

# **Squirrel Girl**

**Barbara Marquardt**



Copyright 2008

Dedicated to all the wonderful environmentalists and naturalists, professional and volunteer, that I knew in the Chicago area from the 1970's through the 1990's. I learned so much from them. Thank you.



## Prologue

"Back in the best days of the Squirrel Nation, we might have been able to stop this or at least send out the call for help. If we wanted to, we could send a message as far as what is now New York or Georgia or Illinois or Mississippi. They were all connected in those days by a forest that seemed never to end. But we wouldn't have had to call for help, because if one home was lost it was easy to find one just as good or maybe better, and not very far away, either." Just imagining it made the speaker's tired old eyes sparkle.

"Are those places far, Great-Gram? Those places with all the good home trees?" Lambert Squirrel wiped his tears and waited, spiky tail up and mouth hanging open in a big "O."

The wizened old squirrel matriarch thought over his question. "Far back in times that will never come again, Bertie," she finally said. "Millions of lost trees and hundreds of squirrel generations back. According to what my own Great-Great-Grandma told me, compared with those ancient forests, that little wood lot you're crying about would have seemed smaller than a drop of water in those big storm clouds overhead." She glanced up at a darkening sky.

"But our nest was in that woods. I had nuts buried all over there, and the same ground isn't even there. It was all gobbled up by the big yellow machine." Lambert

looked ready to cry again.

"I know, I know." Great-Grandma looked tearful herself. "It's the same story over and over, wherever wild families live and people *want* to live."

She put her old thin cheek on Lambert's chubby one and they stood hugging for a few moments, both of them trying not to snuffle. Then she continued, talking to herself as much as to Lambert.

"I saw Wilmadene Woodchuck wandering around over there this morning looking for her old burrow. She was a pitiful sight nosing around in the ruins made by that huge earth moving machine. But I told her, just like I'm telling you, there's nothing we can do about it anymore except move on and make a new home."

She shook her head and sighed. "I helped Wilmadene find a place under the bushes in the little park by the library. I would have liked to move there myself, but there's already a squirrel nest in every tree, even the ones that aren't really big enough. But my new nest tree isn't so bad. I just don't know how long it will be before somebody decides to get rid of it."

"Our new nest is all right too, but there aren't any other trees nearby to jump into. And maples don't make acorns."

"Maple seeds are delicious, and there's nothing as scrumptiously sweet as maple juice. Anyway, come on, Bertie," Great-Grandma said, "those big clouds are starting to leak. You'd best come home with me till the rain stops. Your mama knows you're with me and safe."

They headed for a solitary, tall tree-of-heaven in a little patch of dust and weeds behind a six-flat apartment building. Trying to reach the sunlight it had grown up scrawny, and the leaf canopy above the buildings was rather thin, so that Great-Grandma's nest swayed with the slightest wind. With the coming storm it was dipping and rising like a great rocker, but the nest had been built for all weathers and would keep

them secure and almost dry.

"Tell me a story," Bertie said. "Tell me some more about the Squirrel Nation."

They snuggled into the comfy nest just in time, as big drops pattered all around them.

Grandma smiled. "In the days of the Squirrel Nation," she began, "the trees were so tall and thick it was like having a roof. It had to rain for a long time before a squirrel on the ground would feel a drop."

"What happened?" Bertie asked. "Where did all those trees go?"

"This happened," she said, angrily poking her paw out the nest toward their surroundings. "Man. And all his lifeless works. They cleared away the places where animal families could live and killed us outright for food or fur or fun. To survive we had to find a way to live in their lands. Most animals couldn't do that, and they're gone forever, or almost gone."

"But didn't the Squirrel Nation try to do something about it?"

"Oh, yes, Bertie. Their leader during some of the hardest times was a brave little orphan called Squirrel Girl. Her tail was bent and had a missing tip, and she was smaller and plainer than most. But she tried very hard, and you and I are probably here because of what she did at the end of her struggles. But she couldn't save the nation as it was. To survive, the squirrels had to change."

"I want to hear her whole story," Bertie said, "starting with when she was little."

"It's a very long one," said Great-Grandma, "but it looks like this will be a long rain, so we'll begin and see how far we get. But I'm warning you, there are good times and exciting times in this story, but there are some scary parts and some very sad parts. Can you take that?"

Bertie nodded yes, but he looked a little frightened and snuggled closer.

She thought a little bit, then cleared her throat and spoke, already sounding a little

sad.

"In a way, it started with a death. When Squirrel Girl's mother died so that her little daughter could live." Great-Grandma shook her head in sorrow. "The little tyke was still learning to jump from branch to branch--which is what caused the trouble--but she was old enough to vow to herself, after the death, that now she would have to be not just good but special. She wanted to do something with her life that would make her mother's sacrifice less of a waste. She didn't know what she would do, but she knew it would be something that would help others, just as her mother had always helped her."

"One minute the little furry scamp was a mischievous child with a doting mother, and the next she was a terrified orphan, vowing to do whatever would have made her mother proud."

"The last innocent and truly happy moment of her life was right before she leaped to a branch that looked to her to be thick and sturdy. But it was as dead as her mother would soon be, a branch just waiting for the little bump of her landing to help it break off and crash to the forest floor. Squirrel Girl scratched and banged herself going down, and landed hard on the forest floor, right next to the broken-off branch."

Bertie interrupted. "But how could her mother die just because Squirrel Girl fell?"

"Be patient," Great-Grandma said sternly. "And let me tell this my way. I was just getting to the part about the hungry hawk overhead. You've never seen those huge, fierce birds, because we live in a city, and they love wild places. They also love to eat little furry animals."

Bertie shivered. "Oh, no. This really is going to be scary, isn't it?"

"Yes," said Great-Grandma, "Full of danger, just like all life. Now be still and pay attention. And calm down. It might help to close your eyes and try to picture the beautiful place where all this happened. Start by imagining lovely trees and shrubs and



grasses and flowers everywhere, with no houses or roads or cars. That is the world your ancestors knew. A green world, not yet ruined."

Bertie's eyes were still open, and they looked unhappy. "What about that hawk?" he asked. "Should I imagine that too?"

"Not yet. And stop worrying, Bertie. I'll get to it all, I told you, and there's no need to be frightened of what happened so long ago," Great-Grandma said, giving him a squeeze. "This history doesn't just tell what we lost, it also tells what we kept. Our homes may not be all we want, but we still have homes. We're alive and dry and safe, with full bellies and families that love us. Now close your eyes and imagine the lovely place where Squirrel Girl lived as a baby."

## Chapter 1

Some of the youngest animals, and the displaced ones, new to Mapleway Woods, didn't know which of the amazing stories about Squirrel Girl were true. One thing that everyone agreed on was that she was different. Growing up, she had tried things no one else had even thought of, much less done. Since she had gone off on her adventures, many tales had been told about her, but they kept changing, becoming more and more fantastic until Squirrel Girl's friends couldn't see her in them at all anymore.

And so it was that when a message had arrived by passenger pigeon from Squirrel Girl that very morning, saying she was coming back home today, and she had something to tell them, the news had created an uproar. Everyone had something to say, something to ask.

The poor passenger pigeon was so tormented with questions that ruffled feathers stood up all over her body. Members of the gentle dove family cannot manage to sound angry, no matter that they may be steaming inside, so the passenger pigeon, who happened to be called Palomita and who was Squirrel Girl's best friend, could only express her impatience in coos, which never put anyone off. She was a gentle soul, but nevertheless she left in a great huff, unable or unwilling to answer anything. "Ask her yourself!" was all she would say.

The hum of gossip was almost strong enough to start a little breeze blowing. All the old stories that anyone could remember about Squirrel Girl seemed to be whirling

around, gaining wind as they went, as missing parts were filled in by the tale teller's imagination.

At the core of the fabrications, there was at least one certain truth, one thing in particular that made Squirrel Girl different. Squirrel Girl had been a child with a million questions, and the main one had been "Why?" Sometimes she figured out "why" and other times she just added the question to a long list in her mind of things she wanted to find out some day. Before she was grown she had started planning a great trip, an adventure, in which she would finally discover the answers to her "whys."

It was never good enough for her to be told "because this is the way it has always been" or "Squirrel children are just supposed to learn what their elders do, not question or change it."

No. If you told Squirrel Girl to hide a nut a certain way, she would immediately look for a different, better way, or try experiments to find the best way. And if she should chance to come upon a better way, she would give no one any peace until she had done her best to convert him to her new improved method.

She was a difficult squirrel, no doubt about it. It was said that there were many who would hide if they saw her coming. Not that she was mean-spirited or bad. She was just a nuisance, always stirring things up.

So when it came to the story about how she had been orphaned as a wee babe, there were those who wondered if she had somehow been at fault. There were even those who said--because of the way the tales about her had been embroidered over time--that perhaps such a tragic event had not really happened, or that her mother had simply died of old age in an ordinary way.

Even some of those who had actually been present when Squirrel Girl was really and truly orphaned were critical. They said that the child simply didn't listen to her mother, that was the trouble. But then, no, some of the others said, the fault was with

Squirrel Girl's ancient mother, who should have kept a sharper eye on her rambunctious daughter. The child, the only one born alive in that surprise birthing of her old age, was just too much for her.

According to her best friends, Squirrel Girl was a precocious but innocent infant, and no one had blamed her. Few had blamed her mother either, since that sweet squirrel lady had given her life for her babe.

"Shame on you," Nutta Nestmaster Squirrel scolded those who blamed the mother. A little crowd of forest animals had gathered in a sunny opening where a tree had fallen, and they were enjoying the beautiful day, foraging and gossiping. "The same thing could have happened to any of you," Nutta went on, "though I'm not sure you would have all given your life to protect your child."

Nutta was one of the oldest squirrels in Mapleway woods, and she had once been the best friend of Squirrel Girl's grandmother. When she was still a girl, Nutta had left with her family to go to an older, richer woods. Last year, however, men had come to Nutta's old forest to cut down the trees and carry them away. Nutta had lost both her home and most of her family, who had been trapped when the men burned the leftover brush to clear the land for farming.

And so Nutta had returned alone to Mapleway Woods. Her old friend, including Squirrel Girl's grandmother, had passed on to the spirit world by this time. Though Nutta had tried many times to get the true story of how Squirrel Girl had been orphaned, everybody had a different version of that tragic event.

"Squirrel Girl's mother acted very bravely, as far as I've heard, and we should praise and not blame her. Now," Nutta continued, "who actually saw what happened?"

"Let me tell," said Cleoka Catbird. "I was hiding in the dogwood, chatting happily with myself and thinking about lunch, when it started. I was enjoying the day madly, it being so fine and sunny and mild, and I had already had a good breakfast and..."

"No," said Nutta, "You'll never get to the point. There was a crowd there, so someone else should be able to tell it straight."

"I...I...I don't like speaking," Rosenibbler Rabbit said softly, pausing to investigate a possible flea on her flank, "but I feel that I should. Not only was I there that day, but I think I was the one that the hawk was trying to catch. I had been feeding on a delicious clump of strawberry leaves, just enjoying the warm sun on my back fur and the sweet flavor of the young leaves, when a frightening dark shadow with flapping wings appeared on the ground in front of me, still small enough to run from but too big and close for freezing to do any good. I felt sure I had been spotted. I headed for the brambles, since they were a little closer than a hole."

"I saw you run," said Fliptail the chipmunk, "and I wondered what took you so long to notice and get moving. I had started chirping a warning when that hawk was just a speck. But you just kept stuffing strawberry leaves in your mouth. And it looked like you even had your eyes closed for a second."

"I did." Rosenibbler looked embarrassed. "I don't do that anymore. It's stupid and dangerous. But you know, when something tastes especially delicious, you just want to close your eyes and focus on it."

"A chipmunk would never be so careless," said Fliptail. "It's like asking to be a snack." He thought a minute. "Well, maybe safe in my home, with a very special nut or berry. But never ever out someplace where I could be seen and eaten!"

"Did you see everything that happened?" Nutta asked Fliptail.

He shook his head sadly. "No, by the time Hawk got close enough to kill, I was hidden. I'm too small to take chances. But Squirrel Girl herself told me it was her fault. She wasn't paying any attention to the danger, even when I was chirping and Rabbit was running."

"I saw it all," said Lakefeather Bluejay, "and I would have called my family to try

to mob that hawk out of there if I hadn't had little ones in the nest that I didn't dare leave alone. I was screaming my 'Jay! Jay!' warning even before Chipmunk got going. But nobody pays any attention to me."

"Because you're always screaming about something," Rosenibbler said very softly.

"What was that?" asked Lakefeather.

"I said you're always good about seeing something. Can *you* tell us exactly what happened that day?" Rosenibbler asked.

"Yes, of course. What happened is that everyone ignored me, and there was a tragedy!"

"But," asked Nutta, "did you see how Squirrel Girl got to the ground and how her mother saved her and then died?"

"No, not all of it, because I never took my eyes off that hawk from the time he was the size of dust to the moment when he grabbed up the mother, killed her, and carried her off. I missed seeing how the two squirrels got spread on the ground like targets, with the mother on top."

"I can tell you what you want to know." The quiet voice belonged to Victoria Squirrel.

Victoria was a middle-aged squirrel, rather plump. She had a reputation for having the largest and best hidden stashes of black walnuts, which she achieved by cracking them open carefully before storage, and then daintily removing the nutmeats, often in small pieces, to her secret caches.

Many in this group knew, but had forgotten, how important Victoria's help had been to the tiny orphan. Squirrel Girl had been very independent and proud and had taken care of herself, and had even gone on a few short, adventurous journeys before she was full grown, but she was able to be so strong because of the nurturings and teachings

of Victoria, which had begun the very day of the tragedy.

"There never was a more pitiful sight," Victoria continued, "than that baby looking up at her dead mama being carried into the sky by an enormous hawk. It wasn't just that she loved her mother and would miss her. And it wasn't just that now she was alone, without any family or help, when she was too young to know what to do."

"No," Victoria sighed, "what bothered that poor infant was that it had been her fault. Her mama had said to be careful. Yet just minutes before she had been cavorting around the treetops, making leaps to thin or dead branches that experience had not yet taught her were too weak."

"Poor babe! She was so hard on herself. In her mind, she was a worthless disobedient child. She thought her mother had been too good for her, had died because of her foolishness. When Squirrel Girl had crashed to the ground, her mama had taken one quick glance at the situation, at the hawk hurtling down toward her daughter, and had leaped on top of the baby just as the bird spread its talons to attack, so that she was grabbed instead of her child. Squirrel Girl never stopped feeling guilty. I bet she still does."

"You're right. I do." Squirrel Girl herself had arrived. She stepped into the clearing from the brushy edge.

## Chapter 2

"Go eat some rats!"

Chica dodged the kick the speaker was aiming at her lovely calico back, then ran back directly toward the very spot on the deck where the foot had been before it was raised. She'd have to time this just right to get the effect she wanted.

The sailor, known by an inappropriately slim name all knew to be false, Jack Knife, had been thrown off balance when his kick missed its target. His upper body wobbled dangerously as his kicking foot lurched toward the deck.

But the deck at that moment was filled with twelve pounds of manic cannonball cat. Much as Jack would have loved to trounce what he had often called a patch-coated, yowling, useless feline, he might as well have been trying to trounce lightning as it struck him. His foot, finding no purchase, went back up in the air, as did his wildly flailing arms. Then his body crashed backward to the deck, a ball that would not bounce.

Seconds later, safe in her hiding place, Chica purred contentedly, smiling as much as a cat could. She had done well.

Jack lay where he fell, moaning and cursing. "Cat." he said after a while, only he didn't just say "cat." He added some very bad words. In fact, most of what Jack said, even when he was happy, was peppered with bad words which don't bear repeating. "Cat," he said again, "I'm going to get you for this. And when I do, when I do, you are



going to be fish food."

He tried to move, to push himself up, but fell back, cursing foully and groaning. Tears welled up in his eyes, and he blinked hard a few times before closing his eyes altogether. He sighed deeply.

He was really a pathetic sight, Chica thought. Impossible, though, to feel sorry for someone who kicked and abused you. She'd have to watch out now. She had no doubt that he would throw her overboard if he got the chance.

Luckily he was slow and clumsy, and she was fast and agile. If not, she would never have tried what she had just done. She shuddered to think what might have happened had she been slower. She'd have been flat as a rug--a very handsome rug, of course--had he fallen on her.

Footsteps. Chica scrunched down farther, hoping she was covered from all angles. She could tell it was Finn approaching, and he was not someone she wanted to cross.

"Blast your eyes, Jack," Finn shouted, kicking the sailor's bloated body hard with the pointed toe of his boot. "This beats all! Sleeping on duty and right on the deck, like you don't even care if I catch you." He kicked Jack again. "Get up before I mistake you for a pig ready to barbecue."

"Aiiee," Jack cried, trying to push himself up. He fell back again with a long drawn out groan. "I'm hurt. Have some pity on me. That blasted cat tripped me again. I know she does it on purpose."

Of course it's on purpose, stooge, Chica thought, just like your kicks.

"She's a ratter, Jack," Finn said, "and we're troubled by rats. She's useful. I wish I could say the same about you."

"She's a good ratter, too," said a voice behind Finn.

Ah, thought Chica, what a savior I have in this Spaniard.

Finn turned to look at El Gitano, the gypsy. Rather than try to pronounce the word for gypsy, *gitano*, hee-tah-no, he simply called the Spaniard "El Heat."

Finn stepped back, startled, then guffawed. El Heat was dangling a gigantic black rat by its tail.

"This," said the Spaniard, "is what the cat was after."

Chica smirked and wiggled her way to a position which allowed her to seem to be following El Heat. She jumped up and appeared to roughly snatch the rat from her friend, who imperceptibly loosened his grip.

"Easy, cat," he said, "don't take my hand." He watched the cat start to tear the rat open. "She's a fierce one," he laughed, shaking his head in admiration.

Chica was already gnawing at the rat's soft belly, her favorite part. She preferred mice, but rats did have more meat on them. And it was very nice of El Gitano to play this game, to kill rats for her and give her the credit. Tonight when he was sleeping she would have to remember to show her appreciation, to groom his hair for him. He had gotten lousy since they'd been on this ship, and Chica had always found lice to be a tasty little snack.

The sound of wings fluttering jerked Chica to attention. Her eyes, already large and round, expanded. In her opinion, there was nothing so delicious as a bird, especially when it was still warm but could no longer be teased into trying to escape. Of course she would also gladly accept long-dead cooked chicken from her gypsy friend, who was no gypsy at all but a Spanish aristocrat.

To her, he was Pedro, respectfully called Don Pedro by everyone back when she had first been found by him. He was the friend who had fed her boiled chicken and broth when she was a starving orphaned kitten. She had been with Pedro later when he tried to stand up for the Indians, with him when he was sent home in disgrace from New Spain, with him in corrupt old Spain when he was sentenced to death for treason, and was still

with him in his new gypsy identity, escaping to the unknown northern regions of the New World. And with all his troubles, Pedro still thought to provide for Chica's safety and food. Not with chickens or birds though, not at sea. He was just kind, not magic.

The fluttering that Chica had just heard brought no good news of a hunt ending in dinner. It came from a bird now perched on Finn's left shoulder, on a heavy leather cloth that Finn always kept there to avoid getting ripped by sharp claws. This was a bird that filled Chica with loathing rather than hunger.

This small female fish hawk, at this moment staring contemptuously at Chica, as if to say, "I could kill you if I thought you were worth the trouble," had been stolen as a chick from some faraway nest and trained to do Finn's bidding. Called Fishdeath by Finn and Fishbreath by almost everyone else, the hawk had somehow been trained to carry messages between Finn's colony and his ship. But he was no gentle carrier pigeon. Finn encouraged the rumor that Fishdeath would fly straight at the eyes of anyone who attacked Finn.

Fishbreath and Chica were always picking at their mutual hatred and keeping it festering. Now the two enemies stared at each other.

"You're not going to pretend you killed that rat yourself, are you?" Fishbreath asked.

"And why not?" Chica asked, trying not to show that she feared Fishbreath knew the truth.

" Because I saw your lying gypsy trash kill it himself."

Chica tried to keep her own expression calm and to see something in the hawk's terrible face that would show she was lying. But all she saw was triumph.

"I knew you didn't have it in you to be a ratter," the hawk continued.

"Well, I am one," Chica said, "but what I really like is a good fish hawk that stupidly falls asleep at night, which is the very time that cats hunt best. If I were you, I

wouldn't close my eyes tonight."

"And if I were you, I wouldn't take any more little catnaps in the sun."

All that Finn and El Heat could hear of this was soft growls from Chica and warning chirps from the hawk, but they were used to that. They heard these sounds every time the two animals were together, and no violence had come of it so far.

Finn looked at the huge mound Jack made on the deck and shook his head in disgust. "William!" he shouted. "Benjamin! Robert! John!" He looked around as if expecting them to appear instantaneously, and, sure enough, in a few moments the men could be heard approaching. The ship was small, and the indentured servants were crowded together under guard below deck. These four were men Finn sometimes trusted to help his crew with guard duties. They were given nothing extra in return, except more abuse, but they always seemed glad to come up into the fresh air.

The four looked apprehensive, as if they might have been found out in some misdemeanor, or perhaps wrongly accused of something. At the same time, they were taking deep breaths of sea air. The stench below deck was much worse than the stink coming from the heap that was Jack. Truthfully, not a soul on board had bathed since they left England, and anyone on board would make a polecat want to plug his nose. Chica often buried her pink nose into the sweet clean smell of her own meticulously groomed belly. She wrinkled her nose now, once again thankful not to be a human.

"Haul Jack somewhere I can't see or hear or smell him," Finn said.

The four tried to lift him and couldn't.

"Just drag him," Finn bellowed. "Get him out of here!"

They began to pull him along the rough deck, unfortunately not all pulling in the same direction.

"Ow! Ow! Splinters! Save me, mother of God!" Jack cried pitifully.

They kept pulling, but could not get together on the direction. He looked like an

open pliers.

"Excuse me," John said. "I think we should decide which way we're going."

"Let's take him to the doctor," William suggested. "See if he needs to be bled. That is, if Doc isn't too drunk."

"Bled? Bled? Take my blood? That drunk?" Jack was practically crying. "No, no, I'll get up. Just help pull me up."

Two men took each arm while Finn and Pedro pushed Jack from behind, once his back was off the floor. The hawk and cat stared transfixed. How did such clumsy, manifestly stupid, and incompetent creatures survive? Chica corrected a stray hair on her puffy tail, proud of the grace of her species. Even Fishbreath was preening and looking superior.

Unsteadily upright, Jack staggered off, hanging to the rail. At a look from Finn, the four others reluctantly returned below deck.

Signaling with his eyes and a nod to Chica that she should follow him, Pedro turned to go.

"Wait, El Heat," Finn said. "I've been meaning to talk to you."

Oh, no, thought Chica. Now what?

Pedro turned back around and waited.

"You paid your passage, and I can see you're a lot smarter than the indentured men. My guess is that you got in some trouble back in Spain, and probably paid with stolen money, but I still like you and want to help you out. I need a good man to help me when we get on land."

"Doing what?"

"Well, I figure some of the men might plan on taking off and just forgetting about working to pay me back for their passage. It happens every trip. They usually die one way or another, if they do that. They don't know how to live in the wild no way. So to

save them from themselves, you see, I need a kind of foreman to keep them focused on what they're supposed to do."

"I do see." Pedro looked thoughtful. "I'm surprised you don't just get slaves and slave-drivers, the way some farther south are doing."

Chica was surprised too, but what surprised her was to hear Pedro suggest such a thing. It was Pedro's battle against enslaving Indians that got him into such trouble with the King of Spain.

"I am thinking about that," Finn answered. "But I don't like the idea of having people working for me who don't speak my language and who can say things to each other in a language I don't understand. That goes for Spanish, too, by the way, but you speak English and don't have anyone to talk to in Spanish."

Pedro nodded.

Not true, *diablo*, Chica thought. My Pedro talks to me in Spanish all the time. Of course, being human and therefore convinced that only he has a brain and communication skills, he doesn't know I understand either Spanish or English.

"If I help you," Pedro said. "What will be in it for me?"

"Profits. Gold. Are you interested?"

Chica looked hard at Finn's eyes and saw treachery there. She looked at Fishbreath and knew that the hawk was thinking, "Bite, sucker. Take the bait." Surely her Don Pedro, her protector, was smarter than that.

"I might be. How much?"

Chica could not believe what she was hearing.

"I'll prepare a contract, and we can bargain over the details and fill them in the next time we talk. We still have almost a day at sea, enough time to come to an agreement. Maybe tonight."

"I'll think it over."

"Just think over what I told you about those who go off into the wilderness alone. They tend to die. You'd be saving lives. Maybe your own."

"You're not threatening me, are you?" Pedro asked.

Chica suddenly understood. Pedro was in danger of being kept as an indentured servant himself. He was playing along. Chica looked up at Fishbreath. She was laughing at Chica, the cat was sure of it, though people were too imperceptive to see the slight changes of expression that indicate laughter in other animals.

"No, no, just trying to tempt you," Finn said. He laughed heartily, too heartily, and patted his "El Heat" on the back. "*Amigos*, eh?" He went off laughing. Fishbreath looked back at Chica and smirked.

Pedro reached down and stroked the cat. "Don't worry Chiquita, I know what he's up to."

### Chapter 3

There was a stunned silence as everyone gawked at the storied Squirrel Girl. She was so ordinary that the little ones could not keep their dismay to themselves. Squirrels are rarely shy about expressing their opinions, but in this case the children were downright rude.

"She's so small!"

"Look at that ugly kink in her tail!"

"She's very plain. I pictured her different."

And so on in that vein. And their elders were not much politer, chattering loudly about how Squirrel Girl's appearance with that hideous crooked tail would certainly ruin any chances she had ever had of mating well. Not that she had ever been seen as a desirable kind of mate, not with her headstrong wandering ways and orphan background. They doubted now that anyone would want her. Poor girl, with no chance of having a family. And, after all, raising a family, or two or three or four or more, was what life was supposed to be all about for a female squirrel.

