

**Silas Oaktree
and the
Fox's Challenge**

by Nicholas Ballard

Book One of the Silas Oaktree Series

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To all my flock.

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Chapter One: The Forest Council Meeting

March in Tennessee laid in the pissed-on side of springtime. It was still dark at the edge of the forest, the pre-dawn chill permeating the nest. Silas Oaktree stood up, stretching his wings. He looked over at his wife, Crystal.

She was still sleeping, her recently augmented bulk resting on four turquoise gems. One of the eggs was sticking out too far from Crystal's warmth. Silas rotated it tenderly with his beak until it was tucked back under his wife's breast. She shifted in her sleep, but didn't wake. Like the rest of the forest, she was still.

Looking at Crystal sleep, breathing slowly in and out, her dull plumage blending in with the strings of browned plant matter weaved into the nest, Silas felt a warmth that made him temporarily forget about the nip in the air.

We're doing this, Silas thought. We're really doing this, hatching a family. And it's going to be better for my brood than it was for me when I was a nestling. Her and I, we're going to do it right.

Silas puffed out his chest, his deep red breast expanding. He hopped to the edge of the nest, surveying out from his vantage on the great oak.

The oak tree was on the edge of the state forest, adjacent to the backyard of a suburban development. The nest was on a prominent branch midway up the tree, and the tree itself was one of the best nesting properties in the forest. So Silas had thought, and so he still thought, two years after he and Crystal had moved to this part of the woodlands. An out of control fire had forced them from their old home in Virginia, but all in all, he thought they had come out of it having moved up a branch in the world.

Silas' brother Harvey had moved along with them. But that was another matter entirely. On the whole, they had moved up a branch.

What Silas didn't understand was why he had been sleeping so poorly lately. His eyes felt heavy on the sides of his head, like weights trying to anchor him to the nest.

But there was too much to do. Whether it was the Forest Council meeting later today, the mental pressures from impending fatherhood, or the thought of a much-needed full day of worming that he had been dutifully putting off, Silas would not feel justified in snoozing through the morning.

Silas tilted his head, scanning his surroundings. A gray squirrel with a bend in his tail ran along the ground, toward the human structures. Towards the feeder, Silas was sure. As long as water was still wet, and the sky was still up, the squirrel was heading to the feeder.

An early breakfast seemed like a good idea to Silas too. He launched off the side of the nest, plummeting some feet, navigating the oak branches and budding leaves. He spread his wings, translating his vertical drop into horizontal progress. Silas zipped over the expanse of lawn, overtaking the squirrel. He landed on the railing of the large wood deck attached to the back of one of the houses.

The squirrel was Colin Nutter, a neighbor who lived in a nearby beech. The kink in Colin's bushy tail was pronounced, but not so bad as it had been last week. As Colin climbed the deck, Silas greeted him.

"Your tail?"

"Your mother."

Silas flipped his tail feathers contentedly. Colin appeared better than he had last week, when he had hardly left his beech tree. Colin skittered to the bird feeder, angling his weight onto the frame of the feeder's seed silo, as the perch was spring loaded to close from a squirrel's weight, and reached in for some seed.

"Nah," Colin said. His cheeks worked in circles chewing the seed. "It's getting better. Throbbled like a son of a grub after Sadie tried setting it, but this morning not so bad." Sadie was a young female gray squirrel Colin was seeing.

Silas hopped over, flitting to the feeder's perch. "Maybe you should have the vet who lives in the blue house look at it."

Colin guffawed, some seed spitting out. "Let that quack grab at my bush? No thanks, Silas." He nodded, indicating the dog sleeping in the doghouse the next yard over, a brown sixty pound short-hair. "Ralphie was yippin' soprano when that lunatic chopped his nuts off last month. I'm no friend of the flea bag, but even I'm feeling a little sorry for him. You hear that?" Colin shouted so Ralph could hear. "I pity you, you mutt!" Colin tittered laughter.

Ralph's ears switched back and forward, one eye squinting open before he went back to sleep. It was too early, even for barking at squirrels.

"Hey, lay off Ralph," Silas said. "I like him. He just chases us for sport. He never hurt even one of us. Besides," Silas pointed his wing at the sliding door on the opposite side of the deck, "he keeps that ill-tempered furball on her toes."

On the other side of the glass, a cat with long white fur swished her tail menacingly.

Wings beat closer.

"Ill-tempered? Who's talking about my wife behind my back?" Mack Starling landed beside Silas and Colin. Silas found he enjoyed Mack's company, whose shiny, clean black feathers, marbled with white, contrasted starkly with his dirty mouth. Mack wasted no time bobbing his head into the feeder. "So what have you girls been jawing on about?"

"Oh, you know," Colin said, "The same, really. We were just debating which was worse: your nesting habits or your mating call. I said your mating call, but then again, it's not me sleeping in your dropping-filled nest."

Silas chirped laughter. Mack joined in good-naturedly. "Hey, at least my tail isn't looking as crooked and ugly looking as something else your girl Sadie's been mentioning...."

Colin's jowls sagged. He swore at Mack.

Mack spread his wings. "Colin, kiddo, easy! Don't get in the ring if you can't go ten rounds with the maestro!" He dipped his beak back into the feeder. "You might be onto something about the dumping though. If Corey keeps putting out this so-called seed, I could fly over and paint lines for the high school field myself."

"It's better than that muck we see them putting out for Sour Puss over there."

Mack looked over at the cat inside the door. Yes, Maybee. She was as wicked as her name was atrocious, and there wasn't a bird around who didn't love to hate her. Mack jibbered his beak mockingly at Maybee, spreading his wings. "What? What?"

The cat stirred irritably behind the glass; they could see her mewling to go outside. Too bad for the cat, Corey, who owned the house, and his girlfriend, who recently moved in and brought Maybee with her, never got up before a beeping signal from inside the house repeatedly went off, stimulating them awake.

Mack was right about the seed, though. Silas could taste the cheapness. Feel it, too, when it came out much the same as it went down. "I'll have to talk to Corey, tell him to put out something better."

Mack let out a low whistle. "That's our Silas Oaktree, the one we know and love. Always going to bat for us, when the rest of us are sitting on a branch with our wings folded up like a-holes. I love ya, buddy."

"What?" Silas didn't know if Mack was patronizing him. Sometimes it was hard for him to tell. "It's just bird seed, guys. Corey's decent. He'll probably listen."

"Mack's got a point, Silas." Colin was packing his cheeks with more seed, so his words were becoming more garbled. "It's not just bird seed. You're always thinking about more than just yourself. You care about more than just what's inside your own nest. That's not common. Not for a bird, not for anyone. Speaking of which, you going to nominate yourself at the Forest Council meeting today?"

"No, I —"

"Yeah, Silas," Mack said, "Why aren't you running for Council this time? Cougar made a nice big vacancy when she ate Ten Point Tom. You'd have our support, buddy. You're liked well enough in the forest, and we could tweet good words about you — help you with your campaign."

Colin put on a show of thinking hard. "Say good things about Silas Oaktree.... Whatdya say, boys? It will take some getting used to, but anything's worth trying once...."

Silas cawed at Colin, but he knew he was kidding. Did they really want Silas to run for Council? He had never even entertained the thought. Now, imagining himself on the Council, debating endlessly with the other animals, forest politics seemed even uglier up close than it did from a distance.

"I don't know, guys. I've got a clutch of eggs incubating. Four more mouths to feed, plus, you know ... Crystal is still not ..."

Even Mack seemed sobered up. "Yeah, I've been meaning to ask. How is she? Still not flying yet?"

"Not since hitting that bay window."

"Oh, man. Sorry to hear that. You know, sometimes it takes a while to get over the shock of something like that. I know a grosbeak that — Well, like you said, with the eggs incubating...."

Mack rustled his feathers uncomfortably. Colin's tail twitched.

A yellow ball of feathers flapped their way. Silas felt a flood of relief. His best friend in the world, Mitch Birdsly, falling from the sky ... a subject change from heaven. The goldfinch landed on the feeder, budging up between Silas and Mack.

Mitch sensed the atmosphere. "Who died?"

Mack said, "My appetite, the moment I saw your ugly beak."

"Down a fox's throat with you." Mitch looked over at the squirrel. "Sorry, Colin."

Colin shrugged. His tail bristled. "Whatever."

"But really, what were you guys talking about?"

"Just how Silas should run for Forest Council, but he's being a selfish prick saying he doesn't want to, but we all know he isn't a selfish prick, and that's why we want him to —"

Mitch turned to Silas. "Not a bad idea. Why don't you? Yeah, Silas. I can't think of an animal better up for the job."

"Why? So I can squabble with Barnes and the rodents over every stupid thing that's going on in the woods?" It came out more snappish than Silas would have liked, but he meant it. He didn't want a Council job; he had enough responsibilities under his wings already. He didn't need his friends putting him out in the clearing like this.

"But that's why you'd be perfect for the job, Silas," Colin said. "You aren't a grub-juggler. You wouldn't be taking the job to feel important, which is why the other Council Members are doing it. You'd actually be doing it for the good of everyone in the forest."

"Lay off him, guys," Mitch said. "You might be right that he would be good for the job, but that's not going to make Silas do something he doesn't want to do. He's got a lot he's got to do already. Don't you, Silas?"

Mitch darted into a feeder hold, his black capped head and wings handsome on his yellow body. If Silas didn't know Mitch better — they were, after all, born just a tree away from each other — Silas would have mistaken Mitch's seeming casualness for something other than the show it was. Mitch might want Silas nominated to the Council perch, but he knew pushing the issue wouldn't budge Silas an inch.

The blaring wake-up signal went off inside the house, muffled from the closed window, then stopped abruptly. The one time Silas had asked, Corey, the human, said there was a way to hold off the signal, though it could only be appeased for so long.

Colin, his focus taken by the sound (then the cat, the sleeping dog, the wind blowing through the trees — he was rather titchy), turned back to the group. "Silas is the only Oaktree I'd be voting into the Council. Who'd we elect, Harvey? There'd be mandatory Crazy Berry harvesting. We'd all be thinking we could smell the color blue, and —" He noticed what he was saying. Mack and Mitch were suddenly interested in choking down the dry seed. Silas' wings slumped.

"Hey, Silas, I'm sorry, I —" Colin started. Silas held up a wing to stop him.

"No, it's okay. I know he's got a problem. Harvey knows too. He just ... likes his problem too much. That's all."

That wasn't all, and Silas knew it. The rest of them probably knew it too, and that's why they almost never brought up the oh-so-taboo subject of Harvey Oaktree. Silas' older brother Harvey had been flying high on mushrooms, Crazy Berries, poison leaves, and anything else that scrambled brains into bird droppings for years now.

"Sorry Silas."

"Forget about it."

After that breakfast buzzkill, it wasn't long until Colin left, saying he had to look for some acorns he'd misplaced. Mack made an excuse too, except he didn't put as much effort into it as Colin. He mumbled vague hissing and gargling sounds in his throat, finally giving it up as a bad job. "See you ladies at the meeting," he said, before taking off.

More birds were flying in and out now. Chit Red Squirrel came up on the deck, but he wasn't much for banter. Silas and Mitch pecked at seed in silence, husking shells off sunflower seeds tasting uncannily like Christmas lights.

Silas could sense what was coming.

Finally, Mitch said, "You know, they do have a point. Maybe you should go for the Council Perch."

Yep. There it was.

"Mitch. What am I going to do, huh? Deal with the flaming a-holes that already are on the Council, plus deal with the human Wildlife Resources Agency ... on top of taking care of Crystal? Plus to mention the eggs ready to hatch? Not to mention Harvey ... The ground has barely softened enough for serious worming...."

"Okay! Okay! You made your point, Silas. You can stress out better than anyone I know, I get it. But maybe that's why you should consider —"

"— I said I'm not —"

"— Let me finish. I'm not saying to run for Council. I know you've got a lot of bills to take care of. But that's the point the others were trying to make. They're just not as suave and good looking as I am, so I have to make it for them.

“Seriously though, the point is that you actually are taking care of the other bills. You don't let things slide, Silas, in a good way. You handle things. You care. You know the saying, 'If a bear doesn't craps in woods, does he even matter?' Well, you do give a crap. You do matter, Silas, because unlike the rest of us tick-bitten creatures —"

"— I don't think that's how the saying about the bear goes."

"My point, Worm-face, is before I feather a nest with some dull-feathered hottie and start hatching Mitch Juniors — like someone I know is doing with his girl — I would want to know someone is out there trying to make the forest they hatch in a better place."

Silas's feathers were almost sticking straight off his body. "I am trying to! ... " He deflated, took a breath. He did not want to keep talking about this ridiculous idea. "Just leave it."

"Silas, I'm —"

"Just ... leave it."

Mitch shook his body placatingly. "Okay, Sigh. Okay." Silas knew the son of a grub was trying to hide his amusement, feeling like he had won something.

Soon Mitch flew off to practice singing — a warbler was teaching a seminar on how to get more reverberation into your call. Silas felt out of practice himself; after he a Crystal started going steady, he just didn't see the point.

Silas had eaten the seed for himself, if you could call it much of a breakfast. What he needed was to wrangle up some worms for the gullet. Real, live, nutritious worms. Grubs, too. Nothing beat the crawlers when it came to food, and with Crystal incubating the eggs, he wanted her to have only the best.

Still, Silas hoped when the eggs hatched in a couple weeks, if everything went okay with the baby birds, Crystal would start feeling well enough to fly again. It had been over a month now, and the excuse of incubating aside, Silas was worried.

The sounds of movement inside the house went from the top floor to the bottom. Silas could see Corey shuffling around inside, oblivious to Maybee winding around his pajama bottoms, supplicating access to the outdoors. Silas admired Corey for his dismissal of the cat. Most humans were subservient. Maybe it was

because Maybee was only truly bonded to Corey's girlfriend, Jenny. Maybe it was because Maybee was a real pluckhead.

Corey was average height for a male human. (Which is to say, large. For that matter, most things that didn't crawl through the ground eating dirt through one end and pooping it out the other were considered large by robin standards.) Corey had black hair, long enough to cover his ears but not much more; a roundish face for a human; full lips (human lips crept Silas out, how they were flushed flat to the face); and a stomach that pushed out his wife beater top.

Corey reached in a cupboard, pulling out a box and a bowl. He poured seed for humans into the bowl, dumping his weight into a dining room chair just on the other side of the glass. Corey stared out the window vacantly as he ate with no apparent enjoyment. Perhaps, Silas thought, because with spring coming, Corey had no need for his extra winter weight.

He finally saw Silas, who stretched a wing in greeting. Corey gave a lethargic wave.

Silas did not have all morning to watch Corey graze like a deer. He landed on the deck, hopped to the glass, and tapped with his beak. Maybee ran up on the other side, pawing the slider.

"Stay right there, bird! I'll be out to play with you soon!" A motor sound started in Maybee's throat as the twisted feline was undoubtedly fantasizing tearing Silas to bits. The least he could do was help her visualize.

Silas spread his wings out wide, puffing up his red breast looking all the more appetizing to the cat. When he started a sidestepping mambo in front of the glass, she licked her mouth.

"You want this? You want this?" Silas sang, jiggling back and forth, undulating his wings in The Wave.

"You little pluck!" Maybee screamed, slamming her paws into the glass. "I'll rip your plucking throat out, then crush your ribs with my teeth!" She was losing it, cursing out Silas, then Corey when he told her to shut up.

Corey got up, motioning Silas to retreat to the railing. He tried holding Maybee back with his foot as he opened the slider, but she lept over and onto the deck. Her movements turned to stalking as she moved under the railing.

Silas tutted. As if he suddenly couldn't notice a twitchy white ball of fur slink across the brown deck. He perched atop the feeder. Corey huffed.

"Damn it, Maybee! Get back inside! I've got to get ready for work."

"Pluck off, Corey. I've got a bird to maul." Maybee stared fixedly at Silas, all eyes for him as she prepared to jump onto the railing. She didn't notice as Corey came up from behind her. He punted her sidelong with his foot. Maybee yowled indignantly.

"Get the pluck out of here, Maybee! Get back inside! If you weren't Jenny's cat, you'd go for a ride to the pound."

Silas had known he liked Corey for a reason. But rather than go back inside, Maybee slinked down the steps and out of sight around the corner of the house.

"Corey," Silas said.

"Silas."

"How are you?"

Corey sighed, "Fine." He rubs his arms. "Cold. Damn! It's freezing."

"You're telling me. I live out here."

"I can always tell it's you. The mark on your beak. And you have a deeper red than the other robins."

Silas puffed out his breast. "Thanks, Corey. You don't look too bad yourself." It was a lie, but flattery works both ways.

"Say, Corey, what kind of seed do you have in there? What's that you're eating?"

"Seed? I guess I've got some of those chia ... Oh, you mean ... cereal?"

"Yeah. What kind of cereal is that you got?"

"Cheerios."

"Cheerios." Silas bobbed his head, acknowledging he understood. The one with the picture of the bee on the box, with the mutated face. Silas knew an unorthodox queen who lived deep in the woods, but he had only ever encountered bees that made honey; he had never come across bees making Cheerios. Nor, frankly, did he care to. If he did, he thought the hive best be destroyed and the unnaturalness stopped before it spread throughout the forest. "Yeah. Cheerios. I've tried those. The little loops, right? Yeah, they're okay...."

"Say ... Corey. I see you're cold, so I'm going to get right to the point. Lately you've been putting out seed for us birds and squirrels that's ... let's just say ... not too good. We appreciate it and everything, it's just —"

"— I put it out for the birds, like you. I don't want the squirrels eating it all up."

Corey was missing the point, but at least he was participating.

"I'm sorry. What ... what does it matter if squirrels eat the seed?"

"Because I want you birds to have it."

"Why just birds?"

"I don't know, because ... I like seeing you. Your colors and stuff."

Colors and stuff. Silas wasn't one to judge, getting a bird pregnant in winter even before he was calorically secure and with a fully built nest, but Silas thought humans were supposed to be smarter than this. It just went to show....

"I'm flattered Corey. Really, we all are, that you put this seed out for us. I can't say how much it helps. Especially in winter."

"I like to put suet cakes out, too. Help you put on fat."

Silas pointed his wings enthusiastically at Corey, needing to hold tight to this one and only lucid point Corey had made all morning.

"Suet cakes! Yes! That's what I'm talking about! See —"

"But the squirrels get to them ..."

Silas stared blankly at Corey. What was this bizarre preoccupation with squirrels? Did Corey have nothing better to think about? Silas needed him to focus.

"Well, the suet cakes, see — those are good. Really good. You should keep those up. Personally, I love suet. Especially when they mix the seeds in the fat ... yum. And the last brand of bird seed you put out, before this one ... that was right on. That was good. You should really get that again. This seed, though —"

"— This seed was on sale," Corey said proudly. "There was a coupon in the Sunday flyer for five dollars —"

"Corey." Silas tried not banging his head repeatedly against the rail. "Corey. We appreciate you putting out food for us. We do. And I'm talking to you now as a friend, and because you put out the best spread in the whole development. Everyone else, it's like they forget about us. But you — you care, Corey. And that's why I'm going to talk straight with you: You're putting out bird seed now, and it's not cutting it."

"I'm putting out bird seed now —" Corey tried following along.

"— And it's not cutting it," Silas finished. "It's Grade F crap, and it's got to go. Whatever this is now, I don't know. The sunflower, flax, everything else ... I don't know, it's just off. Smell it. It's not right. We need you to put out better seed."

"Uh, um ... alright." Corey was shivering, his arm hair spiked. "When you guys finish this bag, I'll —"

"No. Corey. Today — a new bag of seed. The good kind. Right before work —"

"No, I can't. Grace ... I've got to get in, I hit the snooze too much already ..."

"Fine. After work. Go to the store, get the good stuff. Whatever this is," Silas indicated the feeder with his wing, "It's got to go. Dump it out. We'll start over fresh."

Corey said he would, and Silas thanked him. Corey was a decent human, through and through. When Corey understood what he needed to do, he went and did the right thing. It was another thing Silas liked about him.

"How's Grace?" Silas asked. Grace Winsworth was an old female human who lived a five mile straight flight into the city in a old Victorian house. Corey went to care for her as an in-home hospice aide. Silas had started visiting her at Corey's request, as she loved birds. As any sensible creature would, really.

Corey shook his head. More than the cold seemed to be bothering him. "Her lymphoma's at Stage Five. Has been, even when you first met her. Can't believe she's held on this long, but she's tough."

"Yeah. Yeah, she is," Silas bobbed his head. As Silas understood it, Grace was old, even by human standards. Maybe even tree standards. "I'll have to pay her a visit soon."

"She'd like that."

They cut the conversation short as Corey got back inside. Silas flew off in haste to get his work done before the Forest Council, which was scheduled for around four o'clock.

Silas spent the better part of the morning hunting worms. He started on a boggy hillock abutting the forest. The pickings were good; it seemed every hole in the ground, had a worm, Silas turning and tilting his head against the ground to peer into the holes. He filled his crop, making multiple trips back to Crystal in the nest, regurgitating the haul into her mouth. With four eggs on the way, she needed to eat well.

In the afternoon, a shallow depth into the woods, Silas ran into Rob Robin, an acquaintance since hatchlinghood. Rob was a pompous dandy who preened too much, and they hunted the same ground occasionally. They made small talk about the Council meeting — Rob told Silas he was considering running for Ten Point Tom's old spot.

Silas couldn't put a talon on it, but Rob Robin had always annoyed him. Silas tried to not hate him, but it was instinctual; between his too-interested questions in how Crystal was doing, and his redundant name, it was hard not to.

Rob wasn't the only one talking about the Council Meeting, however. Hawk Cooper, who helped patrol the forest, spotted Silas from miles off with his obnoxiously good vision, landing to remind Silas about the meeting later, as if Silas could possibly forget with everyone bringing it up.

Later on Silas heard a big lumbering animal down by the stream. It was Momma Bear, out with her two new cubs, Spike "The Griz" and Joe Bear. They were new this winter, the forest's first offspring of the year, and the whole forest had gone goo-goo eyed for them. The two cubs frolicked in the stream.

"Why, hello, Silas," Momma Bear said in her low, drawling voice.

"Hi Momma Bear. Look at those two! Looks like they're getting ready to hunt."

Joe Bear was pawing at something in the stream; The Griz ignored the water, taking his brother's distraction as an opportunity to launch an assault on Joe Bear's back.

"They're still young yet, Silas. Still learning their berries, and pawing at crawdads. Spike, stop that!"

Spike "The Griz" went on attacking his brother like he hadn't heard his mother. She turned back to Silas.

"Silas, I hear you're running for Council. That's wonderful ... I'll be sure to cast my vote."

Silas' feathers bristled. "Who told you that?! I never said I was running for Council!"

"It's the talk of the forest, Silas. Everyone is saying what a good Council member you will be, and I agree with all my heart. You've been nothing but good to me, getting a thorn out The Griz's paw ... eating ticks off my back.... Speaking of which, Silas, you wouldn't mind, would you?, if ..."

Silas took the hint, hopping on her back and scouring for ticks. Silas didn't mind; ticks went down easy enough. He searched through her black coat, his voice muffled by the thick fur.

"People have been saying I would be a good Council member?" Silas paused as he wrangled a ticks jaws out from Momma Bear's skin, biting down on its crunchy body. He was rewarded as the engorged tick burst, squirting warm blood in his mouth. "I'm not interested in forest politics. I've got a family to take care of, hatchlings on the way...."

"You have family values, Silas. That's a plus. I don't want to name names, but some of us consider family values important. These boys, for instance: Spike and Joe hardly know their father ... out wandering miles and miles, who knows where, marking territory ..."

Not naming names, right. Like Poppa Bear. Silas didn't see any reason to voice this out loud. He continued rummaging for ticks.

"The point is, Silas," Momma Bear went on. Silas had been hearing a lot of points today. "The Forest Council could use someone like you. Everyone thinks you would be good for the Perch."

"Not everybody thinks that." It was a nasally voice coming from nearby. Silas looked up from Momma Bear's fur. Fox came out from behind a tree. His pointed ears stuck out from a narrow face that held a perpetual sarcastic smile. His bushy tail bobbed as he trotted nearer.

"Actually, from what I've been hearing around the forest, a lot of animals don't even want to see Silas run for Council," Fox said, stopping at the stream's edge closest to the playing cubs. "In fact, I've heard creatures say Ten Point Tom getting ripped up was the best chance this forest has had in years for some real change. And they don't want that chance screwed up by another narrow-minded bird brain on the Council."

"That's a terrible thing to say!" Momma Bear said. "Fox, you should be ashamed!"

"It's okay, Momma Bear," Silas said. "Fox is a little sore from Colin escaping him last week. See, unless he's out destroying someone's life, the miserable pluck feels his day's wasted."

"Pluck!" The Griz repeated from the stream. So he wasn't as deaf as he had pretended with his mother.

"Spike! Silas, please! Your language!" Momma Bear prickled with indignation.

"Yeah, Silas, you should watch that dirty beak of yours." Fox giggled a clownish laugh. He surveyed the cubs as they romped in the shallows. "Whatever injustice you think I did to Colin, you're mistaken. The squirrel had lost a wager we had set, and just because he didn't honor our agreement, and I got a little nibble at his tail. It doesn't make me a villain...."

"When you set the price of your challenges as the other animal's life, do you really expect them to pay up?"

"Absolutely," Fox said. "It's called honoring an agreement, Silas. Something, despite what some of the other animals have been saying about you ... I thought you knew something about ..."

"Bug off, Fox. If you're still smarting because I beat you in that challenge with the pebble in the soda bottle —"

Fox's perpetual smile fell. "I paid up for that. You found your brother right where I said. Though why you even bothered with that maggot was is beyond me...."

"Fox, please!" Momma Bear said pleadingly. "I don't see what any of this has to do with the Council meeting this evening ..."

Silas could tell she just wanted the arguing to stop. He didn't mind: just seeing Fox was enough to get his blood boiling.

"It's okay, Momma B," Fox said. "Silas and I are just old friends, trying to see eye to eye. Now, if I was him, I would focus on my family. Eggs hatching, nice wife ... a brother, when he's not out scratching anyone's fur for a quick Crazy Berry...."

Silas wanted to stab Fox's eyes out. Fox went on.

"If I were Silas, I would keep to pulling worms out of the dirt, and keep my beak out of Council business. That's just what I would do, if I knew what was good for me. Momma Bear, you've got two nice little cubs to think of. Joe, and ... Spike — 'The Griz,' right?" Fox chuckled. "I like that. 'The Griz.' You bears should be real careful. Human hunters, prone to accidents, wandering off too far.... You need a Forest Council who's looking out for you. You need more than a bird picking ticks off your back...." Fox's voice lifted in crazed humor. "But that's just me." He tittered.

Momma Bear wasn't the sharpest thorn on the bush, but even she had her limits. She reared up on her back legs, Silas holding on with feet and beak. Momma Bear let out an almighty roar, slamming her paws back to earth and charging Fox.

Fox yelped, retreating along the bank and up a rise. When he was far enough away, he turned.

"I'm warning you, Bear. You don't want to get lumped into the same fate as the company you keep. If I were you, I'd keep the ticks, and lose the bird."

With that bit of repartee, Fox was gone.

"Don't listen to him, Silas. Joe Bear! Spike! Get out of that stream and get over here, right this instant!"

Momma Bear huffed as her cubs frolicked closer, taking their time in getting back to their mother.

"Fox is just worried you are going to get that Council Perch, like I'm sure you will. He's always into those tricks of his, planning and scheming...."

Silas shut his eyes, rubbed the bridge of his beak.

"Like I said a million times, I'm not going for Council. But you're right about Fox plotting. He's always scheming up something, but I don't think he wants to get on the Council himself. He's too much into his wagering and dealing. He's too offbeat to get full support from the forest. Plus he's too busy making a fortune in the Berry trade."

Silas also knew his own brother, and the loser juiceheads he hung around with, were some of Fox's biggest customers. The poison plant trade was illegal in the forest, but good luck trying to tell Harvey Oaktree that when he's toasted off his branch on a Berry bender.

"Siley!" The Griz and Joe were back by their mom. Silas said hi to the cubs, flew over and ruffled The Griz's fur on top of his head. Momma Bear said they were going back up to their den to get in an afternoon nap before the Council meeting.

"The boys will be bored at the meeting — their first one. But you know how children are, Silas. You will, that is —" Momma Bear tried stifling a huge yawn, failing. "Eeeyahhh! ... Excuse me, Silas. I was saying about the eggs on the way. I'm happy for you."

Silas spent the rest of the afternoon worming, filling his crop for one more trip back to the nest to feed Crystal and check on the eggs before heading to the meeting. It embarrassed him going to the meeting without her. They were husband and wife, and Silas was sure the other animals would be asking. Saying Crystal was incubating the eggs would float today — after all, it was true — but Silas knew that excuse had an expiration date.

Why couldn't Crystal get over it? She hit a window. So what? It happened to a lot of birds. What really stuck in Silas' crop was knowing she was still able to fly. She had gotten back to the nest alright. It was the shock that had set in later. That, or she just decided she didn't want to fly, and that the nest was safer.

Silas hated himself just then, realizing his wife embarrassed him.

Worming the Crawford family's lawn — they were having septic issues, and the wet lawn was a buffet of worm spaghetti — Silas heard a chirp of greeting behind him.

There she was. Rose Topbranch. Pale pink breast; dulled plumage; elegant, petite frame. An ornithologist's wet dream.

Silas' breast expanded, trilling a greeting back. It sounded off-key to his own ears; he kicked himself for not going to the warbler's seminar with Mitch. He felt shaky-winged. "Hi ... Hi Rose."

"Hi, Silas." Her voice was melody itself.

Silas scratched the ground, turning his head in a display of what he hoped looked like expert worm-spotting. He failed to notice the one crawling over his right foot. "So ... are you going to the Council meeting later?"

Was he really bringing up the Forest Council meeting? Of course she was going. Her and the rest of the forest.

"Yes." She giggled. "Are you going?"

"Yeah." Silas didn't know what else to say. He kicked the worm off his foot, busied himself looking for another one.

"Well, if you want, we can fly down together. I was just getting some lunch. I heard the Crawfords' was crawling. And look ..." Rose plucked a worm, thin and delicate, and jackhammered it down her gullet.

God. She could even make eating worms look sexy.

"Yeah. Um, sure. Okay. So, do you want me to meet you back here? I've got to do something real quick, and I can meet you back here, and we can go down to the meeting together? You know, just as flying buddies?" Silas swallowed.

Rose giggled, assenting. Silas flew off, feeling lighter despite the worm bits packed in his crop. He flew through the oak branches, alighting on the nest.

Crystal looked up from rotating the eggs.

"Hi Silas, how was your —"

"Hurry up and eat this." Silas jammed his beak to hers. He began retching worms into her throat. Crystal's eyes were wide. "I'm going to be late to the Council meeting. Come on, finish up. Gotta go."

"Silas —"

He regurgitating more worms into her mouth, cutting Crystal off. When he finished, Silas nuzzled her head distractedly, hopped to the side of the nest without glancing at the eggs, and flew back out.

When Silas got back to the Crawfords' lawn, Rose was still there. They flew off together into the woods, and to the Forest Council meeting.

The Council meeting was about two miles into the forest from the human development. Silas and Rose flew together between the trees, piloting around branches, rounding trunks. Animals of all kinds moved below them, heading where they were headed. They broke into a clearing.

Ferns and fallen trunks, patches of bare ground and roils of dirt carpeted the clearing. Though it was hardly past three, the clearing and the trees surrounding were milling with woodland creatures.

Mitch Birdslly flocked with a group of other birds, listening to Flash Goldplume, a large white and gold parrot who had escaped human enslavement, tell a joke. Even Hawk Cooper took a break, trying not to look amused by the joke, as if enjoyment was something unprofessional. Silas and Rose landed.

Mitch nodded to Silas, doing a double-take seeing Rose fly in with him.

"Rose, sweetie," Zig Chickadee said, a snowbird down from New York, making lewd clicking sounds with his tongue. "Why are you flyin' around with that worm bag? Get over here and rub some of that color on me..."

The birds guffawed. Flash asked Zig if he wanted something else rubbed on him. Everyone laughed. Zig pointed a wingtip at Flash. "Watch it, you fast talking son of a grub. At least I don't look like my mother got in the nest with a clown before poopin' you out."

Flash laughed it off. "We'll really miss you when you fly back up north, Zig. Really."

Mitch leaned in close to Silas. "So, what's up with you and ..." he said softly, looking right at Rose, jerking his head in her direction. Real subtle.

"Nothing. Just flew here together."

Mitch didn't pursue it. They looked up when a big shadow soared over them, toward the center of the clearing. It was Wesley Barnes, the Forest Council's Top Perch. Mitch warbled, testing out what he learned at the singing seminar.

"Look who's early, as always.... The old bean counter himself. He'd rather leave his nest not wearing his feathers than be late — even if he is nocturnal."

Barnes was a great horned owl, his plumage a camouflage brown mottled with white. He was on a stump in the middle of the clearing, arranging some papers he had brought with him. Most animals learned to read at least a little, but Wesley Barnes' ability to read and write was something else entirely.

Silas circulated, making talk with the other animals he knew. Rose stayed on his wing for a while, quiet, nice to look at, until she got caught up chirping with some of her girlfriends. Silas could feel the eyes of Rose's friends on his back as he chatted with Bud Turkey. Silas didn't see Bud's wife Janine, but where one was, the other wasn't far off. Bud was alright one-on-one, but when Janine was around, she had him pecked. Silas didn't see why Bud put up with it.

"Barnes looks like an egg's going back up the wrong shoot, don't it?" Bud said. He gargled a soft chuckle.

It was true. Wesley Barnes always seemed annoyed, his imperious eyes daring you to waste his time. As Barnes surveyed the crowd from his stump, however, head twisting around in full circles, searching, he looked more ruffled than Silas had ever seen him. A raccoon approached Barnes — Rex Washer, a junior Council member. Silas could not hear what Barnes asked, nor Washer's response. Barnes' down moustache blew out as he hooted annoyance.

The crowd swelled, thousands of animal voices a cacophony ringing through the clearing. John Deer was there with his bevy, the human baseball cap he was fond of covering his head between his antlers. Alf A. Wolf and his pack stared in the direction of John Deer's group, licking their chops. Fox was in the shaded part of the clearing, talking animatedly with a group of animals, who seemed to be nodding at everything Fox said. Fox barked an unmeasured laugh, and as the group laughed with him, Fox looked past a crane's neck, his eyes meeting Silas'. He sneered.

Silas flew around with Mitch, looking for a perch; the trees were packed with birds, and finding a spot was difficult. Some of the stoner birds were there, but Silas didn't see his brother Harvey. It figured. Harvey probably was passed out in some bush, a poison thorn sticking out the fold of his wing.

Silas told Mitch about his run-in with Fox when visiting Momma Bear.

"I don't see that big broad here. Slept in late, probably. Still, would have been nice if Momma Bear had Fox for lunch ... do the rest of us a favor."

Silas agreed. "Look at him. If being a racketeer wasn't enough, looks like he wants to be a politician on top of it." Fox's tittering laugh carried up to the top branches.

"We could go over there and drop a load on his coat...."

Silas was mulling over Mitch's suggestion when Wesley Barnes fanned out his wings, letting out a feather-raising scream, cutting through the din of thousands of voices. Most the animals went quiet at once; nothing from Wesley Barnes came as a suggestion, and demanding quiet was no exception. Still, some animals chattered.

"Quiet!" Barnes let out another screech that sent ears twitching back, raising the feathers on Silas' crown. "Quiet DOWN!" Barnes adjusted on the stump, looked at the the fallen log beside the stump — The Perch. Rex Washer gave a sheepish wave to the crowd.

Barnes' head swiveled behind him. "Quail! Get out from under those ferns! Yes, I can see you from here! Get on the Perch, no hiding now, we need to start ..."

Don Quail, one of the five Council Members, peeked his head out of the ferns, tensed, then flew quickly to the perch, looking like he wanted nothing more than to disappear into the wood.

Barnes tutted, muttered something about acting like you belonged on the Council.

"It appears," Barnes said, "That we are going to have to start this Council meeting without our other Council Member ... Peter Mole must have gotten lost again on his way here.... That is unfortunate, as that makes two Perch spots empty this Council meeting, with the tragic — violent — passing of our long-standing Representative, Ten Point Tom...."

Barnes' head swiveled one hundred eighty degrees, staring pointedly at a mountain lion spread leisurely on a boulder, cleaning her paw. Cougar felt everyone's eyes on her, pausing mid-lick.

She looked up. "What?" Cougar looked mildly puzzled. "Oh, that. Please." Her tone was unconcerned; she resumed licking. "Ten Point was a dear; we'll miss him dearly, blah blah blah ..." Cougar paused again, purring a laugh at realizing her pun. "Yes, he was a deer, wasn't he? Funny. Tasty, too ..."

John Deer had to hold his wife back, who was shouting profanities at Cougar, attempting to charge her.

"Order!" Barnes shouted. He screeched, and the clearing went quiet again. "Yes, well, as Cougar seems patently aware, her position in the food chain makes her immune to punishment for her heinous act, as much as predation on a Council Member is frowned upon. And it could not have come at a more unfortunate time...."

Barnes chewed his tongue, holding himself back from saying more. "Regardless, we have a list of forest matters to discuss, grievances to hear...." A glaze of boredom frosted the clearing as Barnes rumbled on, consulting his papers.

Detecting the malaise, Barnes looked up from his notes. "Then, of course, there will be nominations for the vacant Council perch."

Heads picked up at this, excited muttering running through the crowd.

The meeting began. Janine Turkey took the knoll, complaining about how squirrels were eating too much into her beechnuts and acorns, sending dangerous looks back at her husband Bud Turkey for support. Bud nodded absently.

A human forest ranger, a thin woman with a pointed face and khaki uniform, gave a dry report on campfires and the peculiar hunting schedules of humans. Don Quail, at Barnes' urging, read in a shaky voice a tick and mite forecast for the coming year.

The sun dropped in the sky as the meeting went on, the light yellowing through the branches. Finally, after Fox responded to allegations of growing a Crazy Berry patch with an oily explanation involving nutritional purposes and growing rights, the matter for Council nomination came up. Wings from both sides nudged Silas significantly. Silas harumphed.

