

The reddened sky had arrived at the tailend of the ever shortening day. It projected its haunting hew upon to colorful tapestries of leaves that had blanketed the floor of these northern forests. As the light of days continued to become shorter, so too was the time when we could prepare for the long and unforgiving environments of the winter before us. It had been that full season since my brothers had last seen our families, but it was for their comfort and survival through the colder months that we had left them.

"I just wish it'd get here already," came the voice of my colleague. His grey fur tinting in the glow of the twilight. His bushy tail rested against the bark of the grand oak that towered above our regiment. It made us squirrels, at an average of only 10 inchworms tall, look more like an army of ants before her majesty.

"The winter?" I chittered.

"Yeah," he replied simply.

I disagreed with this sentiment and frowned, but I knew why he wanted the fall to be over with. "You really miss them that terribly?" I asked.

He looked up to me as if I were some sort of inebriated packrat, I quickly tried to make a correction. "I mean, I miss home too. But the winter, she's quite the brutal wench."

He gave a bit of a laugh at my correction. "Well maybe if ya found yourself a sow you wouldn't weep of loneliness in the winter."

The words were a bit of a punch to the gut to me. It's why I disliked talking about those left behind. It seemed like everyone had someone to fight for and that even in the concept of being alone, I was even more alone. What was even harder to bring to bare is that while he teased that I should find a nice female to settle down with; I didn't feel that was the harvest the Grand Roots had beared for me. In fact, while he would tell me of his exploits with the fairer sex every once in awhile, I had found little interest. What life attracts you to is sometimes not fair.

"What's wrong?" He had noticed that my tongue had been snared at his statement. I knew that I had been caught too deep in thought.

"I— well, I don't know if it's for me."

"How can you say that, Sapel? Why the soot would it not be for you?"

I gave a pause, but in the end I always defaulted to my usual defence.

"Perhaps this war is driving me nuts."

The war was always a good scapegoat. All personal problems were merely a shadow compared to the conflict we currently faced. I craned my head up and looked to the grand oak we stood below. It was in her company that my peers had been lured away from their loved ones. Her leaves whistled in the breeze. When her acorns drummed upon the earth it drove our soldiers to attention. Collectors scurried out into the field to gather them as soon as they hit the ground, as if the very dirt would consume them if they left them out too long. Though we had fenced off the area with scavenged barbwire from the nearby farm and quarantined off the area to prevent those damn red squirrels from stealing any more of our harvest, I suppose one could never be too careful.

“Just remember that we fight for our trees, both the physical and symbolic.” Xylem told me, his voice had a bit of condolence for my lack of the later.

But I just gave a nod in understanding. However I truly never could. While we always seemed to tie the structure of our families to robust plant life; why did we tend to look down upon those whom end up being the leaves in the equation? For only the sickest of foliage would toss them away because they would never become a branch. And unfortunately, to those who didn’t sow a sow, they could find just how sick our societal tree could be.

A bell rang out. It snapped me from my internal thought. My ears perked as I looked up to the branches above. One of our scouts was shaking one of the foliage arms vigorously. A rusted yet functioning bell tied to the disturbed limb was the source of the alarm.

I could see the light glimmer off a glass in the distant bushes. The signature red tufts of the enemy’s ears just barely visible from the position they were scouting from. The higher officers, now alert, started to cry out to the lower ranks to take up their arms.

Xylem tapped my shoulder as he put his cupule upon his head. I too grabbed my head protection and stayed close behind, minding to keep my distance as not to get a bushy tail to my face. We sank into the dug trench before the barbed line. I placed the sharpened bark bit into the launcher before lifting it to rest on the ground, pointed in the direction the enemy was spotted.

We stood quietly for many moments. For what reason, I could not discern. Unless those damn red squirrels were thicker than a stump they would certainly know that we had spotted them nearby.

“Sodding red devils, want our nuts? Eat our bark!” one soldier broke the sacred silence.

To the snark there was no return fire, just silence. The weight of question loomed within the whiskers of everyone on the line. How many were out there? Were they prepared to attack? There were rumors that they were getting more desperate. There was tales that they had attacked travellers for their bundles. We had seen the corpses of kits and sows on the trails of

the forest, empty acorn husks laid by their side. These red devils from the eastern forest were crafty, tenacious, but would they dare risk a head on attack?

Had mere moments gone by, or hours? It was hard to tell as we continued to sit in silence. Another soldier yelled out a taunt to the surrounding pines, but the officers were quick to tell them to stuff their cheeks. Not only did they want them to get a head count, but we also needed to hear the sounds of the forest. Any rustle of a branch, or snap of a twig could be enough to know where to expect them, and how many.

As darkness settled in, we saw a movement in the brush. Recon turned their visors in that direction, "Hold on!" he called out. Then in a tone of pure annoyance he let out a grumble. "It's just a stupid deer."

A collective sigh was released among the troop. As frustrating as a false alarm was, it was far better than a genuine one. Of course an officer wasn't pleased at the scare. "Of for tuft's sake! Wash your specs would you, soldier?"

I personally gave a sigh and glanced to Xylem. "That was good fortune."

He gave that cocky smile he gave. It was rather a dashing smirk, and if anything it made the whole ordeal worthwhile. "The reds may be numerous, but they're scrawny, they'd never take on a fortified grove like our's."

I can say that I believed him full heartedly, but of course there was one issue. "Right, but what about the route?"

His smirk faded a bit and I instantly regretted my inquiry, "Then I'll kill the bastards myself."