All of this was said smack in Squirrel Girl's face, without the least concern for her feelings. If her feelings were hurt, she didn't show it, although those who were watching closely noticed a slight rolling of her eyes and tightening of her mouth. She knew squirrels, especially these squirrels. She had been helped as a babe by many of them, and she had played with others, and they were not a bad lot, but like almost all the animals she had ever known, they did not admire unusual behavior, however much they



might be entertained by it.

"Is this any way to greet a tired traveler? Even if she weren't one of our own?" Victoria Squirrel asked. She had been astonished into silence, but in seconds she was giving her adopted daughter a squirrel hug and nuzzle.

The crowd became quiet, watching Victoria and Squirrel Girl exchange sniffs and rub tenderly against each other. It was an emotional moment, and those who had been saying rude things--that is to say, almost everybody--felt ashamed.

But squirrels are not as a rule sentimental or given to self-criticism. "Let's have a celebration feast!" one of Squirrel Girl's old playmates cried, and in no time there was a chaotic and noisy scrambling about to find and unearth nut caches, followed by quiet munching and sighs of stuffed satisfaction. The birds and rabbits dined as well, bringing to the impromptu potluck their own favorite seeds and greens.

In the sleepy silence that followed, Squirrel Girl spoke. "I came back for a purpose. To the east, life has become much more dangerous, and the dangers are moving this way. I came to warn you."

The squirrels looked uneasy, and the rabbits squirmed. The jays squawked a bit and then began preening as if they were indifferent. A young squirrel piped up, "Is that how your tail got hurt?"

"No. But I'll tell you that story as well, because it's part of my adventures since I left, and I know you're all curious. If you little ones can sit quietly, and you big ones can keep an open mind about goings-on that sound unbelievable, I'll tell you my story."

The little ones were settled down faster than a yellowjacket wasp can find sugar, and in no time at all, the animals who had been so rude were waiting attentively to hear what Squirrel Girl had to say.

"When I left," she began, "I didn't know where I would go or what I would find. The only thing I knew was that somewhere, somehow, I had to do something that would

have made my mother really proud, something brave and important. She died so that I wouldn't die, and I needed, and still need, to feel in my heart that I'm making good use of that life she saved."

Victoria was shaking her head. "She wouldn't have expected it. She loved you no matter what."

"Because she was so good. And even if she didn't expect it, she would have loved for me to be as brave and good as she. Anyway, if just for myself, I have to try."

"That day, the day I left," Squirrel Girl continued, "I was not feeling brave at all, just unsure and scared. But you know what? The very first thing I learned was that the earthfolk in the next woods are not very different from the earthfolk in these woods. And the trees and smaller plants are ones I know, or at least *like* ones I know. The nuts and seeds are as tasty, and the ones I shouldn't eat are as bitter. And the folk I need to beware of, the ones who would gladly snatch me up and gobble me down, are the same types I've watched out for all my life."

"So at first I was relieved, because everything was so familiar. And it was fascinating, because it was similar but not exactly the same. For instance, the red squirrels are a lot like us grays, enjoying the same foods, and making nests in the trees, but there is one big difference. They won't share their home place with other red squirrels. No, instead they must spend every waking moment making sure that no other red squirrel steps in the place they have decided to call their own. Since red squirrels are always defending their boundaries and trying to extend them, instead of playing and chasing all day, as we often do for fun, I believe they must think it's fun to compete for territory. They keep so busy with this that they barely had time to speak to me, and when they did it was mostly to try to get me out of their way, out of their territories."

"I think you gray squirrels are nicer," a little female sparrow chirped in.

"Well, of course I do too. But that's another thing I found out. Every kind of

animal thinks it's the best kind. But we can't all be, can we?"

No one answered. It *was* a puzzle, how all the different animals could know so surely that their own kind was best, and yet it was true, they did.

"Anyway, it was all very interesting," Squirrel Girl went on, "but I begin to feel that although it was very fine to have entertaining adventures, I was not going to be able to do anything very important. No one needed my help."

"Oh, once in a while I was able to pass on word of a predator hunting or hiding nearby, but everyone does that. The truth was, I was the one getting helped and sometimes fed by all the friendly earthfolk I met. The most anybody ever asked me to do was pass on news or messages to family and friends I might meet as I moved eastward."

"Then, as I moved farther east, the land began to change. I was moving uphill most of the time. Instead of looking ahead at more woods and prairies and wetlands, I was climbing slowly through rock-strewn windswept areas, with low mountains beginning to rise faintly in the distance. In open places, the trees began to be smaller and farther apart and bent into contorted shapes by the wind. Some of them were struggling to grow out of cracks in big boulders."

"And the behavior of the earthfolk themselves changed. There were fewer, and most that I saw were moving west. Some even told me I was going the wrong way. When I asked what they meant, they just shook their heads and said, "You'll see," or "You'll find out soon enough," or "Never mind. Just turn around and go back home."

"One other thing happened that was new to me, right before I started to climb the first mountain. Resting in a small elm, I spied a small party of the tall hairless ones we call men and usually try to stay away from. They were stalking prey. I haven't seen very many men, so I was fascinated and followed them for a while, being very careful not to show myself. They looked to me like big plucked flightless birds with only a few feathers left here and there, so that they had to cover themselves with skins stolen from other

animals."

"They were a little different from those we sometimes see near Mapleway Woods. Like the ones we see here sometimes, they hung decorations on their bodies and even painted their faces bright colors, but the style of it all was not quite like anything I've seen before. It was like the differences between gray and red squirrels, who are both alike and not alike."

"I watched them hunt. With a bow and arrow, they had fatally wounded but not yet killed a rabbit who lay dull-eyed with pain, staring up at his persecutors. They asked the rabbit's spirit for permission to kill it and eat it."

"I understood the rabbit's answer, though its voice was faint, and its face barely twitched. Every part of that rabbit was saying, 'No, no, you will never have my permission. But I am as good as dead and eaten anyway.'"

"After they killed the rabbit, they gave thanks to the spirit again, just as if it had given permission. And they did something like this three times altogether, once with another rabbit and the last time with a woodchuck, until they had enough to roast for a meal for them all. Each time they asked permission, did not get it, but pretended they did. It seemed to me they were very good at making up ways to believe that what they wanted to do was also the right thing to do."

"As I watched them," Squirrel Girl said, "I moved a little closer to see better. I thought at first that they had little nuts or maybe seeds decorating their clothes. But then I saw that their decorations were only very pretty shells, a little like those of the clams in our pond or the crayfish in our wet prairies, but more colorful and varied in shape."

"I had been so intent on trying to see if the men had decorated their clothes with food, that I had, without realizing it, moved down the elm too far and was now too close, into the line of vision of one of the men's skinny dogs. I did not realize I had been so careless until the brute jumped at me, snapping his spitty jaws on a few hairs of my tail."

Squirrel's Girl' audience squirmed and exchanged glances among themselves.

"No, I can see the question on your faces," Squirrl Girl said. "That is *not* how my tail got its kink."

"Anyway," she went on, "I was caught by surprise and barely made it back up the elm. From there I leaped to a much bigger maple, where I was even safer. I could have kept jumping for miles, at least back in the direction I had just come from, without going down to where that hound could get me, but I was curious and stopped to look down at my tormentor."

"From up there, just to make him pay for scaring me, I chattered down insults. 'You're not going to make a very good meal for your master,' I gibed, 'when he gets tired of your foolishness and decides to cook you.'"

"'No, no,' the hound said, 'he'll *never* eat *me*. I'm his loyal friend. I'm too good a dog.'"

"Just guessing, I shouted, 'Didn't this friend who starves you once roast and eat your mother?'"

"He looked so sad I was almost sorry I had said it. I hadn't known it was true. I'd just known from the way I'd heard that men treat the dogs that obey them, it could have been true."

"Downcast, the hound said softly, 'Yes, but she must have done something wrong'."

"Or your master must have been really hungry," I said.

"'It won't happen to me,'" he insisted. "I always obey him. He likes me." But he had lost his appetite for hunting, near-skeleton though he was, and he turned to leave me. It was so pathetic. Of course his man would eat him; that's why he was keeping him. But the poor dog couldn't really help it that he was so trusting, so stupid."

The cur ambled toward one of the men and sniffed hungrily, from a distance of

several feet, at the piece of rabbit leg the man was gobbling down in great chunks. The man reached out and pushed him away roughly, then threw a bone right at the dog's face. The dog snapped at it and bit down on it, as happy, it seemed, as if he'd been politely served the whole rabbit."

"After chewing for a while, the hound looked triumphantly up at me, still high in the maple watching him play doggy-slave. He said, in what I'm sure must have sounded to his master like a groan of pleasure, 'See how much he loves me?'"

"I just shook my head, half in disgust and half in pity. Poor fool!"

"I was growing tired of watching a dumb dog adore a man who was pretending that killing and filling his belly with innocent creatures was holy work. A kill for food is simply that, a fact of life, and a lot of mumbo-jumbo while the victim suffers turns a necessary act into a cruel one. When a predator finally gets me, I want my neck broken quickly and without warning. And I hope they don't ask for permission or forgiveness, because I'm refusing in advance."

"Anyway, from my lofty perch in the sugar maple, I looked away from the dog and back over the land I'd traversed, and then forward to what lay ahead. Behind me, as far as I could see, under a rosy sunset, were green treetops full of the songs and flutterings of birds. Ahead, still glowing under the sun's fading rays, the green was less solid and the land sloped toward a still-distant mountain. Boulders lay in rough piles amid the trees, and great rock shelves jutted from the rising land. More of the trees were evergreen, but the trees were fewer in number and more stunted the higher I looked up the mountain. Where there were rock piles, the vegetation under the trees was sparse and unfamiliar."

"I thought to myself, 'This is where things change. This is where I'll find out what everyone said I'd find out. I just have to get to the top of the mountain, and I'll see...I don't know what. But I'll find out.' And I fell asleep, sure that I was headed where I

needed to go."

"The mountain top hadn't looked so far that night, or the next morning when I started toward it, but when it comes to judging distances up a mountain, a squirrel can be fooled. It took me three days to climb that mountain. The higher I got, the quicker I got tired and the harder it was to find familiar food that was ready to eat. It looked to me as if the area had been heavily foraged, and I thought of all those travellers from the east I had been seeing at first. About halfway up the mountain, the earthfolk and any signs of their passage became as scarce as the food. I was beginning to suspect that somewhere there was an easier way to the other side of this mountain and that everyone but me knew about it."

"Exhausted as I was, I was so excited as I approached the peak that I was almost running. Then, when I got there and saw what lay ahead, I felt a terrible fatigue. I could have fallen asleep standing there on the ground in an open place, something no squirrel would ever do. And of course I didn't either."

"The first thing I saw at the tip-top of that mountain was more mountains, a whole string of them lined up running north and south, as far as I could see, and one big one straight ahead of me to the east."

"I got there at dusk, almost nightfall, when just a little peach-colored shine illuminated the mountains, and the valleys between were already dark. The only thing I could make out about the valley in front of me was that clouds of bats were emerging from the biggest sycamore I had ever seen; its pale blotched bark reflected enough of the remaining light for me to make out its shape. It must have been hollow all through, for the bats kept coming and coming."

"I curled up as best I could in the largest pine I could find, a poor wind-bent specimen. There were taller trees behind me, that perhaps I should have chosen earlier, but now I would not go back. I could only think of going forward. And it was almost

dark now, anyway, the time time for flying squirrels, not gray ones.”

Even though I would not go back, I did not feel safe. Wishing that the ground were covered with leaves instead of pine needles, I longed to make a leafy nest in a stronger, taller tree. Thinking about how easily a wildcat could snatch me for a snack as he walked by, I watched the bats whirl until their motion put me to sleep.”

"I slept poorly, although I was exhausted. I was too uncomfortable and exposed to relax. And I kept thinking about how I didn't seem to be making much progress. When I did sleep, I dreamed things I could not remember but which left me shaking and frightened. I had a heavy feeling of foreboding, a sense that I would get the tests I had been looking for, and more, but that I might not be up to the challenge."

"In the morning light, I could see a narrow river flowing slowly through the broad valley between my mountain and the next. It looked shallow, with many rocks exposed, enough, I hoped, to allow me to jump across without getting soaked. The river had in the past apparently changed its course; I could see its old meandering path. A loop of the old river had been cut off as the water sought a more direct downhill route, and the water trapped in that loop was now clogged with what looked from afar like cattails and reeds. There were only a few places where open water reflected the sky.

With the sun starting to shine, from this height and distance, the valley was beautiful, full of flowers and birds and willows. Not a good place for squirrels though. The willows were shrubby and scattered, with no place for a squirrel to jump for protection. And the more I looked, the more I was afraid that there would be many opportunities to get wet, something squirrels avoid. I would have to be sure I traversed it very carefully, in daylight, and reached the trees on the other low slope in time to put together a sleeping place. My plan was to spend a day going down into the valley, if the way down was as easy as it looked from the top, and then spend the night at the bottom before crossing the open marshland.



The first day of my plan went well, although the few earthfolk I met were not very friendly. They were grumpy or worse, and no one would tell me anything about what lay beyond the next mountain. But I found plenty of food, an easy trail as I got near the bottom, and a good oak tree where I spent the night, after making a shaky peace with a skunk already occupying a dug out sheltered spot amid the tree's roots.

But in the morning I found out the hard way that just downslope of my oak almost the whole valley, not just the area with rushes and cattails, was a marsh. Even where the water wasn't deep enough to drown me, there would be no chance of keeping dry. Hidden beneath flowers and low shrubs was enough standing water to completely soak a squirrel's tail and belly. And under that water was a sticky stinking black mud that could suck me to my death if I weren't careful.

The marsh began abruptly in the place where I accidentally entered it. I had been jumping across some pinkish speckled boulders, the kind called granite, and admiring, when I rested for a few moments, the way little mica pieces sparkle in it. When I reached the last rock I took an extra long leap toward what looked like a patch of soft sedges and fuchsia orchids. I landed with a squish and a splash, and if I hadn't grabbed at the stiff orchid stems and the clumped seedheads at the tops of sedges I might have ended my story right there.

As it was, I was wet up to my neck, and my whole lower body was encumbered with a thick coat of the blackest, foulest-smelling mess I ever saw or smelled. Stuck all over my bottom and tail were burred sedge seeds, whose soft look had turned out to be made of needle thin hooked spines. No one of you would have known me, and you might have even doubted that I was a squirrel, for I was now much bulkier and colored a startling green and black and even pink, where some loose orchid petals had stuck in my mucky fur."

"I was so heavy from the mud that covered me, and the plants so fragile, that it

seemed impossible to jump from plant to plant. I tried of course, because somehow I had to get across, but time after time the plants bent over or broke under my weight, and I got dunked again. In the meantime, clouds of mosquitos and blackflies, and even leeches and ticks, tasted my new flavor of meat. I'm sure no squirrel ever before had attempted such foolishness. In fact, a muskrat family came out to sit atop their den and laugh at me and ask if I was crazy or just lost."

"I knew there had to be good things to eat in that marsh, or that muskrat family making fun of me wouldn't have been so fat. But I didn't see foods I knew, or a place to rest and try them. I forced myself to keep going, though in fact I really had no choice, and finally I made it across. By the time I got to dry land it was almost dark again, and I was so glad to see some plants I knew. I ate until it was completely dark, and then had to struggle to stay awake long enough to find a tree where I could rest undisturbed."

"As all squirrels know, the dark is for sleep. I desperately would have liked to close my eyes and rest, but I dared not do that without finding a high safe place. I was still filthy, and at any other time would have cleaned myself before doing anything else, but my exhaustion was too great. The swamp oak I had chosen was already occupied, and I had a hard time persuading the unfriendly red squirrel family already there to let me stay. But there was a hole in it that they only used in winter or in wet weather, and they finally gave up trying to get rid of me and let me crawl in there. I had to promise to tidy it up and then leave immediately in the morning."

"This night I fell asleep immediately and then woke up long before dawn. I waited for the light, tossing and turning and worrying about what lay ahead. I was saddened by all the hostility I was encountering among earthfolk who are ordinarily cheerful and friendly, at least to their own kind and others who do not threaten them. The many warnings, and, even worse, the mysterious silences, had made me nervous, less and less confident of my ability to be successful in my quest."

"At dawn I could see that the woods here were unusually crowded, and there was a great deal of growling and snarling. Some of the residents were recent arrivals from the east, and they were clearly resented by the older inhabitants. Others were travelling through, and their presence distressed both old and new residents. It was a rich woods, full of enough food for all during the growing season, or at least it seemed so as I foraged for breakfast. But all the choice items, like berries, were being gathered and defended as they ripened, and I heard confrontations over food that in Mapleway Woods is ordinarily shared."

"After cleaning myself, which took a good deal of time, I began to follow a narrow trail that wound slowly up the mountainside, much less steep than my first ascent. I leaped through trees where they were close enough, then scampered up the trail, and finally, my energy diminishing, trudged forward. I expected that when I got to the top I would just see other mountains. I worried about meeting a hairless one on the trail, because now I could see man's footprints as well as those of many other earthfolk. I could well imagine a human asking my blessing while he killed me, and I wanted no part of that."

"And I worried a lot about having to cross water again, between mountains. Might a beaver help me, I wondered? I had always gotten along well with beavers, but that was back where the earthfolk were good-natured."

"This time I did not hurry when the mountain top came in sight. There was no rocky peak, just a small sparse meadow at the summit. The truth was, I was afraid to look at what was waiting on the other side, and I took my time getting there, even slowing down."

"What I saw, when I finally got there, and let myself look, shocked me. I could never have imagined it, because I had never seen anything like it. I could understand why others had told me to see for myself, or, better yet, turn around and go back west."

"It was as if a line had been drawn. To the west, behind me, was green life. To the east, in front of me, it seemed as if most life had been replaced by death and devastation. Most of my view was as gray and dirty brown and black as a winter without snow. But winter can be lovely, and this was not. I had a good view and could see details, for this side of the mountain was not very high above the next valley."

"Almost all the trees, for as far as I could see, had been hacked down, and their bodies, or body parts, were scattered about or heaped carelessly. It was as if thousands of huge, land-bound, and slovenly beavers had been at work, but all the beavers I have ever known were of normal size and behavior, aquatic and meticulous."

"In the valley, the land seemed to have been stripped bare of plants, chopped up, and blocked in with a border of rocks piled high, as if it would try to escape. 'Escape is what I would certainly try to do if I were treated like that,' I remember muttering to myself. Some new plants seemed to be sprouting in rows, plants all of the same type. In one of the fenced-in rectangles, a human female was attacking the earth with a sharp instrument, killing anything that was not one of the sprouts. She wore loose clothing that hung like a long skin, but was made of something else. It tightened at the waist and was so long I could not see if she had feet."

"Many of the hairless ones were there, but they were not quite so hairless and did not look like any humans I had seen before. Like the women, the men were covered with a material I did not recognize, but which I have since been told is a cloth woven from plant fibers. Almost all the males had hair on the bottom half of their faces and on their necks, and even looked as if they might have hair on their arms, although from a distance I could have mistaken dirt for hair. None wore skins or feathers or face paint.

"I saw only a few women, several in the fields and one sitting on a stump and holding a baby. She seemed to be watching a small group of children playing near large structures made of dead trees. These shelters are their homes, I have learned, and are

something like tree holes or caves, but much bigger, so that many trees must be killed and stripped of leaves and glued together with mud to make them.”

“Somehow, I have been told, humans make fires inside these shelters, to keep warm and to cook, but these fires usually do not burn down the homes. All of these things about people I have since learned, but at this first sight I did not understand much of what I saw. I only knew that it seemed very ugly and barren to me.”

"Other than some doves flying overhead, I saw no free earthfolk. This explained the travellers west. They were refugees from this destruction. Everything they needed to make homes and raise families, or even to exist for a few days, was gone. There was no food, no shelter. Where there was water, in puddles and a small pond, it looked brown and foul. The air itself seemed brownish in the valley, thick with the silt and dust from the scalped earth. "

"I had seen natural disasters, terrible storms that knocked down trees, and floods that filled burrows. I have seen horrible frightening fires that had burned and blackened everything, killing earthfolk who were unable to fly or outrun them or bury themselves in a burrow. But those places had greened up again in no time, and life had quickly returned. This was very different, because the place had been ruined deliberately and was being ruined even more as I watched."

"The worst damage was in the mountain side itself. It was completely denuded, and rock rubble and dust covered everything. Having apparently dug up every free-living plant, men now appeared to be digging away the mountain itself. Some were beating at the mountain with weapons, breaking off chunks and tunneling in. Others were clearing away the dead trees and piles of rocks."

"I did not see any dog slaves here, but there was a larger animal, bigger than a deer, that I had never seen before. I later learned that the men call this animal 'horse.' Everything about this animal was long—its nose, its face, its legs, its tail, its mane.”

The horse had a rope through his mouth, which a man held to control the beast's movements. When the horse moved forward, he also pulled a heavy load tied to his back and shoulders. In this way, sweating and being beaten if he did not pull hard enough, the poor horse moved one load after another of rocks or logs down from the mountainside into the valley. Then he pulled the empty container, which rolled on four thin circles, back up the hill. I now know that what he pulled was called a wagon, and that the circles are called wheels. What I don't know is how such a powerful animal became a slave."

"I stood for a long time watching the scene below me, understanding completely now why so many were moving west away from it and why so few cared to describe it to me. I wished they had tried to tell me; I had so many questions that they might have answered. It was clear that these strange bearded men had brought the evil, but where had they come from? Was I looking at them all, at the worst of it, or did this plague stretch to where land ended and water began?"

"We've all heard stories about the place at the end of the earth where creatures must swim to live, the place where gigantic sea monsters spit water high in the sky. I know now that men have learned to travel over that water, riding in huge containers made from dead trees that they call boats. But that morning I could only guess at where they had come from or how many they were."

"I wanted to move closer without being seen. Though the mountainside had no vegetation where I could hide, I thought my gray coat would blend in with the pinkish-gray of the rocks and dust and keep me hard to see. Anyway, everyone seemed too busy to pay attention to a little movement in the rocks above them."

"The absence of almost all free life, except for the men, who themselves seemed more enslaved than free, made the place seem very dangerous to me, and I moved slowly and carefully. Once in a while, to cheer myself, I looked at the passenger pigeons wheeling in the brilliant blue sky above; they and the sky itself were the only normal

things I could see. It seemed to me that I had not sufficiently appreciated waking up each day to a world full of beauty and peace and comfort."

"I continued down the slope and managed to get about a third of the way down without any problems, although the bare ground and pebbles made an unexpectedly slippery surface. I was glad it was a dry day; rain would have turned that slope into a slide. But as it was, I picked my way through the rock debris without too much trouble. Several times I dislodged a rock that had supported other rocks and started what seemed to me a very loud cascade of rocks to the bottom. But the place below was itself very noisy, and no one seemed to notice except for a horse, who pulled away from the direction of the falling rocks and was beaten with a stick for doing so."

"As I got closer to the bottom, I grew more nervous and excited. The rock piles were larger, and I could hide behind them but not between them, so I scampered from one to the other as fast as I could go. I think that is why I slipped."

"One minute I was leaping freely toward a boulder and the next I was sliding down the mountainside, pursued by hundreds of small rocks and pebbles I had dislodged. When the little avalanche came to a rest, I lay covered with cuts and bruises, barely conscious. My tail was completely buried by a pile of pebbles that I could not move, at least in my weakened state."

"Pinned to the ground, my mouth full of dust and my body hurting from the tips of my ears to the end of my poor trapped tail, I groaned and closed my eyes. I had seen the skeletons of trapped animals, and I knew what would happen if I did not get free. I would have to try, but first I had to rest. I closed my eyes and drifted into unconsciousness."

"I don't know how long I lay that way, for when I opened my eyes again the sun was hidden behind clouds, and I could not tell how high it was in the sky. Some warm soft creature was enveloping my body and pecking at my head, saying, 'Wake up, now,

wake up. This will never do. You don't want to die here, do you, you silly squirrel?' Peck, peck, peck at my already dented and damaged head. 'What are you doing here anyway? Didn't your mama tell you that squirrels live in trees? Do you see any trees here?' Peck, peck."

"That last remark about my mama made me mad. I didn't much like the chipping away at my head either. I opened my eyes and tried to say, 'Hey, cut that out. And leave my mama out of this.' But what came out sounded more like moaning. And my eyes started to flutter shut again."

"'Good. You're alive enough to open your eyes. Now keep them open.' And that devil grabbed the eyelashes of my right eye and lifted the lid, so I had to look at him, or rather her, as I later found out. It was a passenger pigeon. I had never seen one so close before and was startled by its beautiful soft colors so close to my face, as if a sunset had turned to feathers. The plump bird had spread her wings and was blanketing my chilling body."

"'Don't get any ideas about dying.' the pigeon chided me, as I tried to close my eye again, 'Too many creatures have died here already.' She let go of my eyelid and nudged my head, then my paws. 'Try to move a bit and get your blood circulating.' She nudged again, and I tried harder, keeping both eyes open, though I wanted to shut them and be still."

"'Now you keep those eyes open and keep working on trying to move your toes, and any part of your body you can. I'm going to see what can be done about that tail.'"

"And my new friend--for that is what she has become--set about uncovering my tail, pebble by pebble, all the time keeping an eye on me to make sure I was still awake."

"By the time she had my tail free, it was nearly dark. I could move but I did not have the strength to crawl more than a few feet, to the cover of the boulder I had been jumping to reach. She flew off for a while, then returned with her feathers full of water



for me to lick. Then she made forays for food, one nut or seed at a time, until I began to feel stronger. She stayed with me after that, and we huddled there on the ground all night, both of us out of place and frightened, though she made a good show of strength. She kept us both warm and cozy, and I am certain that her good care saved my life."

"In the morning I felt much better. My tail was very painful and had the kink you can see now, and it still hurt to move, but I was stronger and knew I would survive."

"My new friend convinced me not to go any farther east until I was healed and able to take care of myself. She said it was more important to go back and warn my family and friends of the danger to all earthfolk in the westward path of the human scourge."

"I said, 'How can I warn them? I don't know enough yet. I must understand what is happening before I can convince others.'"

