it in place. Nick reached up at the dangling rope and yanked, testing it. Then he smiled triumphantly at Rose and Serena, whom both looked astonished.

 “Why, Nick, you’re a genius!” exclaimed Rose.

 Nick beamed. “Who will be the one to climb first?”

 Rose looked down at her blistered, oozing paws. “I…I don’t think I should. Nick, you’re in no condition to do it either.”

 Nick turned to Serena, then gestured to the rope. “You’re up. Let us know if you think we can fit through those bars, and what you see outside.”

 Serena hesitantly reached up and took the end of the rope in her paws. Then she turned back to Nick and Rose. “I’ll be right back down.” She then expertly began climbing the rope. Since she was a squirrel with a strong, agile body, this was no problem for her. Omahas were no weaklings. Once she reached the top, she squeezed her head in between the bars and peeked out. Since it was dark, she couldn’t see much, but the moon was bright and full. It was a welcoming sight, and the cool night breeze felt good on her fur. Then she quickly climbed back down the rope.

 Serena turned to Nick and Rose. “I think I can squeeze in between the bars, but you two definitely can’t,” she said rather darkly.

 Nick and Rose exchanged a disappointed and pained look. They nodded slightly. Nick turned to Serena and smiled sadly. “Serena…” he began.

 Serena didn’t let him finish. “No, I’m not leaving without you two!”

 “Serena, you have to go. You have a way to escape, and you’ve got to take it,” said Rose.

 “I can’t just leave you two here!” Serena cried.

 “Serena, listen,” said Nick, getting down on his knees, putting his paws on her shoulders, and looking her in the eyes. “I don’t want you to have to go all by yourself like this; really I don’t. You’re my sister and my responsibility, but you can’t stay here and you know that. Pinewood and all of Penetralia are at risk of being destroyed by The Conqueror, and you have a chance to stop him. You’ve got to get to Veradoom and get the Firewings to help us. The Creator will be with you. Rose and I will find another way to escape, and we’ll come find you, I promise.”

 Serena wiped the tears from her eyes. “You really promise?”

 “I promise.”

 Serena hugged her brother tight, then hugged Rose. Rose herself had to fight back tears. “You can do this, Serena. The Creator will be with you,” she whispered.

 Serena clutched the Firewing scale that hung around her neck, took a deep breath, then, without a backward glance, climbed up the rope and squeezed through the bars with some struggle. Once outside, Serena unwound the rope from the bars and drew it up, so the guard wouldn’t find it the next morning. Nick and Rose looked up at her and smiled and nodded. Serena quickly glanced around, then disappeared into the night, silent tears streaming down her face.

20

A chance at victory

T

amm and Noelle slowly walked across a rope bridge high in the treetops that led from tree to tree. It was pouring rain, and they wrapped their hooded cloaks tight around them to keep themselves dry. They were on their way to meet Aspen and General Flynn Steele about an urgent matter. Tamm and Noelle had no idea what it was about, all they knew was that it was urgent. They wordlessly crossed the bridge and climbed up a few branches to reach the hutch where Aspen and Steele were anxiously waiting.

 Aspen and Steele bowed low when Noelle and Tamm entered. “Your highnesses.” There was another squirrel with them, a young palace guard named Quill who came from the Ember tribe.

 “Please, rise. What is the matter?” asked Tamm, while he and Noelle took a seat.

 “My king, we found something. A chance at victory,” said Steele.

 Tamm’s eyes popped. “What?”

 Steele motioned to Quill, who stood. “Well, your majesties, as you can see, I’m a palace guard. I am with the group that patrols the underground parts of the palace. I was on duty last night, and I found a large barrel that was knocked over. Probably from the rush of the last battle. I went over to it to set it back in place, but beneath where it normally stood, was a trapdoor that I had never seen before. I called another guard over, and while he stood watch, I opened the trapdoor to investigate. There was a ladder, and at the bottom was a good-sized burrow. And you’ll never guess what it was filled with.”

 Tamm leaned forward in his seat, getting very excited. “Please, continue.”

 “Dynamite. Barrels full of it.”

 Noelle gasped and Tamm was speechless for a second. When he found his voice, he said, “And all that was underneath the palace for who knows how long?”

 “That’s right, your majesty. It looked like it had been down there for years.”

 “It’s a miracle it hasn’t blown up! Dynamite is the most explosive thing known to creatures! It could have completely destroyed the palace and beyond if lighted!” exclaimed Noelle.

 Dynamite was fine, black powder that exploded when it came in contact or close to a flame. It was very rare and dangerous to handle, so it wasn’t used very much. Tamm and Noelle had no idea they had a huge stash of it beneath the palace. It had to be taken care of immediately because if even the smallest flame or hot coal came close to it, the entire palace would be wiped out.

 “How did it get down there, and how did we not know about this?” asked Tamm, flabbergasted.

 “I don’t know, your majesty. My guess is it’s been down there since Pinewood fell. The barrels are rotting, and it probably wasn’t discovered because the palace was abandoned when Pinewood was divided,” said Aspen.

 Tamm nodded. That made sense. “But I still don’t know how we didn’t find it when we restored the palace.”

 Nobody in the room had an answer.

 “Well, the important thing is that we take care of it and do it quickly. It can’t stay under there any longer. Too risky,” said Noelle.

 “Agreed. And we have the perfect place to put it,” said Steele, with an eager grin on his face.

 “Where?” asked Tamm.

 Steele, Aspen, and Quill looked at each other and grinned. “Right under the Fosses!”

 Noelle’s eyes widened and Tamm jumped out of his seat. “You’re saying that we use the dynamite against the Fosses?”

 “Absolutely! If we blow it where most of their supplies and soldiers are, we could severely weaken them! Maybe even frighten them off! My king, we could win this war!” said Steele, very excited.

 Tamm’s eyes widened as realization dawned on him. Steele had a very good point. This may actually work! But Noelle had a few questions.

 “How are we going to get the dynamite to the front lines and without being detected by the Fosses?”

 “Well, erm, that’s the tricky part, my queen,” said Steele, slightly embarrassed.

 The entire room fell silent. It would be impossible to get the dynamite right up to the Fosses without being detected. They would have to find some other way.

 “What if we dug right beneath the Fosses, and lit the barrels down there?” Quill suggested.

 Tamm shook his head. “That’s a good idea, Quill, but I’m afraid it will take too long. We won’t last much longer; we’ve got to think of a solution that we can do within a day or so.”

 More silence. Then Aspen looked as if he was about to say something, but then he shook his head.

 “What is it, Aspen?” Noelle asked.

 “Nothing, my queen. I had an idea, but it’s probably too risky,” said Aspen.

 “Aspen, we’re pretty desperate here. All ideas, even risky ones, are welcomed,” said Tamm.

 Aspen cleared his throat before speaking. “What if we launched the barrels of dynamite into the main Fossa camp where their supplies are stored, then immediately shoot fire arrows at it? The thing is that doesn’t give our soldiers enough time to get away once the arrows. But that may not be a problem, depending on how far they are when they shoot.”

 “That…may work,” said Steele, looking at Tamm.

 “That’s definitely an option, but as you said, it may cost too many lives if the archers can’t get away in time. Let’s see if we can come up with any other ideas,” said Tamm. Aspen nodded respectfully.

 “The only other idea I can think of is actually going right up to the Fosses and lighting the barrels with a fuse. And that’s impossible,” said Noelle.

 “Is it?” said Tamm.

 “What do you mean?” asked Noelle, confused.

 “I mean, I don’t think it’s quite impossible. We’d just have to be extra careful and sneaky.”

 “Tamm, it’s much riskier than launching the dynamite. If we are found out, lives will be lost, and our entire plan is blown. At least with the other idea, the Fosses get blown up.”

 Tamm sighed. “You’re right, my dear. But I still don’t feel good about launching the dynamite. That just seems more likely to cause an accident.”

 Steele stepped up. “My king, we will stand by you in any decision you make. We will follow you to the death.”

 “Thank you, Steele, but I think we’d best vote on this. You are my most trusted general. And you, Aspen, have proved yourself a loyal soldier and scout. I trust your judgment. Steele, what do you think we should do?”

 “Your majesty, I believe it’s possible to sneak the dynamite right up to the Fosses. While it may be a little riskier, we won’t lose any soldiers if we pull it off,” said Steele.

 Tamm turned to Aspen. “What do you think we should do.”

 “I think we should launch the dynamite. It’s less risky and it will be more effective. And we may not lose any soldiers, depending on the distance that they will be shooting. And as the Queen said, if we’re found out trying to sneak the dynamite, the entire plan is over.”

 Tamm turned to Noelle.

 “I’m with Aspen. While I hate the possibility of losing lives like that, there’s a chance that won’t happen, and we’re much less likely to be found out,” said Noelle.

 “And I stand with Steele. We can’t afford to lose any more lives like that. And there’s just an accident waiting to happen if we launch the dynamite,” said Tamm.

 The vote was a tie. All eyes turned to Quill, who could cast the final decision.

 “Quill?” said Tamm.

 “My king…it’s not my place to make decisions like this. I’m just a palace guard,” said Quill timidly.

 “Quill, we need you to make a decision here. You’re the one who found the dynamite, so it’s only fair that you chose how we use it against the enemy,” said Tamm.

 Quill took a deep breath. “I think it’s best that we launch the dynamite.”

 Tamm rose from his seat. “Well, that settles it then! We launch the dynamite!”