Janine Turkey tried nominating her husband, who shook his head, gobbling in protest, finally giving in to her demands, accepting the nomination. The bevy of deer nominated John Deer, who, after freezing wide-eyed when everyone looked at him, arranged his baseball cap, stepping forward to accept.

Wesley Barnes' head swiveled around, waiting for more nominations. It wasn't long before an oily voice spoke up.

"I think I would like to take a stab at running, Top Perch Barnes," said Fox, stepping forward.

Barnes hooted indignation. "Fox.... You're running for Council? Why, I think — Well, it's law in the forest ... anyone can run.... Who nominates you?"

"Oh, I'm sure someone will ..." Fox peered over his shoulder to his cronies. Tony Crow and Brandon Weasel stared blankly at Fox with their beady eyes. "Well ... someone's got to nominate me.... Guys!" he sing-songed.

Fox let out a sudden gekkering sound, startling his entourage to attention. Tony Crow raised a wing.

"I nominate Fox," the crow said, not looking too happy about it.

"Yeah ... Me too," said Brandon Weasel.

Silas watched the clearing stir as animals shifted in alarm. "Not in my forest — nu-uh," said Henrietta Fields, a mouse. Even Chit Red Squirrel barked protest. What surprised Silas more was about a quarter of the animals appearing okay, even satisfied, with Fox's nomination. It wasn't the majority, but Silas was alarmed that Fox had that much support. He wondered how many manipulative threats Fox had to make to win that backing.

A few more animals Silas did not recognize entered the runnings for the Council perch. When no one else came forward, Barnes surveyed the crowd.

"Is there anyone else to be nominated as a candidate for Perch?" He looked directly at Silas. "Anyone?"

More wing-nudging. Silas didn't move.

"Silas Oaktree," said Barnes, "As a member of the Council, I cannot nominate anyone. But even from my barn, I could hear the forest stirring with rumors of you running. Come now ... if you're going to run, fly forward. We need to get on with the meeting...."

Silas was stunned. Even Top Perch Barnes was in on it. He shook his head violently, his beak moving to deny it. The raucousness from the trees, almost every bird, and many of the animals in the clearing drowned him out. "Go get 'em, you son of a grub," Mack Starling called.

Silas would just have to fly down to the knoll in front of the stump, explain to everyone he was not running for Council. He took off from the branch, gliding shakily to the clearing floor. Wesley Barnes looked down at Silas with his yellow eyes, expectant; Rex Washer gave a thumbs up; Don Quail shook, but he always shook. Silas opened his mouth to speak.

Then, a crashing sound coming from the woods, coming closer. Silas couldn't see from the ground; Barnes' eyes widened from his stump, looking at the sound. The crowd of animals parted as a huge black bear pounded and huffed, making for the center of the clearing.

It was Momma Bear. Her eyes were wild, spooked.

"The cubs," she said, panting, her eyes wide. "The Griz ... Joe ... they're gone! I looked everywhere.... They're gone."

Chapter Two: The First Clue

Momma Bear's arrival ended the meeting. Animals willingly traded the monotony of the meeting for the action of searching for the missing cubs.

Birds flew through the forest; rodents scoured the trees and ground; deer and wolves scanned the streams and dense woods. The animals had broken into search parties, Robert Kat the bobcat slinked off by himself to search; Cougar took her time getting up from the rock, but eventually helped in the search. The twilight came alive with shouts of "Griz! Joe Bear!"

Silas had taken off with Mitch, Mack Starling, and Ziggy Chickadee. They flew a tight pattern, cutting across the scar in the trees where the stream ran, then circled above the Bear Cave, beginning a search grid heading outward.

"Her bears are missing, and big momma didn't see them go?" Zig said. "Thought her protective hormones were still raging."

"They'll turn up," Mitch said. "Two loud cubs — we'll find them fast. It's obvious what happened: Momma Bear overslept the start of the meeting, the cubs got bored, wandered off ... we'll find them rough-housing in minutes. Promise."

Mack Starling took point formation. "Tell you what: Momma Bear didn't come a second too late. Silas here was about to get Council Perch, show the rest of us up."

Silas cawed. "Ugh ... Guys, we have cubs to search for."

"Don't get all modest on us now, stud. We all saw you with Rose Hot-Stuff, working the crowd. Mr. and Mrs. Council Perch."

"Shut it, Mack. She's just a friend."

Mack made an agreeing sound that wasn't agreeing at all. Silas searched for a subject change. He remembered as the clearing had begun to empty, the animals scattering to look for The Griz and Joe Bear.

"Guys, you get a look at any of the animals in the darker side of the clearing, when we were leaving?"

"You mean Fox," Mitch said. "Silas, I know you and Fox —"

"Fox, Tony Crow, Brandon Weasel," Zig said. "You're talking about that bunch of pluckers, ain't cha?" Zig said. "I saw 'em, alright. Sitting all relaxed like they were getting ready to watch the Bills play the Jets. I hope Mitch here is right — ten to one he is, and you won't find me betting against him — and we'll find the cubs safe and sound, biting wings off dragonflies. But I'll tell you what: That smile on that fox does nothing to help me roost easier. That creepy motherplucker's up to no good, I'll promise you that."

Silas did not know what type of birds the Bills and the Jets were, but Zig had pulled the worm out by the head. While all the animals were mobilizing to find the cubs, Fox was with his posse, looking unsurprised by the news.

"He was listening to that slimy weasel tell a joke. I was right down there on the knoll by the Perch, going to talk to Barnes about declining the nomination —"

"You weren't going to decline.... We want you to run —"

"Mack, that's not the point. I was close to Fox when Momma Bear came in. I saw his expression. He wasn't even surprised. Laughed. I actually heard him laugh, guys ..."

"What are you saying?" Mitch said. "Fox took the cubs? I wouldn't put it past him. He's done sick stuff before.... We all know he's twisted, wagering your brother's life like that ... trying to kill Colin Squirrel. But two bear cubs? That's too high up the food chain, even for Fox. Each one of those cubs is already as big as he is."

"I don't know. Maybe your right and we'll find them. But it's a lot of animals looking for them now. If we don't hear something soon...."

A large colorful bird rose from the edge of the forest to join them, bright gold, red and white. Flash Goldplume hailed them as he approached. "Bears or no bears?"

"No bears."

"You feather brains needed my sharp eyes, that's why. Probably right under your beaks this whole time."

"Scared away by your loud one, more likely," Zig said.

"I was just searching with Rob Robin and Rose Topbranch," Flash said. "Lot of good that did. Silas, your girlfriend was asking about you —"

"SHE'S NOT MY GIRLFRIEND!"

The other birds cried laughter.

Their perimeter widened and widened, crossing paths with other search parties, who also came up empty. After over an hour of flying, the sun was setting. They were circling around for one last pass when Hawk Cooper intercepted them.

Silas knew Cooper was harmless, at least when he was on duty, but when he flew toward them, Silas felt a wave of fear that probably had to do with the hawk being a bird of prey. Cooper flew circles around the group.

"Gents, I need you to come with me," Cooper said in his heavy Texas drawl. "Found something. Actually, it's Silas that I need —"

Flash picked up. "Is it they cubs? You found them?"

Silas didn't know what the patrolbird meant, needing them to come with him. Was it Crystal? She would be on the eggs.... Hawk couldn't think Silas, a robin, had anything to do with the bears missing....

"Not the cubs," Hawk said. "It's — Damn it, just c'mon." He took off, Cooper's broad wingspan making it hard for them to keep up.

Hawk took them to a grove of elms close to the Bear's cave. Hawk landed on the ground, bumping importantly through a circle of animals gathering around one of the large trees. Wesley Barnes was frowning grimly at the tree; Rex Washer was doubled up against a tree, a hand pressed against the trunk for support as he vomited; the human forest ranger was there, her flashlight on, pointing at the tree.

Mack whistled. "Holy jumpin jiminy junebug ..."

Where the flashlight shined on the tree, pinned to the trunk through his hands and feet in a crucifixion, was Peter Mole, the Council Member who was not at the meeting. His pale bare hands reflected the beam from the flashlight.

Above Peter Mole's body on the trunk, in large shiny letters, was a message written for Silas.

* * *

Wesley Barnes slammed his wing down on the table, rattling jars of ink. "What in the hoot do you mean, you don't know what happened?"

They were in the loft of the abandoned barn where Wesley Barnes lived and worked. Silas had never been here before, nor had he ever desired to visit the place. Old farm equipment rusted outside the building, standing in tall grass where the forest had begun reclaiming the field; weathered planks unhinged from the other wall boards; human teenagers had come by to graffiti a love note on the barn door: "Joey likes dick". Silas did not know who either Joey or Dick was, and while glad there was affection between them, he thought relationships should be kept more private.

Despite the haunted house decor of the barn's exterior, the loft was alive with activity. Patrol animals and Council members came and went at all hours, Barnes a notorious workaholic and taskmaster. The interior was lit by the warm glow of a light bulb hanging from the rafters. Silas didn't understand why someone would want to simulate the sun as humans did, throwing off sleep schedules, but he also wasn't nocturnal, nor as big a reader as Barnes, who was clicking his talons atop his long wood table, stacked with papers and jars of ink, as his big yellow eyes bored into Hawk Cooper.

Hawk sputtered. "Buh. Uh ... I ... Well, Perchman Mole wasn't at the Forest Council meeting ... Henrietta Fields found him on the tree —"

"Yes, Cooper, we know that," Barnes said. Even his beak moustache seemed to frown annoyance. "Mole didn't pin himself on the tree, after writing those words in his own blood.... We need answers as to who did!"

"Perchman," Hawk said, "I've been patrolling the forest for years. I've seen some things — coming by the carcasses Cougar leaves ain't a pretty picture, for one example, but that's nature — but this ... this ain't like that. Animals just don't kill each other for the sake of just killin'."

Silas was on a hay bale in the back, near Henrietta Fields, the mouse who found Pete Mole. She was still shaking, shocked by what she found. Don Quail was by her, trying to comfort her, but he was shaking even more than Henrietta. Rex Washer spoke up.

"Whoever it was didn't even take a bite at poor Pete. Not even a nibble mark trying to eat him, just one wound in his neck where the killer got the blood to write on the tree. And pinning him up like that ... writing.... Whoever did that writes as good as you, Barnes ..." adding under Barnes' withering look, "Not that you had anything to do with it."

"How did that go again?" Mack Starling asked. His eyes were slits, a worm's hips away from falling asleep. Mitch, Ziggy and Flash were there as well; only Flash seemed awake, used to odd hours when living in a human's house. "Some message about Silas, right? Talking about how he's the bird for the job to find The Griz and Joe Bear — just like he's gonna get the Council Perch ... probably crack this Peter Mole thing open easier than a warm sunflower seed, too ..." Mack's head was sinking into his body, nodding off. Silas wanted to hit him with his wing, knock him off the bale. The last thing he needed was to get caught up in this.

“Yeah, Oaktree? What makes you think your such a hotshot, huh?” Hawk Cooper said, half unfolding his wings. “Just because you’re popular running for Council Perch, you think you can do everything else, too? I’m patrolbird here —”

Barnes gave a quick scream, quieting Hawk, jolting the other birds awake. He turned his lamplike eyes on Silas. “Silas Oaktree, yes ...” Barnes’ claws and beak scratched through his papers. “Moved here two years ago, shows up with a wife, no flock... You drag in with you into our forest a brother who is in the drug trade, and then you wanted a branch in one of the best trees in the forest — which you got. With my stand against the poison plant problem, I’ll admit, didn’t approve your move here, except one of the animals vouched for you. Seems you were popular even before moving here. Says here,” Barnes traced down the paper with a talon, “you came from the Daniel Boone Forest by Williamsburg, left after your home and the surrounding area was burned down —”

Silas swallowed. He didn’t know Barnes had a file on him. And who had vouched for him? “It was an out of control campfire, some kids —”

“— That’s what you said in your interview when you moved here, yes.” Barnes leaned forward, his shadow on the back wall growing. “I hear a lot of things, Oaktree. A lot. These old ears pick up all kinds of things. Some facts, mostly rumors ... forest drivel. One of those rumors I heard was the fire in your old forest wasn’t caused by some careless humans. I heard it was arson — by a forest animal.”

Don Quail’s voice stuttered alive. “Barnes, be se-se-serious! An animal, starting a forest fire! Why, that’s more preposterous than an anim-ma-ma-mal ... ki-killing another animal — for no re-re-reason! I knows humans and dogs hunt my sp-sp-sp—” His voice was high and strained. “—Species,” Quail finally got out. “But that’s to eat! Or sp-sp-sp-sport! But animals don’t ki-kill just, be-be-be-be —” He gave up the word as a bad job. “It’s not na-na-na- ... natural!”

Barnes kept his eyes locked on Silas. “Not natural, no. Nothing about this is natural. Even among humans, this behavior is not normal. Murder, arson — it’s crimes against nature that no animal in his right mind would commit. I’ll admit, even with my reading and experience, I have no knowledge of acts such as these.... You, Silas, you — You haven’t said anything substantial about your past, coming here with a miscreant brother, and still I turned the my head one hundred eighty degrees the other way. I’ll admit, I’ve heard you’ve already done some measure of good in the forest — well spoken of by some, like Momma Bear —”

“Yeah, he’s not all dirty feathers and poop,” Rex Washer said, smiling. “Made some enemies, though. Fox, for one — that makes Silas good in my books.”

Barnes looked annoyed at being interrupted, unaccustomed to breaks as he spoke in marathon blocks. “Whatever the case, and I don’t know if it true or not, but I heard Silas Oaktree here has some experience in these matters. That it was an animal responsible for burning his old forest down, and Silas was the one who found out, and stopped him. You were even in the human newspapers —”

“That was ... I didn’t want to be in the paper ... I just wanted —” Silas felt flushed with embarrassment as all the animals in the loft looked at him, some in wonder, others incredulously.

Barnes studied him. “Oaktree, I don’t know if we are lucky to have a bird like you around when these abominations against nature come up.... Or, I don’t know if these abominations come up because you are here —”

“I didn’t have anything —”

Barnes held up a wing. “Either way, we only know two things. One, you are the only animal in this forest who has dealt with something similar to the murder of Peter Mole, at least in terms of the heinousness of the act. Please, do not interrupt. And second, the killer singled you out, Oaktree, by name.”

Barnes picked another sheet of paper off his table, holding it up in his beak for Silas to see.

Silas already knew what it said, Barnes having transcribed the message on the tree all of them had seen. Barnes had written:

SILAS SOLVES THE CASE OF THE MISSING CUBS WHEN HE —
I(G)HTSSSE(L)

The second and last letter of the random letters under the message were circled.

“What does that mean, Silas?” Mitch asked. “So whoever did that to Pete also took the bear cubs?”

Silas shrugged. “Don’t know. Seems like it. Except I don’t know who killed Pete Mole, or what happened to the — Wait a second.... Of course!” Silas told the room about visiting Momma Bear by the stream before the Forest Council meeting, his run-in with Fox.

“He was threatening Momma Bear, looking at the cubs! He was practically licking his chops! I’m telling you, Fox has done things like this before. He loves issuing challenges, putting animals’ lives on the line for his games. Fox did it to my brother a few months ago.”

“The pebble in the soda bottle,” Flash said, “We heard.” He shuffled his feet, looking doubtful. “I’m not saying it couldn’t be him, you’re right, Silas ... it’s just ... two bear cubs? How could he take them right out from under Momma Bear’s nose? It would probably have to of been a bigger animal —”

“And Fox was at the Forest Council meeting, same as us,” Mitch said. “He was there in the shadowed part of his clearing.”

Silas clicked his beak. “He could have ducked out before the meeting when we were all jawing, killed Mole, then ducked back into the crowd like he never left.... Wait — the stream! He came out from behind the trees near the spring, when I was with the Bears! We were really close to the elm grove where Mole was pinned, and the Bear Cave was nearby, too! He would have had time to do both before the meeting, kill Mole and kidnap the cubs, then used the meeting as an alibi where we all saw him, when he was sure Momma Bear would have just enough time to wake up and come to the meeting to tell us her cubs were missing! It’s the perfect cover!”

Mitch looked unsure. “Maybe.... But then where would Fox have taken the cubs? And why would he do it all in the first place? Don’t look at me like that, Silas! He’s a slimeball, I know! I’m with you! Just — usually he wagers directly with his victims, doesn’t he? He challenges the animal, puts a price on winning, a price on you losing, which he’s working for — and does it that way. I’ve never heard of Fox operating another way....”

“There are the elections coming up,” Flash said. “For Council Perch. Fox nominated himself to run. Now with Pete Mole gone, there’s two perches open. Maybe he’ll use the cubs as leverage on Momma Bear — maybe on the rest of us — so we don’t oppose him. You know he’s never been one to fight fair.”

Finally, Silas was hearing some sense. “That’s right! Fox is always looking to bite from behind. He wants on the Council, probably to take over the Council, and have the run of the forest. He’s already wrapped up the poison plant business. No offense, Top Perch Barnes, even with you cracking down on it, Fox is stronger than ever. I know because my brother is involved in — well, anyway . . . Fox is not going to rest until he sees the rest of the forest under his dirty paw. I say the first animal we look into is Fox before we look anywhere else.”

Silas was out of breath; he wiped some spit off his beak. Barnes studied him for a long moment. Then he opened a glass topped jar of ink, wider than it was tall. Barnes dipped the his beak in, then began tracing along the bottom of the paper. No one spoke as he worked.

Finally Barnes dipped his beak in a bowl of water, agitating with his face, wiping himself dry on a spotted cloth lain out on the table. “I’m no fan of Fox myself, Oaktree.” Barnes’ tongue darted out to catch a drop forming on the tip of his beak. “But your friend Mitch Birdsly might have a point. Fox has not been known to operate like this, and Goldplume may also be right: Fox certainly has the motive to pull off one of his schemes, especially with the elections coming up by next full moon. As a Council Member and Top Perch, I should stay impartial to the candidates and the elections. But as you said, Oaktree, Fox is up to something, and for the good of the forest, we cannot just sit by and do nothing.

“Two missing Bear cubs, a murdered Council Member. . . .” Barnes shook his head. Which, in his case, meant whipping it in full-circle clockwise and counterclockwise rotations. Silas was getting dizzy watching. Barnes sighed and went on. “To top it off, the murderer — we will not name names until we can prove who it is — decided to single you out, Oaktree. With a riddle, no less. ‘Silas will solve the case of the missing cubs when he —’ The sentence written above Peter Mole was not finished, and it was followed by a string of letters. As we have little time — an inconsolable Momma Bear is waiting for me downstairs, as is the Mole family — I took the liberty of unscrambling the letters.”

Barnes held up the piece of paper he had written on. It said, in dripping black ink:

SIGHTLESS

“‘Sightless?’” Zig Chickadee spoke for the first time since they arrived in the barn loft. “Does that say ‘Sightless?’ It’s been a while since I’ve read anything.”

“Yes it does,” Barnes said. “Meaning blind. A riff on the fact our late Council Member was visually impaired, no doubt.”

Silas felt a chill run up from his tail to his head. Sightless? What kind of crazy game was this killer — Silas would bet a bog full of worms it was Fox — playing at? Why did he single out Silas? Why not a direct challenge like before?

Hawk Cooper said, “We send out a patrol of some of the bigger mammals to pick up Fox already. Robert Kat and some of the wolves.” He turned his head so one beady eye looked snidely at Silas. “That’s what real police work is about. Getting things done, not just standing around pointing wingtips. . . .”

Silas puffed up his red breast, posturing; he would wipe that beak off Cooper’s face.

Flash and Mitch held him back; Mack chirped in his sleep.

Barnes went on like nothing happened. “Good. Silas, I know you are an early bird, but you are the only animal with experience in this sort of thing. That, and you seem passionate in your theories on how Fox works. I don’t know what we will be able to prove, but you are to go with Cooper here. You are to observe — just observe — as Fox is questioned. You have a history with Fox — we do not need you getting hurt. I hear you have a brood on the way, and if you are to run successfully for a Council Perch, you should do your best to keep safe. Stay behind Patrolbird Cooper.”

Silas displayed his breast more prominently. He was furious Barnes would treat him like a hatchling, like he couldn’t take care of himself — all while asking for him to work on the investigation. Hawk Cooper was positively preening with delight.

Barnes ended the meeting, flying out the loft doors and down to the lower level, where Momma Bear could be heard sobbing long lowing grunts.

“Come on, Oaktree,” Cooper said. “We don’t have all night. You can watch how us patrol animals get a confession.”

As Silas contemplated a second murder in the forest that night, he saw the paper with the clue on Barnes’ table. He flew down, using his beak and feet to crease and fold it, clutching it in his feet.

Sightless.

They flew out into the dark.

Chapter Three: Harvey Oaktree

Fox was waiting for them in the elm grove between two wolves and Robert Kat. He was looking at the tree where Peter Mole was still pinned when Silas and Hawk landed on lower branch.

“Studying your handiwork, Fox?” Silas said.

Fox didn’t turn around. “Silas Oaktree, and Hawk Cooper. Two of my favorite birds. Lovely. Tell me, Oaktree, are you a patrolbird now, or just practicing sticking your beak into even more matters that don’t concern you?”

“Don’t answer that, Oaktree,” Hawk said. “I’m asking the questions here, Fox. And Oaktree isn’t a patrolbird. He’s only here because Top Perch Barnes asked him to observe. Nothing more.” Hawk looked at Silas, challenging him to disagree.

“Ah.” Fox’s voice was a blade scraping silk. “So, Cooper, you are the one running the show. Good. How wise of you, then, to bring me here — use my cunning to navigate the mind of a killer, and get to the bottom of this unfortunate incident....”

Silas thought Fox found nothing unfortunate about the Council Member dying; the fox studied the scene with a curiosity holding no trace of horror.

“To get you to confess,” Silas said, calling Fox a name. The ears of the young wolf whipped back, scandalized.

“That’s enough, Oaktree,” Hawk said with his drawling voice. He turned back to Fox. “Barnes just wants your statement about where you were when Peter Mole was murdered, and any information you have about the two missing cubs.”

Fox gave his toxic smile. “That red little rat with wings right by you must have been misleading you, Patrolbird Cooper. See, Silas and I had a conversation by the creek before the Forest Council meeting, where he was being crude and unreasonable, as he just demonstrated with his creative name calling. He must have told you about it, and how I was warning Momma Bear to be careful. It’s a dangerous forest.... But did she listen? ... Undoubtedly influenced by our friend here....”

“You threatened her cubs! You as good as said you were going to do it! Hawk, he’s got all the motive to —”

“To what, exactly?” Fox cut in. “To kidnap two cubs, then do what with them? Then kill the second highest ranking Council Member, when I am already running for Perch and am confident I’ll win? For someone as discriminated against as I am in these woods — you’ll admit, Cooper, I get more than my share of visits from the patrol animals — so it’s hard to see what my motive would be to get in more trouble....”

Hawk was bobbing his head slowly. Silas stared at him. “You can’t be buying what he’s saying?!” Silas was incredulous. “He’s saying nothing! Just being slippery with his words! Hell, he would be good for Perch — just like a politician, misdirecting, talking a lot but saying nothing.... Fox is always plotting —”

“I offer wagers, if that’s what you mean. Why, you and I wagered together, Oaktree, and you benefited —”

“I played only so you wouldn’t eat my brother!”

Fox waved a paw like it was nothing. “You won, didn’t you? And you got your precious brother back, safe and sound...”

“You’re doing something with the cubs — the Council — I know it!” It happened every time: Just talking with Fox steamed Silas.

Fox laughed derisively. “The real question is why I’m the suspect... Everyone knows Oaktree wants a Council Perch —”

“I don’t —”

“— and will do anything to get it... And poor Petey here got the sharp end of the stick. And look,” Fox gestured to the message in blood above Mole. “Silas even wrote himself a little riddle where everyone could see. Of course, a desperate attempt to seem more important, if I’ve ever seen one...”

“Cool it, Oaktree.” Hawk put a wing between Silas and Fox, sensing Silas was going to lose it.

“You all saw me at the meeting. Right, Bobby?” Fox looked from the bobcat, the wolves, then back to the birds. “Wolves? Patrolbird Cooper? Even our red-breasted friend here would be lying if he said otherwise. When would I have taken those cubs, then find the time to commit a murder when I know the first animal they would come looking for is me? What would I gain from that? Now, if you did want to wager —”

Hawk cawed. “None of your games, Fox. No one’s doing any of your challenges. We heard what you had to say. If Barnes needs you, you’ll be hearing from us.” Cooper thanks Robert Kat and the wolves for their help, saying Fox was free to go.

Fox gave one last look at Peter Mole, the corpse a grotesque protrusion from the trunk bathed in moonlight. The words written in blood for Silas still glistened. For a second Silas saw Fox give Peter Mole’s body a worried look, but the next instant it was gone.

Fox began to trot out of the grove. At the edge, he stopped. Fox’s grinned at Silas, a humorless smile full of sharp teeth.

“I don’t know who killed the Council Member, Oaktree. But I understand challenges. Whoever did this, they’re not doing it to win something. They’re doing it to get at you. And they’re not going to stop until they see you break. Personally, I hope it’s soon.”

* * *

“Ah, wookit! Widdle Siwas is twying to sweep!”

Silas opened his eyes. No, he was still sleeping in his nest, in the oak tree in the new forest, with Crystal and the eggs. But that wasn’t Crystal talking.

“If widdle Siwas doesn’t wakie wake, Mommy is going to give all the wormies to Harvey — her favwit.”

Harvey was Silas were still hatchlings, only a couple of weeks old. Harvey mimicked being fed cough-up from their mom, his beak and mouth huge compared to the rest of his hatchling body. He was bigger than Silas, who though just a couple days younger, was not growing as fast.

It was morning in the Daniel Boone forest, spring, the trees alive with other birds chirping. There were more families around — their neighbors the Robins just had hatchlings too, and their son Rob Robin was learning to fly. The Birdsls, a family of goldfinches, were a tree over. It was unusual for so many nesting birds to live so close together, but it had been a hard winter. With resources tight, the birdhouses were in high demand.

It was called The Projects. Shoddy birdhouses dotted the trees, clogged with moldering nesting material, rough-cut holes, broken-off perches, disassembling roofs. Boy Scout Troop 103 had done a slap-up rush job building the development. Now, it was the songbirds of The Projects paying the price of their second-rate work.

Harvey and Silas were taking up most of their nest — it was small, all their single robin mother Mary Oaktree could afford time to put together.

Silas hoped she would get back soon. He was hungry, and so was Harvey. Plus, when Harvey was eating, he couldn't talk.

“Early bird gets the worm,” Harvey said. “Early bird gets the worm, little bro. That’s what mom always says. You hatched two days late. That means what Mom brings back should all go to me, right? More chance of one of us surviving. If it is going to be one of us, might as well be me, bro. Benedict didn’t make it, and you’re real puny.... What do you think, widdle Siwas?” Harvey adopted his baby voice again. “Does Siwas think he will join poor widdle Benny on the floor bewow us?”

Harvey tilted his head to indicate over the nest. When their brother Benedict didn’t make it, to Silas’ horror, he had watched as the mother dump his body over the nest. Silas remembered the sound he made hitting the forest floor. Benedict’s body was probably still there, staring up at them.

“Cut it out, Harvey. Mom’s got food for both of us. Just stop trying to eat it all ... share this time!”

“If you want it so bad, why don’t you fight me for it?” Harvey started pecking at Silas. Silas tried fending him off, but he had nowhere else in the nest to move, and Harvey was stronger.

“Stop! Stop! Okay! Harvey, fine! You can have most of it! Just ... save me some, okay?”

Harvey didn’t stop right away, getting a few more pecks in. One got under Silas’ downy wing that stung. From the Birdslly birdhouse a tree over, a hatchling’s head peeked over to see what was going on. Silas didn’t know his name yet, but he didn’t want to look weak in front of watchers.

Harvey gave one more peck. “Remember, little bro, early bird gets the worm. Early bird gets all the plucking worms. I’m the early bird. You’re the late bird. You’re late, Silas.... You’re too late....”

“No, I’m ... No ...”

A beak was nudging into Silas, gentle, unlike Harvey’s pecks. It kept shaking him.

“Silas. Silas, wake up.” It was Crystal. Silas’ eyes popped open. He looked around to see where he was. He breathed a sigh of relief.

“What time is it?”

“A little over an hour after sunrise,” Crystal said. “You didn’t get in until late; you looked like you needed your sleep....”

“An hour —!” Silas got up, flexing his feet, stretching his wings.

“You don’t have to go so soon!” Crystal said. “We can talk. Sadie the squirrel told me what happened yesterday — poor Pete! And that message....”

“Yeah, sorry. I’ve got to go.” Silas gave her a quick peck on the cheek. “Lots to do. I’ll tell you later. Got to get food, go worming for you ... have to talk with Momma Bear, some of the Council members. —”

“Silas, stay for a —”

“Sorry, gotta go. Love you.” Silas flew out of the nest. His wings felt stiff from the long night. Even sleeping in, he hadn’t gotten much sleep, and what little he did get wasn’t worth a twig. He glided into the grass behind the human development.

“Long night?” Ralph the dog was lying down outside his dog house, watching Silas look for worms.

“I thought dogs were supposed to be social animals, good at small talk.”

“Only with birds they like.”

“Or ones who don’t remind you your balls were cut off.”

“Thanks for that.”

“Welcome.”

They were silent for a minute as Silas looked for worms. The lawn was still dewy. That was good. Still, he wasn’t as sharp as he usually was pulling up worms, and it was taking him longer than usual to pack his gullet.

“Should’ve heard the bird feeder gossip this morning,” Ralph said.

“I can guess what it was about.” Silas knew Ralph wanted to get him to talk about what happened last night; and with Ralph, he didn’t mind telling. Silas told him about the Forest Council meeting, the missing cubs, Pete Mole, what was said in the barn loft. He topped it all off sharing his suspicions of Fox.

“Wouldn’t put it past him,” Ralph said, getting up and stretching. He was leashed to a peg driven into the ground outside the entrance to his dog house. “I bark at him every time he shows up here. Always taunting with that plucking smile of his, wanting me to do these challenges for my freedom.”

“Your freedom?”

“Yeah, my leash. Doesn’t matter. I choose to live with my family of humans. I tell Fox to go back to Hell. About the leash, though, would you mind...?”

Silas hopped over, worked the clasp with a foot and beak, detaching it from Ralph’s collar.

“Thanks.” Ralph barked joy, bounding around the yard, doing a lap past Corey Chapman’s deck and back.

“Good to be off the rope.”

Ralph rolled over, scratching his back in the grass. “So you’re thinking Fox did that to the Council Member? He’s getting pretty bold. And if he took the Bear cubs, like you think —”

“He did! I just can’t prove it ... yet.”

“You a tough son of a grub, Silas, I know that about you. But if you’re going to get Fox, you’re going to have to play him at his own game. You have to get dirty, because we all know Fox doesn’t fight fair. Always planning two moves ahead, and looking for a way to bite you in the back.”

“Yeah, well, a lot of animals think they know me. But they don’t. Thinking I’m running for Council...”

“Well, aren’t you all dark and misunderstood?” Ralph barked a laugh. “Listen, Silas. I wasn’t there, as much as I want to get out more and get into the woods. But from what you’re saying, and what I heard last night and this morning about what happened, it doesn’t add up. This whole thing with the cubs going missing — kidnapped — and Mole being murdered ... and it happening at the same time, during the Forest Council nominations.... I don’t know, Silas. Even for Fox, it’s different, you know? The Pete Mole killing is just like on some of those stupid television shows my family watches.”

“Yeah? They have animals pinned to trees, with notes written over their head in blood?”

“Not exactly. But yeah, something like that. Murders. That’s what they are. Not killings. I killed a rabbit once. That was killing. What happened to Pete Mole: that was murder.”

“What’s the difference?”

“You tell me, Silas. You’re the one staying up all night trying to put this together. I like sport — don’t know a dog that doesn’t. But what that was with Mole — that message written to you in blood...

That isn’t sport. That’s psychotic — too psychotic, possibly for even Maybee over there.”

Maybee was on Corey’s deck under the railing, watching them talk.

“Speak of the Devil, and she appears,” Silas said. “I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I actually have to over and talk to her. Ugh.”

“Why? Am I really that bad to talk to?”

“I need her to take a message for me.”

“She won’t do it. What, is it for Corey?”

“Yeah. Need him to take a look at the message left at Mole’s murder. The last part of it, the letters were scrambled. Barnes rearranged them into a word. ‘Sightless’.”

“‘Sightless,’ huh?” Ralph mulled it over. “Mole was blind, so I guess it makes sense. But what does that have to do with the Bear cubs? Or you?”

“And why was it scrambled up like that? Maybe the killer didn’t know how to spell the word? Hell, I’m pretty rusty myself. Haven’t read in a long while. And I’ve never tried my beak at writing.”

“Don’t see the point in it, myself,” Ralph said, agreeing. “Then again, I don’t go around killing Council Members and writing coded love letters to Silas Oaktree.”

Silas looked over at Maybee. She was still watching him. “That’s why I wanted Corey to take a look at it. I have a copy of the message. Humans are reading and writing all the time. Maybe he can make sense of it.”

Ralph harumphed. “That’s not the only thing Corey’s been making sense of. Him and his woman kept my ears back for hours last night. Going at it.”

“You mean like ...” Silas made a forward and back motion with his beak.

“No. Well ... kinda. Corey’s girlfriend has been at it, I guess. Just without Corey. That’s what they were fighting about. He thinks she’s been mating with others. She’s denying it, yelling at him about who knows what. I never liked her.”

“Jenny.”

“Yeah.”

“Humans like one mate,” Silas said wisely, “Like us birds. If you still had your eggs, Ralph, you’d be doing the same thing Jenny is. You dog like getting around.”

Ralph named Silas a string of creative epithets that could scorch the grass. “And look who’s talking,” Ralph finished. “Birds at the feeder said you were with Rose Topbranch yesterday. One mate my dirty flea collar...”

Silas tucked his head under his wing. It was exasperating. Did birds do anything more than gossip?

“That was nothing, Ralph. Like I told the others...”

“Yeah, yeah. Save it, Silas. You don’t have to explain yourself to me. We’re just kidding — I think. It doesn’t matter to me one way or another.”

Silas felt grateful. At least one animal he knew could let the subject of him and Rose Topbranch go.

“Just if you need to bring that clue or whatever it is up with Corey, don’t mention the girlfriend thing,” Ralph said. “He stormed off this morning ... not in a good mood.”

Ralph went off to smell things and to take a crap in a neighbor’s lawn; Silas flew onto Corey Chapman’s railing, on the other side from Maybee.

“Do you think we can’t see you under the railing like that? You’re like a giant evil dustbunny. You stick out.”

“All it takes is for one of you birds to slip,” Maybee said. “Like you will, one day, Oaktree — when I’ll crush your bones to splinters in my mouth ...”

“Charming, Maybee. You’re a real charmer.”

She started purring, daydreaming of maiming small animals.

“Word is you got a politician killed yesterday, bird. I’ve got to say, I’m impressed.... Didn’t know a morsel like you had it in him ...”

“I didn’t get anyone killed,” Silas said. He believed what he said, but when he heard his own words, he didn’t feel so confident. Did someone kill Mole because of him? If they did, he didn’t know the reason.

“Feeling remorse?” Silas must have been showing how he felt, and Maybee was basking in it. “What a useless emotion. Worrying about something in the past, wearing it like a coat you can’t shed ... no thanks. But as a lesser being, I’m sure you can’t help being pitiful...”

“You could be a motivational coach with that talk. Thanks.”

“My pleasure.”

“Ralph says Jenny has been mating with other humans. Corey’s pissed. Looks like you and your gal pal aren’t going to be here much longer.” Silas had a hard time keeping the hopefulness out of his voice.

Maybee rolled her eyes. “Please. Corey didn’t prove anything. Humans have no sense of smell, and they’re stupid. Especially that dumpy loser Corey you’re friends with. He can prove nothing. He only suspects.” Maybee started tongue bathing a paw. She shot Silas a warning glance. “And you’re not going to be spying around for him, either. Not if you want me to give him a message. I heard you talking with that mutt.”

“I can tell him myself.”

“But you can’t stick around.” Maybee answered. “Flapping off for a full day of talking with worthless woodland creatures, no doubt. Playing detective. Tracking down leads because someone wrote your name on a tree, and it makes you feel important for once. So a rodent was killed ... so what? I would have killed him too. Probably would have been fun ...”

“Good to hear it from a psycho killer’s perspective. So you’ll make sure Corey gets the paper? Tell him it means something about the Bear cubs missing — it was on the tree where Mole was pinned.” Silas filled Maybee in on the details of the murder scene, and the events surrounding.

Maybee yawned. “I’ll tell the fool human. Watching the look on his stupid face as he tries to chew through problems is one of my favorite pass times.”

Silas flew to the nest, retrieving the paper on which Barnes had written the message, returning to the deck. He set down on the boards opposite Maybee, leaving the paper. She launched herself at Silas, but he took off too fast.

Silas circled overhead, calling over his wing, “Glad I can trust you with these matters,” and took off towards the woods. He heard Maybee say something that sounded like “You owe me.”

Silas flew through the branches, marveling at what a psycho Maybee was. He didn’t understand why Corey put up with living with her, or Jenny, Maybee’s evil human counterpart. Especially if Jenny was attempting to fertilize her eggs with another human ...

Animals called out to Silas as he passed through the branches. “Mr. Council Perch!” one said.

Within half a mile of the Bear Cave Silas heard a distressed lo echoing through the forest. The cave, a cavern hollowed in the rock of a hill not a minute’s flight from the stream, emanated sobs and roars like a giant conch shell possessed.

“Momma Bear?” As if it could be anyone else. Unless there was a cow being strangled with barbed wire in there, Silas was pretty sure it was her.

Momma Bear was lying on her side against the cave wall. She scratched and pounded the wall with her paws, each four times as large as Silas’ whole body, shaking the cave. Her roar, which Silas didn’t think needed any help being louder, magnified as it echoed around and out of the cave.

“Ma! Momma Bear.” She didn’t hear Silas. He landed at the mouth of the cave. “Momma Bear!” Her roar drowned Silas out.