The path in question was risky even without the dangers of our skirmishes with the enemy. But travelling it was a necessity, the oak's bounty wasn't going to roll itself home. And even if it could those red scavengers would sweep them up.

As if I had invoked the desire to get our bounty home, an officer walked over and spoke with Xylem. "I don't think we can risk stockpiling any more. First thing in the morning I'm sending out a company home, I am gathering volunteers."

I knew he'd say yes. He didn't liked being cooped up in one place and every time the task came up he was the first to peak interest. It was an opportunity that didn't come around too often. There was danger out there, he knew that, but with his family waiting on the other end. It was a calculated risk. I had hope though that maybe he would realize it was too much a risk now. With an ever boldening enemy, and the size of our bundles growing heavy with the fall's bounty, it was more likely than ever that—

"Of course! It'd be my honor." he beamed. I could see the childlike gleam in his eye. One could almost see the image of him spinning with his pup in paws reflecting in his iris.

The officer gave a smile, "Very good, we leave first thing in morning, get a good night's rest."

"Yes, sir."

With that the grizzled grey began to move past to the next group in order to gather more volunteers. He didn't even look in my direction. Clearly I had declined heading with the convoy once too often, as I had declined every time asked.

I don't know which it was: The guilt of being seen as a slack, or worse a coward, in the eyes of my superiors, or that I had a fear that I would not see my friend again. What I do know is that my voice shot up to the officer before he moved on too far.

"Permission to join the convoy, sir." I called out.

There was a silence as his paws paused. His ears turned before his head. "Really, private? We do need boars here as well."

Xylem took note as well, a look of confusion upon his muzzle. "You sure, Saps'?" he inquired.

I gave a solid nod to both. "If there is room, I am willing."

The officer looked me over, from head to toe, sizing me up. "Well, we'll see Private. I'll ask those whom may want to see their families first. If there is room, then you may join."

My body stood rigid and still, but my spirit was gut punched when the word family was said. With his hard tone, my ears felt that he looked down on me because of my lack of mate. But despite the blow to my soul, I had to brush it off. There was reason in the words, those with others missing them should get the chance to see them. But, damned it all like a beaver if I didn't want to get out of this little wired hole we trenched in.

Xylem moved over toward me after we were left alone, he punched me on the shoulder. "Good on you, Saps. Hey when we get back home I'll see if I can't find a sow for you to miss while you're here."

I rubbed the sore spot, the internal bruising felt like it rose to the surface though the playful smack. "Y-yeah, that'd be great Xylem," my tone was a bit hollow as the waning moon was that night, "if they let me go."

"True." He gave a somber nod giving a quick glance around. "But hey, if not, I'll bring you back some nice contraband." He put a paw up to his muzzle in a hushed tone and a snicker.

Of course the contraband probably wouldn't be anything too illicit. Probably just some sap suckers from home. They did make my mouth water, and took my mind off my concern, if but a moment. "That'd be great, but obviously I'd prefer having them there then here," I said before giving a yawn. "What I do know is that I'm going to turn in early, just in case."

"That's a good idea, until morning Saps," he waved me off as I headed back toward the bunks set up under the roots of the grand oak tree. The mossy and fresh scent was certainly relaxing. But it certainly wasn't anything like the comforts of home.

\*\*\*

The joy I had felt when they had decided to let me tag along had failed several trails back. Since it was my first time and I was a lowly rank, I got the dubious honor of helping to push the heavy acorn cart for most of the trip. As sore as I was, from paw to tail, I knew asking for a break would be beyond foolish. Stopping out here on this trail with this bounty was far too risky to not only our lives, but to those back home.

It was a mixed blessing when we made our way up the bank and now stood at the foot of the Death Grey River. This unnatural abomination of a creation was a river of solid warm grey material. Its banks were aligned with faded white, and its center featured two solid yellow lines which ran along its span like a discolored skunk.

We followed the river along its bank, it would be foolish to cross it directly. For while there was no fear of drowning like its more natural cousins, every once in awhile the creatures whom manifested it upon the land would fly around its bends in their large metal wheeled ships. If one was most fortunate it would hit them square as to have their life sapped from them quickly.

Fortunately for us, we had a bridge to cross this treacherous terrain. Eventually we made our way to yet another creation of the tall ones. As the road came to a bend, a line of shaved trees across the river turned with it. Shiny lines turned with the turn of those poles, and from the structure where the lines turned a line spanned off to cross the road and meet a post on our end of the road.

"Get ready to cross the line," the officer called out.

I was visibly perplexed as I looked up to the wire.

"Something wrong, Saps?" Xylem asked.

I let out a deep breath as I felt the sweat on the pads of my feet against the cool grass. Luckily all this labor occurred during these temperate autumn days rather than the unforgiving blazes of summer. "How're we supposed to drag this cart up the pole?"

He gave a laugh at my ignorance. If I didn't find that smooth chortle so charming I would have been more annoyed than anything. "That's not how we get them across."

"Then how?"

After a pause he gave a self gratifying grin at his own cleverness, "Use your *head*, Saps."

I was about to ask what he was talking about when I saw one of the squirrels in our regiment start to take acorns from the cart and stuff up his cheeks. The soldier then made their way to the tall post, paws sinking into the tar stained wood. They spiraled their way up the post to the flat top. After the ascent they scurried their way across the wire with amazing grace and speed. Clearly they had made this journey enough times to be quite skilled at it.