"I will tell you everything you need to know,' she said, 'just as soon as we get back where you will have food and water. You will find little to eat or drink below, unless you steal it from man. As slow as you are now, you will be killed the first time you try to take anything.'"

"I agreed, and we set out. While I struggled to make the climb, so difficult for me in my weakened state, she flew off to find food and water for herself and for me. It took most of the day, but by night we were in a tree--albeit a low and unsatisfactory one--with almost full stomachs. I knew she could fly to a better place, and that her usual life was with a flock of hundreds, no, sometimes thousands, and so I deeply appreciated her staying to help me. She promised that in the morning, after we ate, she would tell me what I needed to know."

"What she described, when she finally got to it, broke my heart. The more I learned, the more I understood why no one could stand to talk about what was happening. As I tell you, I feel an unbearable sadness, and I have only heard about these things, not

seen them firsthand. The pigeon told me many sad stories about earthfolk she had known, including stories about slaughter of her own kind, but I will spare you this for now and just give you the broad picture. It is enough to bear at one sitting."

"For many seasons now, these strange bearded men have been coming to our land, arriving by sea in what are called boats, or sailing ships. Around here, one man has been bringing most of them, a man called Finn, and each time he brings a boatload, he goes back for another boatload, until almost all the land by the sea is claimed by these men. They are thick as lice on a sick animal, only worse because lice at least do not by themselves kill. No, these men are more like a disease or fungus which eventually kills its victim."

"They cut and clear the land of every plant we are used to and need to live. They kill all the animals they see, not just for food but for fun. Those earthfolk who don't die that way will have no food or cover unless they leave. But when they do leave, they find that the same thing has been happening everywhere, that there are many other men like Finn, and other animals are also fleeing their homes, trying to find food and cover. Even before anyone started moving, the land was already as full of as many animals as it could feed and shelter."

"So earthfolk everywhere in the East are at each other's throats, competing for what there is not enough of. They are coming this way." Squirrel Girl stopped and looked at the crowd listening to her story. "From the many unfamiliar faces before me, I think you already have refugees, who perhaps only knew that their land was getting too crowded."

"But the overcrowding and the deaths in the East are only a beginning. There seems to be no end to it, no way to stop more and more men from arriving and changing our world so that it is unlivable. They are far now, but they will be coming this way. I have come back to warn you that something must be done, some plan must be made for

our future."

Squirrel Girl's audience looked horrified. They looked at each other in wonder and then began to deny a danger they could not accept. "The danger is still very far," they said. "Surely you don't expect us to leave our homes or to fight such an enemy. No, no, it's impossible. Maybe the pigeon was exaggerating. Let's wait and see."

Squirrel Girl looked at them sadly. "All right," she said. "I know this is hard to accept. And I don't really know what to do anyway. But one thing I do know. This Finn fellow is not waiting and seeing. He is bringing more boatloads as fast as he can, and those he brings will keep destroying the land. I don't understand why he's doing it, but I know he is."

Dejected, Squirrel Girl turned, as if to walk away.

"You're not going to leave us again, are you? Not so soon, at least," Victoria begged. "You just got back."

Squirrel Girl walked over to her foster mother and nuzzled her. "I'm sorry, Victoria," she said. "I would love to stay here a while with you. I would especially love to hear you tell again about the days when you and my mother were young. But something must be done now to save our world. It will soon be too late. And there doesn't seem to be much I can accomplish here in Mapleway Woods, if no one will listen."

"I'm listening. And I believe you. But I don't have the strength anymore to help you. I'm just too old."

Squirrel Girl hugged Victoria. "I'll be back. I'll have more proof when I return. And I promise to lead you to a safe place if staying here is too dangerous."

Victoria shook her head and wiped away a tear. "You're headed toward great danger. I'm afraid I'll never see you again."

"That could be true, but I will try to be careful." Squirrel Girl was silent for a few

moments, thinking. "If things get bad here, and I'm not back, you must do your best to get a group together and head west. Do you promise to do that?"

Victoria nodded assent. They embraced once more, holding tight. Then Squirrel Girl turned and headed eastward toward a thicket, where she disappeared from view.

Victoria turned to face the others. "Fools!" she shrieked, beside herself with fury.

There was a shamed silence. Victoria turned in disgust and went to her nest, where she remained until the next morning.

## Chapter 4

When Finn came back, Pedro was still standing in the same place, leaning against a railing and watching me finish off the rat. Maybe ten minutes had passed. Pedro had been talking nonsense to me in Spanish most of that time, calling me *Chiquitita* and *pobrecita* and commending me on my *apetito* as I nibbled on my *ratito*. So I doubt very much that Pedro had been seriously thinking about what Finn had proposed.

"So," Finn said, "have you thought it over?"

Pedro didn't even have time to open his mouth before Finn continued. "I've been doing some thinking myself, and I'm going to sweeten the deal. I like you. And I trust you. Though I probably shouldn't, a man like you, running from the law."

Pedro finally opened his mouth, but Finn didn't give him a chance to speak. "What I've decided to do," Finn said, "is make you my partner, give you stock in the company. Congratulations, you're about to make your fortune." Finn reached around and patted Pedro on the back.

Chica looked up at Fishbreath, still riding on Finn's shoulder. The hawk could not twist his beak into a grin, but his eyes were half-closed in merriment, and the beak was open to let out the silent laughter which shook the bird's head and chest.

Pedro finally had a chance to speak. All he said was, "Tell me more. Will I really get rich?"

Chica wished she could roll her eyes. This is not my Pedro, she thought. My Pedro is--or was--rich but has never cared much about money. Wait a minute, did Pedro

just wink at me? It was so fast, did I imagine that? Does that mean he's playing a game, that he's acting? But he doesn't know I understand him anyway. Or does he? Pedro often talked to her as if she were another person, but she took it as his way of talking to himself out loud.

"Stick with me," Finn was saying, "and you'll be so rich, you'll be worried about getting robbed instead of being a robber."

Well, Chica thought, it was probably true that Pedro would have to worry about being robbed, but not because Finn would ever share any of his profits and make Pedro wealthy. More likely Finn intended to make Pedro work hard and then never get what he had earned.

Fishbreath was laughing so hard up his wing that he almost fell off Finn's shoulder.

"Be still, Fishdeath," Finn said, tapping the hawk's head rather hard with his knuckles.

Fishbreath scowled, and now it was Chica who smirked.

Finn put his arm farthest from Fishbreath around Pedro's shoulder and turned him ninety degrees so that he and the Spaniard both faced in the direction the ship was headed. "You know what I see when I look west?" he asked Pedro.

Water, Chica thought, which except for providing a few sips when I'm thirsty or a fish when I'm hungry is one of the substances I hate most.

"I see the future," Finn continued, not waiting for an answer. "I see opportunity. I see a chance for every man who's willing to work to make something of himself. I see open land just waiting to be productive. I see furs to be trapped. I see men taming the wilderness, turning nothing into something, and becoming rich in the process. I see a new kind of country, a place to be free to believe what you want to believe and become whatever you can."

Chica had heard this all before, in New Spain, in London. Pedro had always been what others called the Devil's advocate, although to Chica he sounded like he was speaking for the angels. The so-called wilderness, Pedro would say, is already fully occupied by Indians and animals and plants, who live amid beauty and harmony that we can only dream about. True, they don't have streets, but our streets are open sewers. They don't have jobs, but they do have enough to eat and leisure time to rest, something our wage slaves wish for, not to mention our black or Indian slaves. They already believe what they want to believe, without our help. Where you see development, I see destruction. Where you see opportunity to get rich, I see that you plan to rob and enslave the current owners and your fellow immigrants as well, if they let you.

Chica waited for this speech he'd heard so often. These were the ideas that had made Pedro a poor man and a fugitive, and he couldn't seem to keep them to himself. But Pedro remained silent.

"Have you ever owned any stock?" Finn asked.

Pedro shook his head no.

"Owning a part of something makes you work harder for it. And it gives people who can't work in a business a chance to buy into it, to let their money do the working."

Oh, oh, Chica thought. Here we go, here comes Pedro's speech on how buying stocks was just another form of gambling, a game that would impoverish losers and make winners rich with the money others had lost. The whole process was unethical, even if you didn't consider the deceptions that were an integral part of it.

But again Pedro was silent. Then he asked, "Do the indentured servants own stock in your company?"

"The indentured servants have no money to buy stocks. That is why they are willing to be indentured, so that I will pay for their passage and food and get them started. When they have worked for me long enough to pay me back, they will be free to

move west and stake claims or get paying jobs or whatever. I am giving them a different opportunity."

Chica had seen what kind of passage and food were provided and how many were dying from it. She had heard one of the nicer sailors tell Pedro that "The poor buggers below, if they arrive alive, will be lucky to live long enough to get their freedom. They'll be charged inflated prices for every tool, every crumb of food, every seed, and their debt will grow like barnacles on the bottom of this boat. The land they work will never be theirs. Running away is their only chance for freedom, but they don't have the skills to survive in a wilderness. They'll mostly die of starvation, or worse, or they'll come crawling back. It's a bad business, from beginning to end. Except for Finn, of course, who gets his fields farmed and his forests cut and his mines worked for almost nothing."

"Tomorrow you'll get your first glimpse of America," Finn was saying. "We'll anchor offshore for the night, because it's too risky unloading men in the dark. But at dawn the next day we'll disembark, and that's where I'll first need your help. Then when we get the men into their quarters, where I'll have someone to guard them, so they don't get foolish and bolt, you and I will go to my office and sign a contract."

"What exactly do I have to do?" Pedro asked.

"Not much at all. My sailors will bring the men up on deck. Most of them are pretty weak right now, and they'll be weaker the day after tomorrow. All they'll be thinking about is stretching their legs and breathing fresh air and getting some food and drink, which they won't have much of tomorrow. Your job will be to tell them that beds and meals are waiting for them and that they should just follow you. One of the sailors will be with you to guide you. He'll be armed in case there's trouble. Actually all the sailors are armed and ready to make sure that everything goes the way it's supposed to."

"Why can't you do all this yourself? You're the one whom they've dealt with, and you know where they're going."



"Oh, you know how people are. They don't appreciate all I've done for them. Some of them might not trust me."

"And why should they trust me?" Pedro asked.

"Well, they might not, but then again at least you're a new face. And I want them to get used to you, because you're going to be their foreman. I had some trouble last trip, and I'm short a man. I know you can read and write, and I suppose you know some numbers as well. I need someone who can keep records."

"And if I say no?"

"Well," Finn said, "I didn't want to bring this up, but you've run up quite a tab. I hope you didn't think that what you paid me up front was the whole amount. So you have to work off your debt just like the others, and at the same time you'll want to put some of what you earn into buying stock in the company."

Pedro said nothing. Chica remembered him asking, when he bought passage, if what he paid covered everything. Yes, yes, of course, Finn had assured him. But it had been a verbal agreement. Nothing could be proved. And even had it been in writing, Finn would be the only law where they were going.

"I'd like for us to get along," Finn said. "I really am offering you a chance to make money. I need somebody I can trust to run things when I go back to England."

Pedro still said nothing. He just looked at Finn.

"Tomorrow morning I'll tell you a lot more about your job," Finn said. "But don't hesitate to ask if you have questions before then." He waited for an answer. Getting none, he turned and walked off.

Pedro picked me up and started petting me like mad, making little indecipherable mutterings and moans and tsks, obviously incensed. I knew that he was chewing over what he thought about what Finn had just done to him and that pretty soon he'd spit it out for me. I wasn't disappointed in my expectation, but I was a little surprised. For what

was making him furious was not just what had been done by Finn to him personally, but the hypocrisy and scope of what Finn said, and the fear that Finn and his like would be successful.

"Well, Chica, if people like him build this new country, I hate to think what it will be like," Pedro said. "Just as in the old world, there will be a few rich and the rest poor. Everyone will be tricked or lured into accumulating debts they will slave to repay but never can. Maybe there'll be free speech and free religion, but it won't have anything to do with power, which will stay with the rich. But maybe people will believe they're doing well, if they're allowed to express opinions all they want--on their own time of course, not at work--and encouraged to get things they can only pay for by pledging away future time and money and by paying high prices and high interest."

"And then some politician with his hand in their pockets will tell them they're lucky, and that they live in the best country ever, and that they're better off and better people than those who live someplace else. And they'll feel wonderful, thinking that they're special. And the next thing you know they'll be soldiers, thinking that because their country is powerful it must be a good country, and that they're powerful and good themselves, instead of poor bloody fools. I saw it in Spain, and I saw it in New Spain, and now here's Finn, starting it all over again in America, and the only difference is that instead of kings there will be confidence men. Oh, I'm sick, sick, sick of this world."

Pedro paced some more. He was massaging me so energetically now that it was starting to hurt. I jumped down, but he barely noticed.

"And of course nature," he continued, "and its creatures and plants, and the Indians who depend on nature, will have to get out of the way, because people like Finn will claim ownership of everything. It will all be as wickedly filthy and ugly as the poor houses and debtors prisons of London or Paris, but everyone will call it progress and opportunity and freedom."

Pedro looked inconsolable. Chica wound herself around his legs, meowing and rubbing as she moved, until he picked her up again. She put her paws on his shoulders and her cheek against his, licking at his beard. It was as close to a hug as she could come.

"But you know what, Chica?" Pedro said thoughtfully. "It hasn't happened yet. America is a big country, and Finn can only have settled a little of the coast. We'll get to see the unspoiled part. And we'll have to try to save it, somehow."

First you'll have to get away from Finn, Chica thought.

"Now," said Pedro, "If I can just think of a way to get away from Finn when we land."

\* \* \* \* \*

When the time to disembark came, Pedro seemed to be in invisible chains. He was doing exactly what Finn was telling him to do. Chica hoped he was formulating a plan, but if he was he hadn't been thinking about it out loud to Chica. In fact, Finn had kept Pedro shut up in a room with him--and without Chica--almost the entire previous day. Then when Pedro had finally come to bed he had fallen into a sad exhausted heap and had begun snoring almost immediately. He hadn't even remembered to feed Chica. It was a good thing she had her own cache of kitchen scraps and rat leavings.

Chica had been keeping a low profile. She had a hunch that if Finn or Jack Knife saw her they might get the idea that something unpleasant ought to be done about her. Jack of course would jump at any chance to torture her or kill her. And perhaps Finn might want her to stay on board as ratter. As if she had actually ever caught a rat herself. Without Pedro she'd have to ask the rats to let her join their army. They'd probably eat *her*.

She did not intend to desert Pedro, but neither was she going to stay with him under Finn's thumb. She didn't know exactly how she would work it all out, but she

knew for sure that even if she had to do something terrible and drastic, like getting wet, she was going to get off this ship a free cat. With or without Pedro, though it made her heart ache to think how she would miss him. No. He had saved her life when she was no bigger than his hand. She would have to stick with him and get him out of this mess.

She could tell Finn was unhappy with the way Pedro was doing his job. Pedro was supposed to be giving a peptalk, inspiring the men to move along, tempting them with the prospect of a good warm meal and a clean place to sleep and a great new life ahead of them in this wonderful new land. None of which Chica believed would happen, though Pedro apparently thought there was at least a chance that conditions would be better than below deck. He *was* trying to entice them, but in an apologetic way, saying things like, "I know you haven't had enough to eat...well, you've practically been starved...and I'm really sorry about that, but if you just will please move along, Finn has promised that a good breakfast is waiting for you. All you have to do is follow me."

Nobody moved. The men were in a single line that wound around the deck. They were at a rough kind of dock, and a gangplank was in place. Sailors stood on guard at intervals, though the indentured servants they watched were mostly shaking and clutching at the rail or each other, trying to keep from falling over. They were thin and yellowish and covered with dirty sores, and most seemed to have teeth missing or bloody gums.

They looked at Pedro, more than skeptical. Then one of them started to laugh, another joined in, one of the sailor guards could not hold back a guffaw, and finally the ship was practically rocking with laughter. Except for Pedro, who looked bewildered, and Finn who was beside himself with rage.

"Are you laughing because you're happy to be finally getting food and drink and a bed?" Pedro asked the crowd.

At this some of them were laughing so hard that tears rolled, streaking their dirty

faces. Jack Knife had to sit down on deck to keep his balance, or maybe, Chica thought, to hide the fact that he seemed to have peed in his pants.

"You idiot!" Finn roared. "They're laughing at you for being stupid enough to believe me! You're supposed to be smarter than them, not the other way! They'll get bread and water and a blanket on the floor, if they're lucky, just like on board, until they prove themselves. And so will you."

Finn pushed Pedro into the line. "Get with the others. You're useless!"

The sailors moved closer, especially those near Pedro. They had their knives out.

It was all too much for Chica, watching from a concealed spot above. Without stopping to think of the danger she was throwing herself into, she took a flying leap down onto Finn's head, where she dug in with the nails of all four feet. She considered biting him, but was too disgusted by what she saw in his hair and ears.

Leaving Finn screaming and bleeding profusely, she jumped to the head of a nearby sailor, who was so startled he dropped his knife and started shrieking. This encore of her performance was all the other sailors needed. They wanted no part of her and were stumbling and shoving each other across the gangplank as they ran to get away. Some jumped into the shallow water and waded to the wharf or beach.

The indentured servants, weak as they were, found their legs and used them. Pedro was the only fool not running, and Chica could see she would have to show him what to do. She followed the fleeing prisoners, giving them added incentive to speed up. But she quickly outstripped them, as did Pedro, who finally realized it was time to leave. The sandy shore was soon crowded with sickly men staggering they knew not where, falling over each other in their hurry to be anywhere else. It was raining hard, and when they got beyond the beach they found themselves trying to run on slick, sticky mud. The filth being washed off the men the men's faces by the rain was countered by a heavy buildup of mud on their feet and legs.

Chica herself didn't know where she was going, but because the land rose to the west she had a good view of her choices. They were in some very small, crude town surrounded by weedy farm fields and woods which were partly cut down, apparently for the timber used to build the town's wretched cabins. Beyond the fields and woods were low mountains. With Pedro not far behind, Chica skirted the town and headed for the first cover of trees.

Most of the escaping men had a similar idea, but they were slowing down, falling behind, their starving bodies again realizing they were out of fuel. Still they lurched on as best they could, picking themselves back up when they fell. A few even helped others, although most just stepped over--or on--those who fell.

Back on the boat a profusely bleeding Finn could be heard cursing his sailors and telling them that if they didn't bring everybody back they'd be doing the plowing and logging and mining and everything else themselves.

Glancing back, Chica saw that some of the sailors were doing their best to capture the fugitives but could not, alone, catch and hold more than one at a time each. Other sailors appeared to be running away themselves. A few who had been trying to catch someone gave it up when they heard Finn's roarings, and just took off. Except for Finn bellowing out threats, it was strangely quiet. There was just the sound of running feet and gasping for air.

Chica stopped to catch her own breath and allow Pedro to catch up. What she saw as she looked back was that Finn had managed to come ashore and had caught up with the only two sailors trying to do what he said, instead of running away. They each had one struggling prisoner.

"One? Two? That's how many you captured, you donkey-brained dunces?" Finn was scarcely able to croak out the words, he was so out of breath and overcome with rage.

As Chica watched, Finn started beating on his two loyal sailors. While he was doing that, one of the prisoners saw his opportunity and grabbed a rock and hit Finn over the head with it. It couldn't have been a very forceful hit, more like a drop, since the man had had a hard time lifting the rock, even though it wasn't bigger than a lady's fist. Nevertheless, Finn fell to his knees. Blood already had been spurting from Chica's punctures but after the new blow, it flowed over his face and reddened his shirt.

Pedro was now standing with Chica, both of them panting and watching the drama behind and downhill from them. Others too stopped and turned around to look, in a semicircle looking down at Finn centerstage.

Finn was not unconscious, but neither could he stand up. In fact, he toppled sideways and was struggling not to lie down altogether. He did summon enough wind to scream, "Everyone is going to pay for this!"

At that the two formerly loyal sailors took off. One of them even helped the prisoners get started on their way, patting on the back the one who had wielded the rock.

Then a strange thing happened. The little town had seemed deserted. It was a dark, rainy day, not long after dawn had failed to make much of a show, and people, if there were any, might have still been asleep.

But when Finn screamed that everyone would pay, the place came to life. People in various stages of dress and undress came streaming from the buildings, falling over their clothes, and started stumbling and lurching after the other runners. There were no women, just a slovenly crowd of men who looked as if they needed women to nag them into better hygiene.

The fugitives thought they were being chased again, and summoned a last burst of energy to drag themselves toward cover. But soon all the tired runners, Chica and Pedro included, began to glance around. Residents and new arrivals alike seemed to be running away from Finn, but no one seemed to be pursuing. Little by little, they slowed down,

then, a few at a time, dropped down to rest, not caring that the ground was saturated. The light rain had soaked them all to the skin anyway.

Then, as they had a chance to look around, they saw that all around them blackberries were plentiful and ripe, ready to devour. And devour them they did, until their faces and hands were purple and their stomachs began to churn.

As for Chica, she had noticed something familiar growing at the edge of a line of trees, where a little farmfield had been planted with seeds from Europe. She ambled over to investigate. There was wheat and there were weeds, and one clump of the weeds had an intoxicating smell. She sniffed it, she licked it, she rolled in it, she bit off a leaf and chewed it up. Then she lay down to rest on her back in it, all four legs waving in the air, gloriously happy. Catnip had come to America too.

\*\*\*\*\*

Chica was almost swooning over the delicious odors rising from a rabbit roasting above a campfire. William, the sailor who had told Pedro about the bad conditions below deck, had known how to get a fire going, and a young indentured servant and former poacher named Ethan had caught the rabbit. They both had joined Pedro and Chica as they were leaving the place where just about everybody had thrown up the blackberries they had overeaten.

The crowd of fugitives had taken off in all directions except back east into the ocean, most choosing to move in groups in the hope that someone in each group might be able to figure out a way to get to a safer place and not starve to death. It turned out that Pedro and Chica were fortunate in their companions, although Pedro himself had wilderness skills enough to take care of them all.

He knew how to find his way by sun or stars or tracks. He knew how to trap and use his knife, and he had the stones to spark a fire, though he would have had a hard time today with everything so damp. To Chica it didn't matter if a rabbit were cooked or raw,



but she did enjoy the smell of the roasting and the cozy warmth near the fire. Pedro kept telling her to back off, afraid she'd singe herself, and she played dumb and edged closer again. But of course she knew exactly how close she could go without being singed or even ignited by a spark.

While the others were working on the rabbit, Pedro had foraged for mustard and young dandelion greens and burdock roots, commenting on how European weeds were faster colonizers than the Spanish, French, and English put together. After stuffing them, all chopped up, into the rabbit to cook, he began gathering fallen pine boughs to use to construct a rough lean-to to shelter them for the night.

The rain had stopped, and he said he was hoping that the breeze might dry out some of the leaves and evergreen needles well enough by nightfall to make satisfactory bedding. Even though they didn't really think anyone could be following them, they had camped for the night in a slight hollow, so that the light, if not the smoke, from their fire would be harder to see. The hollow was damper than high spots, but this didn't worry Chica. She intended to sleep on top of Pedro's chest or stomach or butt, whatever was accessible, and she expected to be quite warm and comfy.

The men kept saying that dinner was the best they had tasted since England, even without salt, and even though it was meager fare for three grown men and a cat. But their stomachs had shrunk to fit the ship's poor rations--except for Chica's, which had been kept full of rats. The men ate slowly, keeping in mind the results of their gluttonous engorgement on blackberries that morning.

Chica herself had spoiled her appetite by killing a careless robin. It had practically walked into Chica's mouth, oblivious to the fact that the patches of orange and white and black on the ground were parts of a long-haired calico cat warming herself near the cooking fire. The bird had been tasty, but this snacking before dinner had taken the edge off Chica's hunger. She ate her share of the rabbit anyway. Who knew if there would be

breakfast?

After dinner, the men began talking about what they would do next.

"Well, I know what I'm gonna do," Ethan said. "I'm walking west till I find a place with no other white men."

"Too late for that," Pedro said, "You'll run into French trappers once you get past the English. And then after that sooner or later you'll meet up with the Spanish."

"Well, then, in between all that, don't you think I can find me some acres to farm where I won't run into no European governments?"

"For a while, maybe," William said. "Of course the Indians will probably kill you. They started out real friendly and helpful, thinking maybe we were gods. Then they got to know us and got their land stolen and their villages burned down. They got our diseases, and what just made *us* sick *killed* them. They got to feeling real bad about us, so we gave them some stuff, blankets that our sick people were done with, and liquor to cheer them up and turn them into weak drunkards. The ones left around here who didn't die or move west don't cause no trouble no more. But if you go west alone, hang on to your hair."

Ethan grabbed his head. "What do you mean?"

"They collect scalps. It's a kind of contest, who can kill the most."

"So what's *your* idea? You know something better for me to do?" Ethan asked, looking at both of them.

William shrugged. "It's all risky. But I'm gonna start by getting out of Finn's way. I'll get into the mountains, then probably head south."

"Have you been that way?" Ethan wanted to know.

"I've heard tell from those who should know," William said. "North or south, along the coast, there's towns and farms starting up, all of it given by the Crown to somebody who had to get it all over again from its real owners the Indians. Who

themselves used to say you can't own land anymore than you can own the sky. I guess they found out different. A lot of them are dead or gone or turned into drunk beggars."

"But anyway, owned or not, the land is getting occupied. The back country, the mountains, the wild places, on a map they may be assigned to some nobleman who'd like you to buy them and then pay taxes, but the fact is that if you go build yourself a log cabin on a mountaintop, and clear some acres for growing things, and hunt for food and buckskin, it'll be a while before anybody even knows you're there. And so many are doin' it, it'd take an army to clear 'em all out. And the English army is usually busy closer to home."

Ethan nodded thoughtfully, then turned to Pedro. "What about you, Gypsy?"

Pedro looked startled to be reminded of his fake identity. *El Gitano*, *El Heat*, Gypsy, he kept forgetting that people were addressing him when they used these names. "Oh, I don't know yet. I'm not a farmer."