I do need singing lessons, Silas thought. Can’t project my voice to save my life. He knew it was risky, but Silas didn’t see how else to get her attention. He flew over, took a few strands of fur in his beak, and pulled.

The next roar belonged in an opera finale. Momma Bear rolled. Silas flew off her back before getting crushed.

“What? Griz? Joe Bear? Is that — Oh... For a second I thought ...” She blinked. The light coming in the cave was bright. She raised a paw, seeing Silas’ small outline. “Who there? I already said I wouldn’t ... If you’ve come back to —”

“It’s me, Momma Bear.”

“Silas? Oh, Silas!” She hastily rolled upright. Her fur was matted. A half eaten tub of fried chicken was dumped on its side. “Just look at me! I’m a mess ...” She half-heartedly tried shaking crumbs of chicken breading off her fur. Silas tried not to look at the wing and breast carcasses scattered about the floor.

“Come on. Let’s take a walk.” Silas flew onto her back; they left the cave. Momma Bear walked erratically, like she hadn’t slept in a long while.

They trudged through the forest in silence, not another animal was around. They all flew for the hills, Silas thought, with all the wailing Momma Bear had been doing.

“What happened, Momma Bear? We didn’t get a chance to talk ... everything happened so fast after, you know ...”

“Top Perch Barnes told me what happened to poor Peter yesterday,” Momma Bear said. “That’s terrible, Silas! And he said the person who did that horrible thing to Peter wrote you a message. The message said you are the one bringing my cubs back ...”

Great. Now Momma Bear was expecting him to find her cubs, too. The way she said it — plainly, like Silas finding the cubs was as certain as trees were tall — made the whole situation feel real to Silas, maybe for the first time since Momma Bear had run into the Forest Council meeting yesterday.

No pressure, Silas. You just have to bring the cubs back safely, taken by someone who murdered a Council Member. Just ignore the survival statistics for animals that go missing ... and the fact you weight less than a McDonald’s hamburger....

“What happened yesterday after I left, before the Council meeting?” Silas asked.

“I thought you knew?” Momma Bear’s voiced sounded dopey. “The cubs went missing. I came to the Forest Council meeting to tell everyone —”

“No, I mean before. You said you were going back to take a nap. We were talking by the creek. Fox came and threatened us, then left. Did something happen between when I flew off and you finding the cubs missing? Anything you forgot to tell Barnes?”

“I don’t think so. Umm ...” Momma Bear said. “Like I told Barnes, I went up to my cave — this is after your visit, of course. And that terrible Fox.” She bared her teeth. “I took Spike and Joe Bear back with me to the cave. They were with me — I was tired. Taking care of two cubs is tiring, Silas. You’ll see when your eggs hatch ... The boys were still so wound up from being out ... takes them a while to settle down for their naps.”

“Did they go to sleep?”

“I think so. Well ... I might of nodded off before they were asleep. Like I said, I was tired....”

“And when you woke up ...”

Momma Bear huffed. “Gone. Gone, Silas.”

“Did you hear them leave?” Silas asked. “When you were sleeping, any sounds, smells you remember?” Silas made a mental note to check the ground for prints. Patrol animals would have been in and out of the cave all last night, but there might be some piece of evidence they didn’t destroy. Forest forensics was about as delicate as a stampeding herd of cattle.

“There might have been some scuffling,” Momma Bear said. “Sounds. But the cubs are always making noise, Silas. You have to learn to sleep through it. When your eggs hatch, Silas, you will —”

“I will see for myself, yes,” he finished impatiently. “But this scuffling sound, was it — I don’t know — different than usual?”

Momma Bear stopped walking for minute, then shook her head. “It might have been, Silas. I don’t know. I remember I was dreaming about ... Well, actually, I was dreaming about being back down at the creek. With Spike and Joe in the creek ... you were there, and Fox ...”

“Do you think Fox was in the cave? Slipped in while you were sleeping?” It would be a risky move for Fox — a lot riskier than Silas pulling fur out of a bear’s back — but Silas would believe most anything of Fox.

She paused, looking out toward the creek wistfully. “I don’t know, Silas... No — no, I don’t think Fox was there. Just having a dream, is all. A bad dream. But I wish I had them back, Silas. Please, if you can help me ...”

Silas couldn’t help being amazed how such a big animal could seem so helpless.

“I’ll do my best. I don’t know what I can do ... I’m just a robin. I’ll try.”

“You’ve always been so good to me, Silas. Thank you. Find my cubs, please! You need to find them soon — this week ...”

Silas thought, Did I just promise I’d be the one to find the cubs? He sighed. He promised that — and every other job in the forest. He had to take care of Crystal, his eggs ... He’d promised to Corey see Grace, to Barnes that he’d look into Mole’s murder. Plus, he had to convince everyone he wasn’t running for Council ... Then there was Harvey ... Harvey. Silas felt his energy drain just considering it. He needed to check up on Harvey, make sure he was still breathing.

“Silas?”

“Yeah, I’m here. Just thinking.”

“Oh, okay. You were quiet back there.”

“Did any of the Council Members or patrol animals know anything about the cubs going missing?”

“Hawk Cooper did a search,” she said. “Rex Washer and Don Quail came by this morning. Hawk kept saying the cubs might have just wandered off, or gotten washed down in the stream. What a horrible thing to say! I told him I expected better ... I knew his mother ...”

“Cooper doesn’t think it’s a kidnapping?”

“I told him it had to be. My cubs have never wandered off before ... They always come back ...”

Silas thought it was actually quite likely that young, curious bear cubs would wander off, but he didn’t voice it.

“Pappa Bear know?” he asked.

Momma Bear huffed. “Who, that no-good vagabond? He probably doesn’t even know what day of the week it is... Well, neither do I — but you know what I mean. Off at the county dump, getting fat ... hasn’t checked in on us in weeks ...”

Silas remembered his mother complaining what a bad father Silas’ dad was, leaving her to tend the nest and hatchlings all by herself. Even then Silas wasn’t sure whether his mother was talking about his parenting skills, or about how thrown away she felt. He could still taste the worms she gagged into his mouth, tasting of empty beer cans.

“Momma Bear, what makes you so sure it was a kidnapping?”

“I know, Silas. I just know. The cubs are young, but they know their boundaries. They would not have gone off too far from me. They know the rule when I’m taking my nap: They’re to stay around the cave.

But Silas, you know someone took my boys! You have to believe me! The message for you on the tree! I already told Barnes and Cooper and the rest of them all I know..."

Silas asked if he look around the cave for evidence. He did a few passes around the cave entrance. Tracks ran every which way. He looked for fox prints — he saw lots of bear, bird, one set that was probably Rex Washer's ... They were too muddled; it was impossible to tell.

He moved around the cave, searching every corner for leavings. Silas held his breath going by the chicken carcasses. By the mouth of the cave, Silas found bird droppings by a feather with coloring the same as ground cover. Don Quail. Silas shook his head, imagining the Council Member there to do his job and investigate the case, instead only managing to shake in fear at being in a bear cave, and pooping himself.

Silas made to leave, taking off around the magnolia tree near the cave entrance. He did a double take, seeing a shiny dark leaf vibrating on a low branch of the tree. Silas landed on the branch. Out of a spiderweb he pulled, not a leaf, but a pitch black feather.

His next stop would help Silas ID the feather. Silas took a little longer than exactly necessary to take off again, then, launching himself off the branch, went to find his brother Harvey. He asked around the forest, and after talking to some of this brother's less upstanding friends, learned where to find him.

His perfect sense of direction got Silas close the rest area; the smell carried him the rest of the way. Silas circled overhead.

The rest stop was a way station for humans traveling inside those metal and glass cages they moved around in. A flock of motorcyclists were out for a spring ride; a family pulled in with an RV, getting out and stretching. The rest stop was on a rise above the highway, ringed by forest in the back, parking lots in the front; stretches of anemic lawn surrounded a building where humans were going in and out. The smell left no question as to what they were doing inside.

Barbaric. It was like pooping inside your nest.

Judging by loud, rude retching noises Silas heard when someone opened the door, humans were not the only ones in the bathrooms. He was embarrassed to recognize the signature sounds of his brother puking.

Silas went through the door as a biker was leaving.

"Damn it! Not another damn bird ... making a damn mess of it in there!"

Silas flipped the man a wingtip feather in a gesture Corey had taught him once. The biker shook his head, muttering curses as he left.

Silas found the stall where the retching was coming from. He perched on top the door. Silas groaned.

"Harvey ..."

A robin, fat and round, was perched on the toilet seat. Feathers shellacked with dirt and bird poop and sticking at all angles, round eyes squinted shut as the robin jilted forward, retching up another wave of vomit into the toilet. A human log of feces larger than Silas floated in the bowl in a yellow brine; the robin's bright red vomit looked almost cheery as it blotted a bloated mass of toilet paper.

Silas didn't know why watching his brother puke reminded him of a father bird feeding his babies. Harvey threw up into the toilet bowl again. Feeding his legacy, Silas thought.

He landed next to Harvey on the toilet seat, putting a wing on Harvey's back as his brother retched again, hovering around in the useless and awkward way of those trying to comfort sick people. The door to the stall burst open; the boy from the RV had come in.

"Hey, kid! Get outta here! Can't you see we're busy in here?"

The boy went to find another stall.

Harvey looked up, his eyelids raised half-mast. "Silas? Is that you, kid? I thought I noticed somebody there ..."

"Yeah, Harv. It's me."

A crust of vomit was drying on Harvey's beak; some of the red spit-up had rolled down his chest, the bright red clashing with his filthy breast.

" 'Bout time you came to visit your brother. I was thinking you forgot about me, up there with your Missus ... Mrs. Golden Goose.... You got yourself a golden goose, don't you? Married her. Mr. Oaktree ... in his oak tree ..." Harvey swayed on the toilet seat, looking close to falling in. Silas didn't think he'd stretch a wing out to stop him, either. Harvey kept talking, turning his head so one beady eye looked angrily at Silas. "Think you're better than me, don't you, bro? Think you're better than me, because you got off the Crazy B's, got a nice wife, a nice tree ... Think you're better than —"

Harvey lurched forward in a new wave of retching. Silas patted his back.

"Harv, what's floating in there looks better than you do at the moment. ... Come on, let's get you out of here."

Harvey coughed, wiping his beak. "There's a vending machine out front. People leave coffee in the trash all the time ..."

Silas wasn't wild about the idea of picking through the garbage for coffee, but he was able to get the father of the kid in the bathroom to buy them a cup. The boy and his sister were thrilled to carry the cup for the birds over to a picnic table before heading back to their RV. Harvey and Silas perched in silence for a bit, watching the family move around their RV, rearranging camping equipment.

"Wonder what that would be like, being able to move your nest around like that?" Silas said.

Harvey grunted. "Speak for yourself, bro. You choose to cage yourself to one nest. Me? I like to soar the open skies, go where I want —"

"You like flying high, that's what you like. And not with your wings."

Harvey chuckled. "Yeah. I guess that's right. Mr. Oaktree, right again."

Silas dipped his beak into the cup. Not bad, for rest stop coffee. "I guess moving once was enough already. It would just be nice to get away for a bit. Haven't done a migration for winter, not even once."

"What? Does Widdle Siwas have a sour worm in his cwop? ... Or maybe it's squirming around under Siwas' tail, itching him somfing awful...." Harvey's expression was dulled from the Berries, but his eyes glinted when he talked, cruelty awakening him more than coffee ever could.

"Come on, Harvey — I'm just trying to talk with —"

Harvey made a raspberry with his tongue and beak. "Let's stop playing with our worms here. I know the Great Widdle Silas Oaktree didn't come all this way to talk to his brother about nests, and all that crap.... What do you want from me now, bro?"

Silas sighed. He didn't think watching his brother puke over a human turd was exactly exchanging pleasantries, but there was no getting through to Harvey. He pulled out the black feather he found outside the Bear Cave. "Recognize this?"

Harvey took it, smelled it, twirled it in his talons. "Yeah, why? What? Has Tony Crow been in your nest, sleeping with that golden goose of yours when you're out?"

"If you mean Crystal, no. I found this outside the Bear Cave. Tony Crow, huh? ... And thanks, Harv, for answering the question in the most insulting way possible." Silas took back the feather. Despite Harvey acting like a real plucker, he was satisfied, his suspicions confirmed.

Tony Crow. Fox's right-paw man. If Tony was outside the Bear Cave, Silas was pretty sure he wasn't there to sing the cubs lullabies.

"So if he wasn't in your nest messing around with your girl, what do you care? You know if you're looking to buy, I can hook —"

"I'm not looking to buy, Harv. You know I don't do Berries anymore."

"Yeah, but you look like you could use one, little bro, help chill —"

"I don't need Berries." Silas felt like he'd been visiting his brother all day, but it had only been twenty minutes. If anyone could wear him down, it was Harvey. "I need to know what Tony Crow was doing outside the Bear Cave. The cubs are missing."

"Yeah, yeah. Already heard. The Griz," Harvey chortled. "I like that kid. He's fun."

"Okay," Silas said. "But have you heard about Pete Mole, and the message left for me?" Silas told Harvey all that had happened, how he suspected Fox behind it all.

Harvey scoffed. "So what if Fox is behind it? Probably is. But what's that going to change? He practically runs this forest already — pansy-tail Council isn't worth their weight in deer droppings — plus Fox is a powerful business animal. Has the only industry worth an owl pellet in this tick-bitten woods ..."

"If you're referring to supplying Crazy Berries, Sugar Thorns, Fun-Guys, and every other substance that passes through your bloodstream, I wouldn't call that helping the forest —"

"You wouldn't. Because unless it's something that puts you in the middle of the clearing, where Silas can get all the glory, then you're not interested."

"That's not the point," Silas said, biting back irritation. "If we can prove Fox is the one who took the Bears, then that's all the sooner we can get them back. He's toying with me — killing Mole, writing the challenge ... If you had been conscious, you would remember it was me who saved you from Fox before."

"He wasn't going to hurt me," Harvey said dismissively. "We're pretty tight. Well, not friends, but I'd say there's a mutual respect there ..."

Silas fumed. Harvey never thought of the consequences past the end of his own beak.

"Well he's going to hurt those cubs. He won't care how 'fun' The Griz is ... or Joe Bear — that's if they're not dead already. Probably not — he'll be using them for leverage. I just don't know why he hasn't issued a challenge yet. But if he had Tony Crow out at the Bear Cave, then I know he has something to do with it."

Harvey wasn't impressed. "Tony might have something to do with it. He's the one who Fox sends out to do the deals with me. He's a goon, just like Weasel and his hired muscle, but Tony Crow is a smart goon. Scary smart. Might not look it — but I wouldn't mess with that bird, bro. I would wash his feather you got, iron it out, and send it back to him with a suet cake, wrapped with a bow, then act like it wasn't me that never found it —"

"— Ever found it."

"What?"

"You meant to say, 'wasn't me that ever found it.' — whatever." Silas watched the family with the RV pull out, heading up the road on their trip. The father was at the wheel, laughing about something, even with his wife nagging at him from the passenger seat. Silas refocused on Harvey. "What I need is a way to search the Fox Den. The Council Members will never follow through —"

"Search the Fox Den?" Harvey spit coffee back into the cup. Silas decided he was done drinking. "And I thought I was the one doing Crazy Berries! You'd have a better chance living if you offered a hunter to use you for skeet shooting. Fox won't give you one of his challenges — he'll straight-up kill you if you go even go near his Den."

"That's why you're going to get me in."

"I knew it. I knew you'd chicken out—" Harvey spluttered, finally comprehending Silas' words. "What?" He shook his head. "You might think your poop don't stink, bro. And the whole forest might be singing a call for popular widdle Siwas to get on Council — but guess what? You've got no pull with Fox. He hates you. He never said it directly, but the way Tony Crow asks questions, indirectly —"

"Yeah. I might have gathered there was something between us when he wrote my name in blood on a tree."

Harvey shook his head. "It's like we're in the old Boone Forest all over again. My bro Siwas has got something to prove — that an underweight hatchling can still make a difference — even if it means burning the whole forest down." He went for another drink, hiccupped, and spilled the styrofoam cup over. They watched it cascade off the picnic table, the coffee sinking into the ground. "What I want to know," Harvey said, "is what's in it for me?"

"Harvey, you do-gooder softie you!" Silas knew Harvey would come around to helping ... in his own way. Silas felt a thrill: this whole mess could be over today, he'd be a free bird again....

Silas felt so elated, he hopped over and ruffled Harvey's feathers with his beak, ignoring the filth.

But just then a voice spoke behind them that sent Silas' blood pressure instantly soaring.

"When you two girls are done making out, let me know," Hawk Cooper drawled; he was perched on a charcoal grill; Silas hadn't heard him land. "Because I've got a one Silas Oaktree for bringing in to questioning."

"I already told you everything I know, Cooper. I'm telling you, Fox killed Mole —"

"Not Mole, Oaktree," Cooper said. "It's Quail. Council Member Don Quail is dead. And the murder scene's got your name written all over it."

Chapter Four: The Brass Cage

"Well, I'll be plucked." Harvey whistled low, looking over the murder scene. When Hawk Cooper had said Quail had been murdered, and that there was another crime scene like Peter Mole's, Harvey's flew right alongside Silas and Cooper as they passed over the woods, strong beats of his wings as if he had not just been throwing up in a highway rest stop.

"What's that say? 'Drawco'? What the hell is drawco?" Harvey squinted at the letters written in blood on the side of the barn. "Yeah, I think that says drawco. What is Donny doing in that cage? That is Donny Quail, right? He looks weird, though ... besides being dead..."

They were gathered around the barn that served as Forest Council headquarters, where Silas had just been the night before discussing Mole's murder. The requisite crowd of animals gathered in a semicircle around the scene, jostling for a look at Quail, and the words on the barn.

"What's that say?"

"Silas'."

"Like in Silas Oaktree?"

"Who else?"

"But what are those hook marks with the dot under them?"

"Question marks. I think those are question marks."

Some patrol animals were keeping the crowd back behind a perimeter of sticks they had set up. Rex Washer had his hands up, looking thoroughly ghosted, pleading with John Deer to keep behind the line, who was insisting he just needed to step forward because he had dropped his baseball cap. Deer said something about how he was running for Council, so it was practically his duty to explore the crime scene. Silas, Hawk, and Harvey were close up to the birdcage resting against the barn.

"Why's Silas get to be right up there?" John Deer asked. "I should have a closer look — You've got to run a fair election ... no picking favorites ..."

Cooper called back, "Keep behind that line, Deer, or I know a few hunters who'll pick you as a favorite to mount on their wall."

Deer muttered something about just wanting to retrieve his cap, backing behind the line.

"Another publicity stunt, Oaktree?" Cooper said, a piece of grass dancing in his beak as he talked. "Or just upping your chances for Council?"

"Go pluck yourself, Cooper."

"How do you explain this crap, then? Barnes is riding my tail for answers, and all I see is a second billboard for Silas Oaktree in as many days." Cooper gestured to the birdcage, an old-fashioned brass one, and the backdrop of the barn wall, the blood used to paint the letters still not completely dry.

"Thanks for pointing it out, Cooper. Don't know if I would've noticed otherwise."

Inside the birdcage, hanging from a string around his neck, was Don Quail. His body rotated slowly; when his front came back around into view, Silas saw the Quail's beak, which normally had been black and hooked

downward, was now covered by a small yellow cone; his breast, which had been camouflage-colored plumage, was smeared with blood so it was strikingly red.

“Looks like an ugly relative,” Harvey said.

Silas looked closer. Harvey was right. Quail was done up in a crude way to look like a robin. What kind of message was the killer trying to send? ... “Where’s Fox?” Silas demanded.

“Didn’t take you long to bring up your fall guy, Oaktree,” Cooper said. “But theory died right along with Council Perch Quail. Shaky Don was with Rex Washer this morning, official business — looking into a case —”

“At the Bear Cave. I know.”

Cooper looked irritated at Silas knowing details about the investigation. He went on. “Left the site — the cave — accompanied by Washer mid-morning, and immediately went to meet with myself, Barnes, and enough patrol animals to fill Noah’s swimming pool —”

“Went where?” Silas asked.

Hawk looked like he was enjoying himself, like he was after a mouse running for cover, taking his time before swooping down to savor the smaller animal’s distress. “That’s classified, Oaktree. Barnes might want you in on the investigation, but as far as I see it, you’re still just an amateur trying to play detective, and it’s —”

“They went to the Fox Den,” Harvey said. Hawk’s look, a mixture of surprise and irritation, told Silas it was true. Harvey hopped around the brass birdcage, peering in getting a closer look at Quail. Top Perch Barnes was looking over at them, his expression furious, but he was still involved talking with a group of patrol animals and Winnie Wildbush, the human forest ranger.

“I don’t see what the opinion of a junkie —” Cooper started to say, but Harvey spoke over him.

“They showed up there before noon. I was there, finishing a — uh ... transaction. I was just about to leave, taking a pit stop on a branch to roll a Hop Leaf, when I saw a parade of these pomp-ass animals, led by our friend here —” He gave Cooper a smirk crafted to get under the hawk’s feathers. “— So I thought, What the hell?, and stuck around to see the action.

“Fox was there, so was Brandon Weasel ... Looked to me like the Council was inspecting the Den, asking questions ... I got out of there when I saw Tony Crow coming back. He’s got sharp eyes ... might’ve seen me, and I didn’t want to be answering no questions. So I flew off to enjoy my purchases.”

“Great,” Hawk said. “Now I’ve got two Oaktrees bobbing their heads in where they don’t belong. Yeah,, that’s the gist of it. We were at Fox’s Den — with Fox — inspecting the place, working off your lead on the Bears. A bad lead at that —”

“Did you find anything?” Silas asked.

“No, Oaktree. Not a single piece of Bear fur. But that’s not my point. My point is we were alerted to Quail’s murder while we were with Fox. He didn’t do it, Oaktree.”

“Wait. You said Quail met you and the others at Fox’s den. Wouldn’t he have been there with you?”

“He, uh,” Hawk looked uncomfortable, the way someone who prides himself on being observant looks when he realizes he might have overlooked something. “Quail didn’t stay with the group. Shaking pretty bad.

Probably too anxious to go into the Den. You know what Quail was like. Fox's Den has a rep as a den of sin, illegalities, all that — plus being his size ... you know how jumpy the Council Member is — was.”

“Let's see if I've got this straight,” Silas said. “Quail came all the way from the Bear Cave with Rex, knowing full well where he was going. Then he meets the group there, surrounded by patrol animals and the rest of the Council — in broad daylight. Then he didn't go in with the group on the inspection — no one noticed he was missing — and the next thing you know, someone found him dead all the way over here at the barn. This animal who found Quail then knew where you and the Council were, though as you say, it was ‘classified’, and had the initiative to go to Fox's Den — in the deepest, darkest part of the forest — to alert you?”

Hawk was chewing his tongue, looking ready to sink his talons into Silas. “Quail was too scared to go in. He chickened out — quailed out — and when no one was looking, he bailed. He wanted to hide but didn't want to own up to it.”

“You know this for a fact, or are you just biting at gnats,” Silas said. If no one knew he left, how did they know to find him here and kill him?”

“If I was the killer,” Harvey said. He saw Cooper's look. “Which I'm not. My alibi is still floating in the rest stop.... But if I was, I would have lured him here. Make Quail think I needed to meet him for something, then BAM! Kill him, and cage ‘em.”

“An interesting theory, Mr. —” Barnes said, landing beside them.

“Oaktree. The Oaktree. Harvey.”

“Hmm, yes.” Barnes inspected Harvey, looking between him and Silas. “The other Oaktree. I heard Oaktree had a brother. But yes, your idea that Quail was lured here is correct.”

“It is?” Harvey sounded surprised.

“Yes. But the problem is, it was I who told Council Member Quail to meet me here. I understood his ... anxieties. I saw no need for another set of eyes inspecting the Den; we found nothing conclusive, anyhow. But I had matters to discuss with Quail, and told him to meet me here, at headquarters. So unless you are suggesting I had anything to do with his demise —”

Harvey and Silas shook their heads in an adamant no. Barnes was so intimidating, Silas doubted they would have said otherwise even if Barnes' talons had been dripping blood. Silas nodded to the barn wall.

“Killer's got some fixation with me — Do you know what it means?”

His name, “Silas”, and question mark symbols were written over and over again on the wall, framing the birdcage on either side and above it. In the middle, right above the birdcage, about three feet off the ground, was another string of letters:

DRAWCO

The A and C were circled.

“It's another puzzle,” Barnes said. The letters are scrambled, but you rearrange them, and it spells ‘coward’.”

“Coward.... The ‘A’ and the ‘C’ — Why are they circled?”

Barnes studied the scene. “I’m not sure why. Maybe it has something to do with the words that aren’t circled ... They would spell ‘word’ unscrambled — but I don’t see what that would mean. And what the perpetrator means by the ... disfigurement of Quail, I do not know. Why someone would do such a thing ...”

Barnes shook his head. He looked strained, tired.

But Silas knew. Silas knew why someone would do such a thing. He remembered what Fox had said:

They’re not doing it to win something. They’re doing it to get at you, Oaktree.

And they’re not going to stop until they see you break.

Chapter Five: The Fox Den

Silas barely had enough time to fly back and check on the nest. He bartered with Colin Squirrel for some acorns hollowed out and filled with birdseed — it tasted suspiciously like the slop from Corey Chapman's feeder — and took them back to Crystal, who didn't get all her questions out before Silas flew back out of the nest and back to the barn.

Barnes met him in the loft; he had transcribed the writing on the wall, the scrambled letters and COWARD spelled out. On the back of the paper was an ink drawing of the scene done in impressive detail. Silas thanked Barnes for the paper, tried taking it, but Barnes had held on until Silas assured him multiple times that yes, he was going to use the paper to find the killer soon, and yes, he understood the impact these killings were having on the Council, and the forest as a whole. Silas was tired, and would have assured Barnes his own breast was colored lime green if it would have gotten him out of there sooner.

Harvey agreed to meet with Silas later at the time and place they arranged. Silas needed Harvey's help to break into Fox's Den. Where at first Harvey wouldn't do it, after he had seen Quail's body and the whole drama around the murder scene, Harvey said he hadn't had so much fun sober in a long time, and agreed.

Silas took off heading away from the main body of the forest, past the suburbs, to a residential neighborhood near the center of the human city. Corey's car was parked on the street in front of an old Victorian. Silas would have liked the house were it not for the pigeons; a group was always hanging around the eaves. Silas hated city birds.

One of the louder pigeons called out, a greasy fat one with small eyes. "Oy! Country boy! Whatdya got there? Permission slip from your mommy to fly across the crosswalk?" He turned to his group, bobbing his head energetically, in an Am I right? gesture. They sniggered.

Silas held up the clue sheet. "Actually, your mother gave it to me when I was over at her roost. I didn't respect her enough to read it, but I see it says 'coward', so I think she was talking about you, Larry."

Larry Palomita's face clouded. "Don't you talk about my mother like that, Oaktree ... I'll knock your beak in..."

This pigeon posse held Larry from flying off the eave at Silas. One of them hissed in his ear, "He's not worth it, Larry!"

Silas gave a bored readjustment of his wings to aggravate Larry more. "Is Grace in?" he asked.

Larry scoffed. "What? Do you think the broad went out for a jog?" He looked back at his group, head bobbing — Am I right? Can you believe this guy? — but they didn't seem to share his joke. Larry turned back to Silas. "Yeah, she's down there. But you better get there fast — before she's down there even farther, you know?" Larry looked at the ground. "You get what I'm sayin'? Like, 'down there' — meaning in the ground ... dead ... From being old and whatever..." Seeing he wasn't getting the reaction he was after, Larry went on. "What? You so desperate you're trying your wing with dying old ladies, Oaktree? Have some respect ..."

"I could say the same, Palomita — but I somehow think you're beyond that. Now, if you'll excuse me, I'm going to talk with Grace and Corey ... recommend she have spike strips installed on her house ..." Silas dropped off the edge, spread his wings, and glided around the side of the house.

Larry called after him, "You wouldn't dare, Oaktree! We like it here —" but Silas was out of earshot.

Silas landed outside a window. He liked these old houses, with their generous eaves and accommodating window sills. Corey was moving around Grace's bed, making adjustments on the surrounding machines that helped keep Grace alive. Even with Grace's body ready to rejoin the earth, she looked cheerier than Corey, who was huffing something as he fluffed a pillow.

Silas tapped on the window with his beak. Neither Grace nor Corey seemed to hear. He tapped again. Humans had a lot of good qualities, but Silas had to marvel at how they survived given their dull senses, slow movements, and obliviousness to what was going on in their surroundings.

Silas tapped one of the dirtier mating call songs he knew, until finally, Grace noticed, said something to Corey, and he came over to open the window. Corey cursed more than usual as he wrestled with the heavy window, shouldering it up.

"Hold on, Silas," Corey panted. "Got to get the stick ... prop it open... There!"

Grace's voice was quiet, raspy, but sincere and buoyant. "Why! As I live and breathe, if it isn't Silas Oaktree! Come to brighten our day with a visit."

"Hello, Grace." Silas flew onto the edge of her bed. Silas knew not to land on one of her legs, even when three stamps were enough to send him through the mail. He always got empathy pains when he visited Grace; his knees and wings ached looking at her.

Grace Winsworth was a dark-skinned human; at least, her complexion would have been darker, had her skin not been so thinned with age, in which it took on a spotted, milky transparenence. An IV snaked from the crook in her arm to a bag of fluid on a metal stalk; her hair was a wiry explosion of white on top of her head, where kind almond eyes watched Silas from a sea of wrinkles; she wore a white patterned nightgown with a high collar.

"And how's my favorite robin doing today? Your colors look so bright, Silas."

Silas couldn't stop himself from preening. He sighed. "I'm okay, Grace. Just have a lot going on right now."

"Not you too!" Grace nodded her head at Corey, who was still beating the pillow harder than was necessary. "This boy here's been a sourpuss all day. Won't say nothing's wrong, mind, but there be a storm cloud thunderin' 'roun his head all day."

"I said there's nothing wrong, Grace," Corey said. The pillow got a few more punches. Silas looked away, studying the pile of newspaper at the side of Grace's bed; he didn't want to let on he knew about Corey's girlfriend with another mate.

"Well, either that pillow done insult you 'n all yo kin, or it be something else." Grace winked at Silas. "I be thinkin' it's lady troubles, myself."

Corey colored, but didn't say anything.

"I thought so." Grace cackled, her mouth more gaps than teeth. Her laugh was infectious, and Silas joined in chirping in spite of himself. "Well, when youz is good an' ready, we'z is here fo' you, boy. Or, you can jus' keep on wif yo' hissy fit." Grace cackled anew.

Silas didn't want to admit it to himself, but he was feeling the best he had felt all day. Grace was a shriveled human, dying; she couldn't walk, let alone fly. Nature had spent decades to cane her good with the ugly stick — And here she was, uplifting him — mouth wide open, gaps of missing teeth and the few remaining dangling on for dear life in diseased gums — cackling her head off. Even Corey started to smile.

And she wasn't being mean to Corey, Silas knew, though she was laughing. She was enjoying her time with him to the full. She understood being open, making her interaction with people as enjoyable as possible, was the way to most honestly like them. Silas hoped he didn't have to be hooked up to machines keeping him alive and nest-ridden before he learned that lesson.

"What's that you done brought me, Silas?" Grace asked, nodding at the paper he carried.

Silas felt guilty bringing something so depressing. "It's a follow-up to something I meant Corey to get earlier." Silas gave Corey a significant look. "You went home this afternoon?"

Corey nodded. "For lunch. Maybee was taunting me the whole time. I was just going to put her out, when she said she had something from you."

"That witch," Grace said. "Lars ... If that cat be in my house, dat cat done be yowlin' from the whoopin' she get! Cat be spawn of the Debil!"

"So you got the paper?" Silas asked.

"Yeah." Corey frowned. "Creepy stuff. Didn't know animals — non-humans, you know — did that stuff to each other, too."

"What stuff be dat?" Grace asked.

Silas filled them in on what had been going on in the forest. Corey produced the paper from his back pocket, showing Barnes' drawing of Mole's murder scene, and the message written out, SIGHTLESS unscrambled. Silas showed them the paper with Don Quail at the barn.

"Lars, Silas, you be swimmin' wif the sharks! Corey done said it: din' think God's creatures be crazy enough to be killin' each uffer. Thought that was just us humans bein' stupid."

"Yes, well, this animal isn't stupid. Just evil," Silas said. "And I've got to search his Den tonight, try to find those cubs — get proof so the Council will finally do something to put him down."

"Boy! I be forgettin' how young you is!, be doin' all the grown fings you be doin'. ... But you thinkin' the law be takin' care o' this? Unn-mmm. You be thinkin' one thing, an' it be de other. Ain't nobody in dat forest who gon' be endin' this but you, hear? You put dat in yo beak an' swallow it dawn — bitter med'cin though it is."

Grace winced in pain. Corey rushed over, changing out one of the pillows propping her up with the one he fluffed. He adjusted something on the IV. Silas felt more empathy pains seeing the stain yellowing the pillow Corey removed.

"You don't be payin' that no mind, now," Grace said, catching Silas watching. "You be closer to nature 'dan us humans ... you know I dyin', an' that be part a-life. That be somefin' Corey here need to learn. I'm dyin', 'n tha's that. Da sooner he get straight what's goin' on be what goin' on, sooner he be moving on."

"Don't think you flyin' above him, 'do, Silas. You right dere wivvum: You thinkin' someone gon' come 'roun, fix dis here unnaturalness," she nodded at the papers on her bed, "but you jus' be dreamin'. Stars and body, boy! Unnaturalness be part-a nature — ain't separate. Unn-mmm. Corey, get me my pocketbook."

Corey brought over a floral patterned pocketbook, opened the clasp for her. Grace fumbled around for a minute until she brought out a picture, yellowed with age.

"This was my boy. That's Nathaniel there. He was in Vietnam, I ev'r tell you dat, Silas? Corey here be hearin' all the stories." Grace laughed, but her voice was softer, wavering. "You know what Vietnam is, Silas? It be a

place over there in Asia, but I'm talkin' da war. Der was a war — stupid damn thing, thousands killin', an' ain't nobody got a good reason between theyselves fo' why. An' my Nathaniel done got caught up in it. Din' want a part-a it, but dat don' matter for chicken's teeth. God ain't ask for none our 'pinion, an' neither did the 'Ten'see Draf' Board. He went, same as all'em boys. They be sayin' he comin' home, jussa peacekeepin' they be doin'. But for all dem years searchin' 'froo that bush, they ain't find even a little bitta peace.

"What happened to your son?" Silas thought of his clutch of eggs, of Crystal — how he had been spending more time away from them than with them.

"He died. — An' don't you be openin' your beak to be sayin' sorry fo' nunna that — He died decades 'go, there in that Vietnam bush. Tha's what happen', 'an there be no chagin' it. Tha's what I sayin', Silas. What done got on got on. No changin' it. Nathaniel, he be with his group in the bush — leaves 'n trees diff'rent, but woods is woods — an' the gooks gottem in a trap. Shootin' all sides, ain't no way out. Call in fo' a gunship — that what they did, see? Turn the tides, 'n all... But they ain't comin'. Ain't nobody comin' fo' them, an' that's what my boy done knowed. If they group be gettin' out-a dat, someone done gotta start shootin' through to the field; ain't no gunship. It's what you gotta know."

"That there is no gunship?"

Grace nodded emphatically. "That's right. Ain't nobody but you to watch yo' brood. Don' matter if someone say they comin', cuz they ain't. Don' want no parda it. What do matter is you is there — on da ground, shootin'. You don' wanna be in this here messa killins 'n unnaturalness never — no more dan my boy Nathaniel did. But here y'are. Ain't no changin' that. Only thing you gotta do is choose."

"Did your son and his group escape the trap?" he asked.

"They got out. Mos' the fighters did." There was wetness in the corners of her eyes. "Not Nathaniel 'do. He be the one layin' down his life so heez friends could live."

Well, this turned into a cheerful visit, Silas thought.

"Grace," Corey said quietly, "you should rest. I'll get making your supper."

"Ain't got no time fo' rest. Our frien' Silas here needs our help. Gots him a puzzle to solve."

"A puzzle?"

"Yessuh, boy, a puzzle." Grace had a tissue, blotted her eyes. Her bony hand reached over to her side table. She tapped the pile of newspapers. "Juz like the puzzles I do in these here newspapers, when Corey's an' my conversating catches the slows." She winked at Silas. He tried his best to follow what Grace was saying.

"Your newspapers have puzzles like these murders in them? Why would you want to read about such things?"

Grace looked surprised, then cackled. "Ain' no murders in the papers, boy! 'Cept the stories." She laughed, her head going back; she dabbed her eyes with the tissue she always seemed to have in hand. "I be meanin' the puzzles, Silas. The puzzles! You know — crosswords, the word fines —"

" 'Word fines'?"

"Find. You lookin' fo' words in a whole bunch-a them letters. I got good at it, too. Here," Grace picked up a folded newspaper. It was a page with cartoons on it, and words and boxes. Most of the page was filled in with letters in Grace's shaky handwriting.

Silas nodded his understanding. He asked Grace if she would be okay with him taking this paper; he'd been putting off maintenance on his nest — now it was in desperate need for refeathering. Newspaper would be excellent building material.

" 'Course," Grace said. "I'm done wif it. Take all it. Corey can take it home wif 'em — closer to yo' tree."

"Thanks." Silas wanted to get them back on track; his wings were already feeling heavy, his lack of sleep was catching up with him. He thought how he still had to break into the Fox Den tonight. "What do you make of the clues? These murders? I could use yours and Corey's help. If no one else is going to end this but me, I'd rather figure it out sooner than later."

"Like I done said, you got a puzzle ta figga. Silas, take 'nother look at them tossed-'round words."

"The ones Barnes unscrambled? Sightless and coward?"

Grace rocked her head. "Them the ones. An' whadda they have in common?"

Silas felt like he could do with an overturned rock of grubs and another cup of coffee. "I don't know, Grace. Obviously Fox is saying something —"

"You don't know that —"

"Okay. Fox or not, the killer is saying something about about the animals he killed. Mole, he was blind — sightless. Quail — well, sorry to say it, but yeah, he was a coward. Scared like a rattling leaf."