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 Noelle crossed her arms and shook her head as she saw the many barrels of dynamite before her. “I can’t believe we didn’t notice this before. How did it even get down here?”

 Tamm shook his head. “I have no idea. But I’m glad Quill found it. This is enough to blow this entire palace and more sky high!”

 Tamm and Noelle were in the burrow filled with dynamite that Quill had found beneath the palace. Aspen and Quill had escorted the King and Queen back to the palace so they could see the dynamite for themselves. Steele had stayed behind at the border of Pinewood. It was very dark in the burrow, so Tamm and Noelle had to use light. But since dynamite was highly explosive, they couldn’t just use a torch. They had to use a lantern, so the risk of the dynamite lighting and exploding was much lower.

 “It’s going to be quite a task getting all this to the border and loaded up in the catapults,” said Tamm.

 “We’ve just got to be very careful. We can’t afford any mistakes,” said Noelle.

 The plan was to bring all the dynamite to the border of Pinewood Forest where the Fosses had most of their supplies. Then they would have to lift the barrels into trees where small, yet very powerful catapults were. They would be launched right into the Fossa camp, then immediately afterward, archers would release fire-tipped arrows into the camp. The archers would only have a few seconds to get out of range of the blast once they released the bowstrings. Steele had not yet found the best place for the archers to shoot from, but depending on the distance they would have to shoot, they may not be heavily hit by the blast.

 Noelle walked back to the ladder that led up to the lower levels of the palace. Aspen was up there. She looked up through the hole and Aspen peered down. “Is everyone ready? We’ve got a lot of work to do,” she said.

 “We’re all here and ready to get started,” answered Aspen.

 Noelle nodded and went back to Tamm. Aspen turned and nodded to the many squirrels lined up down the hall, who had left the safety of their homes to come to assist in bringing the dynamite to the front lines. “All right Omahas! Let’s blow those Fosses sky high!” Aspen shouted. A loud cheer rang up from the squirrels. Aspen’s plan to launch the dynamite then officially went into motion.

21

the perfect diversion

T

he morning after Serena had escaped, the Razorback hedgehog that brought breakfast noticed Serena’s absence. Instead of bullying and questioning Nick and Rose, he quickly dropped their breakfast and hurriedly ran out of the cell. He was back in no time with two guards, and they wordlessly grabbed Nick and Rose and roughly shoved them out of the cell and down the passageway without a word. The Razorbacks blindfolded them and pushed them along. Rose wished she could see where they were going so that she might know her way around better for escape. But the Razorbacks were smarter than that.

 Nick and Rose were knocked to their knees and the blindfolds were removed from their faces. They looked up at the Queen, her beady black eyes bearing down on them. The guards had taken them to the same they had been brought to the morning after they were captured.

 “Speak!” the Queen barked at the guards.

 “My Queen, there is a slave missing, from the same cell as these too,” said the guard who was holding Rose.

 “Missing?” the Queen screeched. Nick flinched and Rose cringed. They were in for it now. The Queen would have them killed and they would never see Serena or Pinewood Forest again. At least Serena had escaped to complete the mission.

 “Yes, my Queen. I personally saw that three squirrels entered the cell last night, and this morning, there were only these two,” said the guard.

 The Queen’s gaze fell on Nick and Rose. They closed their eyes and prepared to meet the Creator.

 “What happened to the other slave?” the Queen demanded.

 Nick and Rose remained silent, praying to the Creator for strength to remain silent.

 “Answer me!” the Queen shouted, enraged.

 Nick and Rose didn’t say a word. They would not, could not, endanger Serena in any way like this.

 The Queen lost her patience. “Very well then, execute them! And find the missing slave!”

 “Your majesty, if I may speak,” began a nervous guard holding Nick.

 “What is it?” the Queen snapped impatiently.

 “Well, executing them may not be the best thing to do. We can’t really spare any slaves if we want to get the tunnels finished before winter sets in. These two squirrels work in the tunnels, and we need them,” Nick’s guard answered rather timidly.

 Rose expected the Queen to snap at the guard and continue her order, but to her surprise, she looked thoughtful.

 The guard continued, braver. “The other slaves needn’t ever know one escaped. We will just punish these two privately, and the other slaves won’t know that anything happened and won’t get any ideas about rebellion. Besides, if these two know how the other one escaped, why didn’t they escape as well? She could have escaped somehow while they were sleeping.”

 That did it. “Very well,” the Queen said. “Whip them, then lock them in their cell with no food or water for the rest of the day. But still, find the other slave and kill her! We will not let a slave get away with this!”

 Nick and Rose breathed a sigh of relief, but they were scared for Serena. They prayed that she was long gone by now and that the Razorbacks wouldn’t catch up with her. Nick suddenly felt gratitude to the guard who had spoken up. A Razorback or not, he had saved their lives. He couldn’t help but smile a little as he and Rose were roughly dragged off.

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 Pain. Blinding, searing pain. That was all that Nick and Rose felt as they lay only half-conscious in their cell. The whipping they had received for helping Serena escape had been brutal, but it was worth it. Serena was now free, and she was on her way to Veradoom to save Pinewood and Penetralia. The Creator was with her, and He would watch over her. He would protect her from the Razorbacks if they found her, and from any other dangers out there. Serena was free, and that was all that mattered.

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 If Rose had thought she used her entire brain function and energy before she had left on this mission, she wouldn’t have been able to imagine her situation now. Serena was gone on her own, traveling across dangerous and unfamiliar territory to a volcano where dragons dwelled, and Rose and Nick had made her a promise. They had promised would escape and come for her, and Rose had never broken a promise before. So all Nick and Rose thought about were possible ways of escape. Clara helped a good bit too, offering ideas and suggestions, and telling Rose all she knew about the underground dwelling of The Razorbacks. Rose didn’t know what they would do without her.

 Besides using their entire brains’ functions, Nick and Rose drained themselves physically every day with the hard labor they were forced to do. The work was not only hard, but mind-numbing, so Nick and Rose were glad their minds were completely preoccupied with something very important. If their minds hadn’t been so active, Rose was sure they would become like all the other slaves; mindless and hopeless.

 Clara was telling Rose of some of her ideas one day as the two were hauling rocks and dirt to The Way Out. “The more I think about your idea of a diversion, the more I think that’s the best and only way.”

 Rose nodded. “I agree. I’m not seeing any other option.”

 “And I have also been thinking of something else…” Clara began.

 “Yes?” asked Rose, interested.

 Clara continued. “Depending on the diversion, what if we made it so big, that it literally destroys this underground area, and all the slaves could escape? Or at least gives them the opportunity to do so?”

 Rose was quiet, thinking hard about what Clara had just proposed. After a long minute or two, she spoke. “It would have to depend on what exactly the diversion is. But if we can do that, we absolutely should.”

 Clara smiled wickedly. “Let’s not escape without doing some damage. Let’s start a revolution,” she whispered.

 Rose smiled. “I’m sure we’ll do something of that sort when we escape.” Then she winced, pain shooting from her back from where she had been whipped a few days before.

 Clara noticed Rose’s distress. “I’m so sorry that happened. I know it makes the work so much harder,” she whispered.

 Rose shrugged it off. “I’ll survive. I’m just glad Serena got out. I hope the Razorbacks don’t catch her.”

 “They won’t,” Clara reassured her. “The Creator is with your friend.”

 Rose smiled as she shoveled dirt out of her wheelbarrow. “Now you’re starting to sound like me when I first got here.”

 “Well, at least one of us is,” whispered Clara as she turned and headed back down the passage with her head hung low.

 Rose caught up with her. “I understand if you don’t want to talk about it, but do you have a family? What did you do before… you know?” she whispered.

 Clara fell silent and her head hung even lower. Rose thought she could see a single tear run down her furry cheek.

 “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t have…” Rose began.

 “No, it’s all right,” Clara interrupted. “I lived on a farm, with my parents and many brothers and sisters. We grew vegetables and sold them in Tampa.”

 “Oh. I’ve been to Tampa when we began our mission.”

 “I got captured when I was making a trip there with a few of my siblings. They managed to escape, but I wasn’t as fortunate,” Clara continued, her voice still in a hushed whisper and emotion choking her words.

 “I’m so sorry…” Rose began, but she couldn’t find the words to finish. No wonder Clara seemed so set on doing damage on their way out. They had taken her away from her family, her life.

 Clara quickly wiped her eyes and collected herself. “Thank you. So, what’s your story?”

 “My parents died when I was very young, and I pretty much raised myself. Nick and I grew up together. I tell you; it wasn’t always easy being Pinewood’s heir’s best friend.”

 “I can imagine,” remarked Clara.

 “I was always teased, and I didn’t have many other friends. But I didn’t mind. I was happy being a loner. I was always the one getting Nick in trouble, and the one getting him out of it too. When we were caught, he always took the blame upon himself. I always thought and always will think that is the bravest and sweetest thing a friend could ever do for you.”

 “Nick truly sounds amazing. I can’t wait to meet him. I’ve never actually met Serena before either, but she seems like the type of sister that would tease you relentlessly of that sort of thing.”

 “Absolutely. But Nick and I learned to ignore her and the others. Serena has always been kind of a strange youngling. She has always had this peculiar fascination with the Firewing dragons, and fire in general. Like she is just obsessed with them, or drawn to them. I can’t get my mind around it.”

 “Odd…” Clara trailed off.

 Then Rose had it, or at least she did for a split second. The perfect diversion. *What was it? I just had it! Was it something I said?* Rose thought about what she had just said, willing the idea to spring up in her mind again.