"That's right. Gypsies don't farm. They wander. And steal?" William looked at Pedro. "Maybe they do, but I bet you don't. You're polite to everyone, you're educated, you're kind to dumb animals," he said, nodding at Chica, whose hair began to stand up in a line along her backbone at the word "dumb." "Those are all unusual qualities, not associated with gypsies or, truthfully, with hardly anyone else. Maybe with a few who have taken religious vows, monks or priests who haven't yet found out that their Church and its members don't really believe in doing unto others what you would have them do unto you. But you're not that either."

Pedro said nothing.

"Who are you?" William asked. "And how long have you been pretending to be a gypsy? You're not very good at it."

Pedro laughed. "Who are *you*? There are a lot of people over here running from something, and I don't mean just from Finn. I'd be willing to bet a lot of gold, if I had it,

that of you two at least one left behind a woman who either had a child of yours or was pregnant with one."

Both men looked guilty.

"And might it be possible that you left without paying back every debt you owed? That there is someone across the ocean cursing you for running out on a promise or obligation?"

"All right, all right," William said. "You've made your point. I'll mind my own business."

"How did you know all that about me?" Ethan asked.

"I didn't. But in Europe it was easy to see who wanted to start a new life in America and why. Either they were in trouble with the authorities for political or religious reasons or they were running from personal troubles."

"Not all," said William. "There are the rich second sons who couldn't inherit the estate back home, so got one here. There are those who love adventure and exploration, who just want to see wild places. And there are those who think they see a way to make a fortune, like Finn."

"Agreed," said Pedro. "And I'm sure there are even the poor but honest and kind young men who hope to make a better home here for their sweethearts and families to come to than they could back in Scotland or Ireland or wherever. And those young men will probably even send for their loved ones, because they'll get tired of the rough company here."

There was silence for a while. Chica snuggled comfortably in Pedro's lap and was almost dozing off when Pedro shifted, jostling her.

"I was just thinking," he said. "There were about a hundred of us leaving that little village, counting the ones who were already there. If even half of them achieve what seems to be the common dream and are able to start up a little farm, maybe even just 20

acres, well, 50 times 20 is a thousand. A thousand acres that used to be covered with trees and wild things, all available for the Indians to use. Gone because Chica here jumped on Finn's head and one thing led to another, until a lot of men got the freedom to try to follow a dream. A dream that represents joy for them and death for everything that's living now on those thousand acres, not knowing they're doomed."

He sighed and then added, "And then, if they succeed, or even if they don't, they'll have a mess of kids who will want their own farms. And they'll have to go farther west, spreading the blight."

"I don't get what you mean," Ethan said. "It's just wild land, not being used. And the Indians could start farms if they wanted."

"You're right. You don't get what I mean," Pedro agreed.

"Well, what are you going to do that's not going to hurt any of those precious acres?" William wanted to know.

"Just look at them while there's still a chance. Talk to any Indians who will talk to me. Make a record, with drawings and notes, of what is there before it's lost."

"What for?" Ethan asked. "You'll never get anywhere doing that."

"If I'm there doing what I came to do, I got somewhere."

"Maybe so, but it's not a place many settlers would want to be. And it's not the kind of thinking that's building this country up."

"No," Pedro said, standing up, forgetting Chica was on his lap. She landed on her feet, alert since he had given her credit--or was it blame?--for helping men survive to destroy about a thousand acres of living things. "No," Pedro repeated, "but maybe there's a way to live in a country without changing it so much."

"People like to improve things. They like progress," William said.

And that was the last word said as they made sleeping places as good as they could without blankets. Chica could see by the light of the dying fire that all the eyes

were open. Poor Ethan seemed confused and worried. Both he and William were frowning far too hard to be relaxing.

Following her plan, Chica stretched out on top of Pedro, her face next to his, as if they were dancing. She could feel his tension, his despair. She understood what was bothering him, and she could see the beauty in the wilderness he seemed to love, but she did not share his concern. All she had ever known that was good had come from a human friendship. Food, warmth, comfort, play, all her blessings came from a person, not from wild places. Well, except for catnip. And birds. And field mice. Sunshine. Grass. And then there were these feelings she sometimes had, that she ought to be getting to know some burly Tom, that maybe there ought to be some kittens in her life. Was she missing something? Her head was starting to hurt. She turned on her purring motor and began to groom Pedro's hair, which was still deliciously lousy.

## Chapter 5

At first, from some distance, Squirrel Girl didn't recognize what she was looking at. What large animal, shaped almost like a kneeling bison, was resting on the ground, so near to structures built by humans? Its fur seemed to be a patchwork of many colors, browns and grays, blacks and whites, golds and russets. Some parts were short haired, others long, and, like the colors, following no particular pattern. And where was its head?

When she was closer, and realized that what she saw was a stack of hundreds of furry skins minus their animals, it took her breath away. This was not just death; this was holocaust.

Squirrel Girl had seen dead animals before, usually very briefly, before she ate them, or before or while they were being eaten by another predator or a scavenger. It was understandable; men, cats, wolves, vultures, and all the other meat eaters ate dead animals because they had to have food to live.

Barring a terrible tragedy--flood, fire, famine, epidemic--deaths usually came one at a time. More often than not, they were mercifully quick. An animal dying of old age or illness or injury often crawled out of sight and stopped eating; it wasn't long before weakness or a predator ended the pain.

The passenger pigeon who had brought Squirrel Girl here was the same friend who had rescued her and later carried a message to Mapleway Woods. Seeing the shock on Squirrel Girl's face, the pigeon said, "I told you this is a place where men trade furs to

get other things they want."

"You did," said Squirrel Girl, "but I didn't know what that meant. I thought maybe a few rabbit pelts from animals killed to make a dinner. I didn't imagine such slaughter."

"You haven't seen anything yet," the pigeon said. "You haven't seen each of these animals suffering for days in the traps that caught them. Some escape by chewing off a foot or a leg. And you haven't--" here she hesitated, trembling --"seen the sky raining dead ducks or geese or even...passenger pigeons." She looked like she couldn't go on, but then she did. "I've tried and tried to get my kind to stop being so predictable, to take different routes, go different places, break up into smaller groups, anything so that hunters won't be so sure where to wait with their guns. But we're creatures who hate to change."

"How did *you* change?" Squirrel Girl asked. "You left your family and friends."

"All dead," the pigeon sighed, "as I would be if I'd stayed with them. I haven't changed though, not in my heart. I just decided that if I had to die before my time it might as well be while I am doing something to warn others. But no one listens to me."

"I do," said Squirrel Girl. "But I couldn't get the earthfolk around Mapleway Woods to take the danger seriously either."

A strange voice broke into their conversation. "You two are really weird. Squirrels and doves are not friends. They compete for food. They have nothing in common. Don't you know that?"

The pigeon flew up to a perch in a chestnut tree, her soft wings making a whirring sound. She looked down on the calico cat who had just spoken and who could easily have killed her. "You were right behind me," the bird said, "and I wasn't paying attention, thinking about our troubles. You could have had me. Why didn't you?"

Chica pondered. "I just didn't think about it. Usually I don't miss a chance at a



plump morsel like you. But I'm not hungry either. Lots of these animals killed for their coats don't get eaten, just skinned, and I've had all the food I could eat, and more if I'd wanted it. But I was also interested in what you were saying, because it reminds me a little of the way my person Pedro talks. He doesn't like all the hunting either. But you didn't answer my question. How did you two ever get together?"

Squirrel Girl said, "My friend here probably saved my life, when she didn't even know me, I think just because she has a kind heart."

"But it's more than that," the dove broke in. "We both are worried about the same thing. And we want to do something about it. I brought Squirrel Girl here to see more of what humans have done, so that she can go back to her woods and convince others to escape while there is still time."

Just then Pedro came to the doorway of a cabin to check on his cat. "Oh, there you are, my little Chiquita. That *palomita* you're eyeing is much too pretty to eat," he said, nodding toward the pigeon. "Besides, you're getting plump, little girl." He laughed and went back in the cabin.

"I think I look good filled out like this," Chica said, but she looked down at herself a bit critically.

"How can you be friends with a human?" Squirrel Girl asked. "They're so cruel."

"Not all. This one's not. In fact, he's going to try to save the woods." Chica looked nonchalant, as if to her it didn't matter one way or the other if the woods got saved.

"What was that name he called me?" the passenger pigeon wanted to know. "Palomita?"

"Yes, it means little dove or little pigeon in Spanish. My person is from a country called Spain where everyone speaks Spanish."

"You mean he's not even from around here? And he thinks he knows how to save

the woods?" Squirrel Girl couldn't believe what she was hearing.

"I like that name," the pigeon said. "From now on, I want to be called Palomita."

"Fine," Squirrel Girl said, "but did you hear what this cat is saying about his human?"

"Say my name first, and then we'll discuss it," said Palomita.

"Palomita. Palomita. Palomita. Are you satisfied? And now can we discuss what this cat is saying?"

"I'm not 'this cat,'" Chica told Squirrel Girl. "I have a Spanish name too. It's Chica, which means 'tiny one.' When my Spaniard Pedro saved me I was only as big as his hand. He adores me. And now that I am bigger I watch out for him too."

Squirrel Girl had never seen any creature as crazy as this cat. For one thing, she was smaller than any of the wild cats Squirrel Girl had ever seen. In fact, if she were a normal size and as fierce as a bobcat, Squirrel Girl would have been up in the chestnut tree as fast as her pigeon friend. As Palomita. And another thing was strange. Chica traveled with this human from who knew where, who had his own different language, and who treated her as if she were his baby daughter.

"Tell me something," Squirrel Girl said to Chica. "Have you ever in your life taken care of yourself in the wild?"

"No, but I could."

"How long have you and your 'Pedro' been around here?"

"Almost ten days now."

"Ten days! Imagine that! You must know the place backwards and forwards!" Squirrel Girl turned to her friend. "Don't get your hopes up, Palomita. What we have here is a completely useless cat, and a completely useless human. Or worse. We do not have creatures who are able to help us, even if I could believe that cats and humans had any kindness in them, which to tell you the truth, I do not believe."

"I know things you do not know," said Chica.

"Please, Squirrel Girl," said Palomita. "Let's hear what Chica has to say. I like her, although I never thought I'd like a cat, even a small fat one like her. She's really quite beautiful, with all those colors in her coat, and she has not once tried to chase us, and she is interested in our opinions."

"I am not fat," Chica said. "And I'm not small. I'm just a different kind of cat than you've ever seen, a kind that usually lives around humans. They pet us and give us treats, and in return we try to keep the mice from taking over their homes and food. Some of them are bad to us, usually the ones who are also bad to other humans, but many people like having us around. Sometimes we get cream from their cows and goats."

Squirrel Girl did not know what cows and goats were, or cream either, but she was not impressed by what she heard. She herself would hate to have all this contact with people.

"What can you possibly do to help us?" she asked Chica. "What can your Pedro do? What can you possibly know that we don't know?"

"I know how all these humans get to this country. Have you ever heard of a man called Finn?"

Now Chica had their attention.

"We know that he is the one who is bringing so many humans here to destroy everything," Palomita said. "But we don't know why. Or anything more."

And so Chica told them. Not everything she knew, but what she thought it was important to know. About how Finn recruited men in Europe, a place where only the mountain tops were not changed by humans. About how he promised to take these men to a place where they would someday have their own land; in exchange for bringing them here, he made them promise to work for him free for many years. From doing this, Finn got more and more workers and more and more money, which he could use to get more

and more things. Chica could not tell them why he, or the men he brought here, wanted to have things so much. To her it seemed men had to work so hard to get all their possessions that there never was time to enjoy them anyway. And they were forever hauling things around, so that they could never move freely. It was as if squirrels had to carry their old trees with them when they moved to another woods.

Chica told them how far she and Pedro, and all the people Finn brought, had come. That to get to America from Europe you had to take a boat and live in it for a long time because the water you had to cross was so wide. It could take seasons to go from eastern land to western or vice-versa. If you went from north to south and then west you could travel for years. Although Chica could not really see why anyone would want to do such a thing.

Chica had heard Pedro say that Finn wanted to turn America into Europe but without kings. Rich men would run it. Chica had heard many bad things about kings. They had too much power, and she thought rich men would also have too much power and use it just as cruelly and selfishly.

"But why do other men let them have power?" Squirrel Girl asked.

"I cannot tell you. Humans are impossible to understand. I love my Pedro dearly, and I believe that if he had power he would use it kindly. But he has almost the opposite problem. He must always be looking for trouble, trying to fix things that are unfair. I understand the idea of having goals. I have them too. Mine are things like rolling in catnip, having a good mouse dinner, taking a nap. His goals seem to involve making other people want to kill him."

"I don't understand," Palomita and Squirrel Girl both said, almost simultaneously.

"Don't even try," Chica said. "Let me tell you about our trip here, and then tell me if what people do makes sense." And she told them about the people suffering below deck, and Finn's threats, and how she changed everything by jumping on Finn's head, so

that everybody had a chance to run away. "But from what Pedro has been saying, all those people who ran away from Finn are probably already out there chopping down trees and ruining things."

"Why?" Again the two friends came up with the same question.

Chica shrugged. "They are all that way, except my Pedro. At least the ones from Europe. Pedro is trying to find Indians and see if they will try some more to fight the theft of their land."

"Men kill so much, maybe someone will kill Finn," Squirrel Girl said hopefully.

"He's only one and would be replaced," Chica answered. "The land north and south of him is being destroyed by other Europeans. They are like ants, and their places like anthills, where nothing else can exist."

Squirrel Girl slumped, not her perky self at all, and Palomita wheezed a little shaky sigh, then said, "So is it hopeless then? We just wait to be shot? Or to die because we have no homes or food?"

"Not at all," Chica said rather crossly. "Didn't I just tell you that Pedro's working on it? And I'm thinking that he could use my help. I might just do a few things myself."

"What can be done if there are so many men here already and so many more coming?" Squirrel Girl looked doubtful.

"Pedro says that this land is very big, bigger than Europe. And most of the people in Europe are busy all the time, killing each other in wars, stealing from each other, making money, and of course doing the things we also do, like eating, and sleeping, and having babies. So only a few come here at a time. If we can just make the lives of those few miserable enough, they may not want to stay. Or they may tell others not to come."

Palomita shook her head mournfully. "Doves are peaceful birds, always billing and cooing, and I never would have thought that I would want to make any living thing miserable. But when I think of how my family and friends died, I believe I could work

very hard to make humans miserable if that would make them go away and stop killing us. But I would not enjoy it. What I would enjoy is flying with my home flock again, or even with a new flock if we could only be safe." She paused, unable to mention her slaughtered flock without being overwhelmed with grief. Then she shook her head and continued, "Oh, well, that's what we're trying to do, make things safe for all earthfolk who remain. All right then, how can we make humans miserable?"

Chica hesitated. "I haven't thought that far ahead yet. It's not what I usually do, and I really wasn't planning on doing it now. It just came to me when I was talking to you."

"I'd like to make their muskets disappear," Palomita said. "But how would we ever do it? First we'd have to go into their houses and find them. And if we did find them, and escaped being murdered while going into their houses, how would we carry the guns out? They're big and look heavy, and most of us carry things in our mouths. I know squirrels and raccoons and possums pick things up in their front paws, but they don't run that way. And I'm pretty sure we'd have to run. Maybe we could push them along the ground, but think of the noise!" She shook her head. "It's beyond us!"

Chica thought about that. "Guns don't shoot without ammunition, paper cartridges that hold little lead balls and gunpowder," she said. "Any animal that could sneak into a house could probably manage to chew up the paper and spread the balls and powder around."

Squirrel Girl laughed. "Next time you're torturing a mouse before eating it, why don't you see if you can make a deal instead and get help messing up the ammunition."

"If I were a mouse," said Palomita, "the last creature I would trust to keep a bargain would be a cat. Excuse me, Chica, but your kind has a very bad reputation, and deserves it." She had never moved down from her high perch during the conversation with Chica, but now she hopped to a slightly higher one, as if remembering who she was

and who Chica was. "But if I did make a bargain with a cat," she continued, "I would never ever keep it. I would run as far away as I could and never come back."

"We're hunters," Chica said, "and we have to eat meat. When we play with our food, we're practicing our skills. Maybe plants don't like you pecking away at them either." She sounded a bit put out. "But there are other reasons that I doubt we could get help from mice. People provide them with more food and nesting materials in one place than they could find in the wild. In a house, it's all nicely stored and convenient, ready for robbing."

"But don't people get angry and try to kill them?" Squirrel Girl asked.

"Yes," Chica said, "but they don't get very far unless they get a cat. So the cats might not help us either. Well, some mother cats might. Humans don't want all the kittens that are born, and they often drown the poor babes at birth. And that is very hard on mother cats. So some of them might resent humans enough to help us."

"Have you ever had kittens?" Palomita asked.

"Not yet. Sometimes I think there might be something wrong with me, that I should have already had some, but I just have never met a Tom who didn't make me mad when he started yowling about making a family. Pedro has asked me many times why I ignore males who approach me--of course Pedro has no idea I understand what he says--but I don't know the answer, unless something inside me was hurt when I was newborn, before Pedro saved me from being killed."

Squirrel Girl was shocked. To perhaps not be able to have babies, what could be sadder? But then she thought about how she herself had refused to join in the mating play, the chases of other squirrels she had met. Was she possibly defective too? In her mind, she had just assumed that when she was finished with the task she had set herself, then she would begin to raise children. But what if she couldn't?

It was sad. It might be tragic. She stared unhappily at Chica, who was herself

looking gloomy. They were standing quite close now, and when Pedro, just then, stepped back out of one of the houses, he looked surprised.

"Do you mean to tell me," he said to Chica, "that you're letting a squirrel stand that near to you without giving her a chase? You must be going soft!"

Squirrel Girl went quite bristly, and Pedro laughed out loud at the sight. "*Que ardilla!*" he said.

"It means 'What a squirrel!' in Spanish," Chica said as she let herself be picked up and cuddled. Purring loudly, she looked over Pedro's shoulder as he started to walk away. "I won't forget our little talk," Chica called. "If I think of something to do, I'll get started. How about you two?"

"What are you meowing about now?" Pedro asked.

"We'll work on it! And we'll try to see you again!" Squirrel Girl chattered.

"Thank you for your ideas! And for wanting to help!" Palomita cooed. And then she added, "I never ever in all this world expected to hear myself telling a cat thank-you. And meaning it!"

"What did that Spaniard call me?" Squirrel Girl asked. "I know what it meant, but how did it sound again?"

"Something like Kayar Deeya," Palomita said.

"How come," Squirrel Girl asked petulantly, "you have a pretty little Spanish name and mine sounds like the mess in the swamp?"

"I don't know," Palomita said, "Squirrel Girl sounds a little young and weak for a creature who's going to lead a revolt. And to be called 'What a squirrel!' is rather flattering, don't you think?"

"Maybe so, but if you don't mind for now I think I'll just be plain old Squirrel Girl, trying to figure out even one thing I could do that might make people miserable enough to go away. When I have a whole army of earthfolk, all with assigned ways to



create misery, you can have fun making up a new name for me. Hmm, would King Squirrel Girl work?"

"You'll work all right, all your life," said Palomita, "but don't even joke about kings. After what Chica said about them, we don't want to follow any of their examples and become worse than we are."

"I think it's too late," Squirrel Girl said. "Before humans came here we would never have been thinking about creating misery."

"Stop it," said Palomita. "You're making me miserable."

## Chapter 6

"Do you think Chica might be here?" Palomita asked, looking around in horror. "I'd like to hear what she has to say about all this."

"Her human was looking for Indians not corrupted by the European settlers. Which probably means they went west, or maybe north or south. We went east ourselves. So no, I don't think we'll see Chica. Though I never thought I'd see a dove and a squirrel wanting to see a cat." Squirrel Girl's forehead was wrinkled into worry lines, something else that she would not have expected or wanted to see on any squirrel, much less a young one like herself. Explosions, the sounds of guns, she thought, were making her edgy.

"These are strange times. Our world is turning upside down and inside out." Palomita flew up for a better view on top of a pile of trash left by humans, things that looked broken or were perhaps parts waiting to be put together. Who could tell, when everything she and Squirrel Girl saw was alien to the world they had known?

The settlement they had reached was much bigger than the little trading post where they had met Chica and her Spaniard Pedro. It also seemed much worse.

Here there were three enormous stacks of furs that used to be earthfolk, but they were not as multi-colored as the single stack they had seen at the post. These seemed to be mostly beavers and muskrats. And, indeed, there was an enormous pile of flat beaver tails off to the side of one stack.

There were more buildings than Palomita and Squirrel Girl put together had toes, and a stinking muddy soup of a trail ran between the houses, connecting them all. There were several pits than reeked of human waste. There were blood-soaked places

apparently set aside for butchering victims, and others which seemed to be in use for skinning or removing feathers. The stench of rotting meat made Squirrel Girl feel faint.

Hundred of crows sat on top of buildings, waiting their shift to feast on the offal, or perhaps already engorged. Hundreds more were taking their turn, up to their bellies in the mess.

"Nobody seems to be bothering the crows," Palomita commented. "If those were passenger pigeons sitting on the rooftops, they'd get to rest about two minutes before all the people got their guns and slaughtered as many as they could."

"Your kind seems to have the misfortune of tasting good," Squirrel Girl answered. "Crows probably taste as evil as they look."

"Maybe the people like it that the crows are clearing away some of their garbage, though it looks like humans add to it faster than the crows can get rid of it. I'll bet if the crows weren't being used to clean up, the humans would be shooting them too, just for the fun of it or for practice." Palomita shuddered as she watched a crow gobbling down a large piece of liver, glad that she was a seed eater.

Squirrel Girl watched them with distaste. Yes, they were cleaning up, but they were also depositing their own waste. Of course, all flocks of birds made messes, even Palomita's beautiful beloved doves. She was glad that squirrels gave each other plenty of room. "You know what?" she finally said to Palomita. "The crows are one group who would never help us, and they might even work against us. People are making their life much easier, providing lots of food."

"There is one place where I've heard that crows are shot, along with blackbirds and doves and geese and all the other birds that gather. It's a place to the south, where humans have cut down all the trees and everything else and, for as far as you can see from the middle of it, are growing plants with wonderful tasty seeds. But birds who go there will be shot if they're not careful." Palomita looked sad. She had known some of

the birds killed in those fields.

"Even if some crows have been shot, I wouldn't ever count on them to do anything about people who give them seeds as well as meat." Squirrel Girl watched for a while, then turned with a sigh to Palomita. "We need to get closer, see what's in their buildings and talk to the animals here who are not being killed, at least not yet. The horses in the field we passed, and others whose names I don't know."

"There are probably the usual ones people keep until they are ready to eat them. When I was flying low over it, I noticed that the little pond we passed had some ducks and geese. I suppose that their feathers had been pulled so they cannot fly. That is what people usually do to birds they're fattening up for the pot."

Palomita flew up a bit and looked around, then came down to report. "In the muds and weeds to the north I see chickens and hogs. On the southern edge, by the last house, I see some sheep and a goat, and, beyond them, some milk cows and oxen. And when we get close, I'm sure we will see mice and rats and cockroaches and fleas and lice, for these all love people. And there may be cats and dogs to watch out for."

Squirrel Girl felt a huge disgust, a longing for the tranquility and beauty back at Mapleway Woods. But its peace was threatened, and if she were going to do anything about it, she would probably have to get to know some of these unnatural animals. "Will some of them talk to us?" she asked Palomita. "I don't mean the dogs or cats, of course, nor the fleas and lice, although after meeting Chica, who knows?"

"I think so," Palomita said slowly. "My impression is that most of man's animals have become very stupid, from never being allowed to think for themselves or take care of themselves. Or maybe they always were stupid, I don't know. They act more like baby animals than adults. They probably just never had wild parents to teach them how to live."

"What should I say to them?"

"Nothing, nothing, Squirrel Girl," Palomita said quickly. "I'll do the talking. Not that you couldn't do it very well, but this takes diplomacy. And these animals don't think of birds as a threat."

"Very well," Squirrel Girl said, a little hurt. "If you don't think I can be diplomatic. But I have always been very polite."

"Were you polite to that Indian's dog who chased you up a tree?"

"Did I tell you that story? That was different. That dog not only chased me; it was a great fool to be loyal to a human who barely took care of it and would someday eat it."

"And how is that different from what is going to happen to a goose or a pig?"

Squirrel Girl was silent. "All right," she said. "I admit I was rude to that stupid dog. And I'll let you do the talking here while I hang around the edges, pretending not to listen. But I just can't understand why animals let people keep them prisoner. Why don't they run away?"

"They were born to it. They don't know anything else. Maybe they couldn't take care of themselves, since they never did."

It was a horrifying thought. Never to have had what Squirrel Girl considered a real life. She sighed. "Where will you start?"

Paloma hesitated. "I think I'll go back to the pond. I've talked to ducks and geese before, wild ones. Then we'll visit the horses, nearby, and after that we'll work our way around the edges to the other animals."

"What will you say?"

"Well, I'll begin the way my mother always told me to begin when talking to strangers. With a compliment. And then I will ask them, very politely, how they are doing, what their life is like. And I will listen very sympathetically. What I will never, never do is act like they are stupid for not running away."

"It's a good thing *you* are doing this. I would have told them to wake up and move their ignorant butts toward freedom. Maybe squirrels are not as polite as doves."

"No 'maybe' to it. Squirrels are known for speaking their mind, loudly and often. Anyway, after I have gained their trust, I hope they will ask how I am doing. If not, I will probably tell them anyway, but as if I am confiding in a respected friend. I will explain that I am worried about all the wild animals that are losing their homes and lives. I will flatter them, saying that since they know so much about people, I would be glad to hear their advice. And that's true. I know I said I thought their minds had become slow, but maybe I just don't understand them."

Squirrel Girl just nodded, but she was impressed. If good manners and sincere consideration for others were all that mattered, passenger pigeons would be the most successful of all the earthfolk. Well, except for the messes they left when thousands of them at once ate and roosted for the night. But she had a feeling that in a world run by people neither manners nor messes would matter, only what people wanted.

Palomita flew ahead, while Squirrel Girl scampered toward some tall grass to hide in near the edge of the duck pond. She would inch closer quietly and try to hear what Palomita was saying to the geese and ducks.