"Ain't no one got that right to judge 'less you Saint Peter. You done said Quail looked froo a bear cave, then parlayed with a fox. Bein' scare't don' mean you no coward."

"He flew off before the inspection of Fox's den, too scared to go in." Silas opted not to mention finding Quail's droppings in the corner of the Bear Cave, pooping himself, he was so scared. Silas was starting to feel anger towards Quail. He was a Council Member — it was his job to keep peace in the forest. What right did he have to run, when Silas had nothing to do with the Council, and was sucked into this whole thing like an eddy?

"You said that killuh put chore name up by them words bofe times. You got a patt'n formin'. Silas, maybe he done be accusing you a-bein' sightless 'n a cow'ert."

"My vision is excellent," Silas said. It came out more defensively than he meant.

"Maybe he ain't talkin' 'bout seein' how a mole can't. Maybe you ain't seein' somethin' the killer think you should. Mayhap it a test — like if you don't figga dis out, tha puzzle — you done good as blind. Good puzzles got all you need right there front chore eyes; that don't make it no easier fo seein' the answer."

"So this is some kind of test for me? Why? Why bring others into this if it is just about me? Fox and I've had challenges between us before, and it was just between him and me." Silas knew what he said wasn't true the moment it left his beak. Hadn't Fox been ready to eat Harvey?

"It ain't about chu, Silas, whatever it seem. You saying it about takin' over the Council, takin' control da forest ... maybe. But even dat — dat ain't about nobody but the one doin' it. They doin' it fo they own reasons, an' ain' nobody else's. But they gon' make you play tho game, that fo sure. It's them words he usin' for a puzzle. You show't me they words that are circled. That tells me mo's comin'. They gon' link togedda, like in my here crossword."

Silas shook his head. "The only thing I'm seeing is the motive to eliminate the Council. Fox would have free reign of the forest — even more than he does now — to run his drug business, to do his challenges and racketeering with no one to make him pay the consequences. He's killing off each Council Member, taking a parting shot calling them 'sightless' or 'coward' or whatever else he has planned.... All the while Fox is keeping me teetering on my perch by involving me, because Fox and everyone else thinks I'm running for Council.... I'm not," Silas finished lamely.

Corey came in with a tray of Grace's supper, as much medicine as there was food. Grace shared a saltine with Silas. The light coming through the window was yellowing.

Silas sighed. Harvey would be waiting for him. "I better get going. Need to take a grand tour of Fox's Den."

"Will you be okay?" Corey asked. "My cousin owns a rifle, I could ask him —"

"No, thanks, Corey." Silas didn't like the chances of anyone going into Fox's den uninvited — human with a gun or not. "I've got to slip in undetected. If I'm going to find anything, they can't have warning someone's come looking. I know that's why the Council's inspection today was worthless. They announced themselves first."

Silas wanted to say something to Corey about his girlfriend Jenny, but he didn't know what he would say that would make any difference. The last thing he needed was yet another issue to dip his beak into.

"You come back tomorrow, hear?" Grace said. "I want-a know what chu find in that Fox Den. An' I have not gotten out my bed so long, I need you to come back, tell me if my pyracantha done start its blossomin'. I miss watchin' you birds goin' hog-wile wid dem berries."

"Yes, ma'am," Silas said. He bid them farewell, flying out the open window.

Silas thought what it would be like living in the city. Slower pace of life, no forest politics ... There was Larry Palomita and all the other loudmouth pigeons, but when you flew in a new direction, Silas knew, you tilted one wing down to raise the other.

Silas met Harvey back at the rest area. Harvey was on a light pole, dropping pebbles on a dog leashed underneath.

"What took you?" Harvey asked.

"I'm early."

Harvey had a pebble in his mouth, aimed it, dropped it. The dog growled, barking furiously. "Since when have you been early for anything, late bird?"

"Can it, Harvey. You ready?"

Harvey clicked his beak. He studied Silas with his beady eyes; they didn't focus perfectly on Silas' face. "The question is, are you, little bro? I'm always up for fast talking. You're the one stupid enough to try getting into the Den. But you do what your big brother says, and you might just live through this."

"How stoned are you?"

"Just a little," Harvey said. "Not as bad as this mutt." He laughed, getting his own joke. "Get it? Ha! Stoned!" He dropped a few more pebbles on the dog's head, who was swearing and yowling, scratching at the post, desperate for revenge. "I'm good, Sai, I'm good. Had a few Berries to get me in the mood. So I'm a little

blazed ... so what? I'm in control. Besides, I told Weasel we'd — I mean, I — I would be by soon. Better not be late; that rodent's got a temper. Like this dog here."

Harvey showered down the rest of the pebbles to the dog's howls of outrage. They took off for the heart of the forest.

The large deciduous trees of the forest gave way to scraggly pines, their branches knitted together in a web of sharp dead wood. About a mile from the den, Harvey dropped below the treeline, Silas following. The trees were so dense the moonlit night vanished into pitch; Silas strained his senses to follow Harvey as he darted and wove between the dense branches.

They landed on a branch. A wall of trees and brambles was between them and a clearing, where the dancing glow of firelight cast the shadows of animals moving around.

"Whew." Harvey panted, wiping a wing across his head. "Haven't flown that hard since I was a fledgling chasing after Marge Grubler. Remember Marge? Momma Spider, she was hot! — Yeah, yeah, I can't see your face, but I know you're looking at me, all business. You're so stiff — Loosen up, bro!. Anyway, yeah, you can see the Fox Den through the trees. Boiling berries, buy the looks of it ... maybe cooking down needles —"

"Stop licking your beak and focus."

"Like I said, you really only need to worry about Tony Crow. And I'll distract him, tell him Brandon Weasel is expecting me. You fly around the other side — the place is huge. The tunnel access is on the north side, if you're really stupid enough to go in there ... don't know where you'll hide...."

"Let me worry about that. I'll go hide over there until you get talking to Tony. Keep him busy. Seven minutes."

"Seven?" Harvey said. "Why not five? What am I going to say to Tony to keep him busy for seven minutes?"

"I don't know ... reminisce about how you met ... how you both like supporting the dirty underside of the forest —"

Harvey gave Silas the feather.

Silas found a cluster of branches that hid him from all sides. Silas heard Harvey flap closer to the clearing with the fire; he was talking with someone now. The animal Harvey was talking to asked someone a question, who relayed the question to someone else. For a while Silas couldn't make out anything else. Then he heard the impossibly deep voice of Tony Crow. "Yeah, who's asking?"

Silas jumped. Tony's voice was closer, up in a tree; Tony's voice was the kind that projected, so it sounded next to you no matter where he perched. Silas peered around the branches, seeing Harvey's outline on a tree, joined by the larger black silhouette of Tony.

"Aren't songbirds like you supposed to be roosting at this hour?" Tony asked.

"Songbirds, yeah," Harvey said. "Junkie birds: we keep a different schedule. We don't roost until after blitz o'clock has come and gone."

"We've had enough visitors today, Oaktree. Get lost. Find Weasel another day to get your fix."

Harvey hesitated. Silas was ready to fly, not knowing if Harvey would be able to hold Crow's attention long enough for him to do any real searching, but then he heard Harvey start in again with Crow.

"C'mon, Tony — you know it's for more than just me; sure, I taste the product from time to time —"

Laughter from the animals in the clearing; they knew an understatement when they heard it.

“— but you know I sell to a lot of animals in the woods. No bird flies high in this forest without me supplying them ... come on, Tony, let me talk to Weasel. It’s late, I know, but I know that son of a grub can’t sleep when there’s profit to sniff out...”

It was silent for a moment, Tony considering. Then he said, “Alright, Oaktree. Wait here with me. I’ll have one of the goons — I mean, employees — get Weasel. You better be ready to buy...”

Silas took his cue. He hopped around to the other side of the tree where he was hiding, launching himself into the air; Silas glided as much as he could, beating a few strong beats of his wings, but minimizing the sound. He made a wide perimeter around the clearing. When he was on the opposite side, where his perfect sense of direction and perception of magnetic fields told him was the north side of the clearing, where Harvey had said the entrance to the underground part of the Fox Den was. He would see what he could find aboveground first. Then, as he knew he would have to, he would search underground.

It was an expansive clearing, at least as large as the one where the Forest Council meeting had been. On the north side where Silas was, stacks of barrels stood warehoused in a neat grid pattern around a large hole in the ground. The hole was big enough to be the opening to a mine. Across the clearing was a fire pit, large and rectangular, stretching some forty feet across. The fire was dug into the ground, so suspended almost level with the forest floor were large black cauldrons; Silas could smell the sweetness of what was cooking inside. Various animals worked around the fire, some up on a metal scaffolding adjacent the fire pit, working controls.

Silas flew from cover, dropping almost vertically to the ground. There he hopped as quickly as he could across open ground. He could hear a group of animals' voices growing closer from the underground entrance. Silas flew between the stacked barrels for cover, peeking his head out to watch. Fox emerged, flanked by a porcupine and an opossum.

"— better teach the Council a lesson. Think they can put their beaks wherever they please — telling the rest of us what we can do and not." It was Fox's voice, greasy. The group came out of the tunnel, Fox flanked by a skunk and a porcupine.

"Yeah, showed them, didn't you boss?" the porcupine said. “Old quaky Quail put in his place ... Ain’t gonna be shakin’ with the Council no more...”

“Shut up, Quill. But yes, one less Council Member to deal with.... It’s going better than I expected.”

The opossum spoke in his nasally voice.

“You hear, boss? Oaktree’s brother is here. Harvey. Came to buy from us. Weasel and Crow are with him now.”

“Is that so? Harvey’s been a good customer,” Fox said. “But I don’t even want to hear the name Oaktree. Silas has been a thorn in my paw for too long. Now that he’s running for Council, and accusing me of the Bear kidnappings, and the murders ...”

“But, boss, didn’t you —”

There was a scream as Fox hit the opossum.

“You don’t know what you’re talking about, Dell. So don’t — talk.”

The opossum called Dell rolled on his side, playing dead. Fox scoffed.

“I don’t need any more talk from any of you. Especially about Oaktree. I don’t care if he’s out trying to solve the riddles, or taking a dump on his human friend’s car.” Fox giggled at his own joke.

Quill laughed dutifully. They came level with the stack where Silas hid. He shrunk back among the barrels, his feathers scraping the wooden sides of the barrels. Silas held his breath, trying not to make a sound. Fox stopped walking, not saying anything. Quill asked Fox what he was looking at. Fox ignored Quill, saying nothing as he stood still, listening. Finally Fox walked on.

Silas let his breath. He peeked out from the stack. Fox and Quill were inspecting the fire, the opossum called Dell catching up. Fox was inspecting the overhead winch where the cauldrons of berries boiled over the fire, conveyed to the end, where they turned and dumped into waiting barrels identical to those Silas hid among.

He could delay no longer. Silas dropped to the ground, hopping quickly to the entrance of the Den’s underground. The tunnel was dark, the air stale and palpably still. It was so other from the Den’s aboveground, which seemed almost cheery in comparison, with its warm firelight and bubbling pots of berries... And homicidal animals that would kill him given the chance, Silas thought. He hopped down the earthen ramp.

Despite the dark, his excellent night vision and keen awareness of magnetic fields made it easy to navigate the underground corridors. What he was looking for now was about a million times bigger than a worm, black and furry, with claws and a musty scent. Plus, there were two of them. If they’re still alive, Silas thought. He shoved the thought aside, coming to a fork. He picked the left tunnel.

More of the barrels were underground, fermenting the berries inside. Just coming out of winter, there were less than Silas imagined would be there in autumn; still, dozens of barrels lined the walls and filled the cavernous burrows serving as storerooms. The sheer size of Fox’s enterprise — the amount of trade he did with forest animals and humans to get this scale — struck Silas for the first time. Silas was getting woozy from the smell of all the fermenting berries.

He searched down tunnel after tunnel. The organized layout of the underground impressed Silas, and with his near perfect sense of direction, and paying attention to the subtle exchange of air, he mentally crossed off corridors and rooms he had already been through. The underground portion of the Den was benign, even if it was in the heart of his greatest adversary’s lair: It was just warehouse space for Fox’s illegal products. The Council had searched the Den. If Top Perch Barnes was anything, the old owl was thorough, and would not have neglected searching here as well as the rest of the Den. As long as they didn’t get drunk off the fumes, Silas thought, shaking his head. He would check down the last tunnel he missed, then head up to the surface.

Silas hammered the sides of a few of the barrels, making sure they weren’t hollow. He heard a soft rumble and groan. He looked around for its source. Then Silas realized it was his stomach. He hadn’t eaten since the small bit of cracker Grace had shared. He moved on, checking the walls for hidden rooms and secret compartments.

He went down the last tunnel. It was different from the storage rooms; there were no barrels or crates; a light radiated from the chamber Silas was coming upon. He hugged the wall as the tunnel turned, opening into a chamber.

It was more of a private residence, or a study, though Silas had never seen any animal besides Wesley Barnes keep a formal study. Papers and jars of ink and water were scattered on a smooth tabletop, lit by the harsh white light of an electric lantern. Silas flew onto the table.

There were not nearly as many papers as Barnes kept in his loft, but quite a few littered the table. Ones appearing older, some yellowed on their fringe in the dank underground, were stacked on a corner of the table. Some were human manuals and receipts, others quick notes. Silas immediately and instinctively knew this was Fox's office. The collection of cushions in one corner of the room was one clue, indented in the middle with an eddy of shed fox fur. Another tip-off came from the shelf along the opposite wall, lined with a neat display of small animal skulls, whose wide and empty eye sockets reflected the table lantern's light with a pearlescent shine. Silas recognized multiple bird skulls, a few squirrels, rabbits, a human skull. Silas was relieved at not seeing two bear skulls. Still, the exposed jaws of Fox's showpieces seemed bared in warning, screaming and pleading for Silas to get out while he could, keep his skull far away from a fate on their shelf. He turned back to the papers on the table.

What were clearly the newest papers were not unlike the two Silas had, as what he saw in front of him were drawings of Mole's and Quail's murders. Extra pieces of papers were closeups of various parts of the victims, scribbled notes describing scents, visitors to the crime scenes, the surroundings. Pages were dedicated to the messages written to Silas at the scenes. The words were unscrambled, solved.

"Find what you were looking for?" Fox was in the entrance, staring at Silas. There was a smile on Fox's face, lips peeled back, incisors in full view. He was perfectly still, waiting for Silas to move first. Fox inclined his head to the skulls on the shelf.

"Like my collection, Oaktree? You'll have plenty of time to get acquainted when I add yours. There's a spot on the top shelf."

Silas didn't wait for Fox to come to him. He flew into Fox's stack of papers, scattering them, kicked off the wall and turned, launching himself at the skull collection. Fox leaped for Silas, snapping with his jaws, but came up short, hesitant to crash into his macabre collection. Silas dove and swept the top row with his feet, sending a cascade of bone clattering to the floor.

Fox lunged again. Silas gained altitude, the roots growing out the ceiling brushing him as he flew out the chamber and into the tunnel. He heard Fox pursuing fast. Silas turned and weaved through the network of chambers and tunnels, heading for the fresh air. He flapped hard, ascending the ramp up and up toward the trees and night sky beyond.

Silas sensed more than felt Fox make another leap. Fox's jaws snapped shut a feather's width from Silas' tail. Now Silas was too high for Fox, gaining speed as he headed for the trees. Fox shouted in frustration behind him.

Silas pumped his wings hard. The effervescent rush of cheating death filled Silas. He had escaped, he couldn't believe he —

Something slammed into Silas, knocking the breath out of him. Bony protrusions dug into his breast and wing, and instead of sky above him, all he saw was what looked improbably like a blanket of fur as Silas rocketed to the ground.

The landing was hard. Silas laid stunned on the floor of the clearing. The fire danced in the distance, its light casting shadows of the animals moving to circle Silas.

“Well done, Josh Glider. You’re earning yourself a place here at the Den.” It was Fox. Silas was limping in a circle, dazed, one wing twisted down like an anchor dredging bottom. Fox’s shadow fell over him, darker than the others.

“And to think, you almost got away!” Fox said, giggling. “Lucky for you I just hired on a flying squirrel ...”

“Yeah, lucky me,” Silas said, finally gasping air into his lungs. His wing hurt badly, a shooting pain. If it was broken ... He needed time to test it, to recover. He needed to keep Fox talking.

“Nice skull collection, Fox. I didn’t get time to look. Do you have Pete Mole’s skull up? Or Quail’s? Or are they still being polished?”

Fox laughed with abandon.

“Silas Oaktree, the great detective — shooting in the dark once again. Tell me, detective: Did you find what you were looking for, coming here? I knew you had a knack for sticking your beak where it didn’t belong ... but really, coming here, to my Den? You’re bolder than I thought.”

More animals were gathering around. Tony Crow landed by Fox; Brandon Weasel skittered around, trying to get a good view of struggling Silas through the circle of onlooking cronies.

“Where’s Harvey?”

Crow cawed indignantly. “Sent him here to distract us, Oaktree? He’s gone now. Flew off. But if I’d known he was here so you could spy on us, I’d snap his neck in my beak. Like I’ll do to you.” Crow walked forward, dipping over Silas. He took Silas’ leg in his beak; his leg looked like a brittle twig in the crow’s maw. Crow looked ready to crunch down, Silas wincing, anticipating the snap, when Fox called, “Stop.”

Tony backed away, looking askance at Fox, his face mutinous.

“Why not? He’s trying to peg the murders on you.”

“Yeah!” Weasel called out. “If he’s accusing, why not make the bird right?”

Fox walked circles around Silas, sniffing him, prodding him gently, experimentally, with his snout. He did not seem angry. Rather, Fox looked to be studying Silas. Enthused. Silas knew what was coming. Fox raised his voice, addressing his cronies.

“Don’t hurt him. Any of you. Touch him for any other reason than to restrain him, and I’ll kill you myself. Our friend here,” Fox turned to Silas, his hackles spread in a wide smile, the firelight dancing in his eyes, “just agreed to a challenge.”

Silas found his voice.

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did. By coming here, Oaktree, you did. The wager, of course, is your life. The challenge ...” Fox made the crowd of animals part, stepping aside so Silas could get a full view of the bonfire. “... is surviving this.”

Oohs and gasps ran through the crowd. Tony Crow scoffed, annoyed with Fox’s toying. Fox looked at his second in command, demanding silence with a look. Fox turned back to Silas.

“Like my boiling station, Oaktree? Humans helped me build it, but it’s my design. I trade enough with the humans, I’ve even got purchasing power with them. See — human, fox, robin ... we’re all the same.

We all have a soft spot, especially those of us who act like hard cases. Especially them. It's not always in the same spot, though. But it's there. Some are afraid to lose. Like you, Oaktree. You're afraid to lose. Even when the stakes are just your worthless junkie brother. I know your soft spot, Oaktree — and that's where I'll bite.

“Now me,” Fox went on, “I'm a striver. But I'm not afraid to lose. What really yanks my bushy tail is being held back from doing things. I love spinning the wheel of chance. As long as the wheel is turning, I am happy.”

Silas flexed his hurt wing. It wasn't broken. That was something.

“Wow. Good for you,” Silas said deadpan.

“What I sell: all the berries, needles, leaves, mushrooms ... you name it — it's all about the soft spot, Oaktree. Right where the flank is covered, that's where you know it's soft. Before I put you to the challenge and you die horribly, I feel I need to teach you this. You think you're so noble, opposing me, in the elections... my business — now trying to see me chased out of the forest by turning everyone against me —”

Silas scoffed. “Your kidnapping the cubs and murdering innocents might have had a bit to do with that.”

“Fortunately for me, Oaktree, the stick levers the rock whether the rock likes the stick or not. This time, your challenge isn't to see how clever you are. The forest is already atwitter with enough animals thinking you're so great.

“This time, your challenge is really just completing what you were just trying to do: escape. The wager, as I said, is your life. If you lose, no more Oaktree. All I have is a barrel of berry mixture that's been spoiled. Poor me....

“And if I win?”

“That won't happen, so there's no point in discussing it. But since I'm a fox of my word, and no wager is complete without consideration ... You would get your life.”

“What a prize,” Silas said. “So I either die, or I don't die. How about, when I escape, me and my family — all of it ... myself, Crystal, my eggs and all my egg's offspring ... even Harvey — we get complete immunity for all of us. You and your goons won't hurt us. Not plan it, directly or indirectly. If I was sitting in your mouth, you couldn't bite. Lifelong immunity, Fox.”

Fox laughed. “Would you like me to throw in the moon while you're at it? Sure — immunity for you and your family if you escape. Seeing as you should be cooked well-done within minutes ... deal.”

Tony Crow spoke up.

“Boss, why are we doing this? Let's just kill the robin, and be done with it. We still need to make sure that she —”

“Shut it, Tony,” Fox said, snarling. “No one gets in the way of my challenges! You run the operations here, but you still work for me. Remember that.” Tony flew off, muttering about the ridiculousness of Fox's challenges.

“Ready for the tour?” Fox asked Silas, tittering in high humor. A fruit bat and the flying squirrel called Joshua Glider held down Silas, tying him with string. Glider dragged Silas along behind him on a lead of the string, keeping up with Fox as he slowly walked the perimeter of the bonfire.

“This is where we boil the berries, Oaktree. Crazy Berries need fermentation, and this is one of our first steps. Berries are picked and dumped on the ramp on this end,” Fox indicated a conveyor that rose on an incline from the ground to the level of the black cauldrons, which hung suspended like giant, extinguished Chinese lanterns. “The berries dump into each cauldron until it’s full, then it moves along the overhead conveyor, dipping lower over the flames. It moves along to the other end, where we’re going....”

Silas rolled helplessly on the ground as he was dragged along. They hadn’t trussed his feet, but it didn’t matter, as the squirrel kept pulling him off balance. The wall of heat itched Silas’ feathers as they moved along the length of the long rectangular fire pit. They came upon the short side of the fire pit, where barrels were lined up, their tops resting against their respective barrel.

“And here’s where the berries are dumped,” Fox said, explaining casually, like he was giving a tour to a group of tourists. “These are our cooling barrels, Oaktree. Made of oak, how do you like that? The berry mixture is four hundred degrees when the vat travels to the end of the fire pit, automatically dumping into the next available barrel. Then the vat makes its way back to the start. But you don’t have to worry about that, because your story ends here, at the barrels.”

Fox checked with Joshua Glider that Silas’ strings were tight. Fox’s fur seemed electrically charged with excitement.

“Your wings are trussed — so there’ll be no flying away from us this time. You are going in the bottom of that barrel. It’s nearly four feet high with smooth sides. Oh, and every minute a new vat of boiling berries comes around to the end.

“Since you’ll be dead, I thought I’d let you know what happens after. The barrel cools here for five hours, then the lid is secured, and it’s rolled off to ferment for months. Later the berries are mixed with a solidifier and pressed into Crazy Berries. Just to think,” Fox said, cackling at the thought, “This summer, your fat brother Harvey is going to be getting high off a mixture with you in it.”

Silas struggled against his bonds. “You’re a sentimental fool, you know that, Fox?”

Fox indulged him with a chuckle, then nodded to the other animals. Silas was handled roughly past the full cooling barrels — the heat radiating from them was intense — to the closest empty barrel in line. The flying squirrel huffed carrying Silas up the side of the barrel. Silas clawed with his feet, pecking at Glider. Glider backhanded Silas with a paw, rolling him over the lip of the barrel. The animals heard the hollow plunk as Silas fell in. Some cheered. Fox called out to Silas.

“One more tasty tidbit for the great detective before he boils: You were making blind accusations about me, Oaktree. But you were right on one thing. I did take the cubs. Taking the Bear cubs ensured I would get control of the Council. At first I was worried you would actually get the seat. But the Council members being taken out, and with you being — indisposed — there will be no problem in me now taking over that fool Barnes’ loft.” Fox’s voice was sing-song with mock sadness before he burst into a peel of tittering laughter. “It’s just too bad you had to pay for this information with your life!”

Silas heard the creak of the pulley. He looked up. The black vat was overhead. It tilted.

“Goodbye, Silas Oaktree,” Fox said.

The boiling mixture cascaded into the barrel.

Chapter Six: Zig's Story

He wasn't dead. Dead robins could not feel so sore, or so tired.

He hopped into a still pool of the stream. He gyrated his body, agitating water over his feathers. The water was cool — cold, even. It felt as good as Silas felt beat.

The sun was already up, the sky a lethargic blue. Silas closed his eyes, refusing his body's plea for the rest he so wanted to take.

Silas had hopped two miles from the Fox Den. His wings had still been trussed with string as he hopped through the forest, not daring to slow his pace. He wanted distance between himself and all the animals who worked for Fox. While he hopped, Silas had time to fantasize about the string tying him unwrapping from his own body, then flying around Fox's neck, the bat's, the flying squirrel Josh Glider's — Weasel and Tony Crow and all the rest of them. He got a thrill of visceral pleasure seeing their face swell, their eyes bugging out from not breathing. At this point in his fantasy, Silas cawed in triumph before plunging his beak into each of their eyes, their cries of agony delicious retribution for the shame of Silas' capture.

Silas had used the rocks in the creek bed, sawing up and down on a jagged piece of shale. The tension on the string broke, blood free to flow again in his wings and breasts, but hesitant, like a prisoner on his cot whose cell door unexpectedly swings open. He flexed his wings, fanning them, flapping them. They hurt, but they worked.

With his freedom came a heady rush of spite, the feelings self-justifying and vindicating for Silas, damning for Fox. Fox would pay for everything. Today. Silas would see to that. No more games. No more murders. No more challenges.

Hadn't Fox admitted outright to kidnapping the cubs?, thinking his overcomplicated attempt to kill Silas would bury the secret with Silas, four feet deep in lava-hot berries?

It hadn't worked, and here was Silas, plotting revenge. But wasn't it really justice? Revenge was personal, and had it just been between Silas and Fox, Silas' plan for retribution may have been just that. Justice, though: That carried the weight of all the wrongs in the forest, righted in one stroke. Silas would go see Barnes, rally the forest animals to crush Fox once and for all....

Silas' splashed water in his face. His wings drooped.

After breakfast. Silas had left his energy back in another life, two days ago, before the Forest Council meeting where everything had changed so suddenly. Breakfast would give him enough of a jump-start to go talk with Barnes.

Silas shook his feathers of excess water. He sighed, stepping out of the shallow pool, flying to the top of the creek bank. He took off for Corey's feeder.

"Who dumped you out of the nest this morning?" Mitch Birdsly asked, making room for Silas at the bird feeder. "You look terrible."

"Thanks, Mitch."

Silas reached in the feeder hole. It was the same buckshot Corey had been passing off for seed. Of course. Silas swallowed mechanically. The deck was a menagerie this morning; all the perch space at the feeder taken

up, Flash Goldplume the only bird eating with gusto as he attacked the feeder hole opposite; Colin Squirrel was there with his girlfriend Sadie; Ziggy Chickadee was in the middle of the thick of birds, given first priority for a feeding slot; Mack Starling was finishing a joke about a human bird hunter who mixed up his mating calls, but Mack was eyeing Silas — Silas knew he was going to say something about his appearance. Mack always had something to say.

"Silas! Glad you make it! It's Zig's last day before he flies back to New York to pick up trash with his beak ... We're celebrating. Having a going away breakfast. But look at you! You look like crap, Silas. Your wife leave you for a bird who wasn't so ugly?"

Laughter. Silas joined in, but he had to reach deep to pull off the sounds of laughter, like his paltry remains of good humor were at the bottom of an empty barrel.

"Nothing like that, Mack. Just when your wife's first eggs hatch — if some have red breasts, that wasn't me."

Mack bobbed his head, taking in the comeback. He and Silas had been flying this formation since they met. Still, he knew something was up.

"At least someone's getting something out of that old rooster," he said. "Really, though, Silas ... you okay, buddy? You look like you've been chased by a fox."

"Funny you should say that. You guys won't believe what happened to me last night." Silas told them about the Fox Den, sneaking in, the skulls he found in Fox's study, being trapped, and Fox confessing.

"But how did you escape?" Flash Goldplume asked. "If your wings were tied, and you were put in the bottom of a barrel, watched by Fox and the rest of them ... I mean, that's something! How did you do it?"

Silas waved Flash's question aside. "Never mind that. What's important is Fox confessed to taking the cubs. Linking that to the messages at the killings, especially Mole's, where he mentioned the Bears, he outed himself for both sets of crimes. I'm headed over to Barnes right after this, going to tell him about the whole thing, get a party together to raid the Fox Den. We'll get that menace out of our woods for good."

Flash chewed his tongue, looking doubtful. He dipped back into the feeder, eating ravenously.

"How can you eat that seed like that?" Silas asked, irritated. "I can barely manage to choke a little down."

Flash shrugged. "I'm not picky, I guess. I was locked in a cage for years by this crazy old woman. She kept me in her house, but didn't think to feed me more than once every couple weeks. I'd eat this molding old seed she's put in the cage. I learned to ration it — you know, not eat it all at once. That's what kept me alive."

Mitch shook his head. "That's terrible. And she never let you out?"

"Never. She kept my cage in her foyer — that's kind of like a room when you go through the front door in a human's house. I could see part of her around the corner in the living room. She sat in her chair, knitting all the time but as far as I could tell, never finishing anything. She knitted while listening to sermons on her television."

They all knew what television was, seeing the spectral glow pulsing nightly in nearly every human's home in the development, capturing the humans in a trance like deer in headlights.

Flash shook his head. He looked like he didn't want to go on, but felt compelled to.

"This old lady, she didn't leave her house much. Hardly ever. But when someone knocked on the door — my cage was right there, in the foyer — she would pick up my cage. It was heavy, but small for my size — I'll

admit, when I saw Quail's murder, how they put him in that small cage ... that reminded me of me. I wouldn't wish that on anyone. But anyway, the old lady would carry me to the laundry room, threaten not to feed me for another week if I made a sound, then would go get the door. Usually a neighborhood kid offering to mow her lawn, or selling cookies."

Mack clicked his beak. "Jumpin' jitter bug ... and you lived with this crazy hag?"

"Had no choice," Flash said, shrugging. "I was born in a pet store. Didn't have much of a choice when she bought me." He lifted a foot, showing a metal band welded on.

If Zig Chickadee felt shorted with the spotlight going off him at his going away breakfast, he didn't show it. "How'd you escape, Flash?" he asked.

"I had all the time in the world to plan it. I spent hours and days and months planning my escape. I went on like that for years. The years built up in that cage, the bars caking with my filth. The old lady would only change the newspaper at the bottom when I squawked long enough — and probably not even that's what did it. She probably couldn't stand the smell anymore, or didn't want to embarrass herself when the neighborhood boys came by asking to mow for her.

"She'd lay out new paper — not often, just every once in a while — and that became the only thing I had to look forward to. Though that witch was there threatening me about what would happen if I tried to get out of the cage, in that moment ... the cage door was open. I could imagine what it felt like to be out of there. And that's when the fresh newspaper would come in. She'd lay down the comics pages — she thought the only part worth reading were the obituaries, talking and laughing to herself from the chair, cheered up that others were dying while she still clung on. Miserable old grub," Flash said.

"Those pages became everything to me. Through the bottom grate I would read the comics. Those cartoon characters were my only friends ..." Flash was staring unseeing into the distance, transported to his old life. "She'd hurt me if I made too much noise, reading and working out the comics. That's how I learned to read.

"To answer your question, Zig — sorry, by the way. I shouldn't of commandeered your party like this. Just guess I needed to get it out. So yeah, I finally escaped. It happened one night when the hag was watching her public access sermons. I had a newspaper, excited by the fresh set of comics. That was my life — the only time I felt alive. I'd be careful to poop off in the corner ... I hated it when that or my molting covered parts of the paper, and I couldn't reach a wing between the bars and move it. ... Sorry." Flash laughed, seeing the look on their faces. "Gross, I know. But at the time, nothing else mattered to me.

"I was reading a news article in the paper. It wasn't the comics, but I was excited — excited in a way I had never felt in my entire life. Like I said, the only fresh air in my life was that paper. But one of my feathers fell through the floor bars. I was trying to move it out of the way so I could finish reading the article. I wanted to finish it. Needed to. I was making a lot of noise, I guess — enough for the old lady to keep shouting for quiet, that she was couldn't hear her sermons.

"I really wasn't listening, so I didn't notice her until she was right outside my cage, looking ready to kill me.

"She almost whispered it, saying, 'I told you to be quiet.' That's what made me stop trying to move the feather. I looked up, and there she was, towering over my cage. She stuck a finger in, trying to hit me. I bit her, and that got her mad.

"I'd say she lost her mind, but she was already crazy. Because that's when she took out her teeth, and struck them through the bars to hit me with them."

Silas was dumbstruck. "She did what?"

Colin grimaced. "Take out her teeth? How could she take out her teeth?"

"They were fake," Flash said. "Fake teeth. She took out the upper row. They were dirty. Yellow, with food and beer stains. She whacked my beak, my head. I wasn't even thinking. I fought back, biting and grabbing. She was getting crazier. She dropped her fake teeth in my cage. That's when she had to open the door. I managed to get past her. That's when I escaped. All those years of planning, and I got out when I least expected it."

Some of the listeners let out a low whistle. Mack shook his head slowly. "As long as you've lived here, Goldplume, you never told us that. It's no wonder. Sounds like a nightmare."

Flash nodded. "That's why when Silas tells us how Fox captured him, tied him up, and he escaped ... that impresses me. Silas, you're my hero —" Some of the birds made a sappy Aaaah! sound. Flash waved them down. "No, really. I know what it's like to be caged. It's no way to live. You said Fox admitted to having the Bears. You've got my support, Silas. Being held prisoner is against nature. Nail that son of a grub to the wall, just like he did to Mole."

The others cheered their agreement.

"Alright," Silas said. The thought of punishing Fox filled him with energy. More so, he wouldn't admit, than the prospect of rescuing the Bear cubs. He hopped to the rail, getting ready to fly. "I'll go see Barnes now. Zig, have a good flight back to New York; we look forward to another mouth to feed next winter with our scarce food supply. And Flash ..." Silas nodded at him. "Thanks for sharing your story. I'm sure it wasn't easy. But I needed to hear that. Needed to know someone was behind me ... this whole Fox thing...."

Zig Chickadee said quick goodbyes to everyone, joining Silas on the railing. "Jeepers. I should be heading out, get in a good day of flying. Can't say I'll miss you bunch'a misanthropes, but I'll say it anyway. Silas, I'm going your way. North's on the other side of the barn, if that's where you're headed."

They took off in the direction of the barn. Before long Zig spoke in his heavy northeastern accent. "Mind if we pull ovah onto a branch, Silas? I've got a darn lot of miles between me and Long Island, and before I go, I've been wanting to run by beak with you. Have been wanting to since I seen you caught up with this killah and mystery business! Now let's get on a perch before I wheeze myself to death."

They went onto an elm branch.

"You've been living here in this forest for a couple years now, isn't that right, Silas?"

"Yes." Silas knew Zig was a talker, and Silas needed to see Barnes. But since Silas had met Zig two autumns ago, when Zig came down to winter in the forest, Silas knew him as a straight flier. If he took Silas aside to talk, there was a reason for it.

"Pretty hard start to spring down here, killings and all." Zig pronounced hard as haaard.

"Yep."

"I know you and me haven't talked much," Zig said, "More acquaintances than friends, as sorry as that sounds."

"I think we're friends, Zig."

Zig waved a wing impatiently. "No. I mean friends who talk about things that matter, the worm that's crawling deep in your gut no one else knows is there."

"Umm," Silas said. "if you think I have digestive problems, you didn't have to take me aside —"

Zig cut him off.

"It's not that you ain't funny, kid. It's just you're not getting what I have to say. I come down here every winter from New York. Between the hours of dawn and dusk, I'm either napping or crapping, small talking with you birds round a feeder. And I wouldn't have it any other way. You come to be my age — and they're ain't no prize for guessing, so don't bother — talking with pals over a slow meal is about all you care to do.

"But that don't mean I still can't separate the worm from the dirt."

"Meaning?" Silas asked.

"Meaning tell the difference between the important and the not so important. And I know something else, too, because I've been in something similar to where you are now. The texture's different, what you're dealing with now, but I'd bet a bucket of worms the flavor's still the same. You're headed to talk with Barnes in a few about Fox. Don't get me wrong — that dog needs putting down. I don't have a note of lament in me if you get Fox locked up, or killed. He probably deserves it ten times ovah.

"But every other animal in this forest is up against Fox, too. You might have a history with him, Silas, but you're not the only one suffering at his paw. What makes you different is what keeps you hopping, though your wings are tied, and you haven't snooze in days."

Silas spoke up. "Fox is a killer! And a kidnapper! If we don't get the cubs back soon —"

"Save the speech for when you're on Council," Zig said. "Silas, I know what's making you push so hard. And it ain't Fox. You've got something crawling out your past, and it's chewing on you every day." He held up a wing. "Don't try telling me otherwise. I've been where you are, and you can't hide it from someone who's flown the same wind."

"I don't have anything —"

Zig pointed a wingtip aggressively in Silas' face. "You've got a parasite from your past, Silas. But you didn't leave it there. I've heard some of what you had going on up in that forest in Virginia, but I don't think anyone else but you knows the whole story. And I don't ask because I'm curious. I'm asking so you can get it off your back. Until you can talk about it, that parasite is staying right where he is. That parasite will feed on you until there's nothing left ... and keep chewing! You've got a choice, kiddo. You can talk to an old squawker like me and get it off your back, or you can keep carrying that big motherplucker around! What will it be, Silas? You can fly off this branch a free bird. You just have to say what happened up in that forest."

Silas kept quiet. He guessed Zig was right: he did see him as an acquaintance. He didn't want to talk about his business, especially to someone he wasn't close to. Still, the thought of talking about what happened in the Daniel Boone Forest had an appeal. Could he really be free of it?

"Well?" Zig said, prompting.

"Zig ... I ... I can't — I can't. Sorry. There's nothing."

Zig pursed his beak. "You're sure?"

"Sure. I'm just tired. I ... I just want to get rid of Fox, like you said...."