"Line up!" was barked in our general direction. Xylem motioned for me to get behind him in line as we each took turns gathering a mouthful of nuts and climbing the tar stained post. As I got closer I could smell the odor of the treatment that laced the pole. It smelled a bit like the wooden structure had been in a fire, and unfortunately with my cheeks stuffed with acorns I had no choice but to take the scent in fully through my nostrils.

As one squirrel would scurry across the line, another would climb the post and wait for the other to fully cross before wire walking themselves. I could see as that after they made their descent on the larger pole across the grey river they emptied their muzzled into a cart similar in construction to the one on our end.

Then it was my turn. I kept looking upwards as I moved up to the large pole. I felt a coldness under my sweaty paw that sent a chill up my tail. I had stepped on something. It was some sort of metal tag of some description. The shape seemed to match a discolored spot on the side of the well-worn structure. It clearly had not been visited by the tall ones in quite some time.

As my claws gripped upon the wood, it was a bit softer than I expected. I gripped and spiraled upward, my eyes focused up, and always up. In a few moments I had reached the apex. Xylem was crossing at that time, and I found myself quite fortuitous to have to get to watch him as his tail bobbed. He was a bit larger than the others so the wire seemed to give a little more with each of his strides. The wriggling made me all the more nervous about my upcoming go.

And then it was time. I would have taken a deep breath if not for the fear of inhaling the nuts stuffed into my cheeks. I put a paw out onto the wire, and to my relief it was quite sturdier than it appeared from the ground. My eyes kept forward to the other post top as I began to place one paw in front of the other to grip the girth of the metal wire.

I breathed heavily through my nose as I felt the spiraling rivets of metal beneath my paws. While I have made my way across the spans before, as probably every squirrel has, never had my

pads been covered in the perspiration of previous ordeals before when doing so. That's probably why I felt my left paw slip from its grip.

Everything moved slowly then. I felt my chest sink forward. My heart sank with it. The sudden stop in momentum caused my jaw to gape. A rush of air went into my mouth as the acorns fell free. I gripped harder with my right paw as my mouth lost its load. My tail sank low to counterbalance. I felt the length of metal cross my tummy as i hugged the wire.

Luckily I had stopped myself from falling off. However, the position forced me to look down as the acorns smashed into the solid grey ground below. Pieces of the hearty nuts could be seen fragging off in multiple direction with an echoing crack. The sound caused my stomach to sink. It didn't take too much of an imagination to vision what a similar fall would do skull or bone.

"On your feet private!" an officer barked.

I felt embarrassment wrack my entire being as I had pulled my left paw back to the wire and started to carefully make the rest of the span. While it seemed heartless that no one came out to help, it was known that having more than one squirrel on a line can cause disorientating ripples to travel over the span. If one was in peril it was best to pull one's self up by their own paws.

As I descended the pole I couldn't look the squad in the eye. One chittering quip was heard that broke the silence. "Dropped your nuts, private? Guess you're a big boy now, eh?"

"Shut it soldier or I'll stuff the whole cart's worth in your cheeks and have you carry them the rest of the way home!"

"Yes, sir," the joker said candidly before he was silent.

As the attention started to draw away from me, Xylem moved along to my side and he put a paw around my shoulder. "You okay, Saps?"

I took a deep breath, his presence and voice calmed my racing heart. "I am now, thanks."

\*\*\*

It was ironic that the familiar forests I had walked in my youth would feel so foreign to me. Being away for so long, it was if I was walking a dream; the environments engrained in my nostalgia made manifest in my flights of fantasy. But as we made our way around the final bend, and saw the grove teeming with life before me, it took everything within me to not stop marching and kiss the ground below my paws.

It was true. I was home.

The light was once again fading, the red hues trickling through the ruffling leaves that towered

above. It had taken us the full day to travel from our post back home. From the upper branches cheers came out as we escorted the seasonal bounty for the winter's cache.

There was a ringing in the air which had caused me jump. It rippled like a wind blowing through those strange pipes the tall ones would put outside their dwellings.

"Easy Saps, they're just letting them know we're home." Xylem said.

I, of course, knew that. I had been one to hear the chimes myself in my youth when those before me had returned with the harvest of prior seasons. We had two distinct bells: one for welcoming and the other for warning. But having been out in the fields for so long, my psyche had quickly tied any bell to a sense of danger.

The dirt path up to the Harvest Tree was well cleared and respectfully kept. Others started to come down from the branches above to watch as we escorted the cart up to its destination. Volunteers had gathered at the foot of the tree. As soon as we had stopped before them they began to unload the acorns and climb up the trunk to hoard our bounty within.

We stood still, but we were like pups at the end of the longest of school days. We knew that the comforts of home were but a dismissal away, and the moments dragged on. And after what felt like an eternity the officer in charge finally released us.

"We move out in the morning. Return to this spot at first light. Dismissed!"

The well ordered lines scattered to the winds of those words like the fallen leaves in the breeze. I could see many of the soldier find their loved ones amongst the crowds. Other, such as Xylem didn't even have to look.

"Daddy!" came a shout from the spectators.

I could see that light I saw in my friend's eyes earlier return to them. He ran up to his daughter and gave her a warm and embracing hug. "There you are, little pumpkin! Where's your mom?"

Without a word the fine sow weaved her way forward. Her face bore the expression of great joy. The happiness that filled her daughter running over into her own soul. "She's right here."