 Then she saw the fire-lit torches hanging along the walls of the passageway. *Fire…*

 “Fire…” Rose said in a barely audible whisper.

 “What?” asked Clara, confused.

 “Fire… the Firewings…” Rose continued to mumble.

 “Rose…” Clara began.

 Then Rose’s head snapped up. It came back to her. “I have it! The perfect diversion!”

 Clara’s paw was over Rose’s mouth in a flash. “Shh! Not so loud!”

 The two friends stood perfectly motionless for what felt like an eternity, waiting for a guard who had heard Rose to come rounding the corner. But to their great relief, no guard came along, and no one had heard her. Clara removed her paw from Rose’s mouth and Rose breathed a sigh of relief.

 “Now,” whispered Clara. “What is this perfect diversion?”

 Rose smiled mischievously. “Fire.”

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 “I have a solution,” said Rose as soon as she and Nick were back in their cell that night.

 “Thank the Creator!” breathed Nick. He knew Rose would come up with something.

 “It involves fire.”

 Nick sat up, alarmed. “Absolutely not.”

 Rose was taken aback. “I have a way to get us out of here,” she said, confused.

 “But using fire is a horrible idea! I was thinking we sneak out, not cause a whole scene and get caught,” Nick explained.

 Rose shook her head. “No, no, no, you don’t understand. Fire is only a diversion. We’ll make it so big that all the guards will be focused on it. We’ll escape through The Way Out.”

 Nick frowned. “Okay, but it still sounds risky.”

 “Besides, we’ll be doing great damage to the Razorbacks. Give them a taste of their own medicine. Clara doesn’t want to leave without teaching them a lesson. And it’ll give the slaves an opportunity to escape as well,” reasoned Rose.

 Nick’s ears perked up. “You’re right! We would be giving all the other slaves a chance to escape!”

 Rose smiled and leaned forward. “So, what do you say?”

 Nick grinned. “This is a terrible, horrible, incredibly foolish idea. Let’s do it and see what happens.”

22

Taking a Risk

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ire. Rose truly believed it was the perfect diversion. It was everywhere on torches along the walls of the tunnels, so getting some wouldn’t be a problem. Fire was also dangerous, which would mean the diversion would be serious and large enough to attract all the guard’s attention. And if the diversion was largely successful, the fire would get so big and spread so quickly that the guards in The Way Out would be forced to abandon their post and aid in putting out the flames, leaving a clear shot of escape for Nick, Rose, Clara, and all the other slaves who woke up and saw their opportunity.

 While fire was the best distraction, Nick and Rose would still have to take risks in order to carry out this diversion. First of all, they still hadn’t worked out details, and Rose wasn’t sure how and where they would actually start the fire. Rose was thinking maybe in a main corridor where many tunnels led off of, because there were more highly flammable objects in the corridors. The only problem with that was that there were always guards standing at their post in the corridor. They never went anywhere. If they were to start the fire in the corridor, they would have to act fast. There would be no room for slipups, and once started, they would be committed. There would be no turning back. That was why Nick, Rose, and Clara thought about this long and carefully, weighing and thinking through every possibility and risk.

 “But no matter what we do,” Nick said to Rose when they were alone in their cell one night. “There’s always going to be a great risk. There are no completely safe options here. We just have to choose the less risky one if we can.”

 Rose nodded understandingly. “I see, but I just want to make sure this will work. I’ll never forgive myself if this fails because I didn’t think of a good plan.”

 “Rose, that doesn’t sound like you. You’ve always been the one to take risks and get into dangerous situations. And Rose, if we do fail, it won’t be your fault. The Creator alone knows if this is going to work, and nothing you can do will change that. He may get us out of here, or He may not. But He knows what He’s doing and He’s in control. We can trust him,” said Nick.

 Rose smiled at him. “Thanks Nick. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

 “Ha! You’d be in a whole heap of trouble from those situations we got ourselves into as younglings! I was the one taking the blame and getting you out of trouble.” Nick laughed.

 “You’re absolutely right,” Rose smiled.

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 All this thinking and straining of the mind went on for another day, then Clara remarked rather abruptly, “You know, I think we’re completely overthinking all this.”

 Rose didn’t look up from her work, but she still looked shocked. “What do you mean, we’re overthinking this?”

 “Well, we’ve been constantly looking for the least risky solution, and by that, we’re looking for a solution that provides little risk. I now believe that that solution doesn’t even exist. We won’t find it,” said Clara.

 Rose blinked, still confused.

 Clara noticed Rose’s silent and visible confusion. “What I’m trying to say is, that we’re making this more complicated than it has to be. We just have to go and take this chance. There’s no safe solution. If there were, we would have thought of it by now.”

 Rose sighed. She hated to admit it, but Clara was probably right. They had been looking for a solution that didn’t exist. Nick had tried to tell her. *Of course I was overthinking this! I am such a furbrain!* She thought, feeling rather foolish.

 “You’re probably right. Thanks, Clara.”

 Clara nodded curtly, but whispered nicely, “Don’t feel bad. I’m sure you’re under a lot of pressure. You shouldn’t have to do all the thinking by yourself.”

 “Right again. I should have learned that a long time ago. What do you propose we do then?”

 “Simple,” said Clara. “We’ll light the fire right off the main corridor. The Razorbacks keep a stash of oil there to keep the torches burning. We don’t want to start it right in the corridor, or it might block off the slave’s chance of escape. I’ll grab the oil and spill it all over the floor and the flammable objects. You grab a torch and light it all up. The fire should immediately consume everything and spread. The alarm should spread quickly as well, and Nick and the other slaves will see what is happening and make their escape. We’ll have to act fast though.”

 “That sounds incredibly risky…” Rose began, but stopped herself. “Sorry. It’s going to be risky no matter what we do. It’s a good plan Clara. I’ll tell Nick tonight.”

 “Let’s plan on pulling it off tomorrow if nothing comes up,” whispered Clara.

 “Wait, tomorrow?” asked Rose, her heart suddenly beating faster.

 “Yes, tomorrow. The sooner we do this, the sooner we can be out of here.”

 “Alright. Tomorrow it is. I’ll tell Nick.”

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 “Wait, tomorrow?” Nick’s reaction to what Rose had told him was just the same as Rose’s when Clara told her that they should try to escape the very next day.

 “Yes. There’s no reason to wait,” said Rose.

 “Do we even know what we’re doing? I’m digging the tunnels all day, so I can’t be of much help.”

 “I know. You won’t have to do anything except wait and be ready to run.”

 “So, does this mean you and Clara thought of a plan?”

 “Yes. Well, Clara did.”

 Nick sat down on his mat and leaned forward eagerly, willing Rose to continue.

 Rose took a deep breath and spoke. “I’ve been overthinking this whole thing. I was searching for a plan that wasn’t too risky. Clara helped me realize that such a plan didn’t exist. You tried to tell me that too, Nick, and I’m sorry I didn’t realize this sooner.”

 Nick nodded. “I was trying to tell you something of that sort. But it’s all right, you realize that now. Please, continue.”

 “The plan is so simple; I should have thought of it long ago. I was totally overthinking everything. We will light the fire right off the main corridor. Clara says they keep a stash of oil nearby for the torches, and she will spill some. I then will grab a torch and light it up. As soon as you sense something’s wrong and the guards start running off, run for it. We’ll meet you outside The Way Out.”

 “Wait, I’ve never been to The Way Out. How do I know which way to go?” asked Nick.

 “Follow any passage that is leading up. All passages leading up will take you there eventually. You can’t miss it,” informed Rose.

 “All right,” said Nick rather hesitantly. “You and Clara have to work fast, though. Please don’t get caught.”

 “Don’t worry about us,” said Rose. “Just focus on getting out. Try to get as many slaves as possible to come with you. If you make it out and don’t see us for a while, don’t wait for us. Go on to Veradoom.”

 Nick frowned but nodded. “Same goes with you. Don’t wait for me if I don’t appear. Serena needs someone to come for her. I…I don’t think she can make the trip back to Pinewood all by herself.”

 Rose shook her head. “No, I don’t think she can either. That’s why she needs us.”

 “The Creator is with her, Rose. Even if we aren’t.”

 Rose nodded and drew in a deep breath, letting it out slowly. Tomorrow would either go terribly right or terribly wrong. They would either escape and catch up to Serena, or they would get caught and be killed. There was no in-between outcome. Only the Creator knew what would happen tomorrow. They would simply have to trust Him.

 “We should get some sleep,” said Nick, breaking into Rose’s thoughts. “We have a big day tomorrow, and we don’t want to screw it up.”

 Rose nodded. “We should try, at least. I doubt we’re going to get any though.”

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 Nick and Rose found it nearly impossible to choke down their breakfast of stale bread the next morning. They tried to calm down and act normal, but their hearts wouldn’t stop pounding. Nick’s was pounding so hard and fast that he was sure a guard might hear it. While he was at the end of the tunnel and began digging, he could hardly hold his pickaxe steady and firmly. He forced himself to calm down and clear his head so he could be ready to run once Clara and Rose started the fire. The morning dragged on painfully slow.