Zig nodded slowly. "As you say. You don't want to talk, that's fine. It's poisoning you ... but fine. Just know you can sing me your song when you're ready. I'll be back next autumn, you know. You fellas ain't rid of me yet."

"Thanks, Zig."

"My pleasure. You asked for it, though: You won't talk, so I'm abouta do it for the both of us. I got a story ... Hoping you can get something out of it. Maybe learn you some lessons that this old bird was too dumb to learn himself.

"Now," Zig went on, "you probably don't know this about me, Silas, but I'm not from New York."

"Oh?" Silas didn't give a mite where Zig was from, but he didn't say so. Older birds reminded him of dogs dry-humping a human's leg; they'd sidle up to anything with an ear. "Where are you from, then?"

"Thanks for asking," Zig said wryly. "State of Maine. Bar Harbor and thereabouts. Lived in a pine with my sweetie, not too far inland."

"Why did you move?"

"That's the story. Maybe you'll get wise from it, maybe not. Silas, don't think I don't know birds like me talk like ears are just holes for filling. I know you've got a lot to do. More than any other animal flying, running, or crawling this forest. So I promise, I gotta point, even if I get to it slowah than a dung beetle rolling bear turd uphill."

Silas couldn't help checking the sun. It was already near midday, and he had lots to do yet. Silas sighed. Zig cleared his throat, settling into his perch for some marathon jabbering.

"I left Bar Harbor same reason what's going on in these woods. Nature was off it's rocker. I know the whole balancing act; can't have the good times without the bad, and all that buncha compost. But if that was so, there must of been a hell of a good time right around the corner, cuz I was seeing just a wicked lot of bad. I had to get out of there."

"What happened?"

"Someone killed my wife. That happened."

"I'm sorry. Who ate her body?" Silas hoped he sounded sympathetic.

"That's the point. No one ate her. She was murdered."

"Who did it?"

"Didn't know at first. Thought it was some of the human boys, got in their daddies' hunting cabinets. A while there there was a group of boys doing just that, tramping through the woods with rifles, leaving empty beer cans, bodies of the birds and squirrels they shot. Just lying there, on the ground." Zig gesture, as if the bodies were strewn all across the forest around them.

Silas thought of his baby brother Benedict, thrown out of the nest by their mother. He thought of hearing the body thump on the forest floor. Zig's face was grim.

"You could hear the boys coming a mile off. Louder than a rampaging moose. Talking loud, laughing when they'd shoot down a bird. Never seen anything like it in my life. I'd hide up in my tree, too scared to do anything, hoping I'd be the one they didn't see. They'd walk right under my tree, brags bouncing between

them, saying pussy this, pussy that. All the pussy they were getting. Can't be sure," Zig said, "but I think they ranked their status by the number of cats they owned, and not by their ability to sing and their colorings."

Silas pondered it. "Could be. Corey's girlfriend has a cat, and she seems to have higher status than him."

"That's probably so," Zig said, nodding, "But we're getting off my point. Point is, these boys were monsters. I thought for sure if anything happened to me or my wife, it would be by them."

"They shot your wife?"

Zig scratched patterns in the bark. He shook his head. "They didn't. Bad as they were, it wasn't them. I'm saying I thought it was them. When I found my wife dead, I was sure it was those boys. No bullet wound in her. She was crushed. Like under a heel."

"That's terrible," Silas said. "I'm sorry, Zig."

Ziggy waved him off. "It's wind blown under the wing. It's past. I ain't pretending I still don't think about it every day, but it's my burden alone. I'm telling you because maybe I can teach you something."

"Now, I went after those boys faster than if a falcon was chasing my tail. Got birds together to dive bomb them everytime they went outside. One of them had a car, a beat-up looking thing with only one working light, but those boys worshipped it like it was a suet cake tall as a tree. We dive bombed that, too. Later had a moose friend put his antlers through the windows, smash the car until it couldn't run. Even got the forest rangers involved, then the human police."

"They questioned the boys, found some stuff on one of them — not Crazy Berries, but something close. The police ended up putting him in a cage. Said he would be the female dog to the others in the cage. Don't know what that meant, neithah — The boy was a male human, but I guess men in cages have female dogs for status, too. Who knows."

Silas thought he would ask Ralph next time they talked. Zig stretched his wings out, encompassing everything he said.

"I thought all of this would make me feel better. It didn't. But if anyone tells you it doesn't change how you feel: liar, liar, wings on fire! Take it from this old Maine'ah, you'll feel different. Maybe not good, but ... charged up. Like you've been flying hard for an hour, and you're feeling pumped. You'll feel vicious. You want to stab your beak into something; a defenseless grub, maybe. But there ain't no grubs around, and you're just there, revved up, but with nothing to fly at."

"If it wasn't the boys, who was it?"

"I'll get to that. But that's later. So I woke up one day, my tree swaying like it was rabid. Thought there was an earthquake, except Bar Harbor don't get earthquakes. Or like the wind was going to blow down the pine, but there ain't no wind neither. I look down. There's this beaver, chewing at my tree."

"You tell him to stop?"

Zig gave Silas a look telling him to get serious. "No, I asked him if he wanted his teeth polished.... Of course I told him to stop! He wouldn't though, 'cept to tell me he'd been wanting my tree for months for his dam!

"I told this beaver to get lost. Told him I knew some wicked large mammals in the woods who would be happy meeting the animal damming up our stream! Now those were some pretty big words for me; except for those boys with the rifles, confrontation was a pretty new thing for me, so I was shaking more than I wanted

to let on. Talking to someone with a scar on his beak like you got, I know I'm talking to someone not afraid to ruffle a few feathers. But I tell you, I was scared. The beaver said, Like it or lump it, he was taking my tree!

"I dive bombed, but he kept chewing the trunk. Said my poop was nothing that wouldn't wash off in the water! Damn it if that little pissah didn't fell my tree!, takin' it off to build on his own dam!"

Silas shook his head, commiserating. "Zig, that's terrible. But hey, listen. I've got to get —"

"Going, I know. I told you I had a point. Perch tight until I get there, alright? I ain't talking to hear myself speak; I already know the story. I'm saying it for you.

"Now, like I was saying, this beaver took my tree. And I did what any good bird with a measure of self respect would do: I let him get away with it. I put my head down, found a new tree, and built a nest.

Silas had a hard time seeing himself letting someone do something like that and get away with it. Zig went on.

"I kept on, keeping on for some months. And by that I mean I ate my entire life savings of dried insects by day, then got drunk on fermented berries by night. I would hear that beaver in the woods some nights, chewing through some other sorry animal's tree. But I let it be. Too drunk to care, too busy feeling sorry for myself, with just a dead wife, and a cold Maine wintah to look forward to.

"Flocks of religious birds kept stoppin' by. Just like scavengers, they are, circling your tree. It's like they can smell when you're vulnerable. Trying to get me to join their flock, hand out strips of tree bark with their Mother Spider scripture. Said they'd teach me to write. I told 'em I had nothing to write about." Zig looked sidelong at Silas. "You're not religious, are ya? No? No, I didn't think so. You don't have that chirpy happy-to-be-alive attitude that's so wicked annoying.

"Anyway, I said to those birds, I said, If Mother Spider has a pattern woven special for each of us, why doesn't she learn to spin a better thread? Her eight legs must have got tangled while she was doing mine, because my life looked like a ball of crap."

They chuckled.

"Got the Mother Spider nuts to finally go away," Zig said. "Funny how ugly they can get when you don't drink the nectar. But I couldn't shake what they said about each of us having our own pattern. Woven into the same web, but each pattern different, see? Pulling one thread tugs on the others. And so on. I don't buy into the whole Mother Spider crap, but to borrow one from the humans, a broken clock is still right twice a day. So maybe it wasn't Mother Spider screwin' up my web, but your pal Mr. Zig Chickadee here was sure doing a good job tangling himself up in it. I was weaving my own story about poor Ziggy Chickadee, and I'd been telling it every night before I got erased on Crazy Berries.

"So finally I said to myself, If I'm still so miserable, it's because something ain't settled. My wife's murder. There's grieving, and I had that, but time had passed. Hell, Silas, it had already been three months. So it was something else wormin' through me, chewing on me. Injustice, that's what it was. I had gotten those human boys good, that's for sure. But partah me knew it wasn't them.

Partah me always knew. Didn't want to believe I was wrong, though. Get what I'm saying, Silas? I had a pattern I was set on weaving in my damn part of the spider web, and I didn't want to face the truth because it wasn't the same as what I'd been weaving.

"Okay...." Silas couldn't see directly through the branches, but it looked like high noon. He shifted on the branch. "So what did you do then?"

"I went to sleep," Zig said. "That's what I did. I told myself I'd find what happened to my wife — tomorra. But that night? I had three Crazy Berries popped down my throat. But listen up, kiddo; this is the cream filling.

"Here's what happened. I had set to weaving myself a new pattern, but it wasn't going to wait for me to get my worm-filled rear out of the tree! The new weaving started that night.

"The beaver came back, middle of the night. I woke up to my tree shaking. I shouted at him, still half drunk, but it was just like before. I'd learned what I could about the beaver from some other animals. His name was Buck Castor, kicked outta Eastport for causing trouble.

"I didn't know what to do. I tried dropping pebbles on him. He just kept sawing away. Don't think the beaver remembered me from before. That bucktooth grin as he looked up the tree at me — that ... that I remember like it was today. It wasn't evil. Not exactly. More like a dumb pleasure doing what he did, and knowing nothing kept him from it. He was a saw. Happiest when he was sawing. Tell him he's destroying your home, and you're still talking to a saw. All it wants to do is what it's made for.

"Silas, I told him he better stop; that he got away with it once, and if he sawed down my tree, I'd be sweet-talking the fur trappers down at the diner. He stopped gnawing at that, said he'd heard someone say that before. Another chickadee, a female.

"My body temperature dropped. I asked him when. This Buck Castor said he didn't know — some chickadee saying she was watching a friend's nest while they were gone. She was there when he started chewing it down, said the same thing about the fur trappers I did. Then he said how he asked her to come down and talk with him, reasonable-like, on the ground. That they could work something out.

"This part in Buck's story, he stopped. He chuckled thinking back to what he did. Not evil, like I said, just the uncaring you'd expect from a saw — though I guess that and evil might boil down to the same thing. That's when Buck said the chickadee landed near him. Said she was a pretty little thing, too! I remember he chuckled again. I'll never forget that. Then Buck said he turned real quick, slapped down with his tail. He crushed her. So my wife wasn't crushed by no heel of no boy. It was a beaver tail.

"That, Silas, is when I found out who killed Mrs. Chickadee. Mother Spider or some other sick son of a grub was weaving my thread wicked fast now, right around my plucking neck. I couldn't breathe."

Silas asked, "Did you get him back?"

"Did I kill him? That's what you're asking. Not that day. What could I do? I was a drunk bird no bigger than a pinecone, against a sixty pound yellow-toothed killah. He chewed up that tree just like the other. Carried every last branch into a canal he built! I hadn't noticed how big his pond was growing until it was too late. When he took my second tree, my part of the forest looked more like a wetland. That beaver's pond was nearly lapping at the trunk of my tree, and I was too caught up in my web to notice. Too busy thinking the boys were the enemy, and me — the poor, oh-you-should-feel-sorry-for-me — drunk widower.

"When that tree starting to fall Buck Castor laughed like he had discovered how to turn water into honey. I flew off before it hit the ground, and I didn't touch the ground again until I was halfway to Portland. Don't remember making the decision to leave; but when I did, I realized I'd made that decision three months before, when my wife died. There was nothing for me there in that forest.

"I traveled the skies for years, going where the wind blowed. Got whatever seed I could. Finding whatever feeders not all the way empty. A while there I sang for a meditation group that met in the mornings,

some new-age human hippie thing. I'd sing my beak off for seed. I did everything to stay out of the woods. And by everything I mean I worked just enough for food, then ate Crazy Berries until my beak was red.

"Then, about three years ago, circumstances — some pulls on the thread of my web — brought me to a state forest outside Nashville, Tennessee."

"Here?"

Zig nodded. "The same. I hated it right away. Reminded me I could find a place to make a decent life for myself if I wanted. I had spent the previous few years traveling, weaving a new story, I thought. But Mother Spider be damned if it didn't look a hell of a lot like my old one. Talking with some of these animals here helped set me straight. Barnes might seem so starched you wonder how he flaps his wings, but let me tell you, Silas, he was a big help. Mack Starling, Flash, when he moved here a year. You. Even Colin Squirrel: he ain't half bad neithah. Point is, if I can stretch the spider web analogy one last time, a web can only stay up when it's attached to something; anchored somewhere. Me? I was drifting, and my pattern was a mess. That's when I decided: no more falling trees for me, mistah!

"I decided I'd find a home. More than one, if it came to that, and it did. I've got this place for wintering — three years in Maine is a lifetime of snow. Rest of the year I got a place up in Long Island. And despite being a cynical son of a grub, I think I actually like how things have turned out."

"But what about the beaver, Buck Castor?" Silas asked. "Did you ever go back to Maine?"

Zig nodded his head slowly. "Last year. Tied off that weave of the web for good. Headed back north, just like I'm doing today. But instead of turning east off the Jersey turnpike, I kept on until I was back in Bar Harbor. There's a story there, too. But not for today. Maybe not evah. We're burning precious daylight here as I jibber away.

"Just remember," Zig said. "There's always two patterns in the web. The first one is a story you're weaving. This one makes sense — Hell, why wouldn't it? You're the one weaving it! Then there's the othah: This one's called reality. It's what's really going on. And it usually doesn't have a damn thing to do with the story you've been telling yourself in your head the whole time.

"Don't do what I did. Don't wait over two years to finish it. If you're going to stop what Fox, or whatever crazy animal you think is plucking with the forest, do it soon. Don't carrying it around with you. Don't do what I did: not now with Fox, and not with whatever you've been carrying around since the Daniel Boone Forest."

Silas blew out a breath. "Thanks, Zig.... I think. So, you think I should —"

Zig cut him off. "I think you're wasting time not talking to Barnes. What are you doing, sitting on this branch wasting time talking to me for? Get going! Best of luck, kiddo!" Zig pushed Silas off the branch with a wing.

Silas shook his head as he plummeted for the ground. The nerve of Zig, taking his time like that, then telling him, Silas, he was the one wasting time! Silas spread his wings, the underside of his wings skimming the forest floor; then he got lift, gaining altitude. He banked in the direction of the barn.

Silas looked back at the branch.

Zig was already gone, headed back north.

Chapter Seven: The Barn

Silas flew to Council headquarters. He circled the barn; no sign of life inside or out. Council Member Don Quail's murder scene was much the same as when they had found it. And when had that been? Just yesterday? Silas couldn't believe it; it felt like a distant memory. Now the birdcage was empty, the string from which Quail had hung swayed in the breeze; the side of the barn was still painted with dark red strokes, asking, Silas? Silas?

Silas flew through the open door on the barn's upper level, landing in the hay loft. Barnes wasn't in. Silas preened his feathers on a bail. They were filthy; he vowed to himself to take another bath, to finish getting the smell of dirt and Crazy Berries off his plumage. Soon he grew bored of his self-grooming, and began exploring the loft.

It was austere, utilitarian. Hay bales stacked around the perimeter of the loft; a corner had a neat deposit of small, dark cocoons of fur about the size of prunes. Silas examined one, pecking it with his beak. He pried one open; it came apart like a cotton ball tearing, the interwoven fibers offering little resistance. Silas jumped back when his beak pulled out an arm bone belonging to a small animal. He shivered, realizing what the cocoons were. Owl pellets. They were packages of regurgitated animals, fur and bone crushed and formed into tiny macabre parcels. Silas wondered if he himself was eaten and spit out as a dark wad, if anyone would be able to ID his remains among all the other owl pellets.

Silas flew from the corner. He was going for the loft doors when Barnes landed between him and the open sky.

"Silas Oaktree. If you didn't come find me, I was going to go find you."

"Why's that?" Silas couldn't help a glance back at the owl pellets. Barnes clucked with his tongue, the closest Silas ever heard him come to a laugh..

"Not to make you dinner, Oaktree. That's for the animals who don't pay their tribute to the forest's Food Stores. Last I checked, the Oaktree account is current. Now, we need to talk about the next Council meeting. It's at the next empty moon; that's coming up soon."

"Oh. Yeah. Of course." Silas exhaled a deep sigh. "I don't know what came over me. Wound up, I guess. Perchman Barnes, I have to tell you something! Fox admitted to —"

"— To kidnapping Spike and Joe Bear, I know."

"How did you ... Did you already —"

"— Already know? Not until half an hour ago." Barnes tutted. "You know as well as I: birds spend more time gossiping than they do flying. By now everyone in the forest probably knows what you told the others at the Chapman feeder."

"Great! Then you know we have to get some big animals together ... take down Fox, shut down the Den. I'm sure the cubs are in there somewhere...."

"Sure? How can you be sure? Oaktree, you know a delegation from the Council and me personally searched the Fox Den. And let's not pretend I don't know you made a search for yourself — unauthorized — last night. It is fortunate you got out unharmed. I hope it taught you a lesson about the dangers of vigilantism...."

Silas sputtered. "That's what you're taking away from this? That sneaking around is dangerous? What about getting the cubs back? Shutting down Fox? Isn't that what matters?"

"It does matter," Barnes said patiently. "All in due course. And that is precisely what we need to discuss: How you WILL accept the nomination for Council, and how you will accept the post when elected to it."

Silas wasn't sure he was hearing Barnes right. Was he guaranteeing him a Perch on Council?

"What are you saying? The election is going to be rigged?"

Barnes twisted his head in a three-sixty, his eyes bugged angrily. "Fix the election?! Oaktree, I am the only one trying to fix democracy in this forest! The broken democracy! How do you think there is even a Forest Council at all? Or, how it can have members as low in the food chain as a mole, or a quail —"

"— Yeah, that worked out —"

"— Or even enforce to the tiniest degree rights for all animals, no matter their size, so they have a chance to make for themselves something that hints at being more than just survival? No, Oaktree, what I'm saying is the system is already rigged. Despite my best efforts, Fox has maneuvered into position to win that fight."

"What do you mean?" Silas asked. "Who would vote for Fox besides his cronies? ... especially knowing now he took the Bears and is killing off Council Members? Everyone loves the cubs. Fox just can't get away with —"

"Oh yes he can. The first lesson you have to learn about politics is, Oaktree, is might is right. Fox has the might. You're taking that Council Perch because this forest needs you. I don't agree with a lot of your methods. You try to do good, so I turn a blind eye most of the time. But you're a vigilante. Lawless. Admittedly, you get some things done. And that's something we need right now. We need to show this forest that right can have might, too."

"What do you mean, Fox has the might? He's got a lot of goons, I know, but he won't win the vote —"

"You're right, he won't. He never planned to run a clean race. He plans to take the forest, starting with wiping out the Council. Two down, if you've taken notice, and we were already one down with Ten Point Tom's untimely death.

"Fox, he's hired on mercenaries. Some human chawbacons with assault rifles and dynamite." Barnes produced two blown up photographs from his pile of papers. The first one was a close-up of a human male, mid-thirties, medium length dark hair, a face with more pronounced features than the average flat human face, but still flat by any self-respecting bird's standards (though, as Barnes had a rather moonish face, Silas chose not to voice this, remembering the owl pellets in the corner). The man was standing in front of a large black truck, with chrome accents.

Silas whistled. "Shiny. I think I've seen that truck before." He couldn't remember where.

Barnes said, "Hayden Townsend. He's the alpha human of the two Fox hired. Human police verified he doesn't perform typical human work roles. Rather, he specializes in drug trafficking, fitting in nicely with Fox's niche —"

Silas cut in. "Fox's Den looks like it has enough drugs to supply the whole state."

Barnes nodded. "Fox is rich in a currency forest animals and humans alike will pay dearly for. Maybe Fox wagered this Hayden Townsend and won, but however he did it, Fox certainly has some form of leverage on

this character, because Fox is calling all the shots. He's been having this human do dirty jobs for him for a while now, keeping his own paws clean.

Silas didn't know what Barnes' intelligence sources were, but he was impressed; he hadn't given Barnes his due. Clearly Barnes took his job as Top Perch seriously. Still, Silas knew Fox's paws were anything but clean. "And the other human?"

Barnes showed Silas the other photograph, another human male, long hair going past his shoulders but balding prominently in the front, making his forehead grotesque. The man had scruffy beard growth around a large tattoo of a cross on his cheek; he wore a leather vest over a bare torso, showing sleeves of tattoos down his arms.

"Buck Lowell. Violent and volatile. He works under the other human, Hayden Townsend. But my sources say he is too unpredictable to be completely controlled, even by his alpha."

Buck Lowell. Zig Chickadee had just told him about a homicidal beaver that destroyed his life in Maine. Hadn't he been a Buck, too? Nature followed patterns.

"What does this have to do with the Council meeting coming up?" Silas asked. "And me being on Council?"

Barnes put the photos back on the stack. "I have reason to believe Fox plans to set a trap for us at the meeting. The meeting is when we are electing the new Council. It's less than a week off, and if he hasn't killed again by then, I think he plans to finish the job then at the empty moon. I'm guessing here, but it stands to reason when he has the forest all gathered in one place, he'll use these human mercenaries, and his other goons. He'll make his move to take over the forest. Fox is going to subjugate the forest by force. If animals don't submit, he'll kill them.

"As far as you go, Oaktree, I need you to stay alive. Your stunts last night at the Fox Den — and who knows what else you've been up to — lead me to conclude you aren't serious about your safety. You welcome danger, even though you have a wife and eggs to think about, not to mention the investigation I charged you with. I need you to go into hiding. I have already instructed Rex Washer to do the same. I need you to lay low until after next week, after the meeting."

"What about you?" Silas asked.

"This forest needs leadership," Barnes said. "I will work with the proper channels, start the process of charging Fox, and whoever works with him —"

"That's not good enough!" Silas burst out. "The proper channels' is exactly where Fox expects to find you, Top Perch Barnes, no offense, and that is where he's going to take you down. If we are going to stop Fox, we need to act — now! Today! We can't wait for him to hatch his plan when he's prepared to take us all down!"

Barnes shook his head, like Silas was being a chick chirping selfishly for attention. The condescension infuriated Silas. Barnes headed him off. "There are ways of handling problems. We cannot shed our rules and processes just because they seem inconvenient — inexpedient, even. I know I asked for your help because you had experience. And you will be helping the forest, if you can cool down that head of yours. Do what's best by hiding out until this issue with Fox is resolved. The forest will need your leadership when the democratic process resumes —"

"No!" Silas was shouting now. "Your 'democratic process' has so far been nailed to a tree, the other mutilated to look like a robin hung in a cage —"

Barnes stretched to his full height. "That is enough!" he boomed, feather moustache blowing. "I will not have —"

The barn shook.

"What was that?"

A tremendous crashing rocked the two birds where they perched.

"It's coming from downstairs," Barnes said. A loud plodding sound moved around the floor below them. Silas heard grunts. He couldn't be sure what was making those sounds; they were coming from whatever was downstairs, or maybe from floorboards under tremendous stress. Barnes hopped over to the hatch in the floor, pulling the thin wooden cover off with his beak. He peered down the hatch.

"I wonder what that is? I just use the bottom floor for storage —"

"Barnes, don't! Get away from there! —"

"Maybe it's —"

Silas flew full speed, launching himself into Barnes full force. It was just enough to throw them aside to avoid a huge paw coming up through the hatch, its three inch long claws raking the floor where Barnes had been standing a moment before. The beast let out a feather-raising, huffing grunt. Silas recognized it.

"Momma Bear?"

Silence. Then, "Silas? No, no ... You shouldn't be here, Silas! Go! It's supposed to be Perchman Barnes!"

"Momma Bear, what are you —"

Barnes cut in, blustering. "What is the meaning of this, Momma Bear? Back down that ladder! I'm flying down. We're going to talk about this!"

Silas' eyes bugged. "Barnes! What are you thinking? Don't —"

Barnes was already down the hatch. Silas could not believe the owl's arrogance, thinking because he operated through diplomacy, everyone else did too. Barnes' voice carried up to the loft, muffled by the floorboards. "Momma Bear, I'm in a meeting right now with Silas Oaktree.... We're discussing a private matter. If you could come back another — Aaaaah!"

Silas had no choice. He flew up, plunging down the hatch to the lower floor. The ground level was dark, the only narrow slats of light coming through gaps in the walls; dust motes floated thickly in the air. In the far corner, past the support posts, Silas saw Barnes backed in a corner. Momma Bear was trying to get around old farm equipment between her and Barnes, making lethal swipes through the air.

Momma Bear roared frustration. She slammed down on the thresher between her and Barnes, a double-paw slam of such force the metal shrieked, denting. Rusted metal snapped and the machine collapsed. Barnes had just enough time to fly as Momma Bear bodyslammed into the wall, shaking the barn. The wall made an ominous crack.

"Up the hatch!" Silas shouted. "Get to the loft!" But Barnes wasn't listening. He flew between the vertical support beams, headed for the other side of the barn. Momma Bear lumbered in pursuit, slamming and ricocheting off the posts, rattling the upper floor. Silas saw her mouth froth with spit from her exertion. She made a straight line for Barnes, running heedlessly into the last support post. It buckled in the middle, the barn creaking like a dying ship. Silas looked up nervously at the tons of lumber above him.

"Barnes! Not another corner! That doesn't work!" Barnes had flown into a corner on the other side, edging against stacks of yellowed paper and dusty jars networked with cobwebs; he pecked against the wall, as if he could somehow work through it. Momma Bear was knocking aside a sea of collectibles.

Silas knew Barnes had less than a minute. Barnes' hoarding had bought the old owl time, but that time was running out. Momma Bear tossed aside a dining room table displaying full skeletons of small animals. They reminded Silas of Fox's skull collection, though Barnes' seemed more scientific in nature than Fox's trophies. Momma Bear's cymbal-sized paw demolished a skyscraper stack of papers, causing Barnes to wince. An old-fashioned loom threaded with a long-abandoned project stood between her and Barnes; her claws went to work breaking through the wooden structure. Silas cupped his wings over his beak, shouting at Barnes.

"Move! Fly! You've got time!"

But Barnes wouldn't fly. The owl watched Momma Bear work closer, his eyes large.

Silas steeled himself, not believing what he was about to do. He flew at Momma Bear.

Silas dove between her paws smashing the loom, dodging the flying splinters of wood. He picked among the spindles the strongest roll of thread he could find, jumping out of the way of a wooden shuttle Momma Bear broke off. Silas took the end of the thread in his mouth and flew. He didn't get far before he was jerked back by tension in the thread, dropping it.

He cursed, flying back to where a wooden spindle held a bobbin of thread through its middle. Silas rammed it. The bobbin was stuck. Years of dust cementing the roll to the loom worked against Silas. He held the end of the thread in his mouth, kicking at the spool — "Mother-plucker!" — kicking it again and again. A cloud of dust filled the barn, choking him, making it hard to see.

Momma Bear roared at either the dust or a splinter, backing off for a moment to huff and paw at her eye. Silas got the second more he needed, and with a final kick, the bobbin loosened on the spindle. He took off again with the thread, now unrolling freely behind him. He flew the length of the barn, turned back and flew back toward Momma Bear. She was almost through the loom now.

Silas flew back this time on the other side of the broken support post, wrapping the thread on the high part of the beam where it had buckled. He dipped under Momma Bear's flank, past her chest and over her shoulder, making another loop around the post. He continued this, weaving and dodging her thrashing limbs. When Silas was running out of the length of thread, he tied it off at the post.

Silas landed back at the spool on the loom, which was now almost completely destroyed. He hefted the spool of the spindle. He put his claws in either side of the spool. It was so heavy he could barely take off. Wings pumping hard under the load, Silas reinforced his weave. Momma Bear was on her back legs, putting the finishing swipes on the loom, exposing Barnes behind it. Silas' breast, lats and feet burned from the strain as he darted around the bear and the post.

He made one last pass, dropping the spool, evading the paws sweeping less than a foot from Barnes, landing beside him.

"We need to fly ... Now!" Momma Bear reached for Barnes. Her claws came within an inch of his beak. Barnes' eyes were squinted shut; he opened them a slit, daring a peek them open to see if he was dead yet. Momma Bear was struggling to push forward, scores of thread webbing her to the post. She pushed forward again. The post groaned.

"Go!" Silas shouted.

As she fought with the threads, Silas pushed Barnes off the shelf. The owl flew reluctantly along the wall, slower than Silas would have liked. They flew for the hatch to the loft. They weren't going to make it.

Momma Bear turned to chase her prey. That did it. The tension on the thread pulled the weakened post. It gave way with a splintering crack. Time stood still as all three looked up at the ceiling, sensing the shift in the barn.

"Down!" Silas slammed his feet down on the top of Barnes' head, turning their trajectory into a dive. "Fold your wings!"

Barnes did, a fraction of a second before they hit the ten gallon bucket, landing inside. Their impact flipped the bucket over as the barn collapsed.

Earth and sky shook. A deafening crash. Then, in an instant, it was over.

Barnes and Silas were squeezed tight together in their hard plastic bunker, Barnes' mass taking most of the space. Silas' beak was pressed into the older bird's feathers; figuring by the smell, it wasn't prime real estate on the owl. He then realized Top Perch Barnes, great leader of the forest, had crapped in their shelter.

"Oh, come on ..." Silas bit back a crop full of reproofs. He opted instead to ask Barnes if he was alright. Barnes seemed not to hear him. His voice echoed in the bucket.

"My papers ..."

Silas closed his eyes. He waited. It could have been minutes or hours when the shifting through the wreckage reached them. Was that Momma Bear, unburied, come to finish the job? The bucket tipped over.

"Over here! They're here!" Silas looked up at a long brown face, a baseball cap between a rack of antlers. He sighed relief.

"John Deere." Silas said. "I don't care what your wife says about your face. It's the most beautiful thing I've ever seen."

John pursed his lips. "You know, I was having a pretty good day. I should flip this bucket back over, pretend I never found a big-mouthed bird in the wreckage.... Who's that with you? — Is that Perchman Barnes? Is he okay?"

"He's fine. Now help me out of this bucket, before our wise leader's poop runs down onto my beak."

Out of the bucket, Barnes straightened his feathers, favoring his tail, which had been partially smashed by the bucket. Within minutes, though, Barnes had fallen back into his old role, taking control of the scene. Animals swarmed the barn — rather, the wreckage of what used to be Forest Council headquarters. Dust settled over the heap of collapsed lumber and roofing. Silas took flight, doing circuits to survey the damage. From the air he could still see the words left for him at Quail's murder, now broken up, jumbled into a heap of red letters and question marks.

Larger animals shifted boards, worked into teams coordinated by Barnes, who pointed here and there with his wings as he gave orders. Bill Foreman, a human hunter Silas knew from the few times they chatted, and his sons Jake and Benson came out of the woods. They put their guns down and helped move debris. They jumped back when they uncovered Momma Bear's head, awake and roaring. The other animals laughed at the humans' reaction, though they themselves had been spooked.

Everyone was focused on Momma Bear when Silas looked back at the edge of the forest. A huge black shape watched the animals work the wreckage. The animal turned its head up to Silas, watching Silas watch him. The figure disappeared back into the forest.

Momma Bear was not severely injured, but she was dazed from the collapse. A length of wood had speared her leg. The rescuers removed the wood and cleaned the wound, causing a roar that threatened to knock Silas out of the sky.

Barnes landed on a rise in the wreckage above Momma Bear, keeping a generous distance. He kept smoothing his moustache against his beak with a wing.

"Momma Bear ... Why? Were you ... were you trying to ... to kill me?"

Silas bused out with a caw of laughter. He couldn't help it. The animals looked at him for an explanation.

"Well, it's obvious she was, isn't it?" Silas gave another short laugh. "I mean, by the looks of it, Momma Bear didn't come to tickle your tummy with her claws."

Despite being saved by him minutes before, Barnes gave Silas an icy stare before turning back to Momma Bear.

"Well, Momma Bear? What do you have to say for yourself? Is Oaktree right? Were you trying to kill me?"

For someone as well studied as Barnes, Silas continued to be astounded how thick he seemed when it came to taking in the reality right in front of his beak. Momma Bear looked at Barnes. She nodded slowly, putting a paw over her face. She wailed.

"Ye-ye-yesss. Perchman Barnes, I'm sorry! I — I —" She broke off, sobbing. Her wails gave Silas the willies. "My cubs — they're ... Fox said if I didn't ... didn't — Oh! This is horrible! — He ... he said if I didn't kill you and — and the other Council Members — I guess it's just Rex Washer now... Fox said he'd kill my cubs! If Silas didn't take down the barn, I don't — I don't know what would have happened!"

Momma Bear was inconsolable. The animals looked around at Silas. Rob Robin sounded unbelieving.

"You're saying Oaktree destroyed the barn? How?" A murmur repeating the question ran through the group. Rose Topbranch glowed as she looked at Silas, presenting him her feathers in an approving display. Colin Squirrel gave Silas an A-OK sign. Cougar was kneading Momma Bear's back, trying to sooth her; she gave Silas a sultry look, purring how impressed she was.

After some minutes they got Momma Bear to tell the story. When she had come into the Forest Council meeting two days ago, she had known as much as the rest of them: that her cubs were missing, nowhere to be found. That night, after Peter Mole was found pinned to the tree, Fox had showed up at Momma Bear's den. He told her he had the cubs, that they were safe ... for now.

Fox said he had a challenge for her that she couldn't pass up. Otherwise, Spike and Joe Bear were dead. He said she had a week to kill the entire Forest Council. He didn't care how she did it. She said she wouldn't do it. But, like any mother bear would, eventually she caved in. Fox had had all the leverage he needed.

The next morning Silas had visited Momma Bear, asking about what happened. Here in her story Momma Bear looked guiltily at Silas, saying repeatedly, "Silas, I'm sorry, Silas! I'm sorry!" They eventually were able to pry her out of her remorse enough to continue.

Momma Bear felt so bad about everything — not just about her cubs, but about Pete Mole. She suspected Fox, but she was more worried about the challenge he had charged her with. After talking with Silas, Momma

Bear had been hopeful. She had been confident Silas would find her cubs before anything happened. So Momma Bear decided to wait a couple days before she did anything. She was scared, having in her whole life she had only killed to eat; never murder.

When Don Quail came up dead, Momma Bear's worries redoubled. She thought Fox was losing patience with her, going ahead with taking out the Council without him. If he didn't need her to do the job, then he didn't need to keep the cubs safe as leverage. That's when Momma Bear heard about the Council searching the Fox Den, finding nothing. That's when she feared the worst: Fox had killed her cubs, deciding she was not up to his challenge. She had retreated to her cave, despondent. When she woke up today from her stupor of sorrow and buckets of fried chicken, Momma Bear had decided she would save her cubs, no matter what.

If there was even the slightest chance that Fox had not done anything yet to them, Momma Bear would do her best to get them back. That's what had brought her to the barn to work on Fox's challenge, and kill Barnes.

Momma Bear lied in the wreckage of the barn, surrounded by an audience of mostly sympathetic animals. Barnes chewed his beak, studying her. Through Momma Bear's sobs, he got her promise she would not try to kill him, Rex Washer, or anyone else who became a Council Member. Barnes looked pointedly at Silas.

Barnes appeared older, more tired, as he surveyed the pile that used to be his loft. He went to work recovering papers. The other animals got busy again, too, sifting the wreckage.

Silas looked down at his feet standing in the debris. Rattling in the wind under his claws were two pictures. A man with dark, glittering eyes stared up at him.

Silas tightened his claws over the photos. He took off for the city.

Chapter Eight: City Birds

Silas flew hard, paying no attention to his surroundings. He was thinking about Fox's challenge, how Fox had found enough leverage on Momma Bear to turn her into a furry four hundred pound tank, used to lay siege on the Forest Council.

But what was really sticking in Silas' crop was how Fox's real challenge was never about him, Silas, at all. Fox had used the murders as a distraction, a sideshow using the weaker Council Members. And it was not so much to distract Silas, but to toy with him. Fox's real focus had been on Momma Bear. Silas hated admitting it, but his ego had taken a hit realizing it was not he, but someone else, that was the center of Fox's focus ... even if that attention was coming from a serial killer.

Maybe Harvey was right. Maybe Silas was only interested when he was the center of attention. Perhaps that was why all the animals had just assumed Silas was running for Forest Council. After all, a Perch on Forest Council would serve to put Silas in the spotlight.

But so what if there was a part of him that needed recognition? He knew there was an equally large part of him that wanted a quiet life — one on the sidelines, where meaning was found in the mundane, comfort in the ritual of surviving through another day. Maybe it was Silas' craving for the quiet life why he found reasons for escape into the city, like he was doing now, where there were less animals, a slower pace of life for birds.

The large southern red oak mushroomed from the front of the lot, and behind it, Grace Winsworth's Victorian. Silas tucked in his wings slightly, angling into a shallow, spiraling dive circling the property.

Right as Silas was about to plummet to Grace's bedroom window, he saw a large dark figure launch out her window, taking off into the sky. Silas veered back, diving into the red oak, hiding among the branches. The bird was large, soot black, with a large hooked beak. Silas stayed unmoving deep in the branches, his heart beating fast.

Tony Crow. What was he doing here? Did he know Silas was still alive? But how did he know Silas visited Grace, and where to find him, deep in Nashville?

Because forest animals talk, Silas answered himself. That's all they do.

Silas needed to see Corey, alert him to the danger. But the driveway was empty, and his car wasn't parked on the street. He had seen Tony fly from outside Grace's bedroom window...

A rising dread crept over Silas. It was a mild March day. If Grace's window was left open for air...

Silas needed to get inside, check on Grace. He bent his legs, which felt rooted by fear into the branch, willing himself to launch into the air. He flew straight for the window; he could hear pigeons cooing in the eaves, but didn't look up. Silas landed on the sill. The window was wide open. Grace lay in her bed, sleeping. Silas felt awash with relief.

"Grace! Grace! I was worried ... I saw Tony Crow here, I didn't know if you were..."

Silas trailed off as he looked around the room. It was wrecked. Pictures that had been on the wall littered the floor smashed in their frames; the lunch tray was tipped over, spilled on the bed; the newspaper was scattered and ripped, strewn on the foot of the bed and floor, Grace's puzzle page half finished. And on the far wall, where the pictures used to hang, were huge red letters, dripping wet:

YICKSL

The C and K were circled.