Xylem stood up and lifted the girl pup to his shoulder, striding up to his love. He wrapped his free arm about her and gave her a deep embracing kiss. It really was a touching and beautiful moment, but for myself there was a tinge of bitter loneliness as well. As their embrace drew on I had felt awkward not having anyone to interact with myself.

I looked for any reason to take my leave and leave him to his family. However, the loving welcome for my friend came to a close before I could consider slinking away. "Hey Saps, get



over here!” Xylem called out.

I had slowly made my way up to them. The inquisitive eyes of his family bore holes on me as I approached. I took a deep breath and tried to get over the anxiety of the moment.

“Cambi, this is Sapel. He’s been keeping me out of trouble out there on the post.”

The sow gave a respectfully light bow in my direction. “It is great to meet you in person, I’ve heard many stories of you. And your father of course.”

“Hopefully only the goods ones.” I gave an uneasy laugh, I really didn’t want to get into the topic of my father.

Cambi didn’t really know how to respond to that, but Xylem cut in with a boisterous laugh. “Of course Saps! You don’t get into too much trouble. At least none that I was able to pull you out of.”

I gave a nod. Stories had a tendency to spread like a fire on dried brush around these parts. In fact I wouldn’t have been surprised if the entire grove didn’t hear about my stumble on the wire by now.

In speaking of the rumormill, the next words from Cambi reminded me very much that I was home. “So where is your father? I think he of all would be here to see his son return.”

A wave of emotion swirled through me. It took me everything I had not to spit upon the ground before me. “He didn’t know I was returning,” I replied simply.

There was an entirely awkward pause. Xylem gave a smile, “Well you best say hi to your old man for me. Put in a good word for me and such.”

I frowned. “I really hope that’s not why you’re friendly to me, Xylem.”

Xylem gave a pause and shook his head. “Of course not Saps,” he gave a pause. “I know you and him don’t get along, but he really is looking out for our best interest. Being the Grand Root is not an easy job.”

I roll my eyes, “I’m aware, he tells me all the time.”

Clearly the topic was bring up some tension so Xylem shifted a bit. “Well, if you wish to stay at our place then you’re more than welcome to.”

I was on that offer like flies on a carcass. My eyes themselves lit up as I gave a nod. “If it wouldn’t be too much trouble.” I said, despite me wanting to shout a simple ‘yes’.

“Not at all, Saps.” Xylem said looking over to Cambi. “We’ll just set up the guest loft and you should be good for the night.

And indeed I had slept better that night than any before. I know it was a bit strange to sleep in the houses of strangers, of those you were unrelated to. I’m sure that if there were prying eyes the rumormill would get in full swing, so I kept a low profile.

But if they did find out and they asked me why, I would say this: ‘Sometimes the company of strangers feels more like family than one’s own blood ever could.’

\*\*\*

Thanks to my time out on the post, I was used to waking up earlier than the sun’s rays. Despite how much less comfortable my accommodations were from the one Xylem and their mate slept in, the small impromptu guest nesting they laid out was far more accommodating than the places we got to rest out in the field. It was difficult to pull myself away, knowing I’d have to head back. My biological clock was stubborn, though, and would not allow me to return to peaceful rest.

I stretched as I got up from the nesting. I gave my tail a few shakes to ensure that it was working. My paws moved over my whiskers as I tried to settle my fur back into place. From the sounds of things Xylem, Cambi, and their child were still asleep. It was at that point I decided to take a step outside and walk around to stretch my legs. The need to get a last look around the grove before I left it to return to the outpost overrode my worry that my old man would find out that I was home.

There was a fresh and cool dew on upon the grass blades. The air had a bit of moisture to it as the rattling of leaves caught in the wind tickled my ears. There was a sense in my whiskers that there was the possibility of rain today. Clearly, I was an outlier when it came to rising so early. The grove was completely still and silent.

But as I would soon discover, I did share that trait with the one who brood me.

“So, you did decide to come home after all?” The voice caused me to stop dead in my tracks. I felt a tinge of frustration flow up my spine. It reminded me that while I did feel a very safe comfort in the trees of home, there were benefits to absence.

“I was just here to drop off some nuts.” I replied back without turning to acknowledge the boar. But from the corner of my eye I could sense his large, portly figure slinking out from the shadows. “I’ll be heading back out.”

He gruffed angrily. “Stubborn brat! You don’t have to go out there. In fact I forbid you from doing so!”

“Forbid all you like. Won’t change the fact I’m leaving tomorrow.” I began to walk away.

But my father’s strong paw grabbed my arm roughly. “Damn it, Sapel!”

I yanked to free myself but he held on tight.

“Listen, I’m not suppose to tell you this, but a little bird has told me that those red squirrels are making a move for our outpost. I am sending more of our soldiers out to defend it. But it’s getting far too dangerous to play your games anymore.”

I finally shifted myself free, but I had no use in leaving as I confronted him. “You still don’t understand. Just because I’m the son of the Grand Root doesn’t mean I want preferential treatment! You’re going to ask our brethren to die for our acorns, yet would selfishly shield your own son from going? How about you and your ilk consume less and perhaps we’d have enough bounty on our side of the Grey River!” The pointed jibe at my father’s weight was as subtle as his girth. As long as I knew him he ate about twice as much as any squirrel his age.

His eyes leered at me, “You know what? Forget it. I gave you everything, I gave you life and comfort. Yet you chose squander the privileges you had been birthed with that I had to strive to earn.”