 Nick started to get slightly concerned when he guessed it was about noon, and still there was no sign that Rose and Clara started the fire. Everything and everyone were going about normally. *What could be keeping them? Are they waiting for something? What if they tried but got caught?* Nick couldn’t stop those thoughts as they bombarded his brain. *Just calm down Nick. You’re overreacting. They’re probably just waiting for the right timing without arousing any suspicions. The Creator is in control, the Creator is in control.*

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 Clara and Rose were indeed waiting for the right timing. They couldn’t get to the area right off the corridor where they wanted to start the fire. A guard just so happened to make his post right in front of the path Clara would need to take in order to spill the oil, and if she tried to run around him, she would surely get caught. So they continued on as normal, each time as they passed through that corridor, looking to see if the guard had moved. He didn’t. He looked as if he were planning to stay there all day. *No! We don’t have time for this. We’ve got to do something!* Rose was screaming in her head. Clara’s face was perfectly expressionless, like all the other slaves. But when they were able to whisper to each other, Rose could tell she was anxious as well.

 Finally, when the sun was high in the sky, Rose decided that they couldn’t wait any longer. They would have to get past the guard somehow, and do it quickly. She whispered to Clara while they were dumping their load in The Way Out. “We can’t wait any longer. When we get to that corridor, be ready to run to the oil as soon as you see the guard move from his post.”

 “What? But what if he’s still there?” asked Clara, alarmed.

 “Just trust me. Be ready to run and spill the oil. We’re not waiting any longer,” said Rose determinedly, and before Clara could ask any more questions, she turned and headed back down the passage, her heart beating wildly. Clara gulped nervously and followed right behind her. *Please Creator, please don’t let Rose do anything reckless or foolhardy. Please let this work*, she prayed desperately.

 That trip down the passage that Rose had done so many times seemed to be much shorter than it really was. She clutched the handles on her wheelbarrow tightly, preparing herself for what she was about to do.

 Once in the corridor, Rose only hesitated for a second before flinging her wheelbarrow aside and rushing straight at the guard who blocked their path to the oil. She was so quick that the guard couldn’t even react when he saw her come right at him. Rose leaped up and drove a well-aimed kick square on his jaw, putting her full body weight in the blow. He stumbled backward, recovered himself, and charged after Rose, who was running in between the legs of three other guards in the corridor who were trying to catch her. Rose was too quick for them, and she ran in circles and dove between their legs.

 It was just then when Clara recovered from her shock and saw what Rose was doing. She had gotten the guard away from the oil. She didn’t hesitate. Clara ran into the fray, dodging the roaring hedgehogs, and bounding into the small cave area where unlit torches and oil were kept. There were also other wooden supplies, like digging tools. Perfect fire starters. She grabbed a pail of oil and sloshed the liquid all over anything that was made of wood and out in the corridor. Rose saw that Clara had done her part, and it was time she did hers. She leaped up and grabbed a lit torch off the wall, and ran into the small cave area where Clara had spilled the oil. Rose just narrowly dodged a burly guard who had thrown himself at her, and dove into the room, dropping the torch right on the oil. It immediately ignited and spread like nothing else. In a matter of a few seconds, the entire room was engulfed in flames. Clara and Rose ran out and into the corridor. The guards seemed to forget about Clara and Rose and began attempting to put out the flames, which were already spreading into the corridor.

 “FIRE!” Clara shouted at the top of her lungs. “EVERYBODY RUN!”

 Everything after was a world of panic. Guards came rushing in to aid in the extinguishing of the flames, but the fire was getting out of control. Clara and Rose ran down the tunnels, dodging guards and shaking every slave they ran into, hoping to wake them up and get them to escape. Many did and joined Rose and Clara in the attempt to get as many slaves as possible out. Rose hoped that Nick now realized what was happening, and was able to get out before he was trapped down there.

 Once in The Way Out, Clara and Rose began shouting “Fire!” at the top of their lungs. The guards immediately looked up and saw the smoke pouring out of the tunnels. They didn’t hesitate. They pushed past the slaves and ran into the passage, ignoring the running slaves and trying to save their home which had taken years to build.

 Clara and Rose reached the dirt fortress walls and began helping the slaves climb up and escape to freedom. Once the slaves were in the woods outside the fortress, they ran off, not looking back.

 As Rose helped more and more slaves over the fortress walls and as the fire grew worse, she began to worry. She hadn’t seen Nick, and if he was still in the tunnels, it wasn’t likely he could get out now. She helped other slaves who had obviously worked digging the tunnels like Nick, so that meant those slaves had gotten the warning and escaped. But Nick still wasn’t anywhere to be seen.

 Soon, there were only a few slaves left in The Way Out, running to the fortress walls. Clara leapt on top and stretched her paw down to Rose. “Come on! We’ve got to go now! The fire’s getting worse!”

 “I haven’t seen Nick!” shouted Rose, hesitant to leave the fortress without him.

 “He might have already escaped. There are plenty of slaves who escaped on their own. We have to go! We’ll search for him out there.”

 Rose hesitated, looked back, then took Clara’s paw. Clara pulled her up and the two friends leaped down out of the dirt fortress and into freedom. They were free at last.

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 Clara and Rose huddled together for warmth beneath a large oak tree some distance from the burning home of the Razorbacks. They had been there for several hours now, watching the flames soar up to the night sky, and waiting for Nick. They hadn’t seen him, and Rose was definitely worried now. She felt sick as she beheld the scene she and Clara had caused. The Razorback’s dwelling was completely destroyed. Their diversion had been far more successful than they had thought it would be. Rose couldn’t help but feel a twinge of guilt.

 Clara took the shivering Rose’s paw. “Look, Rose. We’d better get moving. We can’t stay here. I’m so sorry we haven’t found Nick.”

 “Just a little longer, please,” begged Rose. She knew she had promised Nick she would go on without him, but she wanted to stay a little longer. She might just miss him if she left now.

 “All right,” said Clara. “But we can’t stay here all night.”

 Rose nodded. “I know. Just a few more minutes. I don’t want to go without Nick.”

 But after fifteen more minutes had passed without Nick showing up, Rose very grudgingly rose to her feet and allowed Clara to guide her away from the fire and deep into the woods. Rose felt sick, like she had just abandoned her best friend, which technically she did. She couldn’t believe she was doing this. *You made a promise, Rose! You’ve never broken a promise before, and let’s keep it that way. The Creator will take care of Nick. You need to get to Serena.*

 Rose felt slightly better after thinking those thoughts. The Creator was with Nick, and He would take care of him. Serena was out here all alone, and she needed Rose to be with her. And besides, hadn’t Rose promised she would come for her anyway? Yes, she did, and Rose had never broken a promise.

 Rose looked up to the sky and thought she could just make out an orange glow of fire in the distance above the treetops. *Veradoom. We’re so close. Why, Serena could be at the Penetralian Coast already!*

 She turned to Clara. “I need to get to the Penetralian Coast. Where will you go?”

 As if just realizing she was free to go wherever she wanted, Clara blinked and looked confused and overwhelmed. “Why… I guess I’ll try to go home.”

 Rose smiled. “I wish you a safe journey and that you’ll find your family safe.”

 Clara smiled back. “Thank you, Rose. I…”

 “Rose?” Nick’s voice called from a distance.”

 Rose’s ears perked up. “Nick?” she called back, getting excited.

 “Rose!” He answered, sounding excited as well.

 Rose dashed off into the woods towards the direction she had heard Nick call. Clara was right behind her. Then she saw him. He was barely visible in the darkness, but Rose could see it was him by his unmistakable bushy tail. She ran up to him and hugged him tightly. Then she let him go and looked at him. Nick was covered from head to foot in black soot and he smelled strongly of smoke. “Well,” Rose said in mock severity. “You’re late! You gave me a real fright, you know that?”

 Nick smiled, his white teeth shining against his blackened fur. “I’m glad to see you too, Rose.”

23

The Plan Unfolds

I

 heard that the King has got a plan to win this war. Do you think it’s true?”

 “I don’t know, but I hope so! I have just about had it with The Conqueror and his villainous fosses. Why is he so set on conquering Pinewood? Why can’t he just go back to the Dark Mountains and leave decent creatures alone? What did we ever do to him?”

 “Sometime creatures just want power, and to watch Penetralia burn.”

 Two archer squirrels in Pinewood Forest’s Scurry were standing beneath a tree with a with a rope bridge and a small hutch in its heights. They were currently on guard duty, and a light drizzle of rain was coming down from the sky. Things were fairly quiet at the moment, so these two archers were chatting and catching up on the latest news.

 “What could it possibly be? It seems as if we’ve tried everything we can!” archer number one wondered aloud.

 Archer number two shrugged. “Apparently not everything. The King has found something.”

 “I can’t possibly imagine,” number one stated again.

 “Well that’s not saying much. You don’t have much imagination anyway,” number two teased.

 Number one lightly punched number two. “That’s not true!”

 Number two rolled his eyes. “Everyone knows it’s true.”

 “You take that back!”

 Just then another archer appeared out of nowhere. The other two who were standing guard readied their weapons in a heartbeat. They lowered them when they realized it was just another archer.

 “You two soldiers get over here! We need every spare paw we can get!” the third archer said breathlessly.

 “What’s going on?” number two questioned.

 “Haven’t you heard! The King’s plan is in motion, but he needs help! Come on!”

 Number two turned to number one. “You stay here, I’ll go help.”

 Number one nodded dumbly.

 “We need both of you,” said number three.

 “We don’t have permission to leave our post. Just one of us leaving is bad enough.”

 “Alright, alright. Let’s go!”

