

FORTY-FIVE

Early that afternoon, Blossom, Moselyn, Saniel, and Brave sat on a branch of the butternut tree that contained Saniel's family home. This being one of the large ancient trees of the forest, the branch was nearly the same diameter as Brave's nest tree back in his home forest, more than wide enough for them to perch on with room to spare. The sunny morning had given way to a cloudy afternoon. The scent of snow coming was in the air again.

"Only two more days," Moselyn stated looking outward and down a moment. She was finally used to the height. She thought back to the play chasing with Brave from that morning and how thanks to that she could now make running jumps from branch-to-branch without consciously thinking about it. She had come a long way from the hesitation she felt first coming here just eight days before.

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, time fli..." She was cut off in mid-word as a feathery blur passed through the space she had been in. She vanished with the blur.

Moselyn felt warm liquid splatter her fur. She let out a shrill scream in shock as she realized it was blood.

Brave chattered in warning, "PREDATOR BIRD! MUST FLEE! TAKE COVER! CHIT! SCREE!!!" He reached for the larger Biggen squirrel as his tail flailed about in fear. "MOSS!!! WE MUST FLEE!!!" He chittered in panic forgetting she did not understand most chitterspeak.

"Only two more days," Moselyn stated looking outward and down a moment.

Saniel looked out past her as movement caught his eye. He didn't have time to utter a warning as it was moving very fast whatever it was.

Blossom flicked her tail up and down once. "Yes, time fli..." She was cut off in mid-word as a feathery blur passed through the space she had been in. She vanished with the blur.

Saniel's vision turned red as Moselyn cried out. He chattergrowled and gave chase forgetting about the others. Brave's chitter warning barely registered in his mind. He focused on chasing the large raptor that had just taken Blossom.

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The biggen squirrel would not move frozen to the spot except for her hysterical screaming. Brave nipped her arm, hard enough to hurt, but not hard enough to break the skin. The shock of the pain snapped her out of it enough to look down at him. He pointed with his tail at the doorway. He was so scared she could see the whites in his eyes. He tugged at her forepaw. She understood and fled with him into Sanie!’s home. Inside she screamed and cried.

As Brave retreated with her, he heard others take-up the warning across the forest. Once inside, he scaled the wall and continued to send out the chitter warning, “CHIT! SCREE!!!! PREDATOR BIRD! TAKE COVER!”

Carulin rushed into the room from the bathroom with a towel wrapped around her wet fur as she had been soaking in the tub. Water dripped off her onto the floor. “What’s wrong? Where are the others?”

Moselyn couldn’t speak. She continued to cry and scream at the same time as she stared at Carulin. Carulin saw red droplets in her fur.

“Chit, chit, scree!!!!” Brave uttered trying to fight the instinct. He was inside and safe. Tears filled his eyes as he realized he had lost Blossom. “Chit, chit, scree!!!” he uttered again. He shook his head. “Chit, chit, scree!!!” He panted trying to get ahold of himself. “Large predator bird! No go out!” He panted some more. “Chit, chit, scree!!!!” The tears rained down. “Blossom hunt killed!”

Carulin gasped. She looked about. “Where’s Sanie!?” Her tail began to wigwag in panic. “SANIE!!!!”

Climbing and leaping as fast as he could, Sanie! could barely keep the bird in sight. It was a swift flyer weaving through the branches. He could see Blossom clutched in one taloned foot. Her tail wigwagging. He climbed higher in the trees as he gave chase.

The brown feathered bird finally landed on a tree branch. It bent down and took Blossom by the head with its beak.

“NO!” Sanie! cried out, but he knew he wouldn’t get there in time. He only realized then just how huge it was.

The bird lifted its head up and began to swallow Blossom whole. Her tail twitched again.

“NO!!!” Sanie! screamed and put on as much speed as he could, his muscles screaming at him. He leapt, chitterscreaming as he sailed downward through the last gap, barreling into the raptor with all four paws outstretched as Blossom’s tail vanished. His momentum slammed the bird against the trunk of the tree. The sound of snapping bones echoed through the forest. Sanie!

ricocheted off the bird and was barely able to scrabble onto the edge of the branch to keep from falling.

“Where’s Saniel?” Carulin’s tail began to wigwag in panic. “SANIEL!!!”

Moselyn fell silent for a moment panting for breath as she glanced toward the doorway.

Carulin shook the water out of her fur as best as she could and quickly towed down “Brave!” she spoke in the commanding voice of an Elder. “As the only other adult here, summon the Council. Then comfort Moselyn as best you can until they arrive.”

“Where are you going,” Moselyn manage to stammer between sobs.

Carulin’s eyes narrowed. “To find my son.” She darted out the doorway on all four paws, water droplets whipping off her tail. She quickly climbed through the canopy to her left as she heard the echo of something breaking in the distance.

Brave stuck his head out the doorway and gave the summons call.

The bird plummeted like a rock, sinking into the snow-covered forest floor far below.

“NO!!!!” Saniel screamed out again as he quickly scrambled down the tree and leapt onto the carcass. “Bastard! Give her up!” He began to tear into the torso of the dead raptor with his claws. “Hang in there, Blossom! I’m coming!” He was splattered with blood as he ripped into the bird below the rib cage. The snow turned red around the carcass as it’s steaming intestines spilled out onto the snow. He clawed open the stomach and Blossom’s still body slid out. He rolled her in the snow to rinse off any stomach acid. He froze and stared at Blossom’s still body as he was about to give her mouth-to-mouth resuscitation. Her head was at the wrong angle and there was a large puncture wound in her chest. Tears filled his eyes as he screamed in agony.

In his head, he heard her words from the previous summer as if she were speaking to him right then and there.

“Saniel, it has no choice. It must hunt to live. As our parents teach us, we are prey. At some point a predator might catch and eat us.” Her tail shuddered in his mind. *“We try our best to ensure that does not happen for as long as possible.”*

He gently lifted her limp form up out of the hole made by the bird and his frantic efforts to save her. He carried her body over a few mits, sinking a little with each step. He then held her body tight as he wept. Snow started falling lightly.

He thought to himself, ‘Did she know her time was short? Was that why she seemed to be in such a hurry?’ He nuzzled her damp fur and cried out again as he mourned the loss of his closest friend.

Carulin arrived soon after. She made a couple quick calls on her flatpanel. She then got Sanial to realize she was there. She convinced him to set Blossom’s body down. She then held him tightly, rocking him back and forth as both of them wept and mourned.