Palomita was already sitting patiently on a willow branch over the water, waiting for an opportunity to begin, when Squirrel Girl slipped into a stand of sedges and maneuvered into a good spot to watch. She would show Palomita that squirrels can be silent when they need to be.

Squirrel Girl was no sooner settled than she felt a sharp nip at her hindquarters, followed by a loud "SQUAWK!" and her own "CHAWK" of pain. And then she was jumping and running, a large goose hot in pursuit, squawking and biting whatever she could reach. Leaving a chunk of tail fur stuck in the goose's beak, Squirrel Girl ran up Palomita's willow, it being the only tree in sight. The goose could not fly but stayed at

the base of the tree, loudly complaining and threatening. This set off all the other geese, and the ducks too, until Squirrel Girl wanted to cover her ears. She wanted to chatter back, but kept quiet, not wanting to ruin Palomita's strategy. Palomita was pretending not to know her.

Then Squirrel Girl saw a string of goslings, very young, come running out of the sedges where she had tried to hide. The babies ran toward their mother, who checked them to make sure that being in the vicinity of a squirrel had not harmed them.

"What a beautiful family," Palomita said.

The goose looked up, still angry. "Yes, thank you, aren't they?" she said, somewhat mollified, but then could not resist adding, "Geese are very lucky that their babies are born fuzzy and lovely and ready to run. I understand that yours are naked and helpless and cannot even stand, much less run. From what I've heard, *you* have to run yourself ragged feeding them."

"Yes, that's true," said Palomita. "Geese are very fortunate and very lovely."

Squirrel Girl could not be silent. "But passenger pigeons grow up to be very beautiful."

Palomita gave Squirrel Girl a terrible look. "We don't compare with geese," she said.

The goose was angry all over again. "You ugly gray rat with a skinny little bent brush for a tail, what would you know anyway about being beautiful?" She had a bit of squirrel tail stuck in the corner of her mouth, and kept trying to rub it off onto the willow trunk. Finally it came off, and the goose looked at it with disgust. "Ptooy," she said, and tried to spit its taste away.

Squirrel Girl was deeply offended and was trying to create some unforgettable insults, maybe something about babies that looked like walking dandelions in seed, when she chanced to glance toward Palomita. The dove was glowering. Squirrel Girl simply

said, "I only meant that you both are beautiful. And I am very sorry you think squirrels are ugly. To ourselves, we are fine." Then she shut her mouth before she said what she really wanted to say.

Palomita gave Squirrel Girl another warning look and then turned to the goose. "You look like you have a good life here. Are the humans nice to you?"

"Oh my, yes," she answered. "They let me eat all the grasses and weeds I want when things are growing, and in the winter they give me grain. I have kept at least half of my eggs, and I am sure that I will not be butchered and roasted for a long, long time."

"How do you know that?" Palomita asked.

"Because they have more than enough of the wild geese that they kill on hunts. They will be hunting again soon. I have heard them planning it, and some of the younger ones are practicing shooting straight." She took a long look at Palomita. "They like to eat passenger pigeons, too, you know. If I were you I would go back into the wilds." Then she looked at Squirrel Girl. "They would not be very interested in eating you, not with so many better-tasting creatures around, but they would shoot you anyway, for practice, and throw your carcass to their dogs. Not that I would care." She turned and waddled away, her goslings trailing her like the tail of a kite.

When she was gone, a little duck swam up. "What she said is true," the duck told them. "Everything except what she said about people being nice." She turned to Squirrel Girl. "They are as nice to us as you are to an acorn. You will probably let it grow when it is small and green, but only so you can eat it when it's ripe." She started to swim away, but then turned around. "You will be shot if you stay here, even before the day of the hunt. I had some mallard friends...well, never mind, talking about it only makes me unhappy." She paused. "It's not just that they eat us. They kill us for our feathers as well. My favorite auntie not only became a Sunday dinner; I heard she also is inside a feather quilt. My own mother, who was allowed to keep very few of her eggs, eventually



became soup and a pillow. We find these things out from the cats, who hang around inside the houses and then come out and take pleasure in telling us the bad news."

Squirrel Girl and Palomita looked at each other, for once at a loss for words. But Palomita was always thoughtful and at last managed to say, "Thank you for your kind advice. Try to be careful. Is there nothing you can do?"

The duck hesitated, then said, "Yes, I have a plan. Since I cannot fly now, I am going to walk away, and then when my feathers grow back, I will fly where there are no people. But it will be very dangerous, because I am white and stand out everywhere. Unless I can stay in water, a wolf or fox will easily make me their dinner. If I wait until winter, it may be too late."

"Maybe you could hide on the day the people go looking for a duck dinner," Squirrel Girl suggested.

"That is a good idea," the little duck said. "I will think about it. Thank you. And good luck to you. If you take my advice you will leave this place and be thankful that you still can." She turned and swam off.

Not at all encouraged, they started toward the place where earlier they had seen horses. There was no hurry, and there were seeds nearby to eat, so they took their time. It was probably no use talking to these animals anyway, since all they knew was captivity. It seemed like the only thing wild earthfolk would be able to do would be to escape west, but who could say that people would not follow? Squirrel Girl felt certain they would.

Though they were dawdling, in no time at all they had reached a small field in which seven horses were grazing on weeds and grasses. There was a high wooden fence around the pasture, and near its entrance gate a half barrel was filled with mossy water. Several horses stood near the water, and, as Squirrel Girl and Palomita approached, one of the horses began to drink, slurping noisily. Most of the other horses were crowded

under the shade of a maple tree, one of the few left uncut in the settlement. There was a large dusty spot under the shadowed north side of the tree, and a black mare lay down and rolled in its dust, as if she were trying to get rid of something biting her.

The horses paid no attention at all to the squirrel and pigeon now standing near them.

"Do you think they'd mind," Squirrel Girl whispered to Palomita, "if I took a small drink of their water? I meant to do that at the pond, but I forgot."

"Help yourself," said one of the horses by the water. She was a gray mare, no longer young, and she looked as if she'd been worked too hard and too long.

"Thank you," said Palomita, perching on the lip of the barrel and joining Squirrel Girl in a long delicious drink. Then she wiped her beak on her shoulder and turned to the mare. "It looks like you have a pleasant and easy life here," she said.

The horses made a soft nickering sound that Squirrel Girl understood to be a laugh.

"We're laughing," the mare said kindly, "because you happen to see us on the first day in a moon or more when we haven't been pulling some kind of load, or perhaps giving a ride to someone who kicks or beats us. There are a few men here who are good to us, who bring us an apple or two and don't overload or whip us, but most are as mean to us as they can be and not kill us. They don't really want to kill us. Because then who would pull their loads?"

"The oxen will," a black horse broke in. "They don't mind killing us. They just eat our meat and try to buy a new horse."

"Well," said the mare, "some might not mind, but others do. And oxen are not much good for a fast ride."

They all laughed at the idea, even Squirrel Girl and Palomita.

"Why don't you run away?" Squirrel Girl asked the black mare. "I'll bet you

could jump the fence at night."

"We think of it sometimes," the black horse said. "We have heard wonderful stories of horses living free and wild and running in herds, something like the deer, pulling nothing and carrying no one. But they are only tales. We know of no horse who has lived that life, and every deer we have seen has been dead. If we had a leader, perhaps the stallion who came to us with his owner last year and gave some of us foals..."

"That stallion has never been away from its owner, who I am told beats it mercilessly," a roan mare interjected. "If he doesn't run away from his own bad master, how could he lead us?"

"Anyway," the gray mare said, "I have seen what happens to horses who run away. They are caught and beaten or shot, or they are killed by wolves. We don't know how to live wild, what is good to eat and what is poison. We don't know how to defend ourselves or hide. All we know is what we are now. And we might as well not waste this beautiful day of rest or this tasty grass, worrying about what cannot be."

The horses made noises of agreement and resumed their leisure activities, scarcely noticing Squirrel Girl and Palomita moving on.

As they circled around the settlement to get to the pig pen and chickens, they could see that the low stockade fence that enclosed the pigs and attracted the chickens was built on a gentle slope and included some brushy and grassy sections. There was a little building, where the birds could roost at night, and it was white with their droppings. And there was a larger shelter, little more than a roof and supports, for the hogs. The top of the slope had some dusty areas, where both kinds of animals could enjoy dust baths, and the bottom had muddy puddles where pigs wallowed and chickens drank.

"I think they're going to say they're happy," Squirrel Girl predicted. She and Palomita had perched on top of the fence and were looking with surprise at the amount of corn lying on the ground and being nibbled by some of the chickens and pigs. "They're

certainly fat."

"That must be how they taste best," said Palomita.

"They're making me very hungry," said Squirrel Girl, hardly able to restrain the urge to jump into the pen and stuff herself with corn, a rare treat for her, since it was usually found only near men.

"You may help yourself. We are full and there is plenty."

Squirrel Girl looked down. She had not noticed the sow resting in the tall grass on this edge of the fence.

The sow glanced up and said, "Go ahead. Eat up. Make pigs of yourself, as the men here say. But of course they know nothing of us pigs except that we make their bacon and ham and chops. No. When they say they are making pigs of themselves, they mean they are being greedy or dirty or drunk, or that they are eating too much and will get sick. We pigs never get sick from eating, never drink liquor and act crazy, and we only get dusty or muddy because that is the best way to clean off insects and stay cool. If a pig were to eat until he threw up, we would say he was making a man of himself."

Squirrel Girl and Palomita were stunned by this speech. Neither had ever spoken to a pig before, and few earthfolk they knew would have spoken at such length, or so cleverly, unless it were some sort of occasion. Not knowing what to do or say, they just stood with their mouths hanging open.

"Eat!" the hog finally said.

That they could do. "Thank you," they chorused.

Palomita then flew to a spot where corn kernels covered the ground, and she began eating almost before her feet touched the ground. Squirrel Girl leaped down and grabbed a cob still full of corn. She sat on it, as if she were riding it, and wrapped her front feet lovingly around it, while with her teeth she neatly and thoroughly began to strip row after row of its kernels.

Although Palomita had picked a "table" where no one else was currently dining, she soon had a crowd of fluttering, clucking hens, some with chicks, clustered together in front of her and watching her almost suck in seeds in a stream, so quickly was she eating.

"My goodness," one said, clucking a bit disapprovingly, and apparently speaking to no one in particular, "how many days has it been since this little beggar got a good meal?"

Palomita looked up briefly at the speaker, then turned her back on the whole crowd and resumed eating. All they could see now was her rump bobbing as she dipped for seeds.

A different hen said to the one who had spoken, "Having an excellent appetite doesn't make her a beggar. After all, she is not used to having corn, which is an everyday food for us. On the other wing, she probably eats a great many delicious wild foods that we know nothing about. Besides that, she is free and we are not, and that is an important difference. In a way, we've traded our freedom for this corn, though I don't think we ever consciously decided to do that."

Squirrel Girl stopped chewing for a minute. "I can understand how someone might give up freedom for this scrumptious corn. And you have it without working for it or hunting for it, almost without even moving. If you want, you can just eat and eat and eat and eat until you are too full to move." She blinked her eyes several times and then shook herself. "It makes me very sleepy to eat so much." She began to eat again, but with much less speed and enthusiasm. Then she stopped. "I need to rest a bit," she said, "just for a few seconds." And she put her head down on the cob she was straddling and immediately fell asleep. She was even snoring, ever so softly.

"Now that is something I've never seen before! A squirrel sleeping right out in the open in the daytime!" said the hog who had first spoken to them. "I hope she doesn't do that often, because it will certainly shorten her life."

Even Palomita was surprised, but she defended her friend. "It's because she's not used to being able to eat so much at once. Back in Mapleway Woods, where she grew up, she would always have slept in her leafy nest or in a tree hole. And, at times when nuts were all over the ground, she would have buried most of the food in holes for the winter. Here, she has no nest or tree hole, and she has just this one chance, while we're passing through, to feast on something she loves but almost never gets to taste. I understand perfectly why she ate herself unconscious. But I would wake her up, if I didn't feel like taking a little nap myself." Then she hopped back up on the fence and closed her eyes.

"What's going on here?" A rooster who had been watching from a distance came over. "Night is for sleeping. This is day. COCK-A-DOODLE DO!"

Squirrel Girl and Palomita each opened one eye, located the source of the noise, and then went back to sleep.

"Didn't you hear me? My job is to prevent daytime sleep, for everyone, and that includes you! COCK-A-DOODLE DO! COCK-A-DOODLE DO!"

"Oh, hush," the hog said. "You're an awful nuisance, but you know very well that I and all the other pigs sleep in the daytime whenever we feel like it." But he did get up and slowly amble away from the crowd. When he got as far away as he could, he lay down in a mud puddle and began to scratch his back against a large smooth rock that was conveniently positioned in the puddle.

The rooster watched and then said, "Just for that, I'm following you." And he did, cock-a-doodle-doing as he went.

"The old fool," a young hen said. "He just likes to feel important."

The hen who had called Palomita a beggar shook her head. "That the trouble with the younger generation," she said. "They don't respect elders. They don't want to follow our traditions. They don't appreciate all we have."

The hen who had defended Palomita and talked wistfully of freedom broke in. "They don't want to be eaten. They don't want to stay in one little patch of land and never see the rest of the world."

With all the clucking going on, and with the rooster still crowing as well, Palomita and Squirrel Girl had both opened their eyes. The restless young hen who was speaking noticed this, and she turned to address Palomita.

"Whatever you do while you are here," she said to the dove, "do not lay any eggs. They will surely be taken and cooked and eaten by any humans who find them. It's a wonder that any babies are born here at all, they steal so many eggs! Of course, the eggs they do leave are only to hatch so that the chicks can grow and fatten on corn and then be beheaded and roasted for guess what? For humans to eat; you know the answer."

The older hen was getting very angry. "That is so unfair! Here we have a good home and good food, and they even try to keep the foxes and wolves away, if they can, and all you do is complain!"

Then all the hens started talking at once, taking sides, and the rooster returned, to put in his opinion, which is that humans are very fine folk who, after all, have to eat something. He didn't mention that they find roosters stringy and tough and only eat them if they are out of hens, but the hens did bring this up.

All the hogs had now moved as far away as the pen allowed and were snorting rude remarks about their noisy neighbors.

Squirrel Girl and Palomita looked at each other. "I'm ready to move on if you are," Squirrel Girl said.

Palomita nodded agreement, and, looking rather longingly at all the corn they were leaving, they left, heading straight for a penned-in flock of sheep and a single rather forlorn goat tied not far from them. Even from a distance they had been able to see that the grass within the pen and near the goat was sparse and short compared to the lush

grass around the area, but what they had not been able to see was the amount of manure that had piled up within the enclosure.

"Phew!" said Squirrel Girl. "This is why it's better to let animals spread out."

One of the sheep overheard and said, "We're not crowded here together because we want to be. Usually on a lovely day like this our shepherd, Richard, and his dog take us out to graze where there are wonderful sweet flowers and grasses so tall you can't see your own legs."

"What happened today?" Palomita asked.

It's the stupid hunt planned for tomorrow," a little black lamb bleated. "They're practicing shooting."

"Some of them are getting drunk," another lamb, this one a dirty white, offered.

"Hush, children," said a sheep who was acting like she might be their mother, butting them a little. "Good little sheep do not complain."

"The reason this mother does not complain," another ewe offered, "is because she has often been allowed to be a mother and actually raise her lambs to be adults. Every one of mine has been eaten."

"And you think this gives you the right to complain all day long," the mama sheep said, shaking her head in disapproval. "You're alive, aren't you? They clip your wool and want to clip it again, so they let you live. When you're a mutton chop, then you can complain!"

Palomita and Squirrel Girl looked at each other in amazement at this logic. How can cooked food complain?

A ram standing amid a crowd of females stepped toward the two travelers.

"Allow me to introduce myself," he said. "The people call me Rambunctious and seem to think that's very funny. I want you to know that some of us have a wonderful life here."

"And some of us don't," said the ewe whose children had always been eaten.



At this the ram began to look annoyed and started butting and chasing the complainer. The lambs thought it was the funniest thing in the world.

"That's their father," the doting mother said. "In fact, he's the father of every lamb born here. That gives him the right to tell us all what to do. Of course, not when Richard or his dog is around. When they're here, what they say goes."

"But you know," she continued, "the dog also has to obey Richard, and Richard obeys his father, and his father obeys an old man named John, who runs the settlement, and everybody obeys a man named Finn, who visits sometimes and who seems to have been the one who started everything here. So since everybody has to obey someone here, except maybe Finn, and nobody has complete freedom, why not just accept it, and have a good feed, or a nap, instead of always bleating?"

"That's ridiculous," said Rambunctious. "It's much better to be me than to be you. And it's much better to be male than female, no matter what animal we're talking about, even humans."

The goat spoke up, directing her remarks toward Squirrel Girl and Palomita. "What he's not saying," she remarked, "is what happens to male animals kept by people when the people don't want them for breeding, which is what Rambunctious is here for. They may be gelded, and turned into a creature that is not male, not female, and not normal, an animal that can never breed, but that suits man better. Or non-breeding males may simply be fattened for food, or set to work. The thing is, when males are thinking about breeding, they fight, they show off, they upset the females. They're nothing but trouble."

When the goat started to speak, many of the sheep turned away and sighed. There were comments like, "Here we go again," or "She's always so negative," or "Never satisfied."

When the goat finished, a ewe who had not spoken before said, "You're always

talking about how badly we're treated by people. But the fact remains that we would die from cold and hunger without man's feed in winter, and, even in summer, wolves and cougars would get some of us without man's protection."

The goat considered this. "Maybe you're right for sheep like you, but the birds that fly across oceans tell me that they've seen herds of wild goats in far places, especially in mountain meadows, and the goats survive just fine without man."

Squirrel Girl asked the goat, "Are you alone here, with no other goats?"

The goat looked very said. "I am."

"That is why she is so bitter," one of the sheep said. "She is lonely. They let her have several kids, bringing a male from a small herd kept in another settlement to be the father. But the father was almost immediately taken back after they had mated a few times. And eventually the kids were taken as well, and she doesn't know if they were butchered or kept somewhere for their milk and fur."

"Oh, stop feeling sorry for her," said Rambunctious. "All she has to do is eat and stay alive, as long as there are people here who like goat's milk and cheese and the yarn from her fur. Her body makes what they want, and she can decide to be contented or miserable, to relax or spend her days ranting, as she seems to prefer. Her life's not so bad."

"It is unbearable," said the goat. "To live tied up, with no family, no community of other goats. I would rather be dead. But since I live, I have a dream. Someday I will escape, and I will find my kids and their father. I will find a way to free them and others, and together we will start a wild herd in the mountains to the west."

"Never happen." "You're fooling yourself." "You won't find the others, and if you do, they won't know you, or listen to you, or go with you." Some of the sheep began to walk away, obviously tired of listening to the goat's problems and improbable solutions.

"We're very sorry," Squirrel Girl said to the goat, knowing she could speak for Palomita.

"Yes, very sorry," said Palomita. "It's a sad thing to be alone when you're used to being in a big crowd of friends and relations of your own kind. I am not alone, because I have Squirrel Girl, and we have a mission to accomplish, but like you I miss my family."

"What did you come here for?" asked the goat. "A free creature like yourself."

"We came looking for help, but so far we haven't found anyone who can give it," said Palomita. "Although we're learning many things, we're not learning what we need to know, which is how to stop humans from taking over our wild places and killing us."

"They'll never stop," said the goat.

"Never." "Never." "Never." The sheep all agreed.

Squirrel Girl felt heavy and tired under the weight of the goat's grief, and Palomita's grief, and her own. Everyone was so certain that humans could not be stopped or changed. "Let's go," she said to Palomita. Turning to the goat and sheep, she added, "Thank you for talking to us." To the goat alone she softly said, "Good luck."

Palomita and Squirrel Girl walked slowly toward a pen and shelter for oxen and cows. A large gray tabby cat sat on the pen's fence and watched them, its tail waving back and forth in what looked like anticipation.

"Let's think about this," said Squirrel Girl. "You can fly if the cat chases you, and I may be able to outrun it, but my best defense is to leap through trees."

"What trees?" asked Palomita.

"That's what I mean, and why I want to think about it."

But she didn't have time to think about it, because a large yellow dog came running toward her, barking threats. She ran toward a part of the fence far from where the cat had been, but the cat was nowhere to be seen now. Squirrel Girl, with Palomita trailing her overhead, ran along the fence until the dog gave up and moved toward the

sheep.

"I'd keep my eyes open if I were you. Mama Mouser is not really gone," a deep voice said.

It came from behind Squirrel Girl, and she did a quick whirl. A large ox was looking at her. "Thank you," Squirrel Girl said. "I appreciate your advice, and I will take it."

"Mama M. is not a bad cat, but killing small creatures is what she does best and what keeps her alive. Her owner says she's the best mouser he's ever seen, and he has sold every one of her kittens to people who want to keep mice away. Since she keeps the kittens long enough to teach them to hunt, her kittens are in great demand. She is petted and treated and praised until she thinks she's very important."

"Are you as well treated?" Palomita asked.

"Well, we were all cut as babies, so that we can't ever mate, but it's a funny thing. We don't want to mate. Mostly what we want to do is eat and rest, like we are today, because of the hunt coming up. We usually get enough food, and in bad weather we get enough rest. But otherwise our life is work, from sunup to sundown, pulling heavy loads. Is it true that wild creatures don't have to work?"

Palomita thought about it. "We work to get the things given you by man--food and shelter--and after that we are done. But we always have to be alert for predators who would kill and eat us. And when we have babies in our nests, we spend every minute feeding them and cleaning them. And feeding ourselves, of course. But our babies soon learn to find their own food and to run or fly."

The ox shook his head. "I think I would like your life, although my life in freedom might be more like a buffalo's. But buffalo have been hunted and are gone now from around here. In winter some of the Indians wear robes made of buffalo skins, but I have heard those skins came in trade and are not from woodland buffalo at all but from

others on plains far to the west. So I suppose that if I were like the buffalo who lived here once, I would be dead.”

The ox pondered the matter some more. “I don't know what I would want, if I could choose,” he finally said. “To be free, I think. At least I would experience joy before I was turned into roasts and soup and robes. But I can't choose anyway.” He flicked his tail and pawed at the dust under his right front foot. “I don't understand the world. Why are you born free and I captive? Why must there be danger and a constant threat of being eaten?”

“It sounds like you have a lot of time to think while you are pulling loads. Those are hard questions. I don't think anybody could answer them,” Squirrel Girl said.

“People can,” a cow volunteered. “I have heard them talking while they take my milk or walk me out to pasture. They say there is a god who made all of us, all of the world, in fact, just for people to use. Any living thing, plant or animal, not useful to them, does not matter at all. That is why I am thankful I still produce good milk.”

“That's absurd,” Squirrel Girl said. “That would mean that Mapleway Woods, where my ancestors have lived in peace and barely disturbed by men for generations, exists only because someday it might be useful to humans.”

“Humans who would wreck it and turn it into something that is not Mapleway Woods, anyway, and who would kill all its earthfolk. So then would they say we were put there to hold the land for them and to provide meals and furs when they finally came?” Palomita's voice expressed her disbelief.

“Yes,” said the ox. “I'm afraid that is what they would say.”

“And why not?” asked the cow. “They are the smartest. They know where to find my food. They know when to milk me. They know everything.”

“I do not want to be rude,” said the ox. “But they are only able to take your milk because they have taken your calves. You would not need to be milked or to be brought

food if you lived in a wild herd."

"Oh," moaned the cow, "why does every pen have its radical, its creature who cannot be content, who always finds fault with the way things are, who makes himself and everyone else miserable with his complaining. "The world is as it is, and if the humans say that I give them milk because that's the way their god wants it, that's fine with me. As long as I have good food and shelter from the weather, life is fine." She turned and walked away.

"Until your milk dries up," the ox said softly, so she would not hear. "Then you'll be dinner and someone's new shoes or coat." He turned to Squirrel Girl and Palomita. "Why have you come here? This is a dangerous time and place for wild folk."

"We know about the hunt, and about the practice for it," Squirrel Girl answered. "We have heard the guns the whole time we have been here. We are trying to find out how we can stop humans from coming west and taking our homelands."

"They can't be stopped," the ox said flatly. "Don't even try."

"But their guns have stopped," said Palomita.

They listened. She was right. Squirrel Girl had become so accustomed to the bangs she had been ignoring them. But now it was silent.

"Practice must be over. The men will be coming back," said the ox. "And a woman will be coming to milk the cows. The woman may be surprised to see you, because there are so few wild creatures left around here, after all the hunting. She will not harm you. She likes birds, I think. But if any man holding a gun sees you, he will shoot, just for the fun of it. Even children will throw stones. And their aim is good."

The ox had barely closed his mouth after this warning when they all jumped at a loud bang. Squirrel Girl screamed in pain. The tip of her tail, on the bent part, had been shot off by a man standing in a doorway of one of the houses. Squirrel Girl looked at the little brushy tip lying on the ground, the tip that kept rain off her head and that helped to

warm her on cold days. She wanted it back where it belonged.

Palomita took off into the air, and Squirrel Girl was already running through the tall grasses, away from the settlement, leaving a trail of blood. Shots followed them, but none found their target, and the man with the gun did not follow after them

When they thought they had gone far enough, Squirrel Girl lay down to rest and lick the bloody broken end of her tail. For a full day, Palomita nursed her as she had when the tail had first been hurt, bringing water on her feathers and food in her beak until Squirrel Girl was ready to forage on her own and travel.

She and Palomita talked for a long time about whether they had seen enough to be able to go back and persuade others of the danger. For themselves alone, they had seen much more than enough.

“I think we need more evidence, more stories to convince earthfolk that they can’t just sit back and wait for bad things to happen to them,” Squirrel Girl said. “Who ever thought I would have to go looking for examples of terrible, frightening things? But that’s what I think I must do. Of course, you are free to make your own choice.”

“I have nothing and no one to go back to. I have already tried to warn other flocks of passenger pigeons of the horrors I witnessed. In fact, I’ve tried to tell anyone who would listen. No one wants to believe me, because then they’d have to change their life in some way. All they can say is that this is the best place on earth to be, and I should stop making trouble and scaring the children.”