Brakes squealed outside, a motor killed in the driveway. Corey was back. Silas felt so many emotions at once he didn't know how he felt, but someone in there was fury: fury at Corey for not being here; fury at himself taking precious minutes listening to Momma Bear's story; at Grace for dying (for part of Silas knew she was dead); Tony Crow for what he did; Fox for sending him; Silas was even furious at the pigeons on the roof. He wanted to shriek, to fly after Tony, break his wings in flight and watch him plummet a hundred feet onto asphalt.

But he knew he couldn't do that right yet. He needed a minute with the crime scene before Corey blundered through ruining it. For the first time since the fight with Momma Bear in the barn Silas looked, really looked, to pay attention to his surroundings with his excellent vision. He used his robin-bred ability to see energy distortions.

The magnetic fields coming off Grace were weak, and fading... too faint for any living human. The life support equipment beside her bed was unusually mute. Silas studied the machines, tracing the rubber ropes that usually connected into the wall. The ropes connected into a hub; Silas traced its cord: unplugged.

Silas looked close at the electric rope casing. There were bite marks indenting the material; the pattern showed stress where someone pulled it from the wall. Scratch marks were in the paint below the socket, from Tony's claws, no doubt, as he pried the wire out of the wall.

So Tony had pulled Grace's life support, starving her body of the tools keeping it alive. Silas flitted onto the bed. He hopped around the covers over Grace; her body felt unnaturally stiff, like ground just beginning a thaw. Her eyes were shut, her face peaceful; maybe it was just Silas remembering how she always was, but he thought there was ... not quite a smile, but maybe what was contentment on her face. If it wasn't for her waning energy field, Grace looked like she could still be alive... Silas tilted his head, studying her neck. There was something wet there ...

Silas flew onto her shoulder, leaning in and smelling. Blood. He wedged his body into the crook between her head and shoulder, prying to expose her neck. There was a horrific tearing of flesh; Silas could see sinews and a large artery where the skin was torn away. Surprisingly little blood had run down her neck and under her nightgown.

No blood splatter. So at least Grace had been dead before Crow had torn into her neck, using it as an inkwell for writing the code on the wall.

Silas searched the room for feathers, anything incriminating. He found nothing. Anger flared again in Silas at Corey. The room was wrecked by the killer, but the grime tracked over Grace's covers, the walls, the floor ... that was careless nestkeeping. Then Silas detached his emotions, reexamining the grime, finally considering that maybe it appeared only where the killer had tracked.

Silas followed one trail of grime over the bed that went onto the newspaper still on the bed. It was Grace's puzzle page. Where before he thought it was only partly filled in, Silas saw half was done in dark ink, in Grace's shaky print. He leaned closer. In faint, nearly perfect printing, were pencil marks. The pencil filled in

every block Grace had not, circled every answer Grace hadn't. The pencil circled the letters in the word find ... corrected some of Grace's entries in the crossword ... filled the blanks in the word jumble.

As he studied the page, without consciously thinking to, Silas unscrambled the letters on the wall.

"Sickly."

Talons clicked on the window sill.

"Didn't think you were smart enough to do puzzles." Silas hadn't looked up, but he would recognize the voice of Larry Palomita, the pigeon gang leader, anywhere. Like floodgates lifting, the rage Silas had harnessed, putting it to use studying the crime scene, unleashed all at once through Silas. Larry Palomita was oblivious to Silas' threatening posture, looking around the room.

"Geez, Louise! What happened here? Is that... Is the old lady dead?"

Silas collided with the pigeon, closing the distance with preternatural speed. They hurled off the sill, slamming onto the lawn outside. Silas was on Larry, spearing his beak at his head, Larry barely managing to dodge the blows.

"What the..." Larry blustered. He struggled out from under Silas, flying off around the side of the house, looking to get back to the safety of his flock. Silas flew hot on his tail, Larry plotting an evasive pattern over the pyracantha bushes, around Corey's car, then up to the eaves. Larry's gang cooed in surprise, seeing their leader flying for his life, a robin the source of his distress.

One of the pigeons called out, confused, "Hey, Larry, is that that forest robin? What's he doing —"

The pigeons ducked from their perch on the eave as Larry and Silas flew over, their undersides grazing the city birds' heads.

"Don't just perch there!" Larry wheezed, "Get him!"

Silas chased Larry in circles around the red oak in the front yard. They spun around and around the trunk; Larry flew up, heading for the safety of the branches. The rest of his gang was finally catching on, taking off from the eaves and coming after Silas.

They wove and darted through the maze of branches. Larry landed on a branch, bending his knees to take off again. Silas putting on a burst of speed, launched upward into him. Larry squeaked as the air knocked out of him; he fell, almost hitting a lower branch, pivoting around it and catching air just in time. The other pigeons were in the branches now, too, cooing up a ruckus. Larry's confidence started to reassert. Calling to his gang, he shouted, "Kill this piece of trash!"

Silas had to change course to avoid a pigeon intercepting him. He flew up through the branches, drawing the gang away from Larry, who was directing his goons from the bottommost branch. Silas broke up through the top of the tree, flying straight up, the gang following. Then Silas stopped beating his wings. He went zero gravity before going into freefall. The pigeons under him yelled, surprised as he was suddenly falling back their way. They scattered as he dove through them, wings folded so his body was a red streaking bullet. He shot down through the top of the tree, dodging the branches by pure instinct, ruddering with twitches of body and tail.

Larry, still perched on the bottom branch, shouted to his gang. "You guys catch him?"

In the second before collision, Silas jerked his feet out, hitting Larry like a missile. They slammed onto the ground at the base of the tree. Larry was a crumpled heap. A groan told Silas he was still alive.

The other pigeons landed around Silas, four in total. They circled him. The first to strike was the one behind Silas. He anticipated it, rotating around the peck, clouting the pigeon with his wing. Two flew at him at once. Silas rolled under them, hopping on one's back, biting at his head. The pigeon shrieked, throwing him off. One pigeon locked talons and feathers with Silas. Another edged around his back, trying to take him from behind.

The pigeon wrestling Silas, a big, fat one, said in a deep voice, "Ready to squawk, little guy?"

Silas got out of the pigeon's hold, wrapping his feet around the bird's neck, his wings holding the head in place. "You first." Silas slammed his beak into the big pigeon's skull. There was a cracking sound, and the bird went limp.

The pigeon who had been sneaking around Silas' back suddenly backed up, holding his wings out in supplication. "We're cool, man! We're cool! I don't want to fight!" He flew away.

Silas turned back to Larry, who had gotten up, testing his wings and shaking his head. "You're dead, Oaktree. You were dead the second you flew into me..."

"When did Crow get here? If you told him about Grace, that I come here..."

Larry ignored him, leaping at Silas, looking ready to kill.

Silas side-swiped him with a wing, then his other, then again. Larry was stunned, wobbling to stay on his feet. Then Silas planted his wings on the ground, swinging forward as he lifted his legs, double-kicking Larry square in the breast. Larry sailed back, slamming into the tree trunk.

When you grew up in the Projects of the Daniel Boone Forest, you learned to fight dirty.

Silas pinned Larry Palomita against the trunk. He shouted into the pigeon's dazed face. "When did Crow get here? What did you tell him?"

"Pluck you, Oaktree," Larry said, his eyes half-closed.

"Wrong answer!" Silas used a wing to slam Larry's head into the trunk. "I'll ask you again: What did you tell Tony Crow? How long's he been coming here?" Silas raised his wing, ready to strike Larry again.

Larry choked on his tongue. "Okay! Okay! I saw him go in the old lady's window — That's it, I swear!"

"Don't tell me you didn't talk! Crow is always shaking birds down for information! What did he ask you about me?"

"He didn't talk to none of us today," Larry said. "He came after that fat human parked over there left. Just went in through the window. He was here yesterday, too, after you came. Said he followed you. Said you were a friend. Wanted to know about the old lady ... why you visited her."

Silas looked back at the driveway. Corey had seen the end of the fight. He was getting off his phone, struggling to put it away, work off his safety belt, and open the car door, all at the same time. Silas turned back to Larry.

"What did you tell Crow? Don't lie to me, Palomita..."

Larry coughed and sputtered. "I'm not! I'm telling you! That Crow's one scary bird. That deep voice, you know? Eyes look like they read right through you, into your head, you know? I just told him you knew the human dude, the one that comes to watch the old lady. That you were, like, friends."

“And?”

“That’s it! I swear! Maybe I told him I thought you were a little weird, but that was it. When I asked the crow who he was, he just warned me to not ask questions. I didn’t need telling twice. So when I saw him today, I wasn’t flying over to chitchat, you know? When he flew in, he just said, ‘I’m not here for you pigeons.’ In that creepy booming voice of his, you know? I wasn’t gonna chum up next to him on the branch..”

Silas looked up at the branches. He imagined Crow perched here, dark and forbidding, waiting for Corey’s car to leave the driveway, for Grace would be alone....

Silas looked into Larry’s stupid face, looking for a lie. “Is that all?”

“Yeah!” Larry said, a note of pleading in his voice. “That’s all! Will you let me go?”

Silas nodded his head. “Okay.” He slammed Larry’s head into the tree, knocking the pigeon unconscious.

Corey jogged over. “Silas? What happened? You okay?”

Silas turned on him, suddenly fierce. “Where were you?” he shouted.

“What?” Corey looked nonplussed, not sure why Silas was yelling. “I was getting some lunch. Talking with Jen, making sure where she was...”

Silas felt his temper slowly deflating.

“Corey, I’ve got some bad news. It’s Grace...”

He took him inside, showing Corey what had become of his patient and friend.

* * *

It was later that afternoon, the sun yellowing in the sky. Silas was in his nest, a stack of old newspaper from Grace wedged in a nearby crook where branch met trunk. He was refeathering his nest. Rather than be therapeutic as his wife had suggested, Silas’ anger just ripened from the time to stew in his thoughts.

Silas flew from newspaper to nest and back, tearing strips of paper with a savagery that worried Crystal, who watched, immobile on her roost, as Silas bit the paper into shape, violently pounding the fibers into the weave of the nest. It wasn’t helping Silas’ mood that, in spite of telling Crystal about Grace’s murder by Tony Crow on Fox’s orders, and Fox’s manipulation of Momma Bear, Crystal didn’t have enough sense to keep her big bill shut, micromanaging his work. It was Crystal’s idea to carpet the floor of the nest with the paper, saying it would be softer on the chicks’ feet than the bare twigs. But Silas didn’t see her getting up to help, sitting on top of the eggs like a throne from which she cast orders — “just suggestions,” as Crystal had called them when Silas snapped at her, like he was the one being unreasonable.

Silas chewed a wad of paper, a technique he learned off a traveling chimney swift, softening it into a mushy pulp, spitting it out, mashing it over the floor of the nest. Up until today he had thought he was fighting Fox for the good of all the animals: because Fox was a killer, a force contrary to the good of the forest. But Silas didn’t care about any of that anymore. Moral reasons, fighting for what was good, couldn’t have felt like more of an empty and meaningless excuse than it did to Silas now.

Now he wanted to fight Fox because it would give him pleasure to hurt him, to kill him. Silas was no longer standing against Fox to stop him; rather, Silas stood to match him. As Silas chewed the paper mercilessly, working it over the nest, dutifully ignoring Crystal's observations of which spots he had missed, he schemed.

He would start with Fox's human mercenaries. He didn't know how a bird his size could take down two large hillbillies armed to the teeth, but right now, Silas felt so vicious he thought he could go paw-to-wing against Momma Bear. Besides, how could Silas even feel pain anymore, after seeing Grace's body, lifeless and mutilated?

There was a yip and a growl from the base of the tree. Silas was oblivious, caught up in his work, his circuitous thoughts traced over and over through the same pattern until the anger was worn in a deep groove. The yip came again, and Crystal looked over the side. She chirped a cry of fear. "Silas!" she said.

Silas looked over the side. Fox was pacing back and forth below.

"So it's true!" said Fox. "You're alive!"

Silas was going to plummet down, do to Fox what he had done to Larry Palomita, but worse. Crystal read what Silas was thinking. She hissed, "Don't, Silas! Don't! Please... stay here... for me... the eggs..."

Silas had to hold himself to the nest. "What do you want, Fox? Come to gloat about Grace, you coward?" It disgusted Silas that Fox had sent Tony Crow to kill his friend, not even deigning to do it himself.

Fox seemed not to have heard. "When I heard the talk, rumors in the forest... I thought, they couldn't be true... How? How did you escape the barrel, Oaktree?" Fox sounded incredulous, emphatic in his need for an answer. Silas said nothing, chewing his tongue. Looking at Fox, his narrow, conspiring face; the mouth partially open, demanding an explanation for Silas' escape, the fox's curiosity even now more pressing than any satisfaction from having killed Grace. Silas despised him more for it, his focus on Fox a white-hot beam of hate. Fox twitched his tail.

"How?!" he shrieked, breaking the quiet. "I designed that challenge so it was impossible for you to escape! What happened? Did that flying squirrel Glider loosen your bonds? I will kill him within the hour..." Silas chirped derisively. "It wasn't Glider. I escaped on my own. Your challenge was weak."

Fox yelped, taken aback Silas would insult his challenge. He raised his hackles. "It was not weak! It was inescapable, Oaktree! You were trussed; the barrel was too high to climb out. How did you get out? TELL ME!" His scream sent birds flying out of the trees.

Silas took pleasure in Fox's distress. "Why would I tell you? So you can learn how to kill better? Extorting Momma Bear failed. You heard already: Barnes is alive, so is Washer. Me too. I know about the humans you hired, too."

Fox stopped pacing. He stared at Silas, surprised to hear all Silas knew. He recovered quickly, a sneer twisting his face. "You think that will save anyone, Oaktree?, knowing about the mercenaries? Small comfort, seeing as they have guns. You probably think Washer is safe... that I don't know he's in hiding in the red cedar grove? Did Barnes think a few pungent trees would throw me off?" Fox barked derisively. "Or that Barnes' protection will be enough to save him from my hunters? I own the muscle in this forest, Oaktree. Because I know how to find leverage on anyone... something you can't understand."

“I understand you don’t have leverage on me,” Silas said. “That’s why you tried to kill me in that barrel last night. You’re scared that you’re ridiculous ambitions to take over the forest are about to be squashed by a robin!”

Fox snarled. “Unlikely, Oaktree. That’s something else you don’t understand... thinking I’m doing it just for the power...” He giggled. “Maybe we are alike, in a way. At least as far as living for the challenge. That’s what it’s all about ... Life is all about the challenge —”

“A challenge?” Silas said. “Is that why you sent Crow to kill a defenseless old lady, for the challenge?”

Fox didn’t answer. He stared at Crystal, who was watching him over the nest. It gave Silas a crawling feeling on the back of his neck. “You come after my wife or me, I’ll kill you, Fox.”

Fox blinked, like he was coming back to the present. He refocused on Silas. “I told you, Oaktree. The wager on the challenge. You escaped the berry barrel — I don’t know how, though I will find out. The agreement was I would not touch you, or any of your family ever again. I will not try to hurt you, as much as I would love to see you die.”

“How reassuring,” Silas said sarcastically. “I almost believe you. Too bad you’re a homicidal psychopath I wouldn’t trust if you said your fur was red.”

Fox smiled, or bared his teeth. “You have my word, Oaktree. You, and Crystal, and your deformed little eggs — all safe from me. You could dance on my teeth, and I wouldn’t bite the life out of you.”

Silas considered Fox. Could he trust what he was saying? Not a chance. Fox had been killing an animal a day for the last three days; it hadn’t even been twenty four hours since Fox had had Silas tied and tried murdering him. “What about the Council?” Silas asked. “Will you call off your mercenaries? You can stop this, you know.” Silas didn’t like how magnanimous he was sounding to his own ears. He seemed to be offering a truce to Fox — but it was too late for that. As far as Silas was concerned, Fox had sealed his fate with everything he had done since the Forest Council meeting.

Fox coming here stirred up a lot in Silas. But like with Grace’s murder scene, he needed to master himself, to work on what he could control while he still had a chance. Fox had showed his hand: his human hunters knew where raccoon Council Member Rex Washer was hiding; Silas would bet his brightest feathers they were on their way to take him out now. Silas needed to find Mitch Birdsly, to get going, now.

Still, there was always time to incense Fox.

“Great,” Silas said. “If I’m so immune, then you won’t mind my doing this.” Silas swooped out the nest, dive bombing Fox’s head. He pulled up before he was in jaw’s reach, dumping a wet load of poop on Fox’s head. Fox howled displeasure, Silas taking off to find Mitch, feeling a peevish satisfaction from his stunt.

A few minutes later he landed in Mitch’s tree, a handsome sassafrass. Mitch was settling in for the evening, sharing a late grass seed dinner with a pretty female finch.

“Sorry to interrupt,” Silas said. The finches looked up. “Mitch, I need to borrow you.”

“This better be good, Silas. I had a raspberry saved for dessert.”

Mitch and Silas flew hard. Silas led them toward the interstate exit, where it met a county road. “Sorry about taking you away from your date. That was a nice looking girl sharing your branch.”

“Don’t worry about it,” Mitch said. “She was too high maintenance for me anyway. Always preening, making me feel self-conscious of my own grooming. What is it we’re doing?”

Silas told him about the two human mercenaries, how Fox had hired them to kill off the rest of the Council, and how he had a strong feeling they were out for Rex Washer right now. “Barnes hid him in the red cedar grove. He didn’t even tell me where Washer was, which I guess makes sense, though he wanted me to go into hiding too. Lot of good it would have done: Fox came to my nest just now, told me where Washer was. He knows Barnes’ secrets.”

“So what are we going to do about it? Get Rex out of there before the hunters get to him?”

“Yes,” Silas said. “That, and put an end to these mercenaries. Now.”

Mitch nodded. He didn’t say anything. He didn’t need to. Mitch and Silas both grew up in the Projects. They understood something about the hard side of life the animals of the high-resource state forest they lived in now never would: When a conflict came up between you and another, you had to put them down before they put you down. That was nature. Silas wished he could have told Zig Chickadee that years ago, before he had lost everything to not taking action.

They flew along the country road, using a straight trajectory to overtake the vehicles moving below, which had to wend and curve around the bends in the road. They were looking for the truck Silas had seen in Barnes’ photos of the two mercenaries; he described the black and chrome truck, wishing he had not forgotten the pictures in Grace’s bedroom, so Mitch could have a better idea of what he was looking out for.

“There’s a road up ahead. Cuts into the forest,” Mitch shouted over the wind. “Runs closest to the cedar grove than any other road I know of. Let’s check there.” The wind was picking up, a negative ionization in the air alerting them rain would start soon, even though the falling sun still glowed unimpeded by clouds.

They traced over the road going through the forest. The paving turned to dirt, narrow and treacherous in parts, hugging the cliffs. Still, no sign of the truck. “Don’t know if they’re here, Silas,” Mitch said. “The road runs out soon. The grove is not a minute’s flight past that.”

“Then we’ll circle back,” Silas said, beginning to bank his wings, ready to retrace the roads until they found the truck.

Then they saw it. Pulling into the muddy clearing where the road ended, the brake lights of a large pickup lit up, illuminating human skull decals over the lights.

Mitch whistled. “I didn’t see the pictures, but what would you bet —”

“It’s them, alright.” They flew low, landing unseen in a tree overlooking the truck. They were close, but unnoticeable to dull human senses, especially if those humans weren’t looking for two small birds. Down in the trees it was already dark. The doors of the truck cab opened. The two mercenaries got out.

The man from the passenger side spoke. Silas recognized him as the one called Buck Lowell. “You said one thousand apiece for killing this coon? Why would anyone pay that much? Fur ain’t worth nuthin’.”

The driver came around the back of the truck, opening the tailgate, pulling out two rifles, passing one to Buck. Silas recognized him as Hayden Townsend, the leader. “We aren’t killing for its fur. It’s an animal that’s paying. A fox. I guess this raccoon is some kind of animal politician.”

“An animal... what?” Buck rasped a laugh, quickly turning into a cough. He spit on the ground. “I just about heard it all! An animal politician... This fox... Is it The Fox? One sells you those drugs?”

The men were silhouettes in the growing dark. A lighter illuminated Hayden's face, nodding a yes while lighting a cigarette. Mitch looked over at Silas, looking for his friend's reaction. Silas ruffled his feathers, incensed seeing the fire. He hated fire. Hayden exhaled smoke.

"That's the one. He's loaded. I don't think I know a human with as much money as that fox's got. We do this job right, there'll be more coming. I'm sure of it. He's planning something. Rumor is he's hired out a whole engineering firm — for who knows what. A war against other animals in the woods, I think." Hayden planted the cigarette in his mouth, reaching into the bed for something that made metallic clanging sounds as he wrestled it out. "Help me with this cage."

Buck came over. They pulled a large metal trap out, setting it on the ground. "What the hell's this for? We're killing the coon, ain't we?"

"Not until we get back to Fox. I didn't come all the way out here to bag the wrong one. They all look alike. With ten grand on the line, I'm not taking that risk. No raccoon we catch is going to say he's Rex Washer — that's the one we're getting paid for. He'll just say he's someone else, even if we've got the right one."

Buck stared fixedly at his partner. "Ten grand? You said two — thousand for me, thousand for you...."

Hayden took a drag, acting casual. "Did I say ten? No, one each, like I said." Buck glared, studying the outline of Hayden in the dark.

"If it's ten, I'm getting five of that, Townsend...."

They argued about it for a while, Hayden finally mollifying Buck, saying they'd settle it when they got to Fox — that without the raccoon, they didn't get anything. They grabbed the cage, their rifles in hand. Buck said, "Sounds like we should put a bullet in the fox. Find his cash, if he's as rich as you say."

"We try that," Hayden said, "we wouldn't be getting out of the woods alive. Guns or not, every damn beast in that woods is working for him."

Buck patted his rifle, "Don't matter none, when you got Mr. Smith, and Mr. Wesson with you."

Their voices grew distant in the woods. Mitch turned to Silas. "They're so loud, Rex will know they're coming a mile off."

Silas wasn't so sure. Rex had been on the Council for a while now, and had been living off Council rations and protection; Silas thought Washer's survival instincts were dulled. "Let's make sure. If they cage Rex, we should be ready."

The two birds flew down to the truck. "You're the expert here, Mitch. See what you can do. I'm going back down the road a ways. See what I can get done there. I don't know how long those humans will be; let's see how fast we can get ready." Mitch waved a wing distractedly, already perched on the half rolled-down window to the cab, looking around.

Silas flew back to the part of the road hugging the cliff. He looked over the side, noting the twenty foot plummet into the forest, the damp soil under his feet; he looked where the dirt road moved around the rock wall of the cliff. Loose stones lay at the base. A light rain started as Silas flew into the forest. He asked around the forest, looking for nocturnal creatures big enough for the job he needed doing.

A lot of the animals recognized him. A coyote tried to catch him in conversation, talk about the barn he heard rumors Silas destroyed. Silas begged him off, asked a disinterested wolf pack, then an elk for help. He even came across Bud Turkey sleeping, who seemed game to help, until his wife Janine shut him down, telling

Silas thanks, but no thanks with a waspish expression. Then Silas came across a small bevy of deer, two adults and two fauns. He woke them up, apologizing. They just stared at him as he pleaded for their help, their dull, glassy eyes showing no indication of sympathy. Then their nostrils flared, their ears twitching, as a large, plodding, huffing sound neared. A deep voice rumbled through the clearing, scaring the deer to their feet, their eyes now wild with fear.

“They’ll help you, Silas Oaktree, if they know what’s good for them.”

A massive black bear, even larger than Momma Bear, came into view. A musky scent rolled off him, reminiscent of a landfill; the smell made Silas’ head swim.

“Thanks, uh, Mister...” Silas said, alarmed, but relieved, as he had been getting desperate for help.

“Poppa Bear. And I know who you are, Silas Oaktree. Even for a loner like me, news that you crashed a whole barn down on my wife gets around.”

Silas was suddenly scared. So Poppa Bear wasn’t there to help at all, but to settle a score... Silas was running out of time; he needed to get back to the truck. The last thing he needed was the biggest bear he had ever seen out to kill him too. Poppa Bear was on the same wavelength.

“I’m not here to come after you, if that’s what you’re thinking. Actually, in a way, I should be thanking you.” At Silas’ silence, Poppa Bear added, “If you hadn’t created that scene today with my wife and the barn, I wouldn’t have found out about my cubs being taken — Wouldn’t have made it back to do something about it. From what I hear, you’re the only animal in this forest who gets things done. The rest of these animals,” Poppa Bear looked at the deer, who were huddled together, shaking against the trees of their copse, which effectively pinned them in swatting range of the bear. “The rest of these animals... not worth their weight in droppings.”

Silas exhaled, relieved. “Thanks, Poppa Bear. The thing is, I need something done... There isn’t much time. There’s these human hunters...” The family of deer’s eyes went wider at hearing this. “And I need some heavy rocks moved...”

Poppa Bear nodded his head, considering. “Better get started, then. Show us the way. One with a deer path.” He lifted a paw, flexing his claws. “Because I’m sure our friends here are volunteering their help.”

It looked like the last thing the deer wanted, but the adults nodded, running in front of Poppa Bear, whose loping run kept a devil’s pace at their hooves, herding them where Silas flew, back along the curve against the cliff.

Silas directed the deer to move the stone into the road. They looked reluctant, but furtive glances back at Poppa Bear decided them, and they got to work. They shoved rock and gravel over the dirt, graded toward the edge of the precipice. Silas put Poppa Bear to work rutting the dirt road in front of the constructing stone ramp, claws loosening and churning the earth to better imbibe the rain, which was falling heavier.

Silas watched on as the larger animals worked; the fauns looked to be having fun, even if their parents showed duress at the forced labor. After a half hour, the urgency to get back to Mitch and the truck grew too pressing. “That will have to do,” he said. He thanked the deer family, who looked less than sanguine in spite of Silas’ appreciation. The deer retreated back to their copse, leaving Poppa Bear and Silas.

“You’ve got to get back,” said Poppa Bear.

Silas nodded. “Thanks. Really.”

The black bear waved it away. “No. I’ll be the one thanking you, once you help me get my cubs back. They are... They’re still alive, aren’t they?”

“I think so.” That was all the comfort Silas could offer; he actually didn’t like the odds, especially since Momma Bear’s public failure to kill Barnes. “Tomorrow, where can I find you? We will go for them then. I’m sorry, but right now, I need to —”

“Go. Go,” Poppa Bear said. He shouted where they would meet tomorrow as Silas darted through the rain, back to Mitch. Rain was hammering down now, roaring in his ears as drops smacked back, beak, and wings. A dark mass nearly collided with him in the sky.

“Thought you weren’t coming back!” Mitch shouted over the rain. “Come on, they already have Washer! The truck is starting to leave!”

They swooped toward the mud clearing. The rumble of the black pickup’s motor mixed with the sound of the rain; headlights cut beams through the dark as the wheels spit mud, circling around to head back down the road.

“He drives like a madman!” Silas shouted. Every sound was drowned in the din of rain and revving truck. He and Mitch pumped their wings, barely closing the distance with the truck speeding back down the dirt road. They could hear the rattling of the cage in the back as it whipped around the bed, tossed around by the speeding truck. They landed in the back.

Rex Washer was gripping the bars of his cage, screaming and whinnying as the cage lashed around. “Who is that? Who —”

“Rex, it’s us! It’s Silas —” Silas had to leap out of the way as the truck jerked, the cage narrowly missing crushing Silas against the wheel well. Mitch gripped on the front of Rex’s cage shouting in Rex’s face to be heard.

“Can you get out? Can you open it?”

Rex whimpered. “I — I don’t know. I don’t see —”

Mitch cut through him. “Shut up, and get those fingers working! There’s the latch! Come on!” Rex started working on the latch, his fingers shaking, slipping around the wet metal. Another jerk of the truck threw Mitch off the cage, landing beside Silas. “I sure hope you were cooking up something just now!” Mitch said. “Because we’re running out of time!”

“I know!” Silas shouted back. They both leaped as the rifles slid towards them. “I built a ramp up ahead that goes off the cliff.”

Mitch stared at him. “A ramp?” He nodded his head, approving. “Silas Oaktree, you son of a grub.... Just when I think I’ve learned all your tricks —” They launched sideways as Rex’s cage came rolling forward.

Silas saw Rex’s lack of progress on the latch. “He’s not going to get it!” He indicated the rope looped through the cage, loosely tying it to a tie-down near the cab. “We’ve got to cut it!”

“What’s that going to —” Mitch began, when a light shined on them, blinding them. A flashlight was trained on them from inside the cab. The passenger window was rolling down, Buck Lowell’s long stringy hair whipping around his face as he stuck out the window, his body squirming to get into the back of the truck.

“Townsend don’t stop for nobody! — But it won’t stop me!” Buck shouted, almost in the bed.

“The rope, then,” Mitch said, decided, feeding a length through the bars to Washer. “Chew!”

“He’s not going to get it! Here,” Silas said, hopping on top of one of the rifles. Mitch started asking what Silas was doing, then understood. He ruffled his feathers. “You son of a grub...” Mitch helped Silas pry back the hammer. They pulled a lead of rope taught over the end of the barrel.

“What do we have here?” Buck crowed. He was climbing into the bed. “Two little birdies!”

Silas tried squeezing the trigger with both claws. It didn’t work. Then he tried wedging his beak into the trigger. “It won’t budge!” Mitch flew over, trying to help. The trigger stayed immobile.

Buck laughed, coughing like a madman. “Townsend! Check this out! The birds are trying to use my gun! Got to get the safety first. I’ll show you how you do it... when I use it on ya.” He reached for the birds. The truck lurched through a dip in the road. Buck was thrown back.

“Thanks for the tip,” Silas said. Mitch jumped on the safety button, depressing it. Then he retightened the rope over the end of the gun. “Now!”

Silas squeezed his eyes shut, baring down on the trigger with all his might. A bang filled the cab. Buck screamed.

“My foot!” He was swearing, landing heavily in the bed. “They shot me!”

Silas tried tugging the rope, but it was stuck under Buck’s weight. “We’ve got to go!”

Mitch flew at Buck’s face, pecking his eyes. Buck squirmed, moving off the rope. He swatted Mitch off, knocking him to the other side of the bed, stunning him. Rex was screaming, delirious, having long since stopped working to free himself. Silas propped Mitch up, helping him to his feet.

“I know we’ve got to go,” Mitch said. “While you were gone, I put all their gun ammo under the hood of their truck.”

Silas nodded. “Yeah, we got to —” Then Mitch’s words registered. He looked at the goldfinch, shocked. “Did you just say ...”

Mitch nodded. “Shotgun shells, bullets, gunpowder packs ... you name it. All of it.” A wild delight shone in his eyes. “We can get that rope airbourne, if we both carry it.”

They each took the rope, broken free from the truck by the bullet, flying it into the air. It was thin, but heavy, soaked with the rain. Their wings strained, beaks biting into the fibers. They were hardly out of the bed with it, and it felt to Silas like he’d been marathon flying for days. Looking forward, he saw a dark break in the road. There was a wedge of stones, then just air ...

He was too out of breath to shout, but Mitch saw it, too. They pushed with their wings harder than they had ever done, Silas’ joints and breast screaming protest. Finally, they came upon the rock bluff, skimming its face with the tips of their wings.

The truck hit the mud pit Poppa Bear had dug. It fishtailed, the wheels spinning without grip on the road. The speeding truck’s momentum carried it up the rock ramp. In the second before it went airborne, Silas and Mitch caught the rope on a jutting formation in the rock face, twisting it around once, twice, tying it off.

The cage smashed against the back of the tailgate, Rex screaming, as the truck sailed off the road, over the bank. The truck was still in the air, the human called Buck Lowell looking back at them, pressed against the cab, when the ammunition went off. The bangs and flashes lit up the sky like a flare, the ammunition pop-

pop-popping under the hood. The truck crashed down the bank, rolling over, before smashing to an instant stop against a large tree. There was a moment of quiet. After a delay, the truck exploded.

Silas and Mitch watched the mushrooming fireball from their perch on the cliff. The cage dangled on the end of the rope, bumping on the rock wall.

They landed on Washer's cage, peering in. Rex was inside, balled on the bottom, emitting a low keening.

"You alright, there, Mr. Council Member?" Mitch asked. The raccoon squeaked something. He would be fine.

Silas and Mitch perched there, rain glancing off their feathers as they took in the quiet, punctuated only by the raccoon's groans.

Then, they started to laugh. When they started, it was hard to stop. Soon they were doubled up against each other, chirping, laughing their beaks off.

They had done it.

Chapter Nine: Back to the Fox Den

Breakfast at the feeder the next morning was a mob scene. Animals crowded Corey Chapman's deck, jostling for space on the railing, deck, and yard surrounding. Ralph had escaped his leash next door and joined the group by the rail; Maybee watched from the other side of the sliding glass, while Corey's girlfriend Jenny shouted from the upstairs bedroom for the animals to shut up so she could sleep; they all roundly ignored her. John Deer was there wearing his baseball cap, accompanied by his family, whose droppings made drumming sounds as they landed on the boards of the deck.

Missing from the crowd was Corey, who Silas had watched leave the house before sun up, looking like he had not slept at all the night before. Silas too hadn't slept, too revved up from his adventure with Mitch, his mind racing thoughts about how things might end today. Thinking all night had accomplished nothing except tally along his building exhaustion from days without sleep.

All the birds were there on the deck, Mack Starling leading the questions prompting Mitch's story, whose breast was visibly puffed out, basking in the limelight as he recounted their stunt with the truck. The animals were rapt as Mitch told about coming upon the large pickup, the two "large and scary" human hunters, how Mitch rigged the truck to explode with ammunition.

"I didn't know what Silas was off doing," Mitch said, gesturing at his friend. "But knowing him, I was sure he was hatching something crazy."

The animals laughed appreciatively, looking over to Silas, who was at the feeder, eating very little. He enjoyed seeing Mitch having a time of it telling the story, but for Silas, the heady rush of last night had dimmed into lethargy. He wanted to sleep, but a nervous energy innervated him.

Silas was meeting Poppa Bear mid-morning. They were going to storm the Fox Den today, put an end to Fox like Silas and Mitch had done to the human mercenaries the night before. They would find the cubs, take out Fox before he could hurt anyone else. Silas was fixed on Fox, his mouth actually watering as he contemplated the taste of his savage brand of justice.

Colin Nutter nudged Silas appreciatively, bringing him back from his reverie. Mitch had gotten to the part where they had used the rifle to shoot the rope. Flash Goldplume let out a whistle like a boiling kettle. "Wow, Silas! You shot the human? Actually shot him, with a gun?" The animals murmured their amazement. Rob Robin, who was trying his best to look unimpressed, asked where Rex Washer was now, half-insinuating Silas and Mitch's efforts might have failed to save their Council Member. Harry Perloo, the rabbit, brushed aside Rob's comment, saying he had seen Washer hours ago, limping off to a tree to sleep. Robert Kat the bobcat corroborated what Harry said, licking his chops, staring hungrily at the rabbit. Even Bud Turkey was there, having somehow escaped his wife long enough to join the group for breakfast.

"Just you wait until you hear what they did next," he said, presaging for the crowd, "Went and lit up the whole forest, not far from my roost. Thought the world was coming to the end, like Thanksgiving came early."

"What? What happened?" Ralph asked, clearly enjoying being part of the group for a change, rather than be roped to his doghouse. "What did you guys do?"

Mitch was finishing up the story, making some generous additions to the events, the long-haired Buck Lowell a more challenging and cunning villain than Silas remembered; the size of the truck explosion, too, was amplified, the cause even more certainly because of Mitch planting the ammunition.

Silas got ready to leave, making his excuses. Animals called to him, imploring him to stay; but with Mitch to focus their attentions, to continue delivering the headliner bringing excitement to their day, most of the animals did not give him too much grief for leaving.

Only Sadie the squirrel pulled Silas aside to condole with him about Grace, having heard she died from Crystal. She wanted to talk to Silas about Crystal, to tell him Crystal needed Silas' support, especially with the eggs incubating. Sadie was talking gently, the voice of concerned reason. This only served to annoy Silas, who didn't need a lecture, especially from a bucktoothed rodent... a rodent who knew nothing of the pressure he was going through, the weight of the forest's future carried by his wings alone.

Flash Goldplume rescued Silas from Sadie, herding him away with a large white wing. But he, too, had an agenda; Flash wanted to talk more about Silas' accomplishments, the barn and the mercenaries, rumors about taking on a whole flock of pigeons by himself.... Silas tried fending off Flash's fanboyish questions, saying they could talk later, but to no avail. It wasn't until a large shadow flew overhead that Silas found his break.

Hawk Cooper had come to escort Silas to the Bear Cave. As they flew to the cave, Silas asked Cooper how he knew Silas and Poppa Bear had planned meeting there.

"Hell, Oaktree," Cooper drawled, "You think you're the only one smart enough to know Poppa Bear's back in the woods? Barnes finds out fast, Oaktree. He's at the cave. It's his temporary headquarters, while the barn you destroyed," Cooper paused, letting his blame carry across, "is rebuilt. We also know you're gunning to be a right little action hero, fixed on storming the Fox Den. You don't have the authority, Oaktree."

Silas gave Barnes points for forgiveness, rooming in Momma Bear's cave a night after she tried killing him. He imagined Barnes trying to roost, one bloodshot eye open as Momma Bear rolled around snoring in her sleep. "I'm not holding my breath for the Council anymore, Cooper. Poppa Bear and I — Momma Bear, every other animal who's tired of being scared, waiting for their turn to be killed off by Fox — we're going to the Den today. We're going to fight ... take Fox out. You and Barnes: you can be with us, or stay out of our way."

"Excuse me?" said Cooper, trying to sound tough. He added, "Remember who you're talking to, Oaktree," but stayed quiet the rest of the way to the cave.

They went to land in the cave, having to circle around looking for a spot to land. Every bit of space in the cave was occupied: Poppa Bear lay on one side, looking entitled as Momma Bear was just outside the entrance, using her mouth to pull out buckets of fried chicken from a large plastic bag, her expression slavish adoration, a little flustered, as Poppa Bear accepted a bucket without thanks; Barnes was perched in the middle of the cave, atop a stack of papers, amid a sea of his memos, notebooks, and varying jars of inks and water. Barnes winced along with Silas and Cooper as they watched Poppa Bear crunch through chicken bones.