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 Things were going better than Tamm had first anticipated. There had been many eager volunteers to help in transporting the dynamite, so the task was running quickly. The dynamite was either loaded in what few carts were available, or was just carried by two or three able-bodied squirrels. Every creature was cooperating and following orders, and things were going smoothly at the moment. The only thing that put a damper on the task (quite literally) was the light, but ever-steady drizzle of rain. In order for the dynamite to work at its best was to keep it completely dry. So the squirrels helping with the task had to cover the barrels of dynamite with thick clothes, which were, unfortunately, in short supply and difficult to find. Pinewood’s Scurry needed supplies like that.

 But other than that, the plan’s success was looking very probable so far. Tamm would have jumped in and helped carry a barrel of dynamite, but Noelle wouldn’t hear of it. He was still recovering from his wound, and being out in the rain didn’t help anything. Tamm begrudgingly agreed with his insistent wife. After all, Noelle knew what she was doing and she was right. So Tamm supervised the task with General Steele. Noelle and Aspen were at the front of the train of squirrels transporting the dynamite towards the border of Pinewood Forest where the enemy’s supplies were the most heavily stocked. Tamm and General Steele led the train through the maze of pine trees.

 Aspen ran up to Tamm and saluted. “All is going smoothly, my king. But we need to find more cloths or move faster because the rain is not good for the dynamite. And it seems to be getting worse.”

 “Have you gotten every blanket and cloth the Scurry can spare? And the other Omahas?” questioned Tamm.

 “We have, my king. We still have squirrels out looking for more as we speak.”

 Tamm nodded. “Good. Do whatever you can to keep the dynamite dry, but be careful. If it’s possible, try to pick up the pace too.”

 Aspen saluted again and was off. Noelle jogged up to Tamm and linked her elbow with his, matching his stride. Her fur was damp and she looked exhausted, yet hopeful.

 Tamm looked concerned. “Noelle, you look exhausted.”

 She smiled weakly. “I’m all right. I just came to check up on you.”

 “I’m fine, but you really should take a break.”

 “No, there’s too much to do. They need my help.”

 Tamm still looked worried, but he didn’t argue. She was strong, and they did need her. “I hope this works,” he said, changing the subject.

 “Yes, me too. It will work, I just know it.”

 Tamm smiled from beneath the hood covering his head. “That’s what I love about you, dear. You’re always optimistic and brave in the worst of times.”

 Noelle squeezed his paw. “Not always, remember? You were the one who remained optimistic and brave when we were on that crazy adventure and thought all was lost. I was the one wallowing in hopelessness and self-pity.”

 Tamm laughed. “Oh yeah!”

 Noelle squeezed his paw again before dropping back to the train of squirrels and helping carry a barrel of dynamite. “Let’s move it, Omahas! We can do this!” she called back to the crowd.

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 It took all afternoon and evening, but they finally got all the dynamite to the front lines and hidden safely in hollow pine trees with large catapults built into them. Each catapult could hold about three barrels of dynamite. Squirrel teams stood at each catapult, ready to load and fire when the signal was given. The rain was coming down harder, so they kept the dynamite in the trees and decided not to load it up until they were ready to be launched.

 Tamm had his paws full of organizing all this with General Steele. The hardest part of the task was to keep it as quiet and secret as possible. They were not far at all from the enemy’s main camp, their target. Steele, thankfully, had organized little scuffles on the other side of Pinewood Forest to keep the Fosses’s wary eyes focused there, and it seemed to be working.

 Noelle and Aspen were focused on organizing the archers who would be firing the flaming arrows at the dynamite once it was launched. Noelle had called out for any volunteers for the job, and to her surprise, she got more than enough eager young archers from Pinewood’s Scurry. They were ready to do what they had to save their forest. These archers would be stationed at the furthest possible distance from the Fossa camp but would have to be closer than the catapults. Once the dynamite was launched, they would fire a volley of flaming arrows right at where the dynamite had landed. As soon as they had let go of the bowstring, they were to fall back as fast as they could. The blast that would follow would be tremendous, and they would surely be killed if they didn’t retreat as hastily as possible. It was risky business, but it was a risk they had to take.

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 “My king,” Noelle said as she neatly curtsied. “We are ready. We await your command.”

 It was almost midnight, and the rain had stopped. King Tamm Omaha looked up to the night sky, the moon breaking through the clouds. Its light was shining upon Noelle, making her fur shimmer beautifully. Tamm closed his eyes and said a quick prayer to the Creator. The events that would happen tonight and the next day could either go amazingly well or terribly wrong. Pinewood Forest would either rise or fall. Noelle took Tamm’s paw and squeezed it. Then he opened his eyes and nodded. It was time.

 “Steele, prepare the catapults.”

 Steele saluted and was off.

 “Aspen, make sure the archers are ready to fire.”

 Aspen saluted and obeyed. Noelle began after him, but Tamm grabbed her paw. “No, you’re staying back here.”

 “But I thought I was going to be with the archers,” Noelle said, confused.

 “Aspen can lead the archers. He’s more than capable of doing so. I need you back here where it’s safe. I can’t bear to lose you,” said Tamm quietly.

 “Tamm please…” Noelle begged.

 “No, Noelle. I won’t let you. Please, stay here with me.”

 Noelle collected herself and stood tall. “I will stay by your side to the very end, my king.”

 Tamm smiled. “Good. Now, let’s blow the Fosses to the sky!” Then he picked up his horn and blew a loud, clear note into the night sky. It drifted through the towering pine trees, and every squirrel who stood ready heard it. There was only a moment of silence, then Steele shouted.

 “Release the catapults!”

 There was a loud swish and dull thud as the catapults were released and the dynamite flew into the air, headed right towards the Fossa camp. The dynamite went right over the ready archers’ heads and landed with loud crashes right on the target.

 “Fire!” Aspen shouted. The archers quickly lighted their arrows and sent a volley that lit the sky right into the now exposed and scattered dynamite. As soon as their arrows were released from the bowstring, Aspen and the archers turned back into Pinewood Forest faster than a hare with its tail on fire. There were then a few terrifying moments that seemed to pass in slow motion, then the entire world burst into bright orange flames.

24

Veradoom

R

ose gave Nick a light shove. “You scared me to death! Don’t ever be late like that again!” Then she hugged him tight. “Are you okay?”

Nick lightly patted Rose’s back. “I’m not hurt bad. Just a little singed, is all. And extremely sore.”

 Clara stepped up and stook out her paw. “Hi! You must be this Nick I’ve heard so much about. I’m Clara.”

 Nick took Clara’s paw and shook it. “It’s good to finally meet you. Rose has told me a lot about you too. Thank you so much for all your help.”

 Clara shrugged and looked down. “I did what little I could.”

 “Oh don’t listen to her. She was the biggest help ever,” Rose spoke up.

 “Well, I wouldn’t have been if you hadn’t tried talking to me and reminding me of the truth,” remarked Clara.

 Rose nodded in mock self-importance. “That is true.” But then she shook her head seriously. “Don’t thank me. Thank the Creator.”

 “So…” Nick began, looking back to the glow of the fire between the trees in the distance. “This actually worked? We’re free?”

 Rose followed his gaze. They had actually done it. They had destroyed the Razorback’s underground prison, and they were free, along with many more slaves. The journey could continue now, and they were so close to the Penetralian Coast and Veradoom. Serena was probably already there, and they needed to catch up with her. There was no telling what she would do when she was actually in the presence of a real live Firewing dragon.

 “Yeah, we did it,” Rose said in awe. “We’re free.”

 “Thank the Creator,” Nick breathed.

 Rose snapped out of her little daze. She suddenly turned to Nick. “You have a story to tell! Why were you so late getting out? Didn’t you run as soon as you saw signs of a fire?”

 “I tried to, but the guards held us back.”

 “What?”

 “Three guards stayed and tried their best to hold us back. A lot of creatures were able to make it past them, but I was among those who couldn’t. Even when it was clear all was lost, they still held us back. I don’t know why. After what felt like an eternity, another guard showed up and began fighting with the guards holding us back and shouting at us to run. Rose, I think it was the same guard that saved our lives from the Queen. He must have secretly hated the Razorbacks and wanted to help us. He allowed me and the other slaves to run free! It was a miracle!

 “By the time I was able to run free, the smoke was so thick I couldn’t see where I was going. Some of the passages had collapsed and were completely blocked. I don’t know how long I was stumbling around in there, but I finally made it out and found you two. I tell you, the Creator had to have been with me. I don’t think I would have made it out without His help.”

 Rose was speechless. A Razorback had intentionally helped Nick escape? It was almost unbelievable. But that one guard had saved their lives when they had helped Serena escape, and nothing is impossible with the Creator. This was truly nothing less than a miracle.

 “We had a secret ally,” Clara said, barely audible.

 “Yes. If only we knew sooner,” said Nick.

 “Do you know what happened to that guard?” asked Rose. If he survived, they may be able to find him and thank him.

 Nick shook his head. “I don’t know, but I think it’s likely he was killed.”

 Rose hung her head and there was a moment of respectful silence.

 Nick broke the silence. “Well, we’d best get to Serena. Creator knows what kind of trouble she has gotten herself into out on her own.”

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 Rose didn’t realize how much she would miss Clara until they said goodbye. Besides Nick, Clara had been her best friend in captivity. They had become close, and they had helped each other get through each day of hard labor. Even though Rose hadn’t known her very long, she felt like they had been best friends for years. But she and Nick had to go. Serena needed them and they had a promise to keep. Clara couldn’t go with them; she had to get back to her family, which probably presumed her dead.

 “I’m going to miss her, you know,” Rose said to Nick as they began traveling to Veradoom in the dark.

 Nick put his paw on her shoulder. “You’ll see her again someday.”