“Some of them even seem to think that if awful things have happened to some animals, it must be because those animals were foolish or careless in some way. They won’t even believe the refugees, because they’re convinced that animals are on the move just because they’re looking for something better, a place with more food perhaps. They think the poor refugees have come to rob them, so of course they don’t listen and learn.”

Squirrel Girl listened sadly. Was it even worth the effort to try to warn others, if

none would listen? Maybe they should just go west and save themselves. She could stop at Mapleway Woods and take any that would come. They could travel west all the way to the place where the trees ended and grasses began, a land she had heard so much about from ground squirrels. And then if that was crowded, go north or south until they found a good home. It would take the settlers a few generations to come and cut the woods, and by then Squirrel Girl would be ready to die.

“Are you thinking of giving up and going west?” Palomita asked. “If that is what you want to do, I will go with you, because I feel that you have become my family. But we won’t be happy. We’ll always be thinking of the slaughter behind us, the animals we might have warned, the danger that is still approaching.”

“And I will be thinking of my broken promise to do something very brave and important, something my mother would be proud of,” said Squirrel Girl. “Come on, Palomita, there’s no getting around it. We must go east again, maybe southeast this time, and find out everything we can about the scourge that threatens us. We have to know so much that when we go back to Mapleway Woods, they’ll have to believe us.”

And so they started east, but south of the town they had just left, Squirrel Girl more determined than strong, and Palomita flying and perching, flying and perching, so Squirrel Girl could keep up.





## Chapter 7

Chica had tried to follow Pedro and the trapper named James into the old Indian's shack, but Pedro had swooped her up and carried her back outside, whispering, "Sorry, my darling Chica, but I want you to be free to run if there's danger."

Chica's "Meow" sounded a lot like "no." She was indignant. As if she, the cat who had saved a shipload of helpless humans from Finn, would run if there were danger. She would respect Pedro's wishes and stay outside, of course, but only to keep guard, to rescue *him* if necessary. Truthfully, she didn't think that either the trapper or the Indian were people to fear. Unless they were working for Finn and intended to capture Pedro for a reward. She doubted that, because she couldn't believe anyone would work for Finn unless he were holding them prisoner. But she would keep an eye out anyway.

She lay down in a clump of grasses facing the entrance to the shack, but a good distance away from its stink. She was in a sunny, warm spot and she felt her eyes trying to close. She had walked a good deal more and slept a good deal less than she was used to or needed. Still, she should keep...her...guard...up...so...zzzzzz.

Her soft snore, hardly louder than a purr, attracted the attention of a very tiny puppy who had himself fallen asleep at a little distance from his protective mother. The puppy approached Chica, whose tail moved ever so slightly in sleep, as if reacting to a dream about a bird or mouse within pouncing distance.

But it was the puppy who pounced and Chica who screamed with terror, her eyes round and bright as little egg yolks. And then it was the mother dog who barked and

herded her pup back into place, growling at the still sleep-stunned Chica. By the time Pedro looked out of the shack door, with the Indian peeking over his shoulder, there was nothing to see but a scrawny mother dog and her pups lying under a shrub and Chica staring at them from a distance, her eyes back to normal. The two men looked at the scene in bewilderment, saw nothing going on that would cause screams or barks and growls, and so shook their heads and went back in the shack.

Chica had been startled by the puppy's pounce, but once she saw how tiny the animal was, and how beleaguered and worn out the mother looked, she was more curious than fearful. There only seemed to be two pups, who cowered when Pedro was looking out. As soon as the men went back inside the shack, the pups were all over the mother, chasing each other, rolling over her back, and even nipping her tail, as she all the while was trying to talk some sense into them. Chica would have laughed out loud if she could have.

"What are *you* looking at?" the mother said to Chica. "Here now, get out of here!" And with that she approached Chica menacingly, growling and waving her tail in a threatening way.

Chica growled right back and added a hiss for good measure.

"You're not supposed to do that," the mother dog said. "You're supposed to run." She stopped and stared at Chica. The puppies watched from behind her hind legs.

Chica could have said something insulting about not being afraid of a skinny mangy mutt who couldn't even control a couple of pups. But she didn't, because then it would have escalated into something silly and Pedro would have come running and told her he was disappointed in her behavior.

"I'm not going to run," Chica said. "I was just admiring your pups. I've never had any kittens, and I was wondering what it's like to be a mother." Chica was amazed at what had come out of her mouth. She had had no idea she was going to say that, but

when she heard it, she realized it was true.

The mother dog looked pleased. She gave each pup a lick and a stern nudge into a resting position, and, amazingly, at least this once, they stayed put. “It’s a lot of responsibility,” the mother said, “but it’s worth it.” She lay down and began to groom them tenderly. As soon as they saw her exposed nipples, they latched onto them and nursed.

“You must love them very much,” Chica said. “How many children have you had?”

“Oh, very many, over the years. I’d say more than you and I have toes, all together.”

Chica looked around but saw no other dogs. “Do any of them still live around here?” she asked.

The mother dog looked upset. “None are alive,” she said darkly, nodding toward the shack. “*He* likes to roast fat puppies.”

Chica was speechless, horrified.

“And that’s not all. I think I may be next. I don’t have big litters anymore. The other day he felt my ribs and said he might have to use me for stew because my old meat would be too tough to roast.”

“No,” said Chica, “he didn’t say that to you! It’s hard to believe. I saw him scratch your head a little before, right behind the ears where it feels so good.”

“Oh, he’s not so bad if you don’t count the killing and eating. But all the Indians do that.” The mother looked resigned.

“Well, I count the killing and eating, and I don’t understand why you don’t just run away. You could live a wild life like a wolf.”

“Like a lone wolf, without a pack.” She shook her head. “I wouldn’t know how to protect my babies and hunt at the same time.”

*“I would go, no matter what,” Chica said.*

The mother looked unhappy. “Can we change the subject? Why don’t you tell me what you’re doing here?”

“My Pedro is trying to save the wild world from being ruined by a man named Finn. He would like to see the wilderness stay wild, and the trees not be cut down, and the animals not all killed. He would like to see the Indians stay as they were.”

“Oh,” said the dog, “it’s already far too late for that. I’ve heard the old man talk. Long before I came along, most of his tribe were killed by the white men, some in a massacre and some by catching their diseases. Their lands are gone, and their ways are dying out. My man has a white man’s house, and white man’s clothes, and he is ruining his life drinking white man’s liquor. Once he had a wife and two sons, but they died long ago.”

“Are there no other Indians left?”

“None in his family, and his tribe is gone. The few who are left joined other tribes, and we see them sometimes. Everything is changing, and your Pedro can’t do a thing about it, except maybe get himself killed.”

Chica was silent, thinking. Pedro would never stop trying. It had been impossible in South America too, but he had kept on doing good for as long as he could, until in the end he had barely escaped with his life. It was a miracle they ever got here, to try it all over again.

The pups had fallen asleep, and their mother put her head down over them protectively. She was just like Pedro, doing all she could for as long as she could, no matter how hopeless.

Pedro, the scout, and the old Indian came out of the shack, all of them silent. “Well,” said Pedro to the Indian, “thank you for the advice, but I can’t give up yet. I think I will see the medicine man, even if you think it won’t help. As long as James is

going that way anyway and doesn't mind me tagging along."

The trapper nodded assent.

Pedro looked down at the pups and smiled. "Cute little fellows," he said.

The Indian smiled. "And tasty," he said, "when they're young and chubby like that. If you pass this way when they're just a little bigger you might get a taste. Though I might save the female to breed and use her mother for soup. I haven't made up my mind yet."

Chica looked at Pedro intensely. *Can't you do anything about this? She thought to herself. I know I eat meat all the time that was somebody's baby, but not when I know the family.*

"That's a good idea," Pedro said.

*What, thought Chica. Traitor!*

"We'll be needing meat as we travel," Pedro said. "Would you be interested in selling the dogs?"

*You don't mean it! I won't eat a bite.* Chica was getting very upset.

"Do you have any whiskey?" the Indian asked.

"No," Pedro said, "but I have some money you can use to buy some."

So, thought Chica, he still has some of his gold. She had been hoping he had a stash hidden in his clothes.

A deal was struck, and the mother dog and puppies were all put on short rope leashes tied around their middles as well as their necks, like harnesses. At first Pedro had to drag them, and they got all tangled up together, tripping each other and Pedro, but they quickly caught on and started to trot along.

James led the way, obviously disgruntled about the three dogs and a cat in the entourage. "I wouldn't have figured you for a man who would eat dogs," he said to Pedro.

“I’m not,” said Pedro. “I just couldn’t stand to think of these getting cooked.”

*I knew it, thought Chica. You never let me down.*

They walked silently for a long time, as Pedro was preoccupied with training the dogs to walk together properly. He kept them on very short leads so they could only go where he wanted them to. When the puppies tired and tried to lie down, he wrapped them in the bottom of his shirt and carried them for a while, until they had rested and were wiggling to get down again.

The second time he was carrying them in his arms, and they were sleeping quietly, Pedro started a conversation with James. “Why,” he asked, “do you call him the old Indian, instead of using his real name?”

“That’s the way he wants it. He won’t take a white man’s name, and he’s too ashamed to use his Indian name. He feels he no longer deserves the name he used when he was young and strong and brave. His name was supposed to match his powers, give him some magic.”

“What was it?” Pedro wanted to know.

“He won’t say,” James said, “and no one I know remembers. If you ask him, he says the man who had his Indian name is dead, and he wouldn’t want his ancestors to see him and lose their respect for the man he used to be. He says he still breathes, but his life has been over for a long time.”

“How did he manage to survive,” Pedro asked, “when the others didn’t?”

“That is part of what shames him. He trusted the white settlers and helped them. He spent more time with them than with his Indian friends and family. He admired them and began to try to be like them. In return they betrayed him.”

“And so he feels that because he was himself betrayed, he ended up betraying his own people,” Pedro guessed.

“Yes. I am told that he persuaded the warriors in his tribe not to attack the

settlements, not to fight the steady loss of the lands they used both for hunting and for farming. He tried to persuade others to do as he had done and become more like the whites, insisting that the Indians were only treated badly because they were seen as primitive, inferior.”

“Most of the men, and women too, in his tribe felt that it was the white settlers who were inferior. Nevertheless, most of them also coveted the settlers’ good guns and liquor and blankets. And those were the very things that ruined them, made them stupid and got them into trouble. Even the blankets, because they were used before by sick people, and the Indians got the same sickness, only much worse, so that most died, including the old Indian’s wife and children.”

“But there’s more. The Indians who were left and still resisted leaving their lands were killed and scalped by white settlers dressed as Indians.” James sighed. “Sometimes I think the real savages are my own people, the English and Irish and Scots who do things here they never would have gotten away with back home.”

Chica, listening in disgust, thought to herself that it wasn’t a question of which human group was savage and which not. She had now seen all colors and kinds, European and American and even African, and the more she saw the more she thought there was something very wrong with the human race. Only a few, like Pedro, could be trusted by their own kind, never mind by Earth’s other inhabitants.

James pointed to some smoke ahead. “We’ll stop at that cabin beyond the poplars.”

“Is that where the shaman lives?” Pedro asked.

“No, that’s a much longer journey. The shaman moves around, and we must look for him. This cabin where we’ll rest a bit is new, part of a farm started by a man named Big Bob, who escaped from Finn about a year ago. He has a wife back in Wales who hasn’t heard from him in years, because he can’t get a message back—or maybe he



doesn't really want to send one. Anyway, he's taken an Indian wife, but he treats her badly, beating her, I've heard. She had been taken captive by the tribe that helped him, a tribe moving through the area, and he bargained for her. No one knows where her own family and tribe might be, including her, I believe.

"She's lived with different tribes, and even was a servant to the French wife of a trapper, but she was never anywhere very long. She's a good woman, folks say, but it's also said she is very unhappy and thinks only of returning to her own people, even if she doesn't know who or where they are. Everybody believes that sooner or later she'll run off and try to find another life, perhaps in a tribe where she won't be a captive."

*Who wouldn't?* Chica thought. Any self-respecting cat would be gone.

"I'm surprised that Indians bargained with this man and helped him," Pedro said. "Why would they do that?"

"Most Indians seem to believe in being hospitable to individuals who come in peace, seeking their assistance," James said. "They are good to guests. And besides, he paid plenty of rotgut for her."

They could smell the house—well, the hovel—as they approached it. Its logs did not fit well and had been left unchinked. The structure was very small and had no windows, just a single door. There was no chimney, just a hole in the roof with a wisp of smoke drifting through it. When they were about ten feet away, a voice bellowed out from the dark doorway.

"Don't come no closer. What's your business here?"

"It's me--James. The man with me ran from Finn and is heading west."

Chica had thought she would never see or smell anyone as foul as some of the men on Finn's boat had been, but this Big Bob had them beat, and by a long way. He'd put his latrine too close to the house too, and the wind was blowing straight from it. Chica wrinkled her nose in disgust, but when she looked at the dogs, they were sniffing

the stink up like mad, looking like they wanted to roll in it. There was no figuring dogs out.

“Finn!” Big Bob bellowed. He hawked up a big glob of spit which he didn’t aim at his guests, but they all stepped back a bit anyway. “Nobody killed him yet? I guess I might have to, one of these days.”

“Nobody would turn you in, either,” Pedro said. “Looks like you’ve done all right for yourself since you left him.”

*Oh, how my Pedro can lie, Chica thought. But why is he bothering to charm this gasbag?* Chica called him that with good reason, because in these first two minutes of knowing him he had already demonstrated from both ends the windiness of his digestive system. *Phew!* She thought, and then glanced at the dogs, all three of them audibly sniffing, as if chops were roasting. *What was it with them, anyway?*

“You think so?” Big Bob was smirking at Pedro’s flattery. “Well, yes, this will make a right smart little farm once I get it going.”

“Smells like you’ve been roasting something,” James said.

Chica thought about that and gingerly sniffed the air. Yes, under the body odor and unspeakable stench, there was an slight smell of burned meat. Maybe that’s what the dogs are sniffing, she thought. She sniffed again, but couldn’t identify what kind of bird or game it was.

“Squirrels,” Big Bob said, “they’re little guys, but I got three, and I only et one so far. I got a squaw, but she don’t need nothin’. Not until she starts to do some more work around here.”

Chica was horrified. She had never liked squirrels particularly, and had chased them by the dozens, but it had mostly been a game, with both parties about equally matched and equally scared. And then she had met Squirrel Girl and Palomita, and liked them, and squirrel was no longer a potential menu item. Neither was dove, and that was a

harder thing, since she had already enjoyed many a plump pigeon.

James and Pedro ducked through the low door after Big Bob, but not before Pedro gave Chica a look that she interpreted to mean, *Stay out here and watch the dogs to see that they stay put and don't make trouble.*

The men had no sooner gone into the hut than a young Indian woman came stumbling out, shoved by Big Bob. For a few seconds she stood blinking in the bright daylight. Chica looked her over, noticing first of all how small she was compared to her abuser. The woman, who soon sat down near them on the ground, had a sad but sweet face and a thin body that was barely covered by the filthy rags she wore. Her coloring and features resembled those of Indian women he had known in New Spain, but those women had not been so disheveled and separated from their own kind.

Chica approached the woman, sensing a potential friend and a chance to get some petting. She gave her best, most plaintive “meow” and rubbed her fur against the woman’s leg.

“Oh,” the woman said, “what a beautiful cat you are.” She had an accent, but it was different from Pedro’s. “I have never seen a cat with patches of colors like yours, and such long silky fur.”

Chica began to purr and preen. She wished she could communicate that the name for gorgeous cats who look like her is “calico.”

The woman sat down on the ground next to Chica, lifted the cat onto her lap, and gently began to stroke her. Chica looked up at the woman’s lovely dark eyes and then began licking the tears she saw starting to trickle down from those eyes onto brown cheeks. Stretching, she put her paws on the woman’s left shoulder and nuzzled her cheek, which is as close as a cat can get to giving a hug.

The next thing Chica knew, the woman was sobbing into Chica’s fur, and all three dogs, mother and pups as well, had closed in and were slobbering all over the woman,

Chica, and each other.

Nobody can cry forever, and presently the woman dried her eyes, looked at Chica and the three dogs and smiled. This greatly excited the puppies, who didn't need much encouragement. They pulled at her rags until she played puppy games with them, free-for-alls that included lots of pulling and fetching and piling on top of her. This went on for quite a while, as the talk inside the shack droned on, until they were all feeling a little sleepy. Chica was now on the woman's lap, purring unashamedly, and the three dogs all had their heads on some part of the woman's legs, and the rest of their bodies curled as near to her as they could get. Chica could have dozed off any time, but was struggling to stay awake and enjoy the lovely stroking she was getting.

Then, without warning, the three men came out. Pedro came first, and smiled at what he saw. Then James came out, picking squirrel meat out of his teeth with a knife and barely glancing at the woman and animals. And then Big Bob came out.

"What do you think you're doing?" he yelled at the woman. He kicked her hard, aiming right toward her lap that was full of Chica, but the woman saw it coming and turned her back, protecting the cat. The dogs slunk further away. They knew a lot about kicks.

Chica caught Pedro's eye and gave him the same look that had saved the dogs.

"Your squaw doesn't look like she's much use to you," Pedro said to Big Bob.

"Use to me? This squaw?" Bob echoed. "She's completely useless. She pretends she can't talk, she won't work, and all she does is cry. And eat my food and take up space. I don't know why I thought I wanted her."

"You probably wouldn't mind selling her then, right?" Pedro said.

Big Bob looked at Pedro hard. "Why? You know somebody stupid enough to buy her?"

"I think I do, yes," said Pedro. Big Bob was looking at the woman, probably

sizing her up to price her, and Pedro slipped a wink in the direction of Chica and James. James was looking somewhat astonished, but he nodded to show he understood.

“I’m not sure,” said Pedro, “but I know an old man who’s looking for a young girl like this to marry, and I think he’d pay enough to buy liquor for both of us for a few months.”

“You got money now?” Big Bob asked. “I don’t care who buys her or if you get stuck with her, long as I get the cash.”

Pedro pulled out a gold coin and held it up.

Bob didn’t hesitate. He snatched it. “Sold, sucker,” he said. “Now get her out of here. And you can’t change your mind.” He started laughing and slapping his thighs. “Wait till you find out what kind of witch you got on your hands.” Laughing and passing gas and coughing, he went back into his dark lair.

“Whatja go and do that for?” James wanted to know.

“You heard the man,” Pedro said. “I’m a sucker.” He turned to the woman. “What’s your name?”

“Witch is all I’ve been called for a long time. But I’m not one. If I had magic powers, do you think I would have stayed there?”

“We’ll have to think up something better. Didn’t you ever have a name that people who liked you called you?”

“Nobody ever liked me,” she answered. “I was always just a slave, traded back and forth between Indians and whites.”

“Sometimes we name women for flowers. Is there a flower you like?” Pedro asked.

She thought. “Many. I love flowers. But my favorites are the sunflowers.”

“Sunflower,” said Pedro. “From now on you will be called Sunflower, if you like.” He reached to help her stand up, and she did not know what he was doing. She

ducked, as if to avoid a slap or kick, and scrambled to her feet herself.

“I think I would rather be named for what I do well. Listen,” she said. She began to whistle and warble bird songs and calls: a cardinal, a dove, an oriole, a wood thrush, and others that Chica did not know. Birds began to flit around in nearby shrubs and trees, as if gathering to see what was going on.

Pedro laughed with delight. “May I call you Birdie?” he asked.

She smiled. “It is a good name for me.”

They started walking, and the puppies immediately began to run through their legs and trip them. Birdie picked them up.

“I will take care of the animals,” she said, wrapping her arms around the pups so that they were cuddled and calm, unable to wiggle away.

Chica was so pleased that Birdie was coming with them that she did not even mind being called an animal, a term she knew most people considered an insult. Her new friend would soon learn that Chica was family.

“James is helping us to find a shaman,” Pedro said to Birdie. “Do you know anything about Indian medicine?”

“There is more than one reason I was called witch,” Birdie said. “I know what plants can do. In the Indian village where I was a slave, as a child, I sometimes helped a shaman, not with magic spells to cause trouble but with healing.” She was silent for a while. “Everyone in that village is dead now, I think. Smallpox or whiskey took them all. Some sicknesses cannot be healed with any herbs I know.”

Pedro thought about that for quite a while. “Did you ever know your own mother or father?” he finally asked.

“My mother died giving birth to me. My father died in battle with the tribe who took me captive, but I was very small. I don’t remember anything, except sometimes I dream of someone who might have been him. Or maybe I’m just making up someone in

my dreams, because I want to remember.”

They walked in silence for a long time before she spoke again, and when she did, she was full of questions. “Why are you looking for a shaman? What are you doing here? Why are you traveling with a cat and three dogs?”

“It’s a long story, one that James has mostly already heard, but if you want to hear it, we have a long walk ahead before we camp for the night. It will fill the time.” And he began to talk, telling her a little about his past and a lot about Finn’s ship and his own quest to stop Finn before it was too late.

As they walked along, Birdie listened intently to Pedro’s tale, but at the same time she kept her eyes open for edible greens and nuts and fruits, which she gathered and held in a pouch she made from a bit of her skirt. By the time the sun was low in the sky, and they were ready to stop and make camp by a stream, she had enough to throw into James’ one pot, along with some of his dried venison, to make a stew. Pedro had carved a few small wooden bowls and utensils the first day he had camped in America, and now, while Birdie started a fire and cooked, and James prepared a lean-to and sleeping spots, he carved some for Birdie’s use.

Chica prepared her own dinner, a vole she chased and tormented long and hard. She offered the finally limp vole to Pedro, because it seemed polite to do so, but when she dropped it into the bowl he was working on, he let out a funny squawk.

“Thank you very much, Chica,” he said, “but I’m not in the mood for vole tonight.”

He never was. She had known that when she offered it, but somehow giving it to him to reject just seemed the right thing to do. After all, she knew he would offer her a little of the stew later, and so he did. Chica sipped it delicately, pawing out pieces of vegetables and venison, not making nearly the mess of it that the dogs did when Pedro gave them leftovers in his own bowl.

“Dog,” Pedro said to the puppies’ mother, “I see I’m going to have to make another bowl for you and your family. And you’re going to have to learn to do a little hunting of your own.”

“What will you name the dogs?” Birdie asked. “If you want them to come when you call them, you’ll need names.”

Pedro pondered. “I think I’ll give them Spanish names, like Chica’s. The mother will be *Flaca*, which means thin. The fat male pup will be *Gordo*, and the pretty female will be *Bonita*.”

All the dogs looked rather plain to Chica, short-haired and a dirty shade of tan. The puppy considered fat only seemed to be so in comparison with his nearly skeletal mother, and it seemed a great exaggeration to say that the little female was pretty. But the dogs looked proud as peacocks of their new names, and both Pedro and Birdie made so much fuss over the pups that Chica began to feel a little put out.

And not only that. Pedro seemed to find everything that Birdie did fascinating. He normally would have been commenting to Chica, or playing with her, and now he seemed to have forgotten she existed. It was Birdie this and Flaca that, and look at how cute Gordo and Bonita are. Chica had rather liked the dogs, but now when Gordo pounced on her tail, she growled.

“What’s this about, my darling Chica?” Pedro asked, swooping the cat up in his arms. “You’re not jealous, by any chance, are you?” He kissed her forehead and nuzzled her. “Silly girl, you know very well how much I love you. Now lie here and make my bed warm.” And he set Chica down to wait for him in the spot where he intended to sleep.

“The dogs are making my bed warm,” Birdie said. “They will probably also give me fleas, I know, but I will still like them sleeping next to me. They’re poor outcasts, like me, and we can comfort each other.”



“Well,” James said, “you two can snuggle up to fleas, but not me.” And he lay down at a little distance and almost immediately fell asleep, unaware that Gordo came right over and curled up next to him.

Birdie and Pedro lay down in their separate places, warmed by the animals they caressed, but they did not fall asleep right away.

“I am too excited to sleep,” said Birdie. “I’m free, I have friends, and tomorrow I will get to talk with a shaman who may be able to tell me something about my people. I am very grateful to you.”

“I don’t know if this shaman is a good man or where he is from,” Pedro said. “He may not be able to help either of us.”

“I am going to be hopeful,” Birdie said. “If nothing else, I can talk to him about using plants to cure ailments and stay healthy.”

“It will be good to travel with you. You know so many useful things.”

“I will share with you everything I know, for as long as we travel together. I owe you my life and can never thank you enough or do enough for you. But you must know also that I need to find my people, if I can.”

“I know.”

“I know too,” muttered James, suddenly raising his head, “but can you two discuss this tomorrow and let me get some sleep tonight?”

Pedro and Birdie laughed.

“Okay, James,” Pedro said. “Good night, Birdie.”

“Good night, Pedro. James, I will be quiet from now on. Good night.”

James was already starting to snore again. Chica’s strong cat eyes could see very well that he had now wrapped an arm around the warm puppy and was lying almost cheek-to-cheek with him. *Good idea*, thought Chica, and snuggled against Pedro’s beard.

## Chapter 8

The dove that Palomita was talking to was getting very excited. Its iridescent green neck trembled and shimmered as it spoke. Squirrel Girl had never seen or heard a dove quite like this before, although apparently, from what she had been hearing, the species was extremely common here now and lived all around and with humans. It had come across the ocean from the place that was sending all the trouble-makers.

The dove, actually called a carrier pigeon because she had been bred and trained by humans to carry messages, was named Columbia. Her sister, who was at this moment was bobbing hard to show agreement, was named Livia. Columbia was mostly a pearly gray and black, while Livia had a good deal of blue in her grays. Both of them had beautiful iridescent patches, especially on their necks.

“Oh, my dear,” Columbia was saying to Palomita, “if you have questions about Finn, you came at exactly the right—“

“—time,” finished Livia, “for he’s here getting ready to sail back to England soon.”

“Just as soon,” continued Columbia, “as he finds enough people he can trust—“

“Who don’t hate him and want to escape,” added Livia.