“Someone has to squander comfort if we’re going to survive. And for everyone such as yourself who refuse to do so, at least two must make up the difference. Count me among them.”

The sun was peering up over the horizon. I had to get going. “We’re heading out now, see you later, pops.”

“That’s Grand Root Heartwood to you, child. If you want no privileges, then don’t spit such an informal title before me again.”

I could live just fine with that. “Yes, Grand Root Heartwood. Farewell.”

And with that I had made my way quietly back toward the Harvest Tree to await my fellow brothers. My true family.

\*\*\*

The air had grown quite heavy with tense moisture as we had made our way back to the Grey Death River. I, for one, welcomed the rain. It would be a great chance to cool off my paw pad in puddles. However, I hoped it would wait until we passed over the wire. My failure crossing over the first time still fresh in my mind.

Unfortunately, the skies above cared not for the wishes of this lowly creature. The cool drizzle

tickled my whiskers as the sky began to open up. Being out in the rain reminded me of the simpler times of youth. Where the sensibilities of staying safe under the shelter of the oak when the world grew wet were yet to be ingrained. It took everything in me to not revert to that, to run off into the forest like a wild boar, perhaps take Xylem with me.

But as my senses returned to my immediate surroundings, the responsibility of adulthood returned. Running off would be foolish. The world was hard enough out there for us when we stuck together, how long could one really last when going it alone. So I had shelved that fanciful thought and kept marching in line.

And Great Oaks above, with what had awaited us around that corner, I have since regretted that foolishly rational decision.

"Hold up!" an officer called out as we were approaching the solid river's edge.

The words stirred many of us from our dazed, instinctual march. I could hardly see past those ahead of us, but it's what I couldn't see that concerned me. The post on our side leaned a bit away from the road. The wire that crossed over could not be seen, and nor could the post it traveled to.

"Xylem, what's going on up there?" I tried to sound calm as I asked, but tension of the moment could be felt as the others in the formation began to gather to the road's edge.

Being a bit taller, Xylem was able to get a view of the disaster before us. Upon the river's bend rest the tall wooden post. The pole lay lengthwise across the road, the end that had kept it anchored to the ground was deeply off color and splintered. The wires that ran to and anchored the fallen pole now both lay a mangled mess beside it.

"The wire bridge is down Saps." he said with a concerned, uncharacteristically somber tone.

Thousands of questions poured into my being at that point. Was this a purposeful sabotage of the path? Was it just a coincidental mishap? How would we cross now? Should we try to find another crossing point? Do we risk crossing at ground level?

I'm sure those kind of thoughts were being discussed by the officers as they were sure to try and keep us calm with their ever helpful, "Stuff it!" and "Back up; keep down!"

We eventually did settle down and lowered our presence back to the ditch dug out aside the river of grey. There was a deathly hush in the air as the higher ranks discussed the next course of action amongst themselves. We awaited their decision with baited breath.

"Really wish they'd hurry it up, if the rain starts pouring down we'll probably drown in this trench." Xylem said.

That thought hadn't occurred to me, and it made me far more weary of the weather. I could feel the shudders begin to wash over the regiment as the soil beneath our paws began to dampen. Bits of loose ditch soil rubbed between my paw toes. Every once in awhile I would shake my tail to lighten it of its drippy, watery load. It caused me to wonder how my younger self could deal with the annoyances of rain soaked fur so happily.

A chitter was heard, a signal from one of the officer to be at attention. My ears and eyes perked and watched as Sergeant Floy quickly dashed his way to the yellow striped lines spanning the center of the grey bend. He perked his head up in the direction away from the downed pole to ensure there was no wheeled abomination was en route. Once he was certain the coast was clear he gave a silent wave of his bushy tail to flag us forward.

We began to file forward, keeping our distance from the downed post and wire. Very protective children's tales warned of the dangers of touching a downed wire bridge, and neither my brothers nor I wished to find out if they held any truth today.

The Sergeant continued to flag us by as our paws touched to cold grey of the river's bend. We lowly bounded forward, as if our stealth would prevent the large four wheel monster from awakening from its slumber.

But as I heard a rustling coming from the bank before us, I knew then that the metal beasts of the tall ones were the last of our worries. I gave a pause, wondering if in the chaos of the moment that I was the only one to hear it.

Xylem quickly noticed that I had halted. "Hey Saps, keep on moving, we shouldn't be hanging around out here."

"Something's wrong."

"Ya we're standing on the grey ground. Let's get off of-"

"Reds! Get cover!" came a shout from ahead.

The alarm was followed by a shrill cry. From the ditch of the opposite bank the red muzzles peered over with violent intent. Their tufts at their ear tips stood tall giving the form a sharper feature than our own more well rounded muzzle. That distinguishing feature was why many colloquially knew them as Red Devils.

Sharp shards of shaved bark began to fly into our exposed position. While the grey ground was considered cursed, I now hugged it tighter than one would their lover as the disorienting attack flew at our regiment.

“Move back, give us cover fire.” The Sergeant bellowed out as he pulled out his own weapon and started to unload upon the wall of reds before us.

From my prone position I fumbled to get my weapon at the ready. However I had a good shot at some of the zealous creatures launching themselves at us from the opposite bank.

It’s a very odd thing to describe what occurred next. I always felt myself as a person at peace with himself and the creatures around me. If the previous fall you told me I’d take the life of another creature without so much as a hesitant thought, I would have seen you as mad. Yet on the river that day my bark shards flew true, and three bodies hit the grey pavement.