 “I hope so,” Rose sighed.

 “Right now, we’ve got to focus on the task at hand. We should reach Veradoom by tomorrow morning if we travel through the night.”

 “We really shouldn’t be doing this. Traveling at night, I mean. We could easily get lost, and we’re both exhausted. It won’t do us any good to arrive there and not be even able to stand.”

 Nick stopped walking. “You’re right. But remember last time we stopped for the night?”

 Rose quickly scrambled up the nearest tree. “We’ll sleep up here where it’s much safer. We will still reach Veradoom tomorrow.”

 Nick looked anxiously south to where Veradoom was. “But, Serena…”

 “Nick listen, it won’t do us or Serena any good to catch up with her and we’re half dead with exhaustion. We at least just need a few hours’ sleep; we don’t have to sleep till morning. We won’t make it to Veradoom in our current conditions.”

 Nick couldn’t argue with that. Rose was right. He became suddenly aware of how exhausted, physically and mentally, he was. He could barely climb up the tree to where Rose lay curled up on a thick branch, her eyes already closed. Nick climbed on the branch next to hers and slumped down against the trunk where he promptly fell asleep.

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 Veradoom was not what you would call just plain beautiful. While it was indeed beautiful, it was also dark and terrible. A ring of thick fog, smoke, and ash always surrounded the island volcano, so no one could actually see it well without actually passing the ring of fog. The volcano had always been active since the beginning of time, and hot lava and fire were always pouring from the top. The fog gave the fire an eerie and foreboding appearance from a distance. Inside the volcano was where the red beauties dwelt. Huge caverns, corridors, and passages were everywhere inside the volcano, and it was the perfect home for the Firewings. Its environment was their natural habitat with fire and lava.

 The only problem with living in a volcano was that there was no immediate access to the pine sap that they needed to fertilize their eggs. It was possible for an egg to survive and hatch without sap, but it was rare, and only a few Firewings were hatched over the years since Pinewood Forest (their only access to the pine sap) fell. They were slowly dying off.

 Now as Nick and Rose lay on their stomachs on a sand dune, looking at the ring of fog that glowed red in the clear night sky, they could see why Serena had said it was indeed beautiful and terrible. It was truly a sight to behold. They could just see the mountain’s dark form through the thick fog and smoke.

 “Serena’s in there,” Nick barely audibly whispered to himself. He was clearly concerned for his little sister.

 Rose took his paw. “She’ll be all right. Come on, there’s a small boat right down there. It’s not a very long distance to row.”

 The two friends slid down the sand dune and ran down to the small rowboat that looked ancient. Under normal circumstances, Nick wouldn’t have trusted it for an instant, but this was an emergency, and he didn’t see any other option. Rose hopped in the boat and grabbed the oars, which were covered in green algae of some sort. Nick gave the boat a hard shove into the water then quickly scrambled in and, taking an oar from Rose, began rapidly rowing to meet an oncoming wave.

 After only about fifteen minutes of hard rowing, Nick and Rose reached the ring of fog. For one moment, all was clear and they could still see the coast, and then the next they were completely enveloped in thick smoke, ash, and fog. They couldn’t see where they were going at all, but they kept pressing forward, knowing they would reach the island volcano at any moment. Rose coughed. It was getting harder to breathe with all the smoke. She panicked a little when she realized that if they were going in circles, they would probably suffocate in a short amount of time.

 Nick had to force himself to focus on rowing forward, and not in circles. He longed to look up in around at the eerie red light that broke through the fog. But if he didn’t focus on rowing, he would probably stray off course. That could not, would not, happen.

 Finally, after what felt like an eternity, Nick and Rose suddenly came out of the ring of fog. They both stopped rowing and gasped at the towering volcano looming just ahead of them. Glowing red lava spewed from the top and ran down its sides and into the ocean, and the entire mountain was pitch black rock with glowing red cracks running through it. Even the ocean water looked red. Neither squirrel had seen anything like it before. Nick would have paid to see Serena’s reaction to all of this.

 “Creator help us,” Nick whimpered in his high-pitched voice that sounded a lot like his father sometimes.

 Rose looked back at the ring of smoke and for a split-second thought she saw a scaly red wing cut through the fog and then disappear again. Since it was night, she couldn’t be sure, but she still felt chills run up her spine. The Firewings probably already knew they were there before they even entered the ring of fog.

 “Rose?” Nick whispered.

 “Huh?” Rose snapped back to attention.

 “Let’s go. We’re practically here.”

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 Nick and Rose hopped out of their boat onto a small, black pebble beach. They pulled their boat up onto the shore and saw another rowboat almost just like theirs. *Serena. So she did make it here after all! Praise the Creator!* Nick thought, greatly relieved.

 The black pebbles felt warm, almost hot, underneath Rose’s footpaws. She trod lightly on them as she ran to steep, winding stairs cut into the rock leading up and into the mountain. “Come on!” she called to Nick, who was still looking at the rowboat.

 Nick looked up sharply and followed Rose up the steps. They were cut into the rock so deeply in some places that they had to climb up on all four paws. Twice, Nick had lost his footing and nearly fell, but had caught himself in the nick of time.

 Rose reached the top first and helped pull Nick up. They collapsed on the rocky ground to catch their breath, then realized that they were no longer outside. The stairs had led them inside the volcano and ended off at a wide passageway that led even further up. A bright red light loomed at the very end of the long passage. They knew Serena was probably wherever that red light was coming from, so that was where they had to go. Nick helped Rose to her feet, and the two friends sped down the stone passage, a sudden burst of energy coming over them.

 The passage turned out to be longer than it looked, Nick and Rose quickly found out. After running until they were panting for breath, the light didn’t look that much closer. They slowed to a trot, keeping close to the sides. If it hadn’t been for the red light in the distance, the passageway would have been completely black. Even with the light, the passage was very dim. Nick could just barely make out Rose’s facial features in the red light as he pulled her along.

 They hadn’t seen any Firewings inside the mountain, which Nick thought odd, but it was probably just as well. He didn’t know what they would think about two, no, three intruders coming into their home.

 Finally, Nick and Rose reached the end of the passage. It ended off abruptly, and the two of them lay low on their stomachs, overlooking the heart of the volcano mountain of Veradoom. What they saw took their breath away.

25

The Dragonspeaker

N

ick honestly didn’t know what he expected to see when they reached the red light at the end of the passageway, but he absolutely wasn’t ready for what he saw next. The passage ended abruptly over a huge cavern that reached as high as Nick could see and a good bit lower than they were. The bottom was covered with huge pools of lava with narrow walkways made of black stone winding through them. Jagged, dark red stone and rock lined the entire cavern walls. But probably the most impressive feature of the cavern was the waterfall of lava, or the lava falls. It came out of another part of the volcano, (Nick guessed the part where all the lava spewed out of the top) and filled the pools of lava on the floor of the cavern. The lava falls itself was very large and wide. Nick and Rose had never seen or heard of such a thing before.

 But what soon caught Nick’s and Rose’s full attention in a heartbeat was the Firewings. They were everywhere, flying in circles around the cavern or perched on the red stone ledges. They were the largest creatures the squirrels had ever seen. The Firewings were a bright, fire red color with orange tipped scales. Their wings were almost as large as their body, and two long, thick, smooth horns that pointed back were at the top of the large heads. Their long scaly tails swished about, and they looked like could knock an entire house down. Smoke steamed upwards from their nostrils. These creatures were not to be messed with; they could do great damage if they chose to. Nick and Rose would have to be careful.

 Suddenly, Rose grabbed Nick’s arm and pointed directly at the largest ledge right across the cavern from the lava falls and with a lava pool a right below it. The largest and most beautiful of the Firewings lay on that ledge, looking down at something that was also on that ledge.

 “I know, that’s a huge dragon,” Nick whispered.

 “No, you furbrain! Look!” Rose hissed, pointing again.

 Nick looked again, this time focusing on what that dragon was focused on. Then it dawned on him. That “something” was Serena. She was standing before the largest of the Firewing dragons, who was obviously their queen. Serena had made it here, and now her dream had come true. She had officially seen a Firewing dragon.

 Realization and awe soon gave way to sheer terror. “Oh no! Serena!” Nick whispered. She could get killed! He sprang up and began making his way down a long, treacherous flight of steps on the side of the cavern wall that led down to the stone paths through the lava pools at a breakneck speed.

 Rose made a lunge to grab and pull Nick back, but he was too fast. She missed him. Rose groaned silently. *He’s going to get himself killed*! She hesitated for only a moment before she herself began descending the narrow stairs. *This is a horrible idea! They’ll see us! We need to think this through!* Then she silently laughed to herself and shook her head. The old Rose she was back in Pinewood wouldn’t think twice before doing something like this. *What is wrong with me?*

 Nick stumbled and nearly fell off the sides of the steps into the lava below twice before he reached the bottom of the flight. He stopped and glanced back up to make sure Rose was following. She was. Nick looked across the cavern. Serena was still on the other side with the Queen Firewing. Between her and Nick lay all the lava pools and the circling dragons. Nick gathered himself and began running across the lava pools on the narrow, black stone paths that weaved between them. The heat from the lava was intense, but Nick didn’t stop. His sister was in grave danger, and he had to get to her. He also had to renew Pinewood’s alliance with the Firewings. His sister, his parents, and all of Pinewood Forest was depending on him.