“—to make up a crew.” Columbia sighed. “He will probably take my master, who will be told to take me and Livia, but I have made up my mind—“

“—not to go, and neither will I,” said Livia. “Our master used to be kind, but since Finn tricked him and he’s lost his freedom, he has stopped feeding us.”

“He’s been telling us to go find our own food, to go away from him, but—“

--that’s so hard,” Livia said, “since we’ve been with him since we were squabs.”

“I am not going on a boat with him, though, not with Finn and that horrid Fishbreath.” Columbia bobbed negatively from side to side. “Never, never, never.”

“She’s talking,” Livia explained, “about Finn’s pet hawk, who comes, I’ve been told, from the other side of the earth. He’s really called Fishdeath, and all the birds and little animals who are still left in this horrible town hate him.”

“Fishdeath!” said Squirrel Girl and Palomita almost simultaneously, nodding and giving each other knowing looks.

“You’ve heard of him?” asked Columbia.

“A friend told us a lot about both Finn and Fishdeath,” Palomita answered.

“Really!” Livia said. “And what kind of bird might your friend be?”

Squirrel Girl and Palomita gave each other looks again, and then Palomita said, “It wasn’t actually a bird.”

Columbia and Livia looked at Squirrel Girl, who had been much quieter than usual, hanging back and letting Palomita talk to the birds.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” said Columbia to Squirrel Girl. “I didn’t mean to be rude. Is your friend a squirrel?”

“Not really,” answered Squirrel Girl.

“Some kind of rodent?” Livia asked, not quite hiding her distaste.

Palomita took a deep breath. “We heard about Finn and Fishdeath from a cat named Chica.”

Columbia and Livia gasped in unison and then fluttered their wings and rose a few feet off the ground, looking in every direction before settling back down.

“Chica is nowhere around here,” Palomita said. “There’s no need to worry.”

“With cats, one must always worry. They leap on you from nowhere, and then they tease you and tease you, making you try to get away, but you never will, and then finally they bite you or break your neck. The worst of it is, they might be doing it just for fun, not even being hungry enough to eat you. Oh, pet cats are the worst of all the scourges people brought to this land.”

The voice had come from the roof of the shed that Squirrel Girl, Palomita, and the two messenger pigeons were near. A mourning dove was perched up there, and they all turned to look at her. She was lighter than Columbia and Livia, and less colorful than Palomita, but she was lovely in her own way, beige and rose and blue gray, with a few decorative black spots and a long pointed tail. When she flew down to join the others, her wings made a whirring sound.

Columbia and Livia nodded a greeting. “Hello, Zenaida,” they said together.

“Hi, girls,” Zenaida answered, then turned to Palomita and Squirrel Girl. “What in the world were you ever doing talking to a cat?”

“Oh, I kept my distance,” Palomita said. “But this cat and his master had traveled over the ocean with Finn, and had escaped from him, and they had information we needed. Squirrel Girl and I are going to try to stop Finn and save the forests for the animals.”

Zenaida and Columbia and Livia were very polite doves, but this was too much for them. They could not keep from laughing, although, being doves, they laughed rather gently and quietly into their wings and then were very apologetic.

“Sorry,” said Livia, “it’s just that—“

“It’s so very impossible, ridiculous, really...oh, I am sorry, I don’t mean to hurt any feelings,” Columbia continued.

“You’ll never stop Finn,” Zenaida said, “but, anyway, other than bringing cats, all these settlers have made things better for some of us.”

“Zenaida likes open spaces and buildings to perch on,” explained Livia.

“And farm fields and piles of stored grains,” added Columbia.

“And hunters?” Palomita asked, somewhat annoyed. “How do you like the hunters?”

Zenaida shuddered slightly. “I like them somewhere where I am not,” she said. “But they don’t often shoot in town, and in the cleared fields I usually can see them coming and stay away. It’s just their sneaky cats I mind.” She thought a bit. “It is true that their barns are very dangerous because of those cats. But I am careful.”

“I have seen much worse things than what you describe,” said Palomita, “but from people, not cats. You are a town bird, and your flocks are small. You have seen birds killed one at a time, by cats, or a few at a time, by hunters. I have seen slaughter beyond what anyone should be able to imagine, who has not seen it.”

She paused, looking as if she might cry. The others looked at her in silence, waiting to hear whatever more she might say.

“What I have hated most,” Palomita continued, “was the killing of our babies. Men would come in groups into my home forest, with long sticks or branches that they used to knock the squabs out of their nests. Then they would gather the helpless squalling babies for the pot, laughing about how they wouldn’t have a lot of feathers to pluck. Or they would use fire to make the squabs jump to the ground themselves, killing hundreds at one time and making jokes about it, cooking some and leaving others for their hogs, or just to rot.”

The doves gasped. Palomita sighed in a trembly way, then went on. “My own babies died that way, not once but two years in a row. My flock was enormous, but dwindled to almost nothing in a few years, as almost no babies were allowed to grow up. And the ways they caught adults...”

Again, Palomita had to stop and collect herself before she could continue. “They suffocated us with smoke, they made us collapse from grain soaked in alcohol, they attracted us with what they called “stool pigeons,” poor hurt victims with eyes sewn shut that they set on stools to attract a flock toward its death.”

Palomita broke down and sobbed, softly, almost like cooing, but Squirrel Girl and the doves could tell the difference. They gathered around her, comforting her as best they could.

When Palomita could speak again, she said, “None are left of those I called my family. None are left of our flock. Only I am left to tell the story. Until I met Squirrel Girl I spent my days flying from flock to flock in the West, trying to warn other passenger pigeons about what is coming.”

She sighed. “It is all useless. They won’t listen. There are so many of them and so few of the white settlers. They think it will be as it is with the Indians, who don’t kill squabs and who take no more adults than they can eat. But this is different.”

Squirrel Girl had heard all this before, but each telling shocked her all over again. The doves were speechless, horrified by the tale.

“Maybe you just met a bad bunch of men,” Zenaida finally said.

“You know better than to say that,” Columbia said. “We have seen how they kill each other.”

“And the piles of bodies skinned for fur,” Livia added.

As if to confirm their opinion of men, a horrible scream and then the sound of a shouting crowd filled the air. It was coming from somewhere beyond the other side of

the shed, and the birds and Squirrel Girl cautiously peeked around the shed to see what was causing the uproar. At some distance, they could see a man beating another man with a thick willow switch, as an evil-sounding crowd cheered him on.

“That is Finn,” Columbia said to Palomita. She and Livia then took off, flying away from the hubbub and toward a distant fenced field.

“Be careful,” Zenaida said. “And good luck.” And then she too flew away.

“We need to hide somewhere and watch,” Squirrel Girl said to Palomita. “Do you mind going into the shed and watching through the cracks?”

Palomita answered by wiggling into an opening in the shed wall. Squirrel Girl followed. Then they turned their eyes toward the frightening scene.

“I didn’t steal food! I swear!” screamed the man being beaten. He was tied to a post, with his hands and feet bound so he could not move them.

“How’d you get them crumbs on your face then?” somebody yelled. “From our broth?”

The crowd laughed and applauded, as if this was the funniest thing in the world.

Whack! Whack! The switch had shredded the man’s shirt, which was now blood-soaked as well. The laughter seemed to end his will to resist, and he cried silently for a few more blows. Then he went limp.

“Weak,” said Finn, throwing down his switch in disgust. “No endurance at all, even though he had half a ham to give him strength.” As he spoke, a hawk flew to his shoulder and perched there. Finn reached up and stroked the bird’s head feathers affectionately. “Look at this, Fishdeath,” he said. “You see what useless, thieving scoundrels I have to put up with?”

Fishdeath’s fierce, nodding head seemed to indicate agreement.

The crowd had gone quiet and was looking a little nervous. Finn was looking them over, making them fidget. Fishdeath also seemed to be surveying the scene as if

seeking out a potential victim.

“Nobody else better think about taking any of my food,” Finn said. “What you’ve seen so far is nothing to what I’ll do to the next man who tries it.”

The men stared at their feet, most of which were bare and filthy.

Finn turned and walked back toward a log house at the far end of the square. The men watched him go, not making a move or a sound until he was inside. Then they came to life, albeit in a subdued way. A few ran to help the beaten man, working first of all on the knots that secured him to the pole. Others laughed and joked, slapping each other on the back.

A slight fellow kneeling beside the unconscious man stopped working on knots and stood up. “I know what you did,” he said to one of the men who was laughing. “My father never put his hands on that ham. We’re Jews, and you all know we don’t even eat ham. But you do and you did.”

“And what is a little runt like you going to do about it?” a tall, heavy fellow asked, stepping toward the young man. He had been laughing hardest of all, and now he turned to chuckle toward his buddies behind him, to share the joke, the ludicrous idea that this gangling adolescent was challenging him.

But as he looked back, the boy snatched the willow whip that Finn had thrown down and slashed it across the big man’s head, cutting his ear and cheek and even part of his nose. Bellowing in pain, and shaking his head, the man lunged for the switch, but the boy ducked and, keeping the switch firmly in hand, took off.

“He was right to whip you,” another tall fellow said. “You and your brother did take the ham.”

Everybody in the crowd had something to say about that, some taking one side and some taking the other, and within minutes all of them were using kicks, punches, even bites to make their points. They didn’t notice that several men had carried the



beaten man away to some safer place. Nor did they notice when Finn came stamping out of his house. They didn't even hear him shouting for them to stop.

He did get their attention, finally, when he loaded up and shot into the air. The men froze and then looked at Finn in shock.

"Now, you fools," Finn said rather quietly. "I don't really care how bloody you beat each other, because it saves me the trouble, and you're still going to have to work just as hard tomorrow. But I do have one question for you. While I was out here beating on Abraham, someone was in my larder." He paused, his face reddening. "And so I want to know... WHO STOLE MY CHEESE?"

The men inspected their feet again, not speaking, and then somebody snorted, trying to suppress a laugh, and that set them all off.

Furious, Finn looked on the ground near the whipping post. "WHERE'S MY WHIP?" he screeched. "WHERE'S ABRAHAM?"

That made everybody laugh harder, and Finn started slapping people and knocking them down. But that was funny to them too, and the madder he got, the more they howled with laughter.

Then he yelled, "NO DINNER TONIGHT! NO BREAKFAST TOMORROW!"

That brought them back to reality. They stopped laughing.

Finn turned and walked slowly back toward his house, mumbling something to himself about it being time to try some African slaves and give up on these Scots and Englishmen.

The crowd dispersed, talking quietly to themselves and going into various shacks.

Squirrel Girl turned to Palomita. "Finn is cruel," she said, "but he's also something of a fool. He doesn't look like an important person either. He's small and dirty and fat. Without a weapon or a very weak opponent, he couldn't even defend himself, much less beat up anybody."

“Maybe so,” Palomita said, “but that fool is winning.”

A tiny voice behind them pitched in, “He makes some very good crumbs.”

Squirrel Girl turned to look at the mouse who had spoken. “And so,” she responded, “I suppose you like all these settlers too.”

“We like their farm fields,” a rat added, peeking out from some straw. “We like the barns where they store food.”

“We don’t like their cats, though,” the mouse added.

“We could have guessed that,” Palomita said. “Does everyone you know like people?”

“If you want to hear some real praise of people,” the rat said, “you need to talk to the roaches. Or maybe to some fleas and lice and bedbugs.”

“No thanks on that,” Squirrel Girl said. “We are quite busy trying to get rid of our own vermin.”

“Are there any here who would help us try to drive people back on the boats, back to where they came from?”

“Whatever for?” the mouse asked.

“I guess you wouldn’t understand,” Squirrel Girl said.

“Oh. Well in that case, I think I’ll go visit the man who stole the cheese.”

“Mind if I join you?” asked the rat. “I tasted that cheese before it was stolen, and under the mold it’s excellent.”

“Oh, I suppose. Don’t take such big bites though. And for heaven’s sake, be quieter this time. You almost got us killed smacking your lips over that ham!”

“The worms in it were what I really liked,” the rat said. “Delicious!”

The two went off, not even saying good-by, so intent were they on getting to their cheese meal.

It was getting dark out. Squirrel Girl and Palomita were in a shed where grain was

stored, and so they ate until their stomachs bulged, talking about how easy it must be for the animals who lived with men to get used to such abundance.

The chance of organizing resistance among the animals here seemed very small, although it was obvious that many of the men would have turned against Finn if a leader had presented a workable plan.

“There is one thing we must remember to pass on to Chica and her Spaniard, if we ever see them again,” Squirrel Girl pointed out. “They will want to know that Finn was trying to get together a crew to go back across the sea. He probably trusts the worst of the men and will choose or force them to go; that will leave others, like Abraham, the man who was beaten, and his son, who may want to help Pedro, or be helped by him.”

“That is all very well,” Palomita said, “and I agree that we should tell Chica, but she has no way to pass on information to Pedro, who doesn’t understand our language. And anyway, for us even the good men are bad. They all kill to eat and clear forests to make homes. And if somehow Pedro got the good men to desert Finn’s settlements, those men would just go west and clear some more land for themselves. And Finn would still be coming back with his henchmen and some more poor indentured servants, or maybe slaves this time.”

“This is true,” Squirrel Girl admitted.

They were silent then, facing the enormity, the likely impossibility, of the task they had taken on.

Finally Squirrel Girl spoke again. “Although no men seem to be our friends,” she said. “I think some are better than others. We have lived with Indians for a long time in fear, but we have kept our homes and our families. A man who kills only what he and his family can eat and who clears only enough land for his needs is much better for us than those like Finn, who kill everything and change everything.”

“Yes,” Palomita said. “But from what I have seen, most of the newcomers are

greedy, even if they are not cruel. They are never satisfied that they have enough. And kind men are seen as weak and are abused. We saw what happened to Abraham.”

Squirrel Girl could not argue with this and just nodded sadly.

Squirrel Girl and Palomita had wanted to see Finn in action and to get a look at Fishbreath, and now they had done it. They had wanted to see this larger town, one of the ports where people arrived, and they had done that too, spending much of the day looking the place over and talking to some of the smaller animals. Even the animals who hated men, like the wild rabbits, had gotten used to what men brought, the vegetable gardens and the weedy grasses. There seemed nothing for Squirrel Girl and Palomita to do here, and the settlement depressed them. They were ready to leave.

Stupified from overeating, they fell asleep, having agreed first to leave in the morning and head for another town they had heard of, away from an area where they knew hunts were scheduled to be happening. They wanted to make another try at recruiting but had no wish to risk their lives—or see the bloodshed—at a hunt.

And so the next morning, by the time the men of the town were beginning work with no breakfast, and Finn was feasting on a robin’s egg omelet he had cooked for himself, with a robin’s breast on the side, Squirrel Girl and Palomita were heading north out of town, slowed down a bit by a heavy breakfast of seed corn.

They had not gone far when they started hearing shots, not just from the direction where they knew there was a hunt, but from every direction, and seemingly coming closer and closer. They dashed for cover in a hole that was doubtless someone’s home, knowing it was probably better to intrude on someone than to get shot. The grasses that hid the entrance blocked almost all the light, and at first they could see nothing in the hole, but they sensed someone’s presence.

“Five minutes more up there,” a kindly voice said, “and you would have ended the day roasting on a spit. Or perhaps your killers would have just taken a squirrel tail

and some feathers.”

As her eyes became accustomed to the dark, Squirrel Girl made out the form of a plump woodchuck.

“Thank you for letting us hide here,” she said. “I am called Squirrel Girl, and my friend is Palomita. We thought we were avoiding a hunt, but it seems not.”

“No, today there are hunts all around here, and the only way to escape them is to stay hidden. But you are welcome in my burrow, Squirrel Girl and Palomita,” the woodchuck said. “I used to be called Granny Groundhog, when my family and neighbors were still alive, but I have been almost alone here for a long time, and there is no one to call me anything. These hunts, you know, have taken so many, and others left when their tree homes were cut down or their meadows were plowed. I have been lonely, and it is good to have your company today.”

A shot rang out very near them, and the animals listened, silent, until the tramping and shooting noises passed and faded away.

“It is as if they want every living thing but themselves to be gone. The first hunts took great heaps of animals, even the songbirds, and now they are lucky to find any victims. If they did not raise animals to kill, they would have no meat,” Granny said. “When the Indians were alone here, they hunted too, but they seemed to know that if they took too many animals there would be none left for future years. We hated to see the Indians come hunting, and we feared them, but we had no idea what horrors were possible or that we were fortunate in our abundance.” She stopped to scratch herself a bit. “Oh, but I suppose Grannies always go on about the good old days.”

“Are there no young woodchucks at all?” Palomita asked.

“None in my family, but over the hill at some distance to the north there was a family, if today’s hunt doesn’t get them.”

Although they didn’t want to think about what was going on outside, shots and

footsteps kept returning to remind them. Squirrel Girl and Palomita spent the whole day with Grannie, since she said there would be hunters everywhere in the neighborhood until it was too dark to see. The men had made it a contest to see who could kill the most, and they used every bit of daylight to try to win.

The next morning Squirrel Girl and Palomita agreed that they had seen enough for now. It was time—in fact, it seemed like it was almost becoming too late—to try once again to warn others.

“Won’t you come with us, Grannie?” they asked. “There are still much safer places.”

“I am too old,” she answered. “My bones are old, and my joints ache. I cannot travel far. And I prefer to die where I lived all my life. But don’t worry about me. I sleep most of the time, and I have grown very wise to men’s ways. I intend to die naturally, in this very hole, when my time comes.”

As they could not persuade her, they hugged her and wished her well. Then they set off for Mapleway Woods, determined to talk to everyone they met on their way. If they could not make a revolution and stop Finn and his kind, at least they would do their best to warn others what was coming.

## Chapter 9

Once again, Squirrel Girl's tale had shocked the good animals of Mapleway Woods into silence. She and Palomita had just finished telling them everything they knew about the holocaust happening to the East, and the audience was staring at them, stunned.

They were in the very clearing at the edge of the woods where they had met before to hear Squirrel Girl's warning. Squirrel Girl was deliberately standing in the place where her mother had saved Squirrel Girl's life and lost her own to a hawk. *I wish you could hear me, Mother,* Squirrel Girl thought, *and know that I am trying to be brave and good like you. I wish somehow you could help me do a better job. But please know that I am doing my best, even if no one but Palomita really listens to me.*

Victoria, Squirrel Girl's foster-mother, was the first to speak. "You have given us more details about the danger, Squirrel Girl, and I hope this time others are convinced that it is real. As for me, I believed you the first time. What I don't know is what you think we should do."

"Each of you must make your own choice about that," Squirrel Girl answered. "As I see it, what is a right answer for one could be a wrong answer for others. I hope that some of the youngest and strongest will come with me back east to help find a way to make the worst of the settlers give up and go back across the ocean."

"But I would like most of you to plan for your own safety, either now or later, when the danger approaches. I just don't want you to wait so long that you are all either

homeless or slaughtered in one of their horrible hunts. Somewhere, somehow, earthfolk must survive, even if we cannot win and stay strong.”

“I am not young and not strong,” Victoria said, “but I can help you here by spreading the word to neighboring woods and to the marshes and meadows in the lowlands. I feel in my bones that I will live long enough to see the danger arrive; I sense it everywhere already. It is like the strange light and quiet before a storm, like the smell of a forest fire in the distance. I know I will be forced someday to move westward, but when I do, I hope you will be by my side.”

“Thank you, Victoria. I know you will help many to move to safety, but you must move with them and help them find new homes. Don’t wait for me.”

Victoria nodded slowly. Squirrel Girl was sure she understood why she should not wait. It wasn’t just that Squirrel Girl would probably come later, when the work was done. The more likely reason was the Squirrel Girl would give her life to this cause and never return.

“I’m getting scared,” Rosenibbler Rabbit said. “We are already crowded here, and, even without hearing what Squirrel Girl has told us, we have seen for ourselves many changes in the last few seasons. It doesn’t surprise us anymore to hear that hunters who are not Indians have been nearby, or to hear gunshots. I’m ready to go to someplace wilder farther west. But I’m scared to do that too!” As she spoke, Rosenibbler grew more and more upset. It sounded as if she were choking back sobs.

Fliptail Chipmunk hunkered down near his rabbit friend. “Rosenibbler,” he said, “I’ve been calling out warnings to you for years. If I hadn’t, you’d have been someone’s dinner long ago. When you’re eating something you like, it’s as if you’re in a trance. A fox could come and tap you on the shoulder, and you’d hardly notice.”

“But we’re getting older together, and I’ve gotten used to taking care of you. If you want to move to the West, I’m coming with you. Who else wants to go with us?”



Rosenibbler nuzzled Fliptail lovingly, as close to a hug as she could manage.

A little group of hesitant mammals slowly began to gather around Rosenibbler and Fliptail, at first just members of their families and friends of various species, and then some older gray squirrels, led by Nutta Nestmaster.

“Nutta,” Squirrel Girl asked, “are you up to taking a strenuous journey?”

“I don’t know,” Nutta answered, “but I do know that I am not up to watching any mayhem here. I don’t want to see it when the trees I have loved are chopped down. And besides, Rosenibbler and Fliptail can use my help. I know they’re grown and responsible and even getting old, but I watched them do so many silly things when they were sprouts that I think they still need watching.”

“Thank you for coming with us, Nutta,” Rosenibbler said. “I *do* still need watching.”

“I just hope I can keep up with you.”

“That’s the good thing about moving on now,” Fliptail said. “We can take our time.”

“I’m going to walk with you a bit when you go,” Victoria said, “and begin to spread the word about what is happening. And maybe that way I will know where you headed and will be able to find you when I come myself.”

“Good,” said Nutta. “We will miss you. But you don’t need to worry about finding us. I’m sure we’ll be able to find some good-hearted birds who will carry messages back to Mapleway. And they’ll bring your messages back to us.”

“Are none of our birds coming with us?” Rosenibbler asked. She looked pointedly at Cleoka Catbird and Lakefeather Bluejay, who had been her friends for years.

The two birds looked at each other.

“Why not?” Cleoka asked. “We’ve been watching out for them all for years. Your JAY! JAY! scream and my chatter have warned them many times.”

“Yes, well, they’ve warned many of our earthfolk here, but Rosenibbler seems to tune us out when she’s eating,” Lakefeather said. “Still, I think you’re right. This would be a good time to go, with no babies in our nests and Mapleway Woods still beautiful. I would not want to leave later and carry with me a memory of death and destruction. Yes, I say, let’s go.”

Rosenibbler and Fliptail jumped for joy.

“Are no other birds coming?” Nutta asked. “We have two good scouts, but it wouldn’t hurt to have more.”

A pair of screech owls opened their droopy eyes, looked at each other, held a little whispered conference, and then announced that they would keep watch at night. Fliptail looked a bit nervous about this until they swore to protect him and his family and never, never think of eating them. Then a family of bats said they would keep night watch as well, and everyone felt better.

There was a hubbub of bird chatterings, as flocks and families conferred. Then a redwing blackbird announced that his flock was going to stay around and keep an eye on things, maybe even help Victoria spread the warning. They could always fly away at the last minute.

When the other birds heard this, they tended to agree, and only a few adventurous loners who never flocked except in migration joined the travelers.

Palomita had not been saying much. She had told her story again of what had happened to her flock. It always made her quiet and sad when she had to remember. But now she spoke up.

“Watch out!” she warned. “When settlers come, they will have seeds. They will plant crops you like. You will become addicted to them, and before you know it, you’ll be hanging around men, and they’ll be shooting you.

The birds who were staying murmured among themselves. Some of them looked

scared, but others looked a bit hungry, as if maybe it might be worth it to see what food the settlers brought.

The group planning to leave excused themselves and moved into the woods, to a smaller clearing where a tree had fallen. There they would plan their journey.

The birds who were staying in Mapleway Woods also left the clearing, saying that since they had made up their minds what they would do, they would be going. They could be heard in the treetops discussing the new food to the east and the danger that seasoned it.

There was still quite a large group gathered around Squirrel Girl and Palomita, but some of them also began to take their leave. The skunks said they were not afraid of anything. The possums were also fearless and said they would like to go east to investigate what kinds of new foods were being grown. The raccoons agreed, and the possums and raccoons left to select a few explorers to head east toward the new farmlands.

Palomita tried to discourage them. “The favorite hat among many settlers is made of raccoon fur, with the long tail hanging down,” she yelled after them. “They have big gourds they use to store possum grease left from their stews. It greases their guns.”

But the raccoons and possums just shrugged and continued walking away. One possum did turn and say “Thank you for the advice, but I believe we know better than a dove and a squirrel what is good for us. We will be careful.” And that was that.

The deer talked among themselves and finally said they were going to wait until the days started to shorten and their fawns were a bit stronger, and then they would head southwest, away from the settlements, and hope for the best. They left the meeting too, heading into the woods as a group.

This still left many animals in the meeting, those who disagreed with their groups or who hadn't made up their minds. Among them, badgers and woodchucks, voles and

flying squirrels, beavers and muskrats, snakes and turtles, along with many undecided rabbits and squirrels, listened and pondered, each wondering what to do, how its own world would be affected. Some predators, like wolves and foxes and bears and weasels and wildcats, had not been invited, but they would be informed, according to custom, by the crows, who knew these carnivores well, since crows were always were allowed to clean up any leavings from predator kills. The crows also promised to spread the word to crows farther west to keep an eye on the travelers and warn them of dangers.

“We do that anyway,” one of the crows said proudly. “You can count on us.”

Squirrel Girl privately thought, but didn't say, that she felt sure that crow gossip had long ago informed these crows of what was going on in the East, and that if they had wanted to, they could have told the same story as she did. But they hadn't bothered to warn anyone. Perhaps she was expecting too much of them.

And yet...she had reservations about crow loyalty. The East was already full of crows, who feasted on crops so voraciously that the settlers had created man-sized flapping dolls called scarecrows. As far as Squirrel Girl had been able to see, the crows were not scared at all and used the scarecrows as perches. Crows profitted from the coming of the settlers.

But they were also hunted and shot by the thousands. Squirrel Girl decided that if the crows said they could be counted on, the earthfolk should accept that. But if she herself sent a message by crow, she would also send a backup. She would also check any messages that crows carried to her.