“Move! Move!” barked the Sergeant.

My fur felt stuck to the grainy grey ground with the grip of a sappy acorn. My body refused to leave its embrace, despite the fact that the safety I felt there was merely an illusion. The sounds of bark shards launched at devastating speed flying and finding their targets started to amplify. I was frozen in place.

But then I felt a paw on my back. At first I was startled. I flipped over to my back and pointed my weapon skyward.

“Saps! Move!” Xylem grabbed my paw and pulled me up.

Like a tree greeted by the warmth of the sun, I felt the energy to stand upon the spinning world around me. As Xylem slinked back toward the ditch we had come from, I followed close behind. I kept my eyes up to his tail, as if focusing on the wall of fuzz would block my senses to the reality around me. However, while my eyes were in denial, my ears could hear the shouting, my nose could smell the fresh coppery scent of blood, and my foot paws had to navigate over fallen furry fighters.

The shrill shout of a red finally ripped my eyes from the shelter. I looked over my shoulder to find the shadow of the enemy rodent stood tall over us from his perch on the fallen lumber.

“Xylem!” I cried out.

Or at least I think I did, I like to think I did. Or perhaps my memory of the moment wanted to convince myself that I had did something, anything, to try and prevent the reality of the following moments.

They drew up their weapon. They fired. I felt an arm wrap about me and the weight of my friend’s body fell atop of me. I could hear the slam of bark against the hard ground, and some giving a hollow thump against furred flesh. My adrenaline pounded.

Was I hit? Was he hit?

As we lay still upon the ground, the damned red devil hopped down from his perch and closed in quickly. He reloaded as he moved in. I could see his eyes look into mine. I squirmed under the weight of Xylem atop of me. I still had my weapon in paw and if I could get it free I could kill him before he finished us off.

He drew up his weapon and went to pull the trigger. As the fear of imminent death took I felt the strength of a bristling oak take hold. My arm utilized all of its strength and pushed Xylem up enough to free my firearm.

I gave a rapid set of rounds square to their chest. I didn't stop until I was empty, at least I think I did, it's possible I continued firing long after it had nothing left to give. The red one fell forward, and as he did I too collapsed back in exhaustion.

After a moment of lying there in silence, I suddenly found strength again as I looked over my friend's back to see if there were any wounds. I tried to started to push him off when I felt him push back against me.

"Don't move, Saps. Keep an eye out. Move only when the coast is clear."

Despite my worry for his wellbeing, I did as I was told. I kept perfectly still. My eyes squinted down to appear shut and dead to the world, but my senses were acute. The intense battle could be heard overhead. As I heard the crossfire and shouting of comrades, it was hard not to wish that I could be stronger, to barrel forth with strength of the forests themselves and shield them from the storm. But in the end we are all but flesh and bone. As hard as it was to wait for an opportune moment to move or fight, we would do more good acting at the proper moment than at the foolish one.

As I made my internal pleas to the forests around us that they would find a way for me to return to them my ears perked as I heard a distant sound in the far distance. Given the circumstances it would be hard to believe that my heart could sink any lower, but the sound of the approaching body in the air was familiar; to both friend and foe alike.

The steel beast of the grey river was on its way. The sound its black soles made across rough grey terrain was hard to describe. It was like a fast moving rain cloud releasing a hollow sounding drizzle. A rumbling of its motor could also be heard, and it sounded angry.

Regardless of the peril our fellow creatures had us in, being still was no longer an option. Xylem knew this as well. He scurried off me, bounding over the bodies that lay fallen on the ground. I followed as fast as I could go.

By the time I had crossed over the yellow stripes I could hear the squeal of the beast as it tried

to stop its charge forward. The contraption, however, could not quell its angry momentum quick enough as it had turned the corner with too much fury. I felt a strong gust tickle my tail as the steel giant whizzed on by and slammed into the downed pole. The round, black feet tripped over the log that had dammed its path. Its momentum caused it to flip over laterally onto its top. With a shattering sound the beast finally skidded to a rest in the ditch of the opposing bank.

I could hear the sounds of conflict start to die almost instantly. No doubt the enemy scurried away in the unexpected calamity. There would never be a hundred percent certainty, but if there was any time to move, now would be it. I gave a shove to Xylem to signal that we could egress from the Grey Death River.

And as we moved back to the safety of the ditch along the bank, I felt a chill when it connected in my mind how much more meaning that name held now given the grey bodies of our furred brethren that now lay strewn within its still waters.

\*\*\*\*\*

“Are you okay?” I asked him as we fled through the forest. Once we had passed the ditch, we kept moving, we never stopped. Despite a limp in his step, Xylem kept moving.

“I asked are you hurt?” my words became louder between my deep huffing breaths. Despite the flurious speed we traveled, I found the strength to push myself to go faster.

I reached out to his shoulder and gripped at it and tugged, “Stop, stop. We’re clear. Can we stop?”

My grip did halt the larger squirrel, who took deep panting breaths himself. He ran his paws over his ears. “I-I just want to see them. I need to hold them.” his voice trembled. It was so uncharacteristic of him, so strange to see the once confident and optimistic creature on the verge of breakdown.

It was at that moment I stepped in and hugged him. It was more instinct than planned. His fur trembled under my paws. Or perhaps it was my paws that were still shaking from the residual adrenaline of combat. As my mind caught up with my body I was worried that he’d push me away.