 Rose reached the bottom of the steps and didn’t hesitate before following Nick out onto the stone paths between the lava pools. A wave of heat suddenly hit her, and she began sweating and panting. The stone beneath her footpaws was scorching hot, so she ran even faster, even though her body was screaming at her to stop. She couldn’t stop. She needed to stay with Nick, and Serena needed them both.

 Nick finally reached the other side of the cavern and began rapidly climbing a flight of steps that led up the large ledge that the Queen Firewing and Serena were on. “Serena!” Nick called.

 The Queen Firewing and Serena suddenly looked in his direction. The queen’s expression was unreadable, and to Nick’s surprise, Serena didn’t call his name and run to him. She only looked relieved, then turned back to the massive dragon before her. Nick stopped in his tracks, confused. Rose caught up with him right at that moment and pulled him down on the steps.

 “Shh! Watch.” she hissed in his ear.

 Nick stopped struggling and looked back up at Serena and the Queen Firewing. A low humming sound came from the dragon, and she lowered her head a little. Serena then stretched out her tiny little paw and lay it on the dragon’s huge snout, smoke coming from the red beauty’s nostrils. The dragon closed her eyes and shuddered a little. The Firewing scale that hung from Serena’s neck glinted in the firelight all around her. It looked as if it were ablaze.

 “Please,” came Serena’s tiny voice. “Please help us.”

 The Queen Firewing opened her bright orange eyes and looked into Serena’s dark blue ones. Watching this all unfold with his mouth gaped open, Nick felt something pass between the huge dragon and tiny squirrel. He knew something was happening, or rather connecting, between the two, but he couldn’t quite figure out what. Rose merely watched with her eyes wide open in wonder.

 Serena and the Queen Firewing held as they were for another long minute, then Serena slowly drew back her paw from the dragon’s snout. The queen turned her blazing gaze upon Nick and Rose. They instinctively shrank back. Serena smiled at the two, her face beaming. She beckoned for Nick to come. Nick immediately rose to his feet and was at his sister’s side in an instant. Rose, sensing that this wasn’t her business since she wasn’t from the royal family, stayed put, not wanting to interfere and ruin their chance to get the Firewing’s aid.

 Standing next to his little sister, Nick now looked up into the glowing orange eyes of the massive and majestic creature before him. He wanted to speak, but couldn’t form the words. He stood there, staring dumbly. Serena rolled her eyes a little at her brother and nudged him a little. “Go on. You’re Pinewood’s heir, this is your responsibility. Her name is Nebula, by the way.”

 “What? How do you know that?” Nick whispered, shocked and confused.

 “I don’t know how I know. I just do. Now go on!”

 Nick was still confused, but he turned to the Queen Firewing, whose name was apparently Nebula. He cringed a little, wishing for the first time that he wasn’t Pinewood’s heir. But Serena was right, it was only fitting that he would renew the broken alliance. It was only by the Creator’s goodness that he found the words to speak. “Please, Pinewood Forest desperately needs your help. I know our alliance is long broken, but we have come here to mend it. We need your protection now of our survival, and you need our sap for your young ones’ survival. We are willing to trade our sap with you in exchange for protection from The Conqueror and his Fosses.”

 The queen closed her eyes, trembling, a low grow coming from her throat. Then she looked square into Nick’s eyes for what felt like an eternity. Nick bravely held the gaze, neither blinking nor flinching.

 Nebula finally spoke in a voice that was low and threatening, yet beautiful and mysterious. “Pinewood has fallen. They fought with one another, and have broken the alliance. Why do you say that Pinewood is willing to mend that alliance? What authority do you have to do such a thing?”

 Nick gathered himself to his full height. “My queen, I am Prince Nicholas Omaha, son of King Tamm Omaha of Pinewood Forest, and heir to Pinewood’s one and only throne. This is my sister, Princess Serena Omaha. Pinewood has been united under one tribe and one throne, and my father, the king, has said himself that he wishes to mend our alliance. He is not here to do it himself because Pinewood is under attack. That is why we need your help.”

 The Queen Firewing’s gaze shifted to her right. Nick followed her gaze and suddenly felt sick. In a shallow lava pool right next to the platform ledge they were on, lay a dozen of large red dragon eggs. They looked dark and dull, a sign that the life in them was fading. A healthy Firewing egg would be black with glowing red cracks in them. These eggs’ cracks weren’t glowing brightly, and some weren’t even glowing at all. Most of them would not hatch, and the dragons in the ones that did would be weak and probably wouldn’t live very long. Serena had an anguished look on her face, and Nick suddenly felt great pity for the Firewings.

 Nebula spoke. “You see, our young are dying. Our entire race is facing extinction. We were about to leave our home here to find a place where we have access to sap. But…” Nebula trailed off, turning her head back to Nick and Serena. “Since you are here and Pinewood is willing to mend our alliance, we will not leave. I hear your plea for help, and I will answer it. I am willing to mend our alliance for our survival and yours.”

 Nick let out a breath he didn’t even know he was holding, and nearly collapsed with relief. “Thank you,” he managed to say.

 Nebula turned her massive head towards Serena and spoke quietly. “You, you are different. You are something special.”

 Serena beamed, not quite understanding what the Queen Firewing meant, but still honored all the same.

 “You found a Firewing scale, and you came to this island without your brother. You are special, Serena. I can feel it in you. It’s like you understand us, like you’re one of us.”

 A huge grin spread across Serena’s face. “Thank you, your highness!”

 Nebula bowed her head, as if in high respect to Serena. “If you should accept, you will become one of us. You will be the Dragonspeaker, the link and ambassador between the Firewing race and all other creatures of Penetralia. You were born for this, Serena; I can feel it. We have waited a long time for you.”

 Nick was speechless. He didn’t know what to think. Should he say something? Should he intervene? Serena was too young for this… or was she? What if Nebula was right, and Serena had been born to be with the Firewings? Then it hit him. Serena’s unnatural and crazy obsession with dragons all her life, and her determination to go on this mission. Nebula was indeed right. This was what the Creator had called Serena for, and he had tried to stop the Creator’s plan for her by not letting her come on this mission before they left. Rose had tried to tell him, and he didn’t listen. It all was coming together now. Nick couldn’t help but think that Serena would make an excellent Dragonspeaker. After all, she was born for this job.

 At first, Serena didn’t understand what the Queen Firewing meant, but then she did understand. It felt so… right. Yes, it felt right. Serena indeed felt a connection between the Firewings and herself, and she knew this was her calling. This was why the Creator put the idea of getting the Firewings in her head and no one else’s. She was the one and only Dragonspeaker.

 Serena looked up into the dragon’s eyes. There was no hint of hesitation or humor in her voice. She spoke confidently and as sure as she was standing there. “Yes, I accept. I will be the Dragonspeaker.”

 Then all the dragons in the cavern suddenly flew down and formed a giant circle around Serena, Nick, and Nebula. They lifted their wings to their maximum height and width, lifted their heads high, and let out a huge burst of flames in salute to their new Dragonspeaker.

26

The battle for Pinewood Forest

T

he dull ringing wouldn’t stop, and his head throbbed painfully from the ear-piercing blast. Even from his distance from the dynamite, Tamm was knocked off his feet. The dynamite had been more powerful than anticipated. Maybe a little too powerful. Tamm’s first thought when he could think again was Noelle. She had been right at his side when the blast came, but she wasn’t there now. Or was she? He thought he heard her voice calling him from the fog that clouded his brain and the ever-present ringing.

 “Tamm!” he suddenly heard Noelle call.

 Then he instantly sat up, now just realizing what had happened. “Noelle, are you okay?”

 “I’m fine, are you hurt?”

 “No, I don’t think so.” Tamm looked down. He didn’t feel or see any wounds. There was only the ringing and painful throbbing in his head from the noise of the blast.

 “The archers… Aspen! Are they all right? Did it work?”

 “I’ll say I worked pretty good,” said Noelle looking around at the burning trees and destruction the blast had caused. It was a nightmare. The dynamite had worked a little too good, and there was very little chance that the archers, including Aspen, who had fired the flaming arrows had gotten away in time.

 “Don’t get your hopes up yet, your highness,” said Steele appearing out of nowhere.

 “What do you mean?” Tamm asked.

 Steele pointed just west of where the main explosion happened. Tamm’s blood ran cold. The other Fosses, including The Conqueror, were quickly forming together and advancing on the squirrels to finish them off once and for all. Tamm turned to Noelle and exchanged a look. This was it. This would be their very last stand for Pinewood Forest. Noelle stooped down and picked up a bow and a quiver of arrows. She nodded to Tamm. Tamm took one more look at the advancing Fosses before picking up his horn and blowing a clear, sweet note that summoned all of Pinewood’s Scurry.

 Then, turning to Noelle, Tamm asked, “Are you with me?”

 “To the end, my king.”

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 The wind blew Rose’s long ears back against her head and she closed her eyes as she hung on to the Firewing’s thick neck for dear life. She squeezed her eyes shut and tried not to be sick. She never in a million years thought she would be experiencing what she was doing right now. She was terrified and thrilled at the same time. Rose was riding on the back of a Firewing, soaring through the night sky. They were on their way to Pinewood Forest to drive The Conqueror and his Fosses from Penetralia forever.

 Nick was on the back of another Firewing who flew right beside the one Rose was on. He looked frightened, but the awe and beauty of it all overcame his fear, and he looked up and around, letting the amazing view sink in. *Oh my. Mother and Father would never believe this.*

 Serena was on the back of Nebula, the Queen Firewing. She flew in front of the large pack of Firewings, all coming to Pinewood’s aid. Nick and Rose’s dragons were just behind Nebula. While Nick and Rose were clinging on to dear life, Serena sat up straight and looked up at the stars above and the shining sea and land below. There was no hint of fear on her face. Her mouth was gaped open, and her eyes were wide and shining with wonder. This was better than she had ever imagined it to be. Nothing ever did, or would, compare to this. The Creator’s handiwork was truly magnificent.