Poppa Bear nodded to Silas. "I'll be ready to go, right after I eat. We'll be ready," he amended, looking at Momma Bear. She said nothing, but didn't disagree. Of anyone there, she was ready to find her cubs more than anyone. Silas turned to Barnes.

“If you’re looking to stop us —”

Barnes forestalled him with a wing. “Silas, we not going to —”

“— Because I don’t care what you or Cooper says, we’re —”

“Oaktree!” Barnes boomed. “We’re not going to stop you. We’re going with you.”

“— Good for you,” Silas said sarcastically, not hearing, “but lot of luck trying to get in my —” He paused. “Wait, what?”

Barnes sighed. “I said we’re going with you, Oaktree. After having some time to consider...” Barnes looked around at his possessions, only part of which fit in the cave so full of bear. “I decided, especially after my visit with Council Member Washer this morning, that the time has come to take the Fox Den, bring in Fox —”

“Kill Fox,” Silas corrected, not caring how harsh he sounded. Barnes said nothing, considering him.

Finally Barnes said, “That is between you, and the Bears. Normally, such vigilantism in my forest — But under the circumstances ...” He trailed off.

Silas marveled. If even Top Perch Barnes had run out of things to say... If that wasn’t a sign it was time to act, he did not know what was.

They set to planning the raid. Barnes called on the birds to alert everyone they could muster, any animal willing to fight against Fox and his considerable number of followers. The message networked from the birds to other birds, then to the other animals. Within the hour a gathering of animals nearly as large as what was at the Forest Council meeting was milling in the grounds around the Bear Cave.

Barnes and Cooper tried being heard, to discuss tactics with the crowd, but their cries to be heard were lost in the cacophony of disorganized animals. Some of the animals might have thought Barnes was instructing them to march, or maybe they were just impatient to get going, because a procession started in the direction of the Fox Den.

Silas decided to ride on the back of Momma Bear, gripping her fur in his talons as she trundled forward. The forest sloped downward, growing more dense as they moved deeper and deeper in the forest. Birds and beasts who chose not to fight watched from the trees as the army moved around them. After a couple miles the trees grew in around them, mostly bare pines with sharp branches, like those where Harvey and Silas had hid before approaching the Den. Silas looked around. He didn’t see Harvey. Nor had Silas expected him to join in the battle. Despite knowing his brother’s nature, he felt anger spike up in him. Rational or not, Silas held an expectation for the role his older brother was supposed to fill, and was hurt yet again when his expectation, based on a desire rather than reality, wasn’t met.

Silas refocused. He told Momma Bear to head for the underground level, describing the entrance on the other side of the Den. Silas suspected that the cubs might have be hidden there, though he hadn’t found anything when he explored it.

He flitted onto Poppa Bear’s head. “Something on your mind? Besides me?” Silas asked.

Poppa Bear groaned. “Matter of fact I do. When this thing breaks out, do you think this Fox is going to stick around?” He had voiced what Silas had been suspecting.

“Unlikely,” Silas said. “Fox is a schemer. Never takes a fight without an unfair advantage. He’s going to let us fight it out with his goons, then run, or hide behind your cubs. Wherever he thinks he has leverage... that’s where he’ll be.”

“You think he’ll lead us to the cubs?”

“I think so.” Poppa Bear nodded, and Silas had to dig in with his talons to save himself from falling off.

“You stick with me when it starts,” Poppa Bear said. “Help me find Fox, corner him. Then I’ll take it from there.”

They moved through the trees, the rest of the animals following. Around a few dense clusters of dead pines, they entered the clearing. The Fox Den stretched before them. A large line of beasts of all kinds stood before them, waiting. Silas saw the workers there from the night before last. There were also many, many more animals, large ones clearly for hire: Silas recognized the deer parents he used to move the stones on the road; there was a pack of wolves; a black bear, smaller than Poppa Bear that Silas didn’t recognize; a mountain lion; a few elk; three male humans with tattoos and leather, holding a hodgepodge of rifles. Fox stood in the center, in the front. He saw Silas.

“You’ve come back. I’m so thrilled.” Fox bared his teeth. “Get them!” he shouted. The animals behind him ran forward, engaging Silas’ group.

Animals clashed into each other, the Fox Den filling with the sounds of lashing claws and teeth. The report from the human’s rifles cracked through the clearing, cutting down a wolf before Alf Wolf’s pack circled the humans, half the pack surprising them from behind; the wolves lunged, the rifles’ shots were replaced with human screams.

One bullet had hit Poppa Bear in his flank. Silas flew to a nearby branch as the bear tossed his head, mouth frothing in rage. “Poppa Bear! You okay?”

“I’m fine,” Poppa Bear roared, “Just really pissed off!” He charged into the battle, raising to his full and considerable height on his back paws, clashing with the black bear hired by Fox. His rage at being shot made Poppa Bear an even more terrible opponent; in seconds the opposing bear succumbed to the ferocious onslaught, retreating in a limping run into the forest.

Silas flew, watching the battle raging on the forest floor below. It was joined by a battle in the trees, climbers fighting it out tree by tree; Colin Squirrel and Chit Red Squirrel dueled the opossum Dell Henson; Henrietta Fields, the mouse mother, fought the bat who had tied Silas, scrambling nimbly around the bat as he screeched to locate her, missing Henrietta as he tried encircling her in his leathery wings.

High in the sky Hawk Cooper locked talons with another bird of prey, free-falling towards the ground, breaking apart at the last moment before hitting the ground, again gaining altitude to continue the fight. Silas noted how hawks did this as a courting ritual; he knew Patrolbird Cooper was fighting, but Silas filed away the scene in his memory, ready to bring it up to taunt Cooper the soonest chance he got.

Silas flew through the air battle, trying to avoid engaging in the fight directly. His one objective was to find Fox, who he had lost from view. He was searching the embattled menagerie for Fox when he hit into a brown feathery wall. A brown owl with mean eyes was coming around to hit Silas again.

“Where are you going, punk?” said the owl. “I remember you from before.... You’re not getting away this time!” He launched at Silas, who didn’t have enough lift to get away in time. The second before the owl collided with Silas, an obese turkey sailed sidelong at the brown owl, slamming him with her expansive butterball breast. The brown owl crumpled, plummeting to earth. “And stay down!” the turkey snarled.

Silas blinked. “Janine?” It was Janine Turkey, Bud Turkey’s henpecking wife. Silas was surprised she was here. “Tha-thanks!”

Janine eyed Silas coolly, her red fleshy wattle wobbling under her beak. “Don’t you have a fox to find? I want this tussle over so I can get my husband home!” She flew off, dive-bombing into a group of unfortunate enemy birds.

Silas hammered his wings through the air, getting lift, dodging the battling birds and bats around him. He scanned the Fox Den floor. Cougar Tanner-Smith was working over the father deer that had worked on the ramp. “Stay still, sweetheart. This will be over soon,” she purred, trying to land a paw on his hindquarters.

“Cougar, duck!” Silas shouted. She did, just in time, as a bee’s nest hurtled through the air, past where her head had been a moment before. It broke open, the swarm of angry bees attacking the animals. The deer saw his opportunity, bucking out at Cougar. He hit her with his hooves. She tumbled to the ground, the deer moving forward to finish the job. Silas swooped at the swarm of bees, catching one in his beak. He flew onto the deer’s head, shoving his beak in the deer’s ear, planting the bee inside. “Thanks for your help last night. Really appreciate it,” Silas said, flying off. The deer howled and bucked as the bee stung inside his head.

Barrels were rolling into the ranks of animals. One hit into Momma Bear as she was edging along the fight, heading towards the underground entrance. It broke open, scalding Crazy Berries coating her fur. She roared in pain at the burns, her cry so terrible it shook Silas to the hollow quills of his feathers. More barrels were hurtling through the crowd, aimed at the Forest Council’s army.

A grackle darted for Silas, its petulant eyes locked on him. They collided in midair, grappling beaks. The grackle’s suddenly broke off, a ball of yellow feathers latched on the bird’s back. It was Mitch. He called in a would-be casual voice to Silas, air wrestling the grackle, “Taking out those berry barrels would be nice.”

“On it!” Silas said. He flew for the production line of the Den. Even in the daylight the long fire pit blazed, the industrial equipment humming along. The cauldrons of berries moved along the cable track over the fire to the end of the line. Silas remembered being dragged past the barrels here, thrown into a waiting barrel by the flying squirrel Joshua Glider, waiting to be buried alive in molten berries.

A skunk and a badger worked on putting a lid on the filled barrels, sending the barrel down a roller track to an elk, who used his powerful antler rack to hurl the barrels at Silas’ allies. Silas flew a circle, analyzing the scenario. Not a chance he could stop the elk for long, or the skunk and badger prepping the barrels.... He traced the production line, the berry receiving area, the cauldrons, the overhead track and unloading system.... Then he saw it. By the barrels receiving the hot berry mixture, at the end of the fire pit, was a two-story metal scaffold. On top were buttons and bulbous status lights. A large bullfrog was up there, working a control switch with a pudgy hand.

Silas landed behind the frog. “I wished it wasn’t you I saw up here.” The bullfrog didn’t turn around just yet, pressing in a green button. A cauldron emptied into a barrel below. He spoke in a low, reverberating voice.

“My friend Silas.” He turned to meet Silas, his wide, ugly face staring. “Why does fate always conspire we meet at opposite banks of the creek?”

Silas shook his head sadly at his old acquaintance. “I think we choose which bank we’re on, Croak. Stop this.”

“You know we’re both too stubborn for that.” The frog raised his posture, nostrils flaring, the clear nictitating membrane sliding over his eyes. Silas was ready for what he knew was coming.

Croak leaped at Silas; the frog’s hind legs straightened, launching the bullfrog’s fat lumpy mass straight at him. Despite his anticipation, Silas was too slow. Croak’s big mouth closed around half Silas’ body. The frog jumped back, tossing Silas behind him. Silas chirped as he hit a rail support, knocking the wind out of him.

Croak made another ballistic lunge. This time Silas was ready, rolling aside, hopping on the frog's back, going at his eyes with his beak. Croak closed his eyes, protecting them in his thick hide. He shouldered Silas off his back, shot out his tongue, lashing it Silas' neck. He reeled Silas in, punching him in the face. Silas staggered back, his feet gripping the edge of the platform; Silas flapped his wings to keep from falling over the edge. Croak saw his chance, leaping to knock Silas off, down into the barrels, maybe into the fire pit beyond.

Silas dropped his wings, rotating around the leaping bullfrog. Croak's protruding eyes widened at seeing only open air where Silas was a moment before, his body sailing off the platform. Silas clutched Croak's back foot in his talons, anchoring himself with his other foot around the grating, one wing hugging the railing support. Croak dangled, hanging over the far drop to the ground below.

"You keep picking the wrong team, del Toro," Silas said, gritting his beak against the strain of holding up the frog. "Make up for it! Help me save the Bear cubs. Where's Fox?"

Croak's long tongue lolled out his mouth, his bass voice strained as blood rushed to his head. "Okay, Silas, okay! I saw him run south, up the hill ... towards the bluffs."

"Thanks," Silas said. "Until next time." He let go of Croak. The bullfrog plummeted to the ground, his head glancing against a barrel. He landed on the ground, unmoving, groaning painfully. Silas went to the control box, finding the red stop button. When he hopped on it, the cauldrons running over the fire jerked to a halt.

Silas looked up from the control panel to find a huge black bird on the scaffold railing, looking at him. Pure hate welled up in Silas. "Tony Crow," he said, "You come to kill me, too? Grace wasn't enough for you?" Mitch landed by Silas, followed by Mack Starling, Rob Robin, and Rose Topbranch. Silas was glad for the support, but even all of them combined, he didn't think a match for the large crow. Tony Crow scoffed.

"I'm not here to fight you, Oaktree. I'm done working for Fox; his days are over."

Silas didn't trust the crow. "Then what are you here for?"

"To do you a favor. Maybe, one day, you can do me a kindness in turn."

Silas spat. "To Hell with you, Crow." Crow looked at the massive fire pit below them, the teaming grounds of the Fox Den, full of animals fighting each other. "Looks like we're already there, doesn't it? I won't help you end this. Like I said, I want no part. But I do have a piece of information for you."

Mack Starling spoke. "What is it, then?"

"The two bear cubs, the challenge Fox gave Momma Bear —"

"He did it to try and kill off the Council, I know," Silas said. "If that's all —"

"That's true," Crow said. "But what no one knows is why. He wasn't doing it for power. There was something else he was planning... the Bears were just the start. No one was supposed to find out, not even me —"

"Then why are you telling us now?" It was Rob Robin, his truculence for once directed at someone besides Silas.

Crow's stared down Rob with a merciless eye. "Like I said... a favor. I don't know much, but I know how Oaktree fancies himself a detective: maybe he can figure it out. I overheard Fox say he was planning something — something big — at Gambler's Peak."

Silas knew the rock formation. It was some miles off, barren of most forms of life. But he didn't have time for this now. "Things aren't over between us, Crow. When I'm done with Fox —"

"Yes, yes," Crow waved aside Silas' words. "Very threatening. Like I said, I'm done with Fox. And you, for the time being." Tony Crow flew off, away from the battle.

"What was that about?" Mitch asked, mystified.

"Doesn't matter," Silas said shortly. "Fox is going towards the bluffs. Croak told me."

Mitch looked at him. "Croak del Toro? Here? Figures — that slimy frog working for Fox...."

They took off over the battle, finding Poppa Bear tossing an elk bodily to the ground. Silas landed on the unconscious elk. "Fox is making a run for it."

Poppa Bear grunted, huffing, out of breath. "Lead the way."

The birds decided on flying a fork formation to flush out Fox. Mack, Rob, and Rose took the left, leading the wolf pack and John Deer, Mitch and Silas taking the right, spotting for Poppa Bear. Silas and Mitch sailed over the trees, looking through the branches whizzing by underneath.

A few minutes of searching passed, Silas near certain Fox had holed up somewhere hidden. Then they saw a streak of red-brown, running along the rise of the forest floor. Mitch fell back to signal Poppa Bear.

Silas landed in a branch in front of Fox. "You're running out of trail, Fox. You're between a forest full of animals with your scent, and a hundred foot drop." He indicated the edge of the cliff. "Give up." The dragnet closed, the sound of animals crashing through the forest coming from all sides.

Silas enjoyed the heady rush of power, of being the one to find Fox first, to deliver Fox to his fate. Fox's running turned into a trot, then, slowed to a stop. His ears twitched like aerial antennae, picking up sounds of the impending mob coming for him. Fox looked up at Silas. Instead of a sneer, or some last acidic remark, as Silas expected, Fox smiled. Then, slowly, he started to laugh, a high, tittering laugh.

"Oh, Silas...." Fox laughed, yipping immoderately in his mirth. "You ... You really are one tough bird to break."

"You're done, Fox. Give up the cubs. Where are they?" Other birds were landing now. A battered Hawk Cooper landed roughly in a branch nearby; John Deer and some other bucks closed in from the south; Poppa Bear came forward through the trees. They all moved forward, forcing Fox to retreat back towards the edge of the cliff. Loose pebbles skittered from under his back paw, falling over the edge.

"The cubs," Fox said. "Little Joe Bear and 'The Griz': they're my leverage, Silas. If I ever tried to teach you anything, it's you've got to find leverage — use animals' weaknesses against them —"

Poppa Bear growled. "Let's see how much leverage you, have, going over this cliff...."

Fox barked a gale of laughter. "Pops, what a toughie you are! But your robin friend here might not be too happy if I took a spill now.... Seeing as your cubs aren't the only babies missing ..."

A spike of dread starting in his tail traveled up Silas' spine. "What did you do?" Fox's face was animated now, wild with a delight Silas thought incongruous to the fox's predicament.

"I didn't have to do anything, Silas," Fox said, "Like I said, we had an agreement. You won the challenge — you still didn't tell me how you escaped.... Any chance of that now? No? Well — You escaped my challenge. I said I wouldn't touch you or your family. That included Crystal ... and your four little eggs."

Silas' wings felt shaky, like useless jelly tentacles hanging off his body. "Where are they?" he rasped.

"That I don't know, Oaktree," Fox said. "But I'm not your only adversary in the forest." Fox adopted a pouty face. "And here I was ... thinking you had your wings full with me...."

"What are you —"

Fox enjoyed Silas' look of cluelessness. He tittered. "You haven't figured who it is yet, have you?!" He didn't see Poppa Bear moving closer, or if he did, didn't pay the hulking bear the slightest attention. Fox's eyes were just for Silas. "You haven't! Ha! And after all of those killings! I thought after seeing Mole pinned up ... or when that old human hag bit the dust —"

Poppa Bear hit Fox across the face. Fox picked himself off the ground, laughing harder than ever. Silas shouted, "Your orders, your kill! What have you done with my eggs? Where's the cubs?"

Fox looked like he was having the time of his life as Poppa Bear hit him again, Fox shaking his head to clear it. "There's so much you don't know ... You think no one can have leverage on you, Oaktree, that no one can have one up on you. But I just didn't know where to look. With these mindless Bears it was too easy —" Another hit for Poppa Bear made Fox spit blood. "But you, Silas — You throw yourself into your detective work. I didn't realize you were one to keep a wingspan away from what's important to you — probably afraid of getting hurt. ... But while you were here stirring up a pointless fight against me, someone's been visiting your nest." Fox starting laughing uncontrollably.

Poppa Bear went to hit him again, to demand where his cubs were, when Fox's back feet slipped. He was hanging off the edge, his front paws digging in to hold on. Poppa Bear groaned surprise; John Deer moved forward to help. The two animals reached to grab Fox, to pull him up.

That's when Fox let go.

Silas flew to the cliff's edge, landing just as Fox's body landed with an small, anticlimactic thud. The hundred foot drop, onto rock and sharp sticks, the unmoving red-furred carcass of the fox ... Silas knew it was pointless to send animals down to check.

John Deer peered down at Fox, saying, "He didn't say where the cubs are...." Mitch landed by Silas, shaking him with a wing. "Buddy, Crystal, the eggs.... c'mon...."

They left the cliff, Silas already forgetting about the siege of the Fox Den, like it were some unimportant task on a list he had long since cast aside.

Chapter Ten: The Prisoner and the Puzzle

Silas flew back with Mitch and Mack towards the oak tree, a wincing Hawk Cooper in tow, saying he was right behind them. Silas felt suddenly too tired, like all the exhaustion from the last few days — all the sleepless nights — had decided now was time for Silas to pay his tab. He pressed on, flying harder, pushing through the air like it were wet cement.

Silas could tell something was wrong. Sadie the squirrel was in their nest, holding something. They landed.

Laying motionless on Sadie's fluffy tail was a robin. The first thought Silas had was that it could not be his Crystal: this bird was too beautiful — too peaceful. But it was Crystal — his Crystal, Crystal Oaktree, motionless in a tranquil tableau.

"She's dead," Silas said quietly. He had been too late. Like he had been too late for all the others — always there ... but after the fact, when he was useless, just a useless observer....

"She's not dead," Sadie said. The squirrel's voice was soft. When she looked up to meet Silas' eyes, Sadie's look was gentle and kind. This alarmed Silas more than anything. Just this morning she was hard as tack around the feeder, warning him Crystal needed him, Silas, to pay attention to his wife. Silas hated Sadie just now, cradling his motionless wife, speaking in that funeralific voice.

"Get off her," Silas hissed. "She's dead. Let her go." Silas felt a wing drape around his shoulder. To comfort him. No, to restrain. He tried shrugging it off.

"She's not dead," Sadie said again. "Crystal is alive."

"Then why is she not moving?!" Silas shouted. He went to hop forward, to pluck the eyes out of Sadie's face. Wings held him back.

Rose Topbranch was there. She hopped into the nest, over Crystal's body. "She'll be fine, Silas. She's unconscious. That's all. Knocked out. Or ... She might be drugged."

Might be? Silas did not know what he had ever seen in Rose. Her dull feathers looked like sick-up dirtying his newly remodeled nest. Rose leaned into Crystal, prying open her beak with her own. Rose poured something into Crystal's mouth from her gullet. Clear, like water. Like poison. If it was Rose who'd done this ... trying to finish off Crystal, move in on Silas....

Silas went to lunge again, but those damn wings held him back again. He would break them, see their owners never flew again....

Then Crystal coughed. Rose gently rocked her with a wing; Sadie supported her head. A slit of Crystal's eye opened. Everyone was still, watching her. Her beak jibbered, weakly, not catching enough air to craft into words. Then she found her voice, tentative and faint.

"My eggs...."

The eggs.

What an idiot Silas had been. How had he not remembered Fox's threat? How had he not seen what was right before him? Silas broke free of the wings holding him back. He came forward, looking around the nest. He nudged under Crystal, checking. He lifted part of Sadie's tail to check under there for the eggs, his hard beak poking the meat of her tail, making Sadie yelp. Silas didn't apologize.

The eggs were gone. Fox had gotten his revenge; dead, lying at the foot of a cliff, on a pyre of sharp sticks, the cunning fox had reached out, striking at Silas one last time.

“My eggs...” Silas echoed. He felt hollow.

Hadn't Silas promised himself — promised Crystal — even promised each little round sapphire egg — that things would be different? Hadn't he watched his mother prune his brother Benedict from the nest like a gardener might a sprig from a plant? Hadn't Silas seen so many other bird parents cast aside their children — sometimes even eating their own eggs — as they played Mother Spider, determining who lived and who died, rather than fight to give each of their young a chance?

And here he was, hanging around an empty nest. Silas' ideals had been for nothing. Not just one, or even a few of the eggs were lost. They all were.

Mitch was nudging, pulling on Silas, saying something. Silas eventually tuned in.

“We've got to go. Go find the eggs,” Mitch said. Silas shook his head. They would have to start by pumping the stomachs of every animal in the forest. Fox had had too many animals in his paws — controlled too many to count; it could have been anyone. Maybe even an animal they wouldn't suspect. Thinking this, another part of Silas reared up, changing his mood like he'd been doused with cold water.

That doesn't mean I won't try, Silas thought. Not knowing won't stop me ripping this whole forest down — tree by tree — until I find who did this.

“Let's fly,” Silas said. Sadie called out — maybe for them to wait around, probably to try and force them to dawdle about Crystal, to coddle her, when she was obviously fine — but Silas was already sailing past the outer branches of the oak, Mitch and Mack and Cooper following. A flock of birds was intercepting them in mid flight. As they came closer Silas could make them out. Rob Robin, Bud Turkey, the warbler voice coach, a few other birds, and — Harvey.

Silas collided into his brother, suddenly furious. “Where were you?” he shouted into Harvey's face. Harvey's reaction was a beat late; he panted, flitting around in air to stay airborne.

“What?” Harvey said, out of breath, his huge cheeks puffing air in and out. “Calm down, bro! Heard there was a battle going on. Wanted to help out.”

“You're late!” Silas shouted. “Nevermind! Someone took my eggs, knocked out Crystal! We've got to find them.”

Surprise lit a dim light in Harvey's eyes. “What? Someone took your eggs?”

“Yeah! C'mon! We've got to find them, fast! We don't have much time!” The other birds nodded their agreement. They knew the statistics on missing eggs. Every minute more the eggs went missing made it only more likely they would be lost forever.

The birds split up, deciding they could cover more ground that way. Mitch went with Silas. Maybe out of instinct, maybe out of ingrained flight patterns, they passed by Corey Chapman's feeder. Maybee was on the deck, laying like the Sphinx under the feeder. Her tail swished as they landed. Some undoubtedly cutting remark was halfway out of her mouth when Silas cut her off. He didn't have time to indulge her ritual of scathing repartee. Silas lit into the fluffy white cat with his questions. He asked if she'd seen anyone come from his oak tree, which was close, on the other side of the back lawn. Silas' eyes blazed, demanding an answer, hating Maybee's ugly, squashed looking face.

Maybee began licking a paw, moving it over her head to clean behind her ear. Silas' predicament seemed to have revived her. "You knew who to come to first in your hour of need. I must say, I'm flattered...."

"Not today, Maybee," Mitch said. He started preening nervously — Mitch had always been nervous around the cat — then caught himself, stopping. "Did you see anything or not? If you did it — if you took the eggs — we'd love to tell Barnes about it. How'd you like that?, a bird bigger than you for a change? You'd talk then."

"More to feast on," Maybee said, purring. "But don't knit your feathers, Birdsly. Haven't I always been the helpful, friendly neighbor to you, my little forest friends?" She turned to Silas. "How about it, Oaktree? If I give you information that helps you find your eggs, wouldn't that be worth something to you? How about leaving your yellow friend here as a snack...."

"C'mon," Silas said to Mitch, who was preening again. "Let's go. We don't have time for this." They bent their legs, getting ready to take off, when Maybee said,

"I always thought he was a weird one. Even by the measure of you primitive forest animals...."

Silas turned back to the cat. "Who? What did you see?"

Maybee went back to grooming. "Like you said, you don't have the time..."

"Stop playing!" Silas yelled. "If you've seen something, I need to know! Who's the weird one?"

"The one who's been around Ralph's little shanty house over there all day," Maybee said. "Didn't see me here watching from the deck. Speaking of Ralph, that wretched mutt's been making a racket, but he's been lying there quiet for a while now. I'd lie down and give up, too, if I were born such an ugly mixed breed. Fortunately for me..."

Silas wasn't listening anymore. He was looking into the lawn next door. Like Maybee had said, Ralph was lying in the lawn, outside his doghouse, his food bowls off to one side. Silas could sense something was wrong.

They flew to Ralph, Silas' gut telling him to circle first before landing, but everything apart from the stillness of the dog was normal. But what was wrong with a dog lying downing in the yard? After all, Ralph normally napped in the afternoons. Maybee was probably just wasting their time, being her usual vile self ...

Ralph was leashed per usual, the green lead hooked to his collar, tied to a spike outside his doghouse. Silas and Mitch landed, hopping closer to Ralph. Horror rose in Silas. Bile rose in his gut. He went to throw up vomit, but held it in, swallowing it into his gullet.

Ralph lay on his stomach, completely still, and Silas knew why. A sour smell rose to meet them as they hopped closer. Ralph's head rested between his two front paws. His lips were peeled back in a frozen growl, showing his teeth. Froth was painted on his teeth and the sides of the dog's mouth, the outer crust drying. A puddle of vomit — kibbles and stomach juices — pooled in front of Ralph's partially open mouth, a tiny rivulet still flowing out his mouth feeding it, coming between his canine teeth, over his lip, into the grass.

"Ralph," Mitch said, almost too quiet to hear. Mitch flitted onto the top of the dog's brown head, moving down towards the face. Holding fast with one foot, he used the other to pry open a closed eyelid.

"Pluck!" Mitch cried out in surprise, flying. They had seen the staring dead eyeball, the blood vessels and mucous like something washed up dead on a beach.

Ralph was ... Well, there was no question. He was dead. Mitch had landed off to the side, on the side of Ralph facing away from where they had come in on. "Silas..."

Silas came over. He looked where Mitch looked, at Ralph's exposed flank. Shiny red letters, as tall as the dog's flank, were painted on the fur:

PINROSER

The I and R were circled.

Mitch was mouthing the letters, trying to figure them out. But Silas had already unscrambled the word, had saw it unscrambled in the instant he saw the letters painted on Ralph's side, over the green leash pulled taught as it ran back to the spike in the ground. So Ralph had been straining against his collar as he died ... retching up as something was killing him, unable to get away.

Prisoner.

Ralph had been a prisoner. Silas had remembered all those times he had visited Ralph, had used his beak and talons to unclip the leash. Silas went to the food bowl, leaning in to confirm his suspicion. Silas knew what had killed Ralph. Other memories were spiraling through his mind, flashes of the last couple days, a collage of animals gathered, in a clearing, the feeder, in battle, on a clifftop ... of dead bodies, words written on walls and trees ... of Zig Chickadee, warning Silas to put nature in balance before it got out of control.

Silas felt an otherworldly clarity. Answers were all around him — they had been all around him. He had been too clouded with his own theories, his own agenda, to pay attention.

He knew where the eggs were. They would be right behind him, in the doghouse. A last challenge waited for Silas, the sum of all the pointless, violent bids for his attention over the last four days.

Mitch was still maneuvering around Ralph, not looking at the doghouse. Silas was nearly through the opening of the doghouse, into the dark space inside, before Mitch pulled his eyes away from Ralph. "Jumpin' Mother Spider," Mitch was muttering, "I can't believe they got Ralph too Silas, we should — Silas? What are you doing? Don't go in there! —"

Mitch's instincts sensed what Silas already knew. But Silas had to go into the doghouse. His tail just cleared the door when a light went on inside. Silas was blinded, heard a metal clatter and thud behind him. His eyes were adjusting. A metal mesh grate had slammed tight over the entrance, sealing Silas in. He tried at the metal wires, but it was pointless. Mitch was on the other side, shouting, slamming inconsequentially into the bars.

Silas turned back around, studying the interior. Along the wall to his left were his eggs, lined up in a neat row. They were spaced apart on top of a plank of lumber, cut to exact size to fit the depth of the doghouse. Each blue egg rested in an upside down thimble like a miniature eggcup.

Taut black string ran in a web like museum security lasers, on and around the plank holding the eggs; Silas followed the string up, his heart leaping into his crop seeing the bricks hanging precariously by the black string directly over the eggs. An electric lantern lighting the doghouse hung high up in the peak of the roof.

A regular ticking sound paced Silas' heartbeat. The wall opposite the door was surfaced like a blackboard. Written on it was the riddle that was on the tree where Council Member Peter Mole had been

pinned. Under the riddle at ground level were multicolored letters — refrigerator magnets — split into two groups:

Silas solves the case of the missing cubs when he —

STACCK IR

Silas jumped at an audible click from a grey box along the wall to his right. The audio crackled as the recording turned on. Silas didn't recognize the voice, the smooth cadence and friendly tone of someone explaining to a friend his greatest passion.

“My friend. My dear friend Silas Oaktree — you wonderful bird! I knew you would make it here! I know it is you, and not some other animal, who has made it to this final trial. You have come all this way, stuck to the trail all this week, because every fiber of what makes you Silas Oaktree compels you to act.

“You see, I understand you, Silas. You might even say we are the same bird. When you fought those pigeons yesterday ... I felt — felt — your anger, as you beat into those apathetic, worthless vermin! They had been given life, their flesh and feathers kept alive by wasted beats of their hearts!, and they just ... squander it! I hope you hurt them bad ...

“But, here we are! The last two years of our lives, it's all led up to this moment! See, I know you just fly at the chance of just — doing things! If there's something that needs doing, chances are you're already on it! And believe me ... this right here: This is something that needs doing! ...

“You see, Silas, I need you to complete this test more — more maybe than you do! Prove yourself, and all will be well. You see those half bricks up there? Can you see what I wrote on each of them?”

Silas looked up. On each there was a word, something he hadn't noticed before. There were five bricks in total, one above each of the eggs in their thimbles. Each word was from the murders — SIGHTLESS ; COWARD ; SICKLY ; PRISONER. The fifth brick said SILAS. The voice on the recording resumed:

“That's right, Silas. Those are the themes of this soiree; they all come together for this last, little, finale. Those things ... those words I wrote for each one of those wretched sacrifices, the ones written up there ... You are none of those things! I am not accusing you of any of them! Never think that, Silas! Except for your name, of course.

But that's why you're here. You must prove to us that you are none of those things, that you are the Silas Oaktree I know, that I believe in! Being blind, a scared, ailing excuse for a life, trapped in your own prison of flesh! ... That is for the other plucked animals in this forest! But not you. Not Silas Oaktree. You ... You are going to show us you are something more.

“You hear that ticking? That’s an egg timer, closed inside that Kleenex box over there. It should have — oh, say — a little more than four minutes left. One minute for each sacrifice, how about that?”

“There is only one thing that can stop that timer, Silas. There is a small token slot in the side of that tissue box. See that? Good. In the next four minutes, you need to find a token and put it in that slot. Then your eggs will be safe. Without that token, when the timer runs out, those bricks will drop. But if you stop it in time, your eggs will be safe to hatch and go on, and — with Silas Oaktree as their father — no doubt go on to lead meaningful, if small, lives....”

“Oh! One teensy weensy detail, my friend. You see how those eggs, the tissue box, those bricks — well, just about everything! — is wired? Don’t try tampering with my test, or those bricks will drop! Then the eggs will be good only for the frying pan!

Good luck, Silas. Show us why you are my hero ...

“... Four minutes! Chop chop!”

The recording still crackled, but the voice, mercifully, went quiet. Mitch had heard the whole thing, looking through the bars at the door of the doghouse. “What did that voice say? Four minutes? Silas, how are you going —?”

“I don’t know,” Silas clipped. He looked around, fighting a rising panic. “Maybe if I fly up there, break the right strings on those bricks, I can —”

“You heard it, Silas!” Mitch said. “You do that and those eggs are smashed! If someone could set this up, I’d believe them.”

Silas was only half listening. He flitted onto the grey voice box. The controls were jammed, the Play button depressed by a weave of the black string that was wired everywhere. Silas flew to the top of the tissue box. The only opening was on the side. There was the token slot the voice had mentioned; it was small, only twice the dimensions of an unshelled sunflower seed. He pecked at the cardboard, trying to break in, get to the egg timer. He punctured the side, a pinprick perforation from his beak; Silas bit at the hole, trying to widen it, but the cardboard was tough.

“Silas, you don’t have time for that!” Mitch cried, watching from the door.

If Silas remembered from seeing them around Grace’s house, tissue boxes had an opening on one side. Since Silas couldn’t see the opening in the cardboard cube on any of the exposed sides, then it must be on the side resting on the ground, or where it abutted the wall of the doghouse. Silas tried prying where the box met the wall, stopping suddenly when a slight movement of the box caused the black strings running up the wall to rattle violently. The intricate network of strings shook, causing the bricks over the eggs to clack against each other. Silas held his breath until the strings’ quivering subsided, and the bricks were still once more.

He gave up on the box holding the timer. Silas went to the far wall, the one with the refrigerator magnet letters under the riddle. He muttered to himself,

“ ‘Silas Oaktree solves the missing cubs when he —’ When he what?” He studied the refrigerator magnets, the rainbow mesh of letters;

(STACCK IR)

Silas began moving them around. Just like the scrambled words at each murder, here Silas was sure the unscrambling of these magnets held some sort of answer.

Or another clue. I don't need another clue!, Silas thought, his mind racing. He studied the new arrangement he made with the magnets. It was a nonsensical mess. Mitch was yelling out guesses from the door, only serving to scatter Silas' concentration more.

“ ‘Stick Rica’ ... ‘Track Sic’ ...” Mitch shouted out, a stream of conscious. “ ‘Risk Cat! ‘Risk Cat! ... No, um ___”

“Shut up!” Silas roared. But Mitch was on a roll, trying to get Silas to arrange the letter magnets with the wild guesses he shouted out.

“ ‘Stick Car’ ... Silas, it's ‘Stick Car’! Quick! The mag— Wait, hold on...”

“They were spaced!” Silas said. He remembered now. Eight letters total, the last two letters separate from the other six. He hastened to separate the magnets into two groups. “The last group is two letters. It has to be a word like ‘is’ or ‘it’ ... ‘It.’ ” He put the I and the T together, trying to guess the first word. Mitch shifted into overdrive with this breakthrough.

“ ‘Stick It! ‘Stick It! ... Try ‘Racks It’ ...” Mitch would not be stopped. “ ‘Tricks It’ ... Silas, you need to trick the timer somehow!”

Silas found himself wishing for a sturdier door locking him in, preferably something soundproof. He knew his four minutes were running short, the metronomic ticking of the egg timer in the tissue box a constant reminder. Was the ticking speeding up, or was it just Silas' nerves? He had to stay cool, had to save his eggs....

His eggs. His four eggs.

“Mitch!” he shouted, his beak a blur rearranging the magnets.

CRACKS IT

“ ‘Cracks It’ ... Mitch!” Silas said. “That's the answer! The fifth egg! One of these eggs is fake; I've got to crack it open! The token must be inside...”

Mitch considered. “No, that can't be it...” Silas nearly screeched in exasperation at his friend. He knew he was right, but if he chose the wrong egg, or ran out of time....

Silas went to fly up onto the lumber plank holding the eggs, then at Mitch's warning shout flitted back to the ground before landing, his heart hammering in his breast. Mitch was right: The plank was laced with strings all around the thimbles holding the eggs, trip wires, he was sure, as sensitive as those booby trapping the tissue box.

He was starting to panic now. Silas twitched his head around, studying each egg rapidly. They all looked identical; the fake one was either a real robin's egg, or a masterful forgery. If only Silas had spent more time in the nest, with Crystal, with the eggs, studying the eggs, their shapes, their precious contents ... Silas had to make a decision — now — or they were all going to be smashed. Silas wanted to give up ... he didn't have the guts to choose.

“Pick one, buddy! Time's almost up!”

Then he knew. Silas did have the guts. That's what the psycho who took his eggs wanted him to prove. He looked up, found the brick that said 'coward', then the egg underneath. It looked just like one of his own eggs ...

Silas flitted onto the plank by the egg, landing his legs precisely between the tripwires. He closed his eyes, then — stab. He pierced the shell with his beak.

He was rewarded with a hollow sounding crack of the shell. He took a breath for the first time in what felt like a minute. He picked the egg up in his beak; it was surprisingly light. Silas stood on the thimble to launch himself off the platform, landing on the ground in the center of the doghouse free from tripwires.

Silas broke open the egg. Inside was a tightly folded piece of paper, and what looked like a ...

A human tooth. A broken-off human front tooth. His token.

The timer was definitely ticking faster now, mere seconds away from going off. Silas sailed for the tissue box, inserting the tooth in the slot. He heard a dull clang as the tooth landed on something inside the box. The egg timer ticked faster and faster, Silas overtaken by dread, knowing the bricks were about to drop. Then ... Then, the timer stopped.