Brown thrashers were dependable messengers, but their habit of saying everything twice was quite annoying. And mockingbirds were even more repetitious. The catbirds? She had seen Cleoka Catbird join the migrating group that had formed around Rosenibbler and Fliptail and had then heard how her chatter kept pulling everyone off track. No, catbirds meant well, but they would never get to the point. Who

then? Grackles? Red-winged blackbirds? She supposed in the end it would be whoever was available and willing. But of one thing she was certain. She would not put crows in sole charge of anything where their dependability mattered, not because they were malicious but because they would do only what they felt like doing at a given moment.

Of all these animals still around her now, trying to decide what they would do, the squirrels were the most talkative, the most argumentative, and, especially when they were grown but still young, sometimes the least cooperative. They had not been impressed by their first sight of Squirrel Girl and were, at the same time, jealous of her fame, which they saw as notoriety and arrogance. They were, for the most part, not about to just accept whatever Squirrel Girl said, and they really were not interested in following her as their leader. Females, especially puny ones, they thought, had no business trying to take charge of anything.

So far, no one had volunteered to go east with Squirrel Girl and Palomita and help start a rebellion. The young, rambunctious squirrels were good candidates to do this, if they could just be persuaded to cooperate. This began to seem less and less likely.

“I will lead a group of squirrel spies,” a brawny, reddish-gray young male named Chestnut finally announced. “But I will not report to you. And I will certainly not report to a female cat named Chica.”

“Then there is not much point in your spying, is there?” Squirrel Girl really wanted help, but she couldn’t see how this would be help.

“I personally think you have once again greatly exaggerated the situation,” another male, very dark and called Charcoal, said. “You just like attention.”

Others protested this, and Charcoal was quiet, but there was obviously a great desire in the group to believe that Squirrel Girl *had* exaggerated, and that the nightmare she described was not true, and that nothing needed to be done, no lives disrupted.

Finally a badger spoke up. “If you hotshot young squirrels want to show how

brave you are, and make yourself useful, why don't you take charge of spying closer to home and protect the earthfolk still here. Let us know when the danger is coming close. Chestnut and Charcoal could lead that group, and we would all be very grateful. I for one would vote for that. I'll even help you, if you like, take orders and all, whatever you say. Who thinks it is a good idea to have a squirrel-run guard here?"

Every paw went up, except for those of the squirrels, who weren't sure if they were being bamboozled into something and were also not sure that Chestnut and Charcoal would be leaders they would want to follow.

Chestnut looked astonished, then proud, then confused, and finally went with being proud. "I accept the honor. How about you, Charcoal?"

Charcoal looked less pleased but nodded assent. "Only if we each have equal power," he said.

"Oh, that will never work," Chestnut said. "Power must be consolidated under one leader, or nothing will get done. And I am the most capable, the strongest, and I also asked to be leader first."

"It doesn't matter who asked first," Charcoal said. "What matters is who is the smartest. I have the most nuts stored of anyone, and that makes me smartest."

"But that has nothing to do with spying or war or bravery," Chestnut said.

The group had about enough of this, and the old badger said he was becoming sorry he had made the suggestion, but, now that he had, he was going to make another, that Charcoal and Chestnut and the other young squirrels move into their home trees to make their decision, and give everyone else some peace.

The squirrels left in something of a huff. Squirrel Girl turned to the badger. "Thank you. You have good ideas. Had I thought of it, I would have suggested some of that myself, but they would never have done it if the suggestion came from me."

"But I would like to put a suggestion to you. For your own safety, and that of all

the others here, could you find a way to work with these others and keep a lookout for trouble? I am afraid those young squirrels will spend all their time arguing and making themselves medals for bravery and will forget all about the hard work they are supposed to be doing.”

The badger, whose name was Stuffy, for his big appetite, agreed, and many of those who usually had nothing to say now spoke up and offered him assistance. Stuffy was fat and slow for a badger, but—unlike badgers in general, who tend to be irritable and unpredictable—he was kind and easy-going, and would be easy to work for.

And with that, the meeting was over. Squirrel Girl and Palomita would be heading back east without a single helper. But much had been accomplished, and Squirrel Girl felt satisfied. She had been taken seriously, and those she loved would be doing more to take care of themselves.

She sought out each of her old friends to say good-bye and then took a long last look at Mapleway Woods.

“Palomita,” she said, as the pair turned eastward, “what I really want to do is pretend that nothing is wrong, just stay here and maybe start a family.”

“With one of those foolish, conceited young males?” Palomita asked, astonished.

“No, of course not,” Squirrel Girl said. “And, anyway, no one can pretend any longer that nothing is wrong. Let’s go.”

In her heart she was afraid she would never see these earthfolk or this lovely place again. So far, she had only been an observer in the East, always watching from some hiding place. The time was coming soon for dangerous action.

## Chapter 10

With night coming on, it was getting harder to see the camp where Pedro was finally meeting with the illusive shaman, who called himself Tall Tom and kept his Indian name secret. The trapper James was with him and so was Birdie, both good interpreters, but even so their meeting had been going on for a long time. James had warned them that shamans couldn't be hurried. Chica and the three dogs had been waiting in a very small cave all day, hiding as far as they could be from the camp and still keep an eye out in case Pedro was in trouble.

Pedro hadn't said it that way, of course. What he had said was that they should stay hidden for their own safety. There were other Indians with the shaman, Indians who might well be hunting for dinner, and Pedro didn't want his animal friends to be seen as potential food.

Chica had gone out cautiously a few times to hunt mice and drink, and then had quickly returned. The dogs had been out briefly too, but Pedro's stern warnings about staying hidden—and the possible consequences if they didn't—had kept them confined most of the time. They were restless now, with Chica in particular wanting to go out again.

*It is almost dark, Chica thought to herself, and no one will see me if I just take a little stretch right in front of the cave.* As soon as she stepped out, she realized she had been wrong.

Looking directly at her, from about ten feet away, was the largest gray wolf she had ever seen. And behind him stood others almost as big. She wheeled to jump back into her cave, then hesitated, knowing that the cave could be a trap where the wolves



could kill her and the dogs easily, if they wanted to.

“Wait,” called the biggest wolf, “we are not hungry. We killed a deer earlier and have eaten as much as we needed. And even if we were hungry, a cat would be our last choice of food.”

Chica turned back around and faced the wolves. “What do you want then?” she asked.

“We are curious. We smelled dogs.”

Chica was silent. These wolves could tear poor, emaciated Flaca and her sweet little Gordo and Bonita to bits.

“We don’t want to fight these dogs, who, our noses tell us, are traveling with you and with men. We don’t like the man smell, but we do like dogs, who seem to be rather weak and pitiful versions of ourselves. This mother and her babies certainly offer no threat, and perhaps they can tell us something that may be useful to us someday.”

At this Flaca emerged. “I will speak to them, Chica. You go inside with the children.” She turned to the wolves then. “My pups are small and know little, but I can tell you many stories that may interest you.” She looked back at Chica, who was still standing at the entrance hole to their cave. “Watch the pups, Chica,” she said, and gave the cat a rather forceful push into the cave. But Chica’s head popped back out, with the two curious pups visible behind her, trying to see who their mother was talking to.

The leader of the wolves seemed to smile. “Don’t worry, Mama Dog,” he said. “Your babies are very like our own. We would never eat them...well, maybe during starving times in the deadest cold of winter...but that is not today. Listen to what I have to say, and you will understand why I want to talk to you,”

“Can we come out and listen?” the pups asked.

“Stay right where you are!” Flaca said severely. “Chica, *please* go inside with them!”

The cat and puppies reluctantly moved back a little, but their eyes could be seen glowing in the dark cave.

“I don’t blame you for not trusting me,” the wolf said. “But I swear I will not harm you or your pups or your cat friend.”

“You were about to tell me something,” Flaca prompted.

“Ah, yes,” the wolf said, looking closely at Flaca. “You know, you are rather thin, but there’s something about you...you’re a good mother. Have you ever thought of joining a wolf pack? Ours is rather small right now.”

“Tell her the truth, Wolfgang,” an old wolf behind the leader said quietly.

The big wolf sighed unhappily. “All right,” he said. “We have come from the East. All of the females and all of the pups in our pack were killed by hunters. They were poisoned while we were out hunting. We are moving westward, trying to start over.”

“I like my new master,” Flaca said. “He saved me and my pups, and now he is trying to save the earthfolk from men like those who poisoned your pack. I want to stay with him and help him.”

Chica had crept out of the cave. “We could use your help,” she said to the wolves. “We are trying to organize the wild animals to do things that will make the new settlers so miserable that they will turn around and go back across the ocean.”

“That is a wonderful idea,” Wolfgang said, “but we have other plans.”

“You’re not afraid, are you?” Flaca asked.

There was an angry murmur among the wolves. “Certainly not,” Wolfgang said. “And we would like to avenge our murdered females and pups. But two generations of us now have seen the men come from the ocean. We used to live in a forest near its shores. That forest has been gone for a long time now, turned into log houses and ships and furniture. And the men keep coming. I think we can no more stop them than we can stop the tides from rolling in or snow from falling in winter. We will all die fighting

them, and they will still come anyway.”

“Does that mean that you *are* afraid?” Gordo asked, peeping out from behind Chica.

“No,” Wolfgang said, “just that I don’t want to see my brothers here die for nothing.”

The wolves behind him began to mutter among themselves, and then finally a young one spoke. “We want revenge. We would like to help fight the murderers. We don’t want to die, but if we do, it will be an honorable death, not by poison. If we die, it will at least be for a good cause.”

“All right,” Wolfgang said, “we will fight alongside the other earthfolk. We will call a truce so that those who are also fighting need not fear us. But we still have to eat, and those who are not part of the struggle will still be hunted.”

“Mostly we eat field mice, with just an occasional deer. I can tell you now that neither field nor house mice will help you, because men have become their benefactors. They probably will not try to obstruct what you do either, and I think that house and barn mice may even accept bribes and could be useful that way.”

“I’m glad you will be on our side,” said Chica. “We need a good strategist and organizer, and you seem to be both. We don’t have an exact plan yet and are still trying to get others to join us. Can you speak to any?”

Wolfgang thought about it. “We can speak to the foxes and the bears. And to weasels and minks and all of their relatives. Perhaps the wildcats. We will tell the beavers as well, who I am sure will join any resistance, as they have suffered greatly; but there are not many of them left. And the crows and jays will always spread messages. We will keep in touch with you through them.”

“What was it you had wanted to ask me?” Flaca said. “Was it about joining your pack?”

“No,” said Wolfgang, “Although that offer stands. I had just wanted to learn more about men, from creatures who have lived with them. But after talking to you, I believe I know more than you do about them. I know that they cannot be stopped.” He paused, and everyone looked at him, as if wondering if he were about to change his mind about helping. Then he continued. “But we will do all the damage we can to these men who have taken our homes and kin.”

“Thank you,” Flaca said. “From what I know of my last master, I am afraid you are right. But I think the good man who saved me, Pedro, will not easily be stopped either, and if he is willing to take risks to make the world a better place, I will stand by him.”

“Pedro doesn’t know what we’re doing to help him,” Chica said. “He doesn’t understand our language. But he is also working in his own way, trying to find good men who are willing to help get rid of the worst men, and so is the woman Birdie who is with him now. You should understand that all people are not bad, and that often even those who seem bad to us are just doing what seems to them to be helpful for their own families, never realizing the harm they are doing to the rest of the world.”

“You are very innocent,” Wolfgang said, “because your Pedro has protected you. I have seen enough to know that most men realize they are causing pain, and they enjoy it, caring only for themselves.”

“I have seen that often,” said Flaca.

“I have seen it too,” Chica admitted, “and I’m afraid that Pedro is an exception, that there may be no others here who are like him.”

“We are going now,” Wolfgang said. “I know the sounds of this camp, and your Pedro and the woman Birdie and the dangerous trapper James have stood up and are saying their farewells to the shaman. Beware of Tall Tom, whose real name now brings him shame. He once betrayed his people to save his own life. And beware of the trapper.

James is not your enemy, but he is not your friend either. He would never help you and does not understand why Pedro and Birdie care for you.”

“Be careful yourself,” said Flaca. “And send messages by crow or jay. We will do the same.”

The wolves nodded, then turned and were gone, only moments before Pedro and the others stepped into the light of a campfire and could be seen taking their leave of the shaman.

Chica was very excited to hear Pedro returning safely, but she knew better than to make noise, and she cautioned the dogs to stay quiet. No one would think that they had just been out of hiding and making plans with a wolf pack.

Pedro and Birdie and James walked right by the cave where Chica and the dogs were hiding, calling softly to the animals to come out and follow them. They all walked in silence then, single file, with a full moon to light their way. They traveled for quite some time before James led them to a good place to camp beside a stream.

Birdie had started to talk once, as they walked, and James had sharply told her to be silent. “I recognized one of the Indians in Tall Tom’s camp. He used to help Finn, and I’m not sure he stopped. He understood Pedro’s English, which I altered somewhat, to make it sound less treasonous toward Finn, when I translated it. I don’t know what side this shaman is really on, but I think it is best that we get far from his camp before talking. There have been rumors about how Tall Tom survived the settlers’ massacre of the rest of his tribe.”

At the camp, Birdie pursued the topic. “Is this why you encouraged me to talk so much with the shaman about herbs and medicines?”

“Yes,” James said, “it seemed best to make that seem the point of our visit.”

Pedro had been silent. It had seemed to Chica that he was angry at James, almost too angry to speak even if silence hadn’t been required for safety. Now he spoke.

“I understand now,” Pedro said. “All day I was thinking that you were mis-translating to thwart me, to change the subject. I could tell from the answers I got that they didn’t match my questions, and something strange was going on. I didn’t realize the shaman might be a traitor to his people.”

“I was trying to keep us all safe.”

“When we talked about what Finn and the settlers had done to the Indians, and whether his magic, his medicine, could have made a difference, his answer wasn’t encouraging,” Pedro said. “I felt that even though you kept changing the topic to Birdie’s herbal cures, Tall Tom knew what I had in mind and was warning me that it wouldn’t work.”

“Maybe,” James said. But what he told you is what he always says, to cover himself when his medicine doesn’t work.”

“He told me his magic is only good for people who really believe in it, not for me. And I suppose he could always say that when his medicine fails, it is the fault of those whose faith in him is not good enough.”

“That is exactly what he does,” James said.

“It was not a complete waste of time, at least for me,” Birdie said. “I learned many new things about ways to use plants. I was surprised he knew so much. Usually women specialize in herbal medicine, and the men focus on seeking help from the spirits in matters related to behavior and power”

“Well, I didn’t learn what I hoped to, and I certainly didn’t find an ally, even a weak one,” Pedro said, “but I did learn many things about using plants to be healthy. I hope you will teach me more. I believe you know as much as Tall Tom, just not all the same things. I was surprised to find out how skilled you are, because you never bragged about it, as many would have.” Chica heard admiration in his Pedro’s voice and something more, the affection and tenderness that usually his master directed toward

Chica.

Birdie smiled at him. "I will be happy to share with you what I know. But you must let me know when I grow tiresome on the subject. I will be naming and explaining every plant if you encourage me, until you fall asleep or beg for mercy." Birdie was talking in a teasing way about plants, but Chica heard something more in her voice too, a warmth and intimacy that told her that it seemed that from now on Pedro would have two females in his life, Chica and Birdie.

"We will make time for botany as we can, whenever we don't have to move quickly and silently, and you may get to be tired of my questions long before I am tired of your answers," Pedro said. "I knew many of the plants of Spain and New Spain, and you cannot bore me with this topic. But it is true that we will not always have time to devote to it. I would like to teach me about the birds here too. And what about the rest of the animals? Do you know things about them too?"

"Yes," Birdie answered. "I cannot read and write, like you, because I had no school for it. But as a child nature was my school, and I had great freedom to study it whenever I had finished the work given me by my Indian captors."

Birdie and Pedro were sitting rather close to each other around the small campfire where they had roasted some fish. James, who had already fallen asleep, had captured the fish in a small lake fed by their stream, and Pedro had cooked them. Birdie had provided greens and seasonings, including raspberries, which she had collected as they traveled. Everyone had feasted, including Chica and the dogs, whom Pedro was now calling *perros*.

Usually after a good meal, Chica would be cuddled on Pedro's lap, caressed into a comfortable sleep. But tonight Pedro seemed to have eyes only for Birdie, and she for him. Chica curled up next to Flaca, making a little warm pile with Bonita and Gordo. This felt good, but Chica couldn't help wondering if this was how it was going to be now,

if Pedro was abandoning her for Birdie.

Then she heard Birdie laugh. “Look at Chica,” she said.

Pedro laughed too. *What was so funny about her curling up with the dogs?* Chica wondered.

Then Pedro got up and stretched. He patted at the place where he intended to sleep, removing a few sticks and stones that might poke him. “Come here, Chica,” he called, “and keep me warm.”

Chica opened an eye and looked balefully in his direction. She did not move.

Pedro walked over and reached down and plucked Chica up. “So, *Chiquita*,” he asked, “are you abandoning me for the *perritos*?” He held her on his shoulder, cheek to cheek. “You have a job to do, little girl,” he said. “Who will keep me warm if you don’t?”

He put Chica down in the place he would call a bed. It was a mild summer night, but when he lay down his warmth felt comforting to Chica. She climbed on his stomach and purred loudly.

Birdie laughed at Chica again. “You’re funny, Chica,” she said. “I can hear you from all the way over here.” Birdie walked closer, leaned over, and petted Chica. “Good-night, Chica. And good-night, Pedro,” she said.

“Good-night,” he answered.

Chica heard rustling sounds from Birdie’s sleeping area, and then it was quiet.

“Birdie,” Pedro said, after a minute or two, “if I were you, I would take a puppy to sleep with me. Maybe Gordo. If he’s anything like Chica, it will be better than a blanket.”

“Your advice is good, but a bit late,” Birdie said. “As soon as I lay down, Flaca was stretched out next to me, warm as bread from an oven. And where Flaca goes, the puppies follow. Gordo is warming my back and Bonita my feet. Chica may be a wonder,



but she can't be in three places.”

“Ah, but Chica is the cat of my dreams,” Pedro said, kissing the top of Chica’s head, “we have been in trouble together on three continents, and she is my faithful friend, whom I dearly love.”

Then Chica really rumbled, blissful in her adoration of Pedro.

“I hope that is Chica purring and not your stomach,” Birdie said, chuckling

But Pedro was already drifting into sleep, and Chica was at the beginning of a dream that involved a plump mouse just inches away.

## Chapter 11

“The skunks have agreed to make a big stink. It’s what we do best.”

“I would think so,” said Palomita, smiling to herself at the way this pretty skunk, with ten adorable young in tow, was managing to look both proud and modest at the same time.

“Of course,” the skunk continued, “we think our musk has a lovely smell. But we don’t take offense at insults from those who would attack us if they liked the smell. I must admit, though, I sometimes feel a bit hurt when I catch my non-skunk friends wrinkling up their noses. I think when it comes right down to it, they are a little jealous of the way we drive off enemies just by turning around and squirting. On the other hand, now that I think of it, we are unfortunate in that one of our worst enemies, the great-horned owl, is not bothered at all by our odor. It is said that his nest smells just like us, although I certainly hope I never find this out firsthand.”

An older female skunk joined the group. “They didn’t ask for your life story, Spicey,” she said. “You do tend to go on about things.”

“Oh, Mother, just because *you* are so anti-social, doesn’t mean that I—“

“Let’s not go there, Spicey, all right? Now I’ll walk on ahead with my grandchildren, and you finish your business here as fast as possible and come and join us.”

“Oh, okay, fine with me, but I wish you’d stop treating me like a child, when I already have my own family. You’ve never given me credit—“

“See you in a few minutes, Spicey. Come on, kits.” The ten clustered around their grandma and headed off toward a clump of gooseberry bushes, just across a ravine full of sedges and columbine.

“When are you planning on making this...uh...’stink’...and where?” Squirrel Girl asked.

“Well, this cat who is organizing everything—her name is Chica—told us she has to discuss everything first with a squirrel and a passenger pigeon—Hey! Are you two--?”

“The very ones,” Palomita said.

“My, my! She told us just yesterday she was hoping to see you soon, and that we should all keep a good lookout, and now here you are!”

“Do you know where Chica is now?” Squirrel Girl asked.

“Oh, dear me, no, that was yesterday morning, and she was traveling one way and we another. She could be anywhere by now!”

“Was she still with a man she calls Pedro?”

“Yes, indeed, and with a woman called Birdie who can sing and call like any bird in the forest. And with a dog they all call Flaca, who has pups named Gordo and Bonita. And a trapper named James, who has a very, very bad reputation. Everybody has a story about some friend or relative cruelly killed by James. But Chica says her friend Pedro is only using this evil James to find their way, and that James was planning to leave them and travel north. Far, far north, we all hope.”

“Mama!” The call came from over by the gooseberries, from her ten kits shouting in unison. “Grandma says to hurry up!”

Spicey gave an exasperated sigh. “If I were you,” she said, “I would speak to the raccoons and possums in this woods. They almost all agreed to help Chica, and I think they even talked about specific details of what they would do. I can’t say for sure, because my mother and my children gave me no peace, constantly rushing me.”

“You’ve helped us very much, thank you,” said Palomita.

“Yes. We appreciate the information and your offer to help. We will find a way to get the word to you, probably by birds, when it is time to come and...uh...”

“Stink. Yes. Well, I’m off.” And with that she scurried across the ravine toward her impatient family.

Squirrel Girl and Palomita continued on their way, following a deer track in a general easterly direction.

“I wonder how Chica ended up with a woman and three dogs,” Squirrel Girl said.

“It is natural for Pedro to befriend a woman,” Palomita said. “What seemed to me unnatural was that such a kind and loving man was so alone. Even though you and I do not have mates and offspring, most living things do, and I believe that some day we also will. In the meantime, we have each other’s friendship. As for the dogs with Chica now, I believe Pedro is one of those people, much in the minority within his species, who cannot see a suffering creature without trying to help it. I imagine he felt he had to save those dogs from something.”

“I’m sure we’ll hear the whole story when we find them,” Squirrel Girl said. “Which I hope will be soon, because frankly all this traveling and grabbing food on the run is wearing me out. I will be glad to have a chance to stop somewhere for a bit. Of course, they may be on the move too and not camping.” The idea clearly made her a bit glum.

“Why don’t you have a little sitdown right now?” Palomita suggested. “I want to fly over the woods anyway and see if I can spot any raccoons or possums who might be able to tell us which way Chica went.”

“Fine,” said Squirrel Girl. She sat under a red maple, thinking if she were not so tired today she would forage a bit for food. But she could always do that as they traveled, to break up the trip a bit. She would wait and perhaps even close her eyes for a

few seconds, but no, that would not be safe when she was alone. She hoped she was not getting sick. It was not like her to feel so listless.

Something told her that it was not sickness, it was something deeper, perhaps set off by seeing the skunk family and having none of her own. It was sadness at leaving Mapleway Woods and knowing that if she ever saw it again, it would be completely different, with most of her friends gone. It was the hopelessness of her task.

She needed something good to happen, something to reawaken her determination. But the news about Chica's organizing was good, she told herself. So why wasn't it making her happy? Surely she couldn't be jealous of Chica, for successfully recruiting. Or could she? Squirrel Girl herself had finally succeeded in persuading the earthfolk of Mapleway to plan how they would save themselves. But she had recruited no army of volunteers. The last and only one she had recruited had been Palomita, who was already on a mission. Still, she and Palomita had convinced Chica too, she should not forget that, and Chica was talking to creatures who had already experienced the tragedy of settlement firsthand and were easier to convince than residents of Mapleway Woods or even those who were drawn to the settlements by the lure of man's food.

The whir of Palomita's wings startled Squirrel Girl from her reverie.

"Follow me," Palomita said. "I found a possum family and a raccoon nursery near a stream just a bit to the south. They all talked to Chica yesterday and will be glad to tell us what they know. They're waiting for us."

Palomita led Squirrel Girl to another deer track that went through hazel shrubs and then red-osier dogwood more or less directly downhill to a slow, shallow stream with horsetails and sedges and young willows grown up around it. Gathered on the near bank were a raccoon sow and four cubs almost as big as her. The cubs were making swipes at insects in the stream and were particularly intent on getting a large beetle larva. A few feet downstream from the raccoons, the possum mother was drinking from the stream,

using a front paw to push insects as well as water into her mouth. She had a baker's dozen joeys swarming over her back, a solid, squirming mass occupying every bit of her fur between head and tail.

Polite introductions were made, and Squirrel Girl admired the children of both families and learned their names. She praised the delightful spot as well, ideal for drinking and catching small water animals, and with a variety of choice greens as well. And then she turned to serious business, asking what they had thought of Chica's message.

"We have seen the damage done to places like this," Mama Possum said, "and no amount of food we can steal from man's settlements—at great risk, I might add—can make up for it."

"I agree," said Mama Raccoon. "This is not where I grew up. Like so many others, I left the East when it became barren and dangerous. I am not interested in being worn as a hat or turned into part of a coat. Like my possum friend here, I will do what I can to drive men away. But I will not bring my cubs the day of the rebellion unless I am certain that the plan is working, and others have spread the gunpowder to the wind and buried all the knives and axes."

"Is that Chica's plan?" Squirrel Girl asked.

"Yes," said the possum. "Birds and mice have agreed to find a way to get ruin the ammunition and locate other weapons to remove. Jays and crows will take the knives and hide them where they will never be found. And wolves will bury the axes. This will take place during the night, which will be very difficult for the birds who are used to sleeping then. But they say that if they can fly at night during migration, they can stay awake to do this. And mockingbirds, who are used to singing long into the night, will also be helping."

"We are hoping to bribe the barnyard animals to be still," the raccoon said, "by

bringing them wild treats that they never have a chance to get. Animals who want to help but not face direct danger, including many small birds, will spend the day before our attack gathering things like seeds of wild grasses and tender flower buds and wild fruits. There are mulberries not too far away that are heavy with fruit.”

“While all this is going on, swarms of snakes will be invading the homes. We expect that when people wake up in a bed crawling with snakes and see that the floor as well is like a moving sea of snakes, they will run screaming for their lives. It will not even matter if the snakes are harmless. People hate any kind