 Rose summoned her courage and opened her eyes, looking around. She was glad she did because she didn’t realize what she was missing when she had her eyes closed. This was an experience that she would never forget.

 Nebula banked to the left and her horde of Firewings followed in perfect unison. Pinewood Forest was ahead far in the distance. Nick couldn’t be sure if he was imagining or not, but he thought he saw a faint orange glow from where Pinewood was...

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 Tamm ducked an overhead slice from a long blade that a fossa wielded. Using his small size as an advantage, he rolled underneath his opponent’s legs and, rising up behind him, plunged his sword into the fossa’s unprotected back. Tamm spun around to face and take down another fossa that leaped at him. They were everywhere, overwhelming Pinewood’s exhausted Scurry. While the dynamite had been largely successful in taking out a good chunk of the Fossa army and destroying most of their supplies, there were still enough Fosses that had survived to put up a good fight, The Conqueror among them. The outcome of this day, or rather night, would determine the future of Pinewood Forest and all of Penetralia, and Pinewood wouldn’t go do without a fight. Neither would The Conqueror and his Fosses, apparently. The raging fire that was everywhere now only added to the danger and ferociousness of the fight.

 Noelle stood a few yards away from Tamm, desperately firing her arrows into the rush of Fosses coming at her. She tried to get closer to her husband, but she had to focus on firing arrow after arrow. Memories of the battle at Arabia against Zodamere to get the Sword and free Rosemary and Bobo. She remembered that every time she thought had spent the last of her strength and was sure she couldn’t take another opponent, the Creator had miraculously shown her that she did have more strength and that with Him, she could continue to fight. That memory now convinced her that she could fight on and defend her forest. She continued to pray desperately to the Creator for courage and strength.

 Noelle was running out of arrows, fast. She was painfully aware of that fact but tried not to think about it. She forced herself to focus on one opponent at a time and to make each arrow count. Finally, she did run out. When she saw an oncoming fossa, she instinctively reached back for another arrow in her quiver strapped to her back. But her paw closed on thin air. Noelle’s heart stopped for a second, and she froze with terror, staring stupidly with her mouth open at the charging fossa.

 Tamm dove for his wife, bringing her to the ground in the nick of time as the fossa leaped for her. The fossa crashed to the ground and sprang up again, growling with frustration. Tamm brandished his sword, standing protectively over Noelle. The fossa charged, and Tamm braced himself and stood his ground, raising his sword and slicing at the enraged fossa. It fell to the ground, dead.

 Tamm turned to his wife and helped her up. “Are you okay?”

 Noelle merely nodded, still in shock.

 Just then General Steele ran up, his fur slightly singed and panting heavily. “My king,” he began and took a minute to catch his breath. “There’s too many of them. We can’t win this. Shall I order a retreat?”

 Tamm looked around at the scene of chaos and death. The fire was raging, and fosses and squirrels lay slain everywhere. Steele was right. They couldn’t win this war, not without a miracle at least. He turned to his wife, whose blue eyes were brimming with tears. She was looking expectantly up at him. Tamm looked around at his Scurry, who was still fighting bravely in the face of inevitable death. They knew they were lost, but they still fought on. This was their home, and they wouldn’t just retreat and let the Fosses win. No, they would rather die than surrender or retreat.

 Tamm turned back to Steele. “You are free to retreat if that is what you wish, General Steele. But my place is here with my home, and I believe these brave squirrels believe the same too.”

 Noelle stood tall. “I’m not leaving my home. I’ll stay here till the end.”

 General Steele saluted smartly. “If you stay, my king, then I shall as well. My place is beside you, and it would be an honor to die for my home and kin.”

 Tamm saluted back and nodded proudly. The battle continued on.

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 Tamm looked up, not believing what he saw. Shooting stars, high in the night sky, coming right for Pinewood Forest. No, they weren’t shooting stars. As they came closer, they appeared to be great balls of fire, at least twenty or so of them. They were headed right for the battle, getting closer and closer.

 *This is the end. Creator help us.* Tamm murmured to himself. He turned to Noelle, who had picked up an arrow and shot it into a fossa, who was crouched on a helpless squirrel. He pointed up to the balls of fire, and Noelle stared hard at them. Then her face turned white and relief swept over her so hard that she nearly collapsed.

 “What is it?” Tamm asked, confused and terrified.

 “It’s…it’s the children! They’ve done it!” Noelle cried.

 Tamm looked up, peering harder at the balls of fire. Why, Noelle was right! Those weren’t balls of fire, they were Firewing Dragons, burning brightly with Serena, Nick, and Rose riding on their backs!

 “They did it,” Tamm whispered, barely able to believe his eyes. It was a miracle from the Creator. The Firewings were coming to Pinewood’s aid.

 Tamm’s joy and relief were abruptly cut short as The Conqueror himself leaped and slammed into Tamm, nearly knocking him senseless as he hit the ground.

 Tamm saw stars dance before his eyes, then forced himself to stay conscious and focus on the present situation. He shook his head and his vision cleared. Tamm lay on his back, pinned to the ground with the hulking beast of The Conqueror on top of him. The fossa bared his teeth in his face.

 “My, my. I have waited a long time for this moment,” The Conqueror snarled.

 Tamm didn’t say anything. He tried to get up, but the fossa was too big and heavy. He was trapped. Tamm turned his head to look for Noelle, but she was surrounded by three fosses, all slowly advancing on her. Steele was nowhere to be seen. Tamm was alone. He was now at the mercy of this villainous brute.

 Tamm looked bravely into The Conqueror’s murky brown eyes. He spoke. “You will fail. You may kill me today, but in the end, The Creator will win. He already has. He will destroy you and all evil someday. You will lose.”

 The Conqueror growled with rage and raised his paw for the killing blow. Tamm closed his eyes and prepared to meet The Creator. But the final blow never came. Tamm heard a bone-chilling roar and The Conqueror’s surprised yelp as a Nebula, Queen of the Firewings, swooped down, lifted The Conquer off of Tamm, and dropped the fossa into the raging fire.

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 The battle was over as quickly as it had begun. Pinewood had risen victorious because of the Firewing’s aid. They had swooped in when all seemed lost and had quickly diminished the remaining fosses. Now, Tamm and Noelle stood with Nick and Rose on the palace balcony, facing Nebula. The sun was rising, its beams of light penetrating through the towering pine trees. The fire caused by the dynamite had been extinguished, and now it was time to rebuild and heal Pinewood.

 “How can we ever repay you?” Tamm said to Nebula.

 “All we ask for is pine sap for our eggs, so our race may survive and flourish,” answered Nebula.

 Tamm nodded. “You may have all the sap you need. Thank you for mending our old alliance. We are eternally grateful.”

 Nebula bowed respectfully, and as what was left of Pinewood’s Scurry, led by General Steele, began to fill barrels of sap, turned to Serena.

 “It is time, Dragonspeaker. You are with us now,” she said quietly.

 Serena nodded and stepped forward, her face excited and serious at the same time.

 Noelle stepped forward and put a firm paw on Serena’s shoulder. “Whoa, what?”

 Serena looked up at her mother. “I am the Dragonspeaker. It is my job to be the link between dragons and other creatures. I am with them now.”

 Noelle was speechless. Tamm turned to Nebula. “Please, explain this.”

 “Your daughter is different. She is destined to be with us; I can feel it. We have waited a long time for her.”

 Noelle spluttered a little, shocked. She looked up to Nick, then Rose who was standing off to the side. They both nodded. Tamm looked down and bit his lip. He knew Nebula was right. He had sensed this all along but had tried to ignore it.

 Tears brimmed in Noelle’s eyes as she sank to her knees and took Serena’s face in her paws. Serena hugged her tight. “I’ll be okay, mother. I’m safe. I belong with them. This is what the Creator made me for. I’ll come visit, I promise.”

 Noelle nodded. “You be careful, you hear me? Come back to me often. You may be the great and mighty Dragonspeaker now, but you’ll always be my little girl.”

 Serena wiped her face and hugged her father and brother. Nick didn’t say anything but hugged his sister tight. Tamm whispered, “You be brave, my little dragon.”

 Serena turned to Rose, who smiled, trying to fight back tears. She ran up and hugged her too. “You stick close to Nick, okay? He needs you,” Serena said teasingly.

 Rose ruffled Serena’s fur. “Don’t worry, I will. I’ll also make sure he doesn’t have too much fun while you’re gone.” She smirked at Nick. He rolled his eyes but smiled.

 Serena turned and strode towards Nebula, her head held high. Nebula lowered her neck and Serena climbed aboard. And with one last wave goodbye, she was off in the sky, followed by the horde of dragons, all carrying barrels of pine sap.

 Tamm looked down on his beloved forest and home. A good bit of it was burned up, and many creatures, including Aspen, had given their lives heroically for their forest. Pinewood Forest was forever changed now. Things would never be the same again with the renewal of the alliance and the siege and battle that had just happened. The events would be put down in Pinewood’s historical record to be remembered forever.

 Tamm gazed up to the rising sun, Serena and Nebula already a black speck against the sun. They had survived, and all would be well. The Creator was truly with them.

The End