Under normal circumstances that fear may have been justified, but having just seen the perversion of social normality to such an extreme, our current transgression was minute in comparison. Xylem seemed to be in agreement as his arms wrapped around my sides and we held each other close for a moment.

We stood there in the drizzle and cold, the air was quiet except for the breath we both we recapturing. I could feel the pieces of my mind starting to meld back together. His scent had



cleared my nose of the scent of blood from my memory. We both needed the peace of the moment, to collect our thoughts.

“So what do we do now?” I asked.

We released our embrace, he whipped at his brow as he regained his composure. “We need to get back to the grove. We need to inform them of what is going on.”

I knew when he said the word ‘them’ he meant those like my father. Normally I would have opposed to such an interaction, but in this moment I would rather go back to him then forward into what was out there. I gave a nod, “Alright, Xylem. Hopefully we will run into others on the way back.”

As we moved along the forest floor, the calming silence in the air began to overstay its welcome. It shifted from a welcome friend to an obsessed stalker, looming over our shoulders. My ears perked, trying to hear for any signs of life. But only the dead foliage upon the ground made any stir.

Were they alright? Had they camped and regrouped elsewhere? Maybe they were waiting for us?

No, those were foolish questions. With the amount of greys that fell at the river, no any troop would wait around with expectations two random individuals would show up.

However, the more dire questions started to fill me as we got closer to the grove. Things were still far too silent. I would have thought that there would be some sort of normalcy returning to the world around us as we got closer to home. That things would resemble some sort of sanity and that we would arrive to blissfully unaware denizens of our little grove, confused as to what two soldiers were doing running AWOL.

This day, however, was merciless.

The first sign things were wrong was smattering of fallen grove guards lying bloodied and torn on the ground. Tall trees stood silent as they had seemed to be abandoned by any creature that used to call them home.

We were silent and still, but for a moment. The reality of what was before us not registering as reality to our mind’s eye. But as we looked upon the scene for longer, the emotions started to tingle forth. Like blood through a tail that had been sat upon, waking from a slumber with all the painful pins and needles poking at one’s very soul with torturous zeal.

Without a second thought Xylem was off like a shot. I cried out his name and chased after him. There was no way to tell if the creatures that did this were still in the area. The danger could still

be lurking around the treetops. He didn't care though. I didn't blame him on that. I just needed to make sure to stick with him. To make sure he got through this okay.

He zipped down the path to his home tree. He leapt up and climbed with such fervor, shards of bark shed from the tree. I had to shield my face from the debris before following him up and into his humble little abode within the healthy maple.

With the overcast sky outside, the dwelling's lighting was dim. I could see and recognize Xylem's silhouette. It stood perfectly still, head tilted down to the floor. At his feet the form of Cambi lay, eloquent even in death. There was a peace about them both, despite the deep red claw marks that were lashed through their furry coats.

But while Cambi lay in peace, the lover she left behind stood in torment. A war of emotions washed over him. Anger, rage, sorrow could be seen swimming through his shaded form. I mostly felt fear myself. Did he even remember I was standing here? I never had seen him this cold or distant. I didn't know what to expect from him.

My paws felt like they were caught up in barbed wire as I moved up to him from behind. As I approached I reached my paw forward to put it on his shoulder in somber condolence. However, just as I was about to touch him his back arched and he let out a shrill and rage filled scream to the sky. He spun around and pushed me to the side, causing me to lose balance and catch myself on the wall as not to fall over completely as he barreled past.

"Xylem!" I cried out as I had tried to scramble to my feet. I was so caught off guard that I had stumbled when attempting to get back up and chase after him back into the open grove.

"You bastards! Don't kill sows and pups! Kill me!" I heard his rage filled tones echo across the abandoned grove as he charged for the heart of our homestead. As we approached the center, I remembered my own family. And despite my hatred for the pompous jerk, my mind couldn't help but wonder, and dare I say worry, about my father.

While Xylem was charging forward without second thought, demanding to know who was responsible, I was a little more aware of our surroundings. My eyes could see feathers strewn about the fallen leaves. The branches on high perched on by chicken hawks, that could hear my friend's rage loud and clear, drawing their attention in our direction.

As we approached the grove's center, I saw the well kept and trimmed maple that I was more familiar with than I had wish to be. It was the political center that my father helped run our scurry. And before the prestigious tree lay the bodies of the leadership, the familiar portly form amongst them.

It was my turn to experience my own vortex of emotion. Though mine certainly wasn't as much pain as it was numbness. I felt so much animosity toward him, yet I would have wanted to have

left him on a better goodbye than the one I had gifted him with this morning. He, like the others, showed signs of being raked by talons.

It was at that point that I could solidly conclude that our home was not gutted and torn asunder by any army of red devils. Instead they were taken out from the skies, by the very chicken hawks that loomed on the branches before us.

Xylem glared up at them, and foolishly spat forth. He raised his firearm, "You featherbrained sons of vultures! What is the meaning of this attack?"

One of them glared down at him and gave a shake of his beak. "Leave this place rodent, this is our grove now."

My eyes fixated on my father's lifeless expression Xylem and the leering hawk exchanged unpleasanties. A sudden flash of memory slapped me like a wriggling trout.

As one began to raise its wings in flight, and my eyes glanced between it and my fallen father, a memory struck me and shook me to my very being. The words from my father this morning reverberated in my skull: 'I'm not suppose to tell you this, but a little bird has told me that those red squirrels are making a move for our outpost.'