It was quiet. Mitch was silent on the other side of the grate; the ticking of the timer that had ruled Silas' life for the last four minutes had left a consuming silence in its void. Had it really just been four minutes? It seemed like hours. Then Silas noticed it wasn't all quiet. There was a white noise, the crackling of the audio recording. It was still running. The voice spoke.

“Silas?”

The voice laughed a triumphant, crowing laugh.

“You did it! You saved the eggs. I knew you would. If you hadn't, this recording would have skipped to another message, saying — Well that doesn't matter, because you did it! You proved that you are everything I knew you were ... Together, we are the force of change in this forest! We are cleansing it of the unworthy filth clogging our nature....

“Take the paper you found in the egg as a token of my ... dedication. To you. I know Fox would move the Bear cubs, try taking those still-innocent babies for his own disgraceful game. The paper has everything you need to find the cubs, safe and sound. That is, if you hurry, before he moves them again. I've been a vigilant guardian, much like yourself. Like I said, we are alike, even though you don't know who I am.

“Take care, Silas. Congratulations on your victory. I'll say goodbye for now. I look forward to us doing this again.”

The recording shut off. The Play button popped up, tripping the string over it. It set off a series of strings in the web overhead, triggering the metal grate over the door of the doghouse to lift, freeing Silas.

Mitch was waiting just outside. “Is it just me,” he said, helping Silas as he staggered out of the doghouse, “or are you a magnet for crazy?”

Chapter Eleven: Spring Cleaning

They found the Bear cubs right where the paper in the egg said they would. At first Silas thought it was a hoax meant to taunt him further; it was a drawing of old, rusting human machines grouped, ancient refrigerators by stacks of old car bodies, tires by haphazard piles of rebar. The drawing was incredibly detailed — perfect, where had it been colored, it would have looked like a photograph. Silas felt a thrill as he and Mitch studied the drawing from the back lawn, some yards away from the doghouse and Ralph's body. He remembered Barnes' drawing of Peter Mole's murder, how well done it was; but then Silas relaxed. Even Barnes' drawings looked amateur next to this.

“Ah, hell...” Patrolbird Cooper had drawled, landing by Ralph. He had been about to chew into Silas, who headed him off, telling the hawk to do his job and get the eggs safely out of the doghouse. At this, Hawk peered into the doghouse, letting out a harsh caw of shock, swearing.

Other animals had started arriving, and once started, came in droves. Barnes was fetched; he'd been coordinating the last of the attack on the Fox Den, managing the Forest Council fighters in herding the remnants of Fox's forces to holding cells at the Food Stores. Brandon Weasel was captured, as was Screech McPherson, the bat that had tied Silas the night he snuck into the Fox Den; the flying squirrel Joshua Glider's body was found floating in the stream, the body a day old, dead long before the battle started. From what Silas found out later, Croak del Toro was not among those rounded up. Nor, as he had predicted, had anyone seen Tony Crow.

Barnes had Cooper set up a perimeter around the doghouse and Ralph, trying to keep the scene from being contaminated by the spectators. But, despite the officials' efforts, a sea of animals milled around the lawn, making looking for tracks pointless. Barnes studied the doghouse with great interest; he seemed more intrigued than horrified by the set-up. He sent for Rex Washer to come use his nimble fingers to disarm the bricks and extract Silas' eggs safely from the trap. Silas had watched on with frayed nerves, supervising the reintroduction of his eggs into the nest. His worry was for nothing, however, as all four eggs were soon back under a convalescing Crystal, all of them — Crystal included — intact and looking unharmed.

Afterward Silas had spent the minimum dutiful length of time with his family in the nest. He felt superfluous; Crystal was doing fine, incubating the eggs. They had little to talk about, his wife still woozy from being knocked out; Silas hoped her vapid attempts at conversation were just side effects of being knocked out. He didn't want to share all the details just yet of what happened to Ralph, how the eggs had been endangered by a psychopath still at large. To Silas' relief, Crystal finally began to doze.

So Silas had busied himself with doing odd jobs around the nest, rethreading loose twigs, repapering the floor. Only a few sections of the old newspaper from Grace were left. Silas went around patching where the soft cushion of newspaper layering the bottom of the nest was torn. He muttered curses for Sadie the squirrel, blaming her twitchy claws for tearing up his flooring. Silas had been hammering a section of newspaper flat with his foot when he paused, pulling his foot away so he could read. Cartoon drawings were framed in black squares. It was the puzzle page, the one Grace had shown Silas the last time he'd seen her alive. He stared.

Silas flew back down to the lawn. Top Perch Barnes was there, using the inside of the doghouse as a type of field headquarters. He was pouring over the drawing from the egg with Washer, Cooper, and Mitch, who had insisted he had the right to be there, as he'd discovered Ralph and the eggs with Silas. Harvey was

there, too, conjecturing in a too-loud voice to a group of animals, leaving no question as to the state of his sobriety. Even Mack Starling and Flash Goldplume, both of whom liked to tell raucous stories, were trying to shush Harvey, who was in the middle of proclaiming he knew something looked odd about the dog and the doghouse, and how it had been the next place he was going to check.

Silas listened passively to Barnes talking about the drawing. He was certain it depicted Riley's Junk, an old scrapyard not a mile from the Fox Den, how there were rumours Fox had had an interest in the place; Barnes decreed he and a group of animals would go there immediately to investigate. Silas volunteered to go, but he had a few things to take care of first.

Silas looked to the deck next door. Maybee peeked between the rails, twitching her tail seeing so many animals so close. Corey too was there, elbows resting on the railing, watching the scene with an expressionless face. Silas was sure Corey was still captive to his grief over Grace, feeling the void where his friend and long-time patient had been. Now he looked empty, idle, with nothing but time. Silas wanted to go to him, to commiserate.

But Silas needed to talk with his brother first. He pulled Harvey away from Ralph's body, which he had been using as a soapbox. Where the other animals were looking shocked by Harvey's irreverence, Silas had felt nothing, chalking up standing on the corpse to another "That's Harvey!" moment. He tried talking with Harvey, who had been jibbering in a manic, Berry-fueled oppressive speech. Silas hit Harvey hard across the face with a wing, shutting him up. Then Silas explained to Harvey what he needed.

When he was done with Harvey, he made it over to Mitch in the doghouse, making a time to talk later that evening. Silas flew onto Corey's deck. Corey saw him, nodding hello listlessly. "What's going on over there?" Corey asked. "Did something happen to Ralph?"

Silas continued to be surprised by the cluelessness of humans. "He's dead, Corey. By the same one who got Grace." This put some life back in Corey. Silas went on. "Can I talk to you in a minute? But first, I need a word with Maybee."

Corey and Maybee both looked shocked at this. Silas, too, had never believed he'd hear himself utter those words. He flew down from the railing, onto the decking by Maybee. She made an instinctual run for him, but Corey stuck out a foot.

"You're a trusting fool, bird," Maybee said silkily. "You've finally realized your life is a worthy trade for my passing amusement..."

Silas' heart had hammered being so close to the cat, but he did his best to act casual and unafraid. "Not today, furball. I've got something better for you: a deal. And I promise, you'll get to use your murderous talents."

Maybee's ears were still pinned back, tail swishing. But she uncoiled a little, flexing her claws. "I'm listening ..."

Silas told her his plan. After Maybee slinked out of sight, probably to see if a bird down at the crime scene strayed too far from the group. With a silent sigh of relief, Silas up to the feeder. He clinked its side with a claw, drawing Corey's eyes to the feeder.

"It's time for new seed, Corey."

Corey scratched the back of his head. "Yeah, I forgot ... But ... Listen, Silas, I've been busy, and with Grace passing ..."

“She was my friend, too, Corey.” But Silas felt no less sorry for Corey because of it. But grief was a luxury neither of them could give into. Silas needed Corey to be strong.

“I wasn’t asking you, Chapman,” Silas said, a bite to his words. “You’re going to go get new seed, right this minute. I’m going down to the old junkyard to recover the missing Bear cubs. Then I’m coming back here. You are going to be back here by that time with the seed. The good stuff we talked about before. And now I’m going to tell you why.”

And Silas flew close to Corey so they could talk. Corey listened passively, then, at hearing what Silas had to say, smiled savagely. Corey’s smile looked to Silas like a wolf’s, like something that belonged out in the wild. Maybe, he thought, just maybe, there was hope for this human yet.

Silas had flown to catch up with the cadre investigating Riley’s Junk, the scrapyard Barnes thought the drawing depicted. And there they were, in a spot in the back of the lot, the photo true down to the spots of rust. Barnes pointed at the scrap, and Poppa Bear, who had joined the group, lumbered up to an old sky blue refrigerator. It was not, Silas thought, too many shades off from the color of his eggs.

Poppa Bear reached out a paw, hooking under the handle. The door opened. Inside, rather than shelves and a back wall, they saw a tunnel, an artificial cave made in the scrap behind the refrigerator. Inside were the two cubs, Spike “The Griz”, and Joe Bear, sleeping.

From a bucket found inside the secret metal bear cave, Barnes deduced the cubs had been steadily sedated with a mixture derived from Crazy Berries. Silas felt a brand of elevation — of vindication — as he watched the cubs parade groggily from the scrapyard, back into the forest, towards Momma Bear’s cave.

As they passed under Silas, perched on a stack of cars, Poppa Bear looked up at the robin. The large black bear said nothing. He didn’t need to. Everything — the senseless murders, the violence of the Fox Den, the discord among the animals — was at an end. The sun was bright as it fell in the sky, the evening unseasonably warm. Spring had finally returned. It was the season of life being born, of things beginning anew.

Silas met Poppa Bear’s eye. He nodded.

* * *

Half the forest turned up for breakfast. At only six in the morning, and the crowd around the feeder was too much to get through. It wasn’t food, for once, that had drawn the animals. They filled every inch of the deck and much of the lawn surrounding; they talked in loud, excited voices, drowning out the shrieks of annoyance from Jenny, Corey’s girlfriend, coming from the window above. No one cared that she was trying to sleep, even after word got out last night from a neighborhood German shepherd, who had it on good authority that the human she was having an affair with had died when his black and chrome pickup truck exploded off a dirt road.

All the happenings of the last few days made for a surfeit of news. The forest animals were excited with more talking points, more gossip than many of them could handle. So a crowd much larger than just the regulars had showed up to the feeder, there to talk and jabber and squawk. There was much they wanted to discuss: They talked about the battle of the Fox Den, the murder of Ralph, the egg-napping of Silas’ brood, and just about everything else. The death of Fox was of particular interest. So, too, was the upcoming Forest Council Meeting, which Barnes had rescheduled for later that day.

Birds, squirrels, and animals of every species worked through the crowd to Silas by the feeder. They shouted to be heard over the crowd, asking Silas questions, most wishing him luck at the Forest Council Meeting, assuming he was running for Perch. Silas tried saying he wasn't, but no one heard; he could have said he was planning on hatching humans from eggs and teaching them to fly, and they would have nodded and wished him luck. They just wanted Silas around them — to assure them with his presence. He was a symbol of stability; a tangible, visible anchor holding against all the chaos of the past week.

Silas just enjoyed being back around the feeder with his closest friends. Mitch and Mack and Flash and Colin Squirrel were there. So was Harvey, who looked like he hadn't slept the night before. Neither, come to that, had Silas, who worried whether insomnia was becoming a permanent fixture in his life. John Deer was there with his family, as was Alf A. Wolf and the pack, who roved the deer with their eyes enough to make them nervous; the Turkeys were there, Janine looking displeased as animals bumped into her, while Bud was cautiously having a good time, furtive glances back to his wife reminded him that he was on borrowed time. Patrolbird Cooper was there trying to maintain order; he soon gave it up for a bad job, falling into chatting nervously with another bird of prey, a fierce-eyed red-tail hawk Silas recognized as the bird Cooper battled at the Fox Den.

Corey opened the slider, coming out in a shaggy bathrobe, his hair sticking up on one side. He shoed the animals off the deck, having to resort to a broom. Slowly the crowd began to clear. Soon it was empty of everyone but the few birds. Cooper flew off with the red tail, and the animals cleared the lawn, herded out by the wolves. Only Silas was left with his brother, Mitch, Flash, and Mack. Mitch had been hounding them about going to the warbler's singing lesson this morning. Harvey was going, saying he was "getting his song on." Mack Starling, who had been laying into the seed as frantically as Flash that morning, was actually wobbling from being so full, saying he was going to sing out his other end pretty soon. But Harvey and Mitch pressured Mack, convincing him to go to the lesson. Despite Mitch's efforts, Silas and Flash refused, staying around the feeder. Corey had gone inside, presumably back to sleep.

The deck was empty, Flash and Silas the only ones left from the busy crowd of only minutes before. The large sack of seed Corey had bought yesterday crackled in the wind, as a chilly morning gust blew.

Flash indicated the bag of bird seed resting on the decking below the feeder. "Did Corey finally change the seed out?" He reached into the feeder slot, the one closest to the railing, from where the big birds had to feed. Otherwise, they couldn't reach the food holes.

Silas nodded. "Yeah. Took him long enough, didn't it? Now he put in the good stuff. You like it?"

"I said I could eat anything," Flash said. "And I can. My time living in that cage taught me that. But you know what? This is really, really good seed. Tastes different. In a good way. I think I actually prefer it."

Silas watched on in silence as Flash continued eating with abandon.

"Say, Flash ... How long have you been in this forest?"

Flash dug into the feeder hole, his voice muffled by a mouthful of seed. "About two years. Why?"

Silas nodded slowly. "You moved in not long after me. Is that right?"

Flash thought for a second. "I guess that's right."

They were silent for a moment. Flash went back to eating. Silas looked around. He studied the fifty pound bird seed bag, mostly empty, shifting slightly in the breeze; he studied the treeline, empty for this time of day. Flash saw him looking.

“Forest around here looks abandoned. Must still think the seed is the old stuff. Or they’re all off celebrating the end of Fox.” Flash bobbed his head admiringly at Silas. “Good job, by the way. Standing up to him like that. I hear you told the Council where the cubs are hidden ... That that’s how Barnes found them.”

“Yep.”

Flash kept bobbing his head. He seemed to be looking for something to keep the conversation going. “Heard Crystal’s recovering ... your eggs are back in the nest. I’m glad. Really glad.”

The silence grew between them. Flash took another helping of seed from the feeder. He pulled his head out, wobbled on the railing, almost losing his footing. “Woah! Guess I’ve been eating too much. Getting lightheaded.” Flash shook his head, clearing it. “Well, Silas, I’m going to get going. I’ll see you around ...”

Silas spoke up.

“Flash, why did you kill all those animals?”

Flash, who was about to launch himself off the deck, paused. He turned back to face Silas. “What’s that?” He looked puzzled.

“I asked you why you killed those animals,” Silas said coolly. “Mole, Quail, Ralph. Grace Winsworth. And your sick little game with my eggs. Before I take you in, I want to know why.”

Flash dropped his casual airs. He let out a low kettle whistle, then chuckled. “When did the great detective Silas Oaktree find out?”

“I knew something was off when you killed Ralph, you sick son of a grub. ‘Prisoner.’ Reminded me of you being locked in a cage.”

“You didn’t think it was Fox?” Flash said.

“I wanted to believe it. But he has his own brand of sociopathy. His challenges — they’re different, consistent. He sets the wager upfront ... none of your coward beat around the bush crap. Your messages — they’re more personal. I thought they were words about me, trying to say something about me. But those words were about you, weren’t they?”

Flash clicked his tongue against his beak. “Don’t ... Don’t call me a coward. But yes. You proved those words weren’t you, Silas. You passed that test with flying colors.”

“Gee, thanks. That means a lot coming from a serial killer.”

Flash walked along the railing, a few steps closer to Silas.

“Silas, you still didn’t say how you found out it was me? It could have been anyone.”

Silas shook his head. “No. It couldn’t. Grace gave me her newspaper to feather my nest. I saw the puzzles she talked about, playing with letters and words. One was called the Jumble — it was exactly like the words left at each murder, letters scrambled up. When you unscrambled it, certain letters are circled. Those circled letters — those are what you take to answer the riddle at the end Your riddle: It spelled ‘Cracks it’. I cracked your twisted game in time to save my eggs. But then later I played around with some more words, and guess what?”

Silas took out a small piece of paper from under his wing. On it was written the names of the victims:

PETER MOLE
DONALD QUAIL
GRACE WINSWORTH
RALPH FULLER

A few letters were circled in each name. Below them Silas unscrambled the circled letters into two words:

FLASH GOLDPLUME

Flash nodded in satisfaction. “You found out each one of them makes up a part of me.”

“You said how obsessed you were with the newspaper —” Silas went on, “how it was the only thing keeping you going when you lived in that cage. And the comics you said you loved so much? The riddles were on the same page.”

Flash nodded again. “The paper was all I had to keep me sane.”

“Lousy job it did. To think I felt bad for you, too ... Wish the old lady kept you locked up until you were dust.”

“I felt like I was turning to dust in that cage,” Flash said. “All those things I wrote: sightless, cowardly, sickly, prisoner ... I was all of those things. I hated myself. The Council Members, the old human, the dog ... my feathers itched just seeing them. Here they were, out in the world, living like I had when I was forced to be in that cage. I helped them, Silas. I released them from their pain.”

“You’re going back to that cage, Goldplume.”

Flash laughed. “And who’s going to put me there? I’m five times your size, Silas. I wish you hadn’t figured out it was me — Though, part of me did, in a way. We are so connected. You are ... You are all the best parts of me.”

Silas shook his head. “You moved here because of me, you sick plucking psycho. You followed me. The article about me and the arsonist, in the paper near Williamsburg.”

Flash let out a whooping whistle. “You got it! I knew I picked the right mentor to study! ... To become. That night I escaped the cage, the old lady had changed out the paper. She had put in the wrong section. The obituaries, her favorite part. She had mistakenly lined my cage with them instead of the parts she didn’t care for, like the comics. But on the other side, the side facing up — was you. In the news,” Flash sketched a headline in the air with a wing, “‘Robin Stops Arson, Saves Forest.’ When I saw that ... Wow. A bird, just like me, who was everything I was not. Here was this bird, smaller than me, less clever than me —”

“Thanks.”

“— who was a hero; did everything I didn’t do. Because I was a coward in a cage! Right then, I determined I would find you ... study you. Become you! You would —” Flash mad smacking sounds with his beak. “— You would complete me.

“When that foul old woman heard me reading the article about you out loud, sounding it out, she knew I had

her section of the paper. She came over to attack me — This was the moment when I changed — changed who I was as a bird. I would before my uncaged — my purest — self. That's when I escaped.”

“You kill the old lady, didn't you?” Silas was afraid he knew the answer.

Flash bobbed an affirmative, emitting a kettle whistle of pleasure. “That evening. She knew I couldn't get out the house, so she stopped looking for me. She taunted me from her chair, telling me how I was hers, how I would never get out, knitting, and watching those sermons. She had the house sealed up like a tomb, which it was — not a window cracked. So I hid out. After a few hours, I started doing my voices.”

“Voices?” Silas asked.

“I'm good at voices, Silas. That's how I lured most those animals I freed from their cages of flesh. It's how I got the old woman, too. I projected my voice, made it sound like the neighborhood boys coming to ask about the lawn. She yelled at them to go away. But I kept calling. I made it sound like the boys were on the other side of the door.

“The old hag got out of her chair, to shoo them away with her walking stick. She opened the door. She went out on the stoop, thinking the boys were hiding, playing a prank on her. That's when I attacked. I tore my beak through her neck. I liberated that miserable woman — liberated her from her own vileness, trapped in that withering flesh. I kept her upper row of fake teeth as a souvenir. And this —” Flash held up a foot with the metal ID bracelet. “As a reminder of my old self — the cowardly, trapped me I was leaving to die with the old woman.

“Then I went in search of you. You had moved away from the Daniel Boone forest. But following your trail of celebrity was not hard.”

Flash blinked his eyes slowly, like he was testing his focus. He shook his head.

Silas asked, “Why me? Why did you give directions to the cubs in that egg if all you want to do is kill?”

Flash laughed.

“Killing is not all I want, Silas! I told you! I free them from their pain. I understand them in a way no one else can. Like how I understand you, Silas. All the pain, all the pressure you're under: your clutch of eggs, your wife, your brother ... everyone thinking you're going for Council. How everyone turns to you to solve their problems....

“So when Momma Bear came into that Forest Council meeting, saying her cubs went missing, I knew right away what happened. Pain — that's what makes us do what we do, it shapes who we are.... Like Fox. Now, there's an animal in pain. He suffered from his need to control, to manipulate. I knew it had to be him, and I was going to make sure. So I flew from the meeting straight for the Fox Den. I saw his cronies bringing in the cubs, taking them underground.”

It didn't make sense to Silas. “But Pete Mole never made it to the Forest Council meeting. You got him before the meeting.”

“You're right, Silas. Very good. I knew that you weren't planning on running for Council, despite all the jibbering around the woods, but I thought you could be persuaded when you saw the Council desperately in need of members. After all, isn't that what you do? Fly forward when no one else will?”

“It was me who suggested to Cougar Tanner-Smith a good place to hunt the night she got Ten-Point Tom, the first Council Member to go down. And it was me who lured him to Cougar by impersonating the voice of

a sexy doe.”

Flash chuckled. “Mole — he was trickier. I had to listen for months, studying where he dug through the ground. The morning before the Council meeting, I impersonated the sounds of Barnes and a busy gathering of animals. That’s when Mole came aboveground, thinking he’d arrived at the meeting, when really he’d surfaced in the elm grove. I was there to free him.”

It disturbed Silas, hearing the casualness with which Flash talked about killing. “But the message about me and the cubs? If that was after —”

“I rushed back from the Fox Den to write it. I taught myself how to write over the years in my cage, in my own — well, I had no good ink to write with. In my cage I would make my own puzzles, too. The Jumble... you are right, it was my favorite. Even meaningless letters could be rearranged to have a purpose. Like I had done — rearranged myself from an imprisoned, visionless wretch, to one whose purpose is to liberate others from their own suffering ... the pitiful sacks of bones, scratching in the filth to prolong their wretched existence —”

“Touching,” Silas said. “Now answer the question: Why the Bears? Why me?”

“Fox was using the Bears as a bargaining chip,” Flash said. “You know how his challenges work. The cubs were the stakes, killing all the Forest Council was the challenge, and Momma Bear: she was Fox’s unwilling contestant.”

“But something surprised me about Fox’s behavior. After Momma Bear failed to kill Wesley Barnes at the barn, when you showed us your spectacular capabilities — bringing the whole barn down on that bumbling oaf — I was certain Fox was going to kill the cubs. Disgusting, taking an animal’s freedom for your own selfish reasons ...”

Silas wasn’t sure if Flash was talking about the cubs, or himself being sold into life with the old woman. Silas was buying the time he needed. But he needed these answers just as much. Flash went on.

“I wanted those Bears rescued, liberated from Fox. Whatever cesspool lives they live from here, at least they will have a chance to make something of it. Like you have with yourself, Silas. My friend.”

“I’m not your friend.”

“You are my friend! My only true friend. My mentor... Hero. See, I knew if someone was going to save the Bears, it would be you, Silas. But Fox was serious about this challenge, and he hid them well. Too well, after he moved them from the Fox Den. The Council didn’t find them. And you didn’t, when you went searching the Fox Den yourself. I wanted to help.”

“You said you were there. At the Den.”

Flash nodded. “Yes. See, I had been visiting almost every night. The riddle I left you during Pete Mole’s liberation promised you’d be the one, so I had to make sure you had a chance of finding them, if you proved yourself.

“I saw them take the Bears down underground, so I had to find exactly where the cubs were. I disguised myself as Tony Crow — sooted my feathers black. The beak and plumage is off, but it’s Tony’s distinctive voice that’s the key to the disguise. No one doubts you’re Tony, not when you can do the voice. Going there at night, I convinced some of the less intelligent Fox Den employees I was Crow, and had them show me the Bears. And that’s when I learned he was moving them to the junkyard.

“As far as why I singled you out, Silas Oaktree — Well, that’s easy. You were — are — my hero. I moved here to be around you. With all the pressures of mundane, high-stress living, I thought you might have cracked. When I finally met you in person, you seemed less than top-of-the-world — more normal — than I had imagined from that newspaper article. Even just a few days ago, when you were at Grace Winsworth’s house, trying to work out the clues, I was listening. I was disguised as Tony Crow in case someone saw me. I’ll admit, even I had doubts about you then, floundering through your investigation. I had to make sure all my suffering, all my work modeling myself after you was for something. You needed a test. I needed to see that you were the bird I thought you were. And you didn’t disappoint.”

“If I’m your hero,” Silas said. “Why would you attack my wife, turn Ralph’s doghouse into a torture chamber, and destroy my eggs if I didn’t figure out your stupid trap?” Silas had about enough talk. “Don’t give me that trial by fire crap, either. When it comes down to it, all your nuthouse killing and puzzles are for one reason: because you enjoy it. You like it.”

Flash shrugged his wings lazily. “That’s a crude way to look at it. But yes... In a way you’re right. I do enjoy my calling. See, you understand me in a way no one else ever —”

“We’re done talking, Goldplume. You have two choices: One, hand yourself in peacefully. I’ll admit, I would prefer you didn’t do that one. Your other option is to fight, to try and go through me and make a run for it. Your choice.”

Flash put on a show of considering Silas’ words. “Options, options.... Thank you for the choices, Silas. It pains me, but I’ll take the second. I really did not want to hurt you. You have made more out of your entrapment in your small weak body than I ever thought possible. But you see, I have my calling. I cannot let anyone stop me from freeing more souls from their torment, even —”

Flash wobbled, his eyes shifted out of focus, then back. Silas chirped mockingly.

“What’s wrong, Flash? Too much seed? Or is it the concentrated dose of Crazy Berries it’s laced with? Guess it’s not all bad having a junkie dealer brother.”

Flash launched himself at Silas. Silas rolled sideways on his back, carrying Flash’s weight over him with his feet. Flash crashed on the other side of the railing, flapping to keep balance.

Silas was on top to him. Flash tried goring and biting with his powerful hooked beak, but his speed was dulled, where Silas was fast. Flash got a bite in to Silas’ tail, breaking a feather. Silas screeched pain, flapping around to Flash’s back, stabbing with his beak, tearing with his talons.

They rolled around the railing. Silas called, “Maybe, now!”

The bag of birdseed crackled. A white flash of fur erupted from the end. Maybee launched herself up the railing. Her paw struck at the birds, hitting Silas.

“Wrong one!” he shouted.

Ears back, Maybee’s face was manic. Silas felt pretty sure she had forgotten their agreement, was now going for the double showcase. She launched again into the two birds locked beak and talon.

There was a soft crunch. Flash’s hold on Silas slackened. Maybee bit into Flash’s back, front paws hooking claws into his wings. She batted him off the rail; Flash fell heavily to the deck. Maybee plopped down on top of him.

Silas struggled to his feet, gingerly testing his wings. His tail stung as the rest of his body ached to the racy

tempo of his heart. He watched Maybee work over Flash; he was a big bird, even for a cat.

“Don’t kill him,” Silas said half-heartedly, watching from the railing, “Barnes wants him brought in alive...” Then he noted again Maybee’s bloodlust, twitching tail, wild eyes. He realized he cared little either way. “Or, whatever you feel like doing.”

The deck was filling with wildlife. Top Perch Barnes alighted next to Silas, taking command of the scene. Patrolbird Cooper landed next to Maybee, trying to pry her off Flash, only managing to get swatted by Maybee himself. Rex Washer came out from under the deck, attesting he had heard everything Flash had said. Luke Wolf arrived with a birdcage hanging from his mouth, the same brass cage Council Member Quail had been hanged in. Corey Chapman opened the sliding door, and after getting over his terror at seeing a wolf on his deck, he helped in wrestling Maybee off Flash; Corey was raked with claw marks as the cat yowled curses, wishing him death. Corey finally managed Flash into the birdcage and closed the door.

Silas watched the whole scene with a growing detachment, a lazy brand of satisfaction settling in. He felt a peace for the first time since — since when? He couldn’t remember. He observed as Corey’s girlfriend Jen ripped open the upstairs window, leaning out in a bathrobe, a towel turbaned around her wet hair. She screamed at Corey, defending “poor poor Maybee,” even as the cat plowed red furrows through Corey’s skin as he tried holding her, tirading against all the animals on “her” deck.

The whole scene was to Silas a show from someone else’s life. As Barnes and Rex Washer plied him with questions, asking for details, offering congratulations ... Silas looked on dreamily, ignoring the pull for his attention.

The only thing that was getting his attention was his nest. Warm, and refeathered. Full of Crystal, and four sapphire eggs. And, very soon, himself.

Silas launched from the rail amid calls of protest. He was going back to his nest.

Silas was, finally, going to sleep.

* * *

The Forest Council meeting started in the mid-afternoon. Silas was sure it had begun on time — exactly on time, as long as Barnes was Top Perch. But Silas would never know firsthand, as he had decided not to go. He perched, listening. The forest was totally silent, absent of the usual calls — the clicks, the stuttering on wood. The only sounds were coming from the two Bear cubs, The Griz and Joe Bear, wrestling in front of the cave. Silas was on Barnes’ stacks of documents, watching the cubs play, as Momma Bear and Poppa Bear slept, napping side by side. They, too, had decided not to attend the meeting, too busy enjoying their cubs’ return.

Silas watched the frolicking cubs, laughing at their antics. It felt odd, the laugh coming out his beak, like a muscle gone unused. He hadn’t laughed since he and Mitch had crashed the truck. But this was something better, more pure. It felt right.

Time passed unmarked, and that too was bliss. The cubs eventually settled down against their parents, falling asleep. A threshing sound, one of large wings, approached. Silas lazily hopped off the stack of papers, a show of respect to Barnes’ precious documents as the owl landed.

Barnes wore an irritated expression, saying nothing as he checked over his collection, which was already half-packed up.

“I can’t leave to hold a meeting for two hours without the cubs getting into my papers! Chewing at the stacks ...” Silas made a sympathetic grunt, though in truth he found the idea of The Griz and Joe Bear attacking Barnes’ papers amusing. Barnes moved some papers into a box, before looking over at Silas.

“Well, if you wanted to show your contempt for the Council, you made your point,” he said, clicking his beak irritably. “Everyone calling for Silas Oaktree to step up to Perch, but the only robin around is that over-preened Rob Robin dandy, with that wing-candy, Rose something-or-other, strutting around.”

Silas felt nothing hearing at Rose Topbranch and Rob Robin were courting. But then an alarming thought struck him. “Wait! They didn’t elect Rob to Council, did they?”

“If you had been there, you would have known,” Barnes said testily. “But no. Mitch Birdsly took Perch.” Silas was glad to hear it. He nodded.

“He’ll be great. Who else?”

Barnes went back to sorting papers. “John Deer got a spot ... and Quill Jackson.”

“Quill Jackson! That porcupine worked for Fox! You can be sure he’s working for Crow’s!”

Barnes shrugged. “We have to work with who we’ve got. You would have had that spot, had you shown interest ...”

“Not politics, Barnes. You know I care about this forest. But politics isn’t my way.” Silas nodded at the papers. “So what’s next?”

“I’m finding a new temporary headquarters,” Barnes said. “Too crowded here in the cave, with the whole Bear family back. As for the forest, half of Fox’s followers are still loose — Which, we’ll probably turn a blind eye to ... We can’t prosecute half the forest.”

“Plus you have that snitch in the Council —” Silas added. “— The one who leaked Washer’s hiding place.”

Barnes nodded. “There’s that, yes. And we need to find what Crow meant about Gambler’s Peak. Then there’s the vacuum problem.”

“Vacuum problem?”

“Sure,” Barnes said. “Nature abhors a vacuum. You get rid of Fox, something has to take his place. Fox was bad, but he was keeping a lot of other bad at bay. Take this, for instance.” Barnes pulled a folder from near the top of a stack. “Breakout from the zoo last night. Maximum security exhibit. Three zookeepers dead. This morning, a game warden finds this.” Barnes opened the folder. A large photo showed the mangled remains of what once might have been a deer. A huge feline pawprint was impressed in the mud by the head.

Silas looked up. “I’ll look into it.”

He went back to his nest. All that investigating ... All that unpleasantness — That was for another day. Now, roosting by his wife, Silas surveyed the spring evening, thinking no thoughts at all. He heard a sound ... a tapping, then a peeping. Crystal moved off the clutch.

The eggs were beginning to hatch.

Chapter Twelve: Epilogue

The morning light woke him.

It hurt his eyes through the lids. He squinted them tighter. That hurt even more.

His whole head hurt. Like it had hit on a plucking rock.

(Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree, eating all the gumdrops he can see)

What? What was that? What was a kookaburra?

He peeled his head off the rock, red fur and redder blood sticking to the stone like bad honey. Why wasn't his body moving? He slid his body forward, biting back a growl as the stick buried in his flank pulled out. His back foot was twisted, but he could still limp.

Where was he?

(Kookaburra sits in the old gum tree, Merry merry king of the bush is he)

Who is? I am, he answered automatically. I'm the king. Whoever he was. Sticks and stones will break my bones, but the kookaburra could suck on his furry red eggs.

His head throbbed worse than the day after that one time he had lost a challenge, and ate a bucket of Crazy Berries to settle the bet.

What challenge? What were Crazy Berries?

He limped through the woods, towards a buzzing he was pretty sure was outside his head. He came across a few animals. Some shouted angry things at him. Like he cared. Who gave a deer's droppings about bears? They were too big to snap up in your jaws.

He broke out of the woods. He was in a clearing with muddy grass and picnic tables and a parking lot with vehicles, humans going in and out of a building that smelled like a shovelful of

(Laugh, Kookaburra!, Laugh! How great a life you lead!)

He shook his head. He yelped in pain. He hurt, but what mattered was his thoughts were clearing.

What had happened to him? Who would pay?

Then he remembered. It was that bird. That grub-digging bird would suffer for what he did.

What was that bird's name? He barked a quick laugh. Yes, that was coming back to him too.

Siras Gumtree. He would suffer. How short a life he'll lead!

First, though, he needed healing. These animals — these humans — were tools sitting idle against the tree. They were there to be used.

He limped to the parking lot. A family was around a — what was it called? It was like a den and a bus rolled into one. He approached them.

“Flat tire?” he called.

The male human was working on the tire, his female yapping something over his shoulder. The cubs, a boy and a girl, were chasing each other nearby. The boy stopped when he saw him, screeching in delight, “Look! A doggie!”

The man huffed, eyes shut in effort as he threw his whole weight into tightening a nut.

“Nah, just went soft. Just had to make sure —” The man turned around, seeing him. “Uh!” He wiped his fingers hastily on his shirt, leaving dark pawprints on the fabric. “That’s a fox, kids. Not a doggie. You look hurt, Mr. —”

“Fox Reynard. F-O-X. Fox.” He smiled at the family. Isn’t that what humans did, to show they were friendly? He showed all his teeth.

“He needs help,” the female human said. It was less a statement, more of an order for the male. Fox widened his smile. The tools were in motion.

“You look like a kind family. You mind giving a poor wounded forest animal a ride?”

The family was around him now: the two cubs cooing in delight, the boy cub trying to touch his fur. The mom held him back, but she looked as taken as the rest of them. The girl clung to her mother’s pants; she was shy, but as Fox looked her way, she tried to bury her face in her mother’s leg to hide the smile. The man wiped his hand on his shirt, bending down, extending it to Fox.

“We’re the Pearsons. We’d be pleased to give you a ride wherever you need to go. Just coming back from a family vacation. Camping. Communing with nature — you know. Didn’t see as much wildlife as we’d hoped. Now you come to us ... how lucky are we?”

Fox barked a laugh, a high, yipping laugh. It hurt his side, but he couldn’t stop. Look at this stupid plucking family! They were holding their breaths, begging for the scraps of his attention!

He extended a paw, shaking with the male. “Lucky indeed.” The cubs squeaks delight. They thought it was a trick the wild animal knew, shaking paws. They were right.

They got into the vehicle. It was a den of sorts, for humans; smaller, less sophisticated than his own.

Wait, what was his den like?

The male fired the moving den up, starting off down the highway. The woman barked orders at the man, listing animal hospitals from her phone. The man had a half-immunity to her bark. Fox could admire it; his fur, too, grew thicker against the winter wind. The man looked back over his shoulder.

“What happened to you?”

“Bad luck happened. Took a gamble, had a bad turn.”

Is that what happened? Fox wasn’t sure, but it sounded right.

The human acknowledged him with a primitive grunt. It sounded non-committal, but Fox read a lifetime into it.

“You a gambling man, Pearson?”

His mate gave him a severe look. The man wet his lips.

“From time to time ... I like to place a bet ... here and there.”

Of course he did. Every life was a wheel of fortune — it’s only purpose was to spin.

“How about a little wager, then? Help pass the time?”

The woman glared at her mate. The male ignored her.

“What did you have in mind?” Fox was sitting on the blue couch, across from the boy, who was fiddling on some device. To turn any wheel, you just needed a lever, and know where to push.

The man looked back. Fox gave him another one of his reassuring smiles, hackles and all.

“Oh, I’m sure we can think of something ...”

He would use these humans, use any animal that came down his trail.

Because what was nature but a test of wills?

And whoever was strongest, drags the rest along behind him.

END

A Comment or Two

Thank you for reading!

Dear Reader,

I hope you enjoyed Book One in the Silas Oaktree Series, the Fox's Challenge. What did you think? Loved it or hate it — let me know. Leave a comment on the book's Amazon page.

Your comments on what you read are important to me. At the risk of sounding trite, I write my novels *at* you, my Reader. The visual in my head involves us sitting on logs around a crackling campfire, adjusting the tinder with a walking stick. Maybe I wear an eyepatch, maybe not. What's important is there, around the campfire, is you: the Reader. You humor me listening to the story, something to brighten the long night. Without you there, it's just a man muttering to himself.

So thank you, my Reader. You can contact me directly by email (nicholasericballard@gmail.com).

If you liked this one, there are three more coming down the line. In the second book in the series, Silas Oaktree and the Bounty Hunters of Tennessee, Silas is in some serious trouble. A ten million dollar bounty is put on his head, and he has to fight to survive the onslaught from amateur and professional assassins alike. It's a fun read and I look forward to you joining me for the rest of the ride.

Nicholas Ballard

Las Vegas, June 2014