Perhaps his words were more literal. "It was a setup," I proclaimed aloud. "They had scared my father into sending more soldiers out."

The hawk looked to the body I had been looking to while talking. "Quite the foolish one, yes. Loved his acorns more than his own countrymen for certain. As soon as one threatened his sacred nut, he was willing to give everything up to protect them."

He fluffed up his feathers as he continued to brashly show off his predatory mind. "All it took was snatching up a couple clutches of the things, and bit of a story. 'Oh yes mister grey Squirrel, I saw those red ones steal your bounty. They took them across the grey line.'

"Soon enough, the ones meant to defend the grove were instead sent on the offense. I heard the chickens on the farm by this land are the plumpest in the land. And we shall get our fill of that bounty by nesting here."

Xylem was shaking with fury. He had loaded up bark shards onto his fire arm and drew it up at the bird. "You killed my family—for some damned chickens!"

"Just as you killed families for some damned acorns, it's just the way of the world."

And so was the thirst of a creature who pined for vengeance of their lost loved ones. Before I could react, my friend sprang forth, his large incisors bared. He opened fire on the hawk as he

closed the gap with surprising speed. Xylem had grappled the larger bird and sunk his teeth into his breast.

Completely caught off guard, the bird squealed out and started to take flight. With his wings free he probably hoped to shake the bloodthirsty squirrel from him. But with surprising strength and stamina Xylem held tied. He bit again and again. The other hawks started to give chase in the air. I wish I had wings myself to pursue them free from the brush and obstacles of the ground. Despite that disadvantage, though, I kept up pretty well.

I watched as the hawk with the violent furred scarf flew out of the forest and into the clearing by the farm. Their struggle over the land which they had both pined for was intense, and the hawk was losing altitude quickly as he began to feel weakened from blood loss. My friend too felt the wrath of the creature's beak across his fur and skin and his blood drizzled from the organic storm cloud that raced forth.

My breath and heart stopped as I saw them flying full bore toward a tall wooden post, like the one back by the Grey Death River. A harsh thud echoed in the air when the two creatures came to an abrupt landing upon two wooden beams that stretched out horizontally like a cross from the vertical post.

I could hardly make out what was going on up top. But I could see Xylem kept holding on, but I could tell he was weakening. My heart raced as I hurried down to the post. The closer I got the more I could see how much my friend was in dire straights. He had given the hawk a good fight, but he was just too torn up from the sharp beak and talons that had raked at him.

The hawk's voice cracked with a dangerous screech. "You little bastard, I will enjoy killing you."

Xylem's voice was raspy, but still somehow cock sure, "Then what are you waiting for?"

I at the foot of the pole when the hawk went in for the kill. I screamed up, as if my voice alone could have blown the vicious bird from the post. The beak clamped down around Xylem's throat. Despite this, I swear I could see him grin. I could see his tail shift down around the a pin top insulator on the beam, his paw solidly on a green wire which eventually ran down the length of the post.

I could see archs travel though the two bodies. The smell of burning fur and feathers quickly wafted in the air. My heart stopped, and so did my ascent up the pole. I knew it was already too late do anything. Touching Xylem now would only mean a third life being caught up in the current of death. Both he and the hawk locked up in their position, their bodies starting to heat and catch fire.

There was no way I could bear the sight anymore, I climbed down the post. Luckily the hawk's friends were also all too shocked to recall my presence. I moved back into the forest. What I

was going to do, or where I would go from there, I had no idea. It was instinct that drove my flight from that cross. It was only when my adrenaline settled down that I had started to feel the guilt fill me. My father had cost the lives of so many from his decisions, yet by some cruel fortune, I was the only one not to be punished for my old man's sins.

\*\*\*\*\*

Eventually I had found some soldier in the forest, those that had found the gruesome scene back in the grove and had fled to scavenge what we could before the winter. We would occasionally go on raiding mission to our old home to steal some of the acorns gathered up in the Harvest Tree.

As the cold winter dragged on, we began to notice something.

"Where did the hawks go?" I wondered aloud as I had started to scour around the bare trees for any signs of lives. Given how many lives they had taken, it seemed odd for them to have left it abandoned.

"I'm not sure," my scouting partner admitted.

It was curious; so I stayed behind. The winter was usually haunting enough, without staying in the ghost of a grove. The horrors and memories echoing on the looming leafless trees. My memory returned to their motive, and why they had taken over the land to begin with. Despite the danger, I had travelled to the nearby farm.

The first thing I had noticed is the eerie similarity to the grove in how abandoned it was. A square sign that was not there when Xylem and the hawk flew over now was planted in the snow covered bank before the tall one's abode. I noticed the metal contraption that usually sat in adjacent to the structure was also missing.

As my mind recalled what the vehicle looked like I had a sudden realization. I felt dizzy and lost balance, falling on my back. My memories raced with the horrors that occurred on the Grey Death River. I remember hearing the vehicle coming at full bore around the corner. I had only captured a glimpse of it, but it was enough now. The red-coated monstrosity was the same design and color as the one that rested at the farm. However, in our blind raging conflict, it and the tall one that piloted it now lay in the ditch. Our bountiful grove, irreversibly torn by the ravages of our war, was now of no use to any creature.

I laughed, and rolled madly in the snow until I began to cry. The lesson and maddening laughter echoed in the now hallowed place. Perhaps if it carried far enough, another would hear it and take heed to work with the creatures around them, and not repeat our selfish and shortsighted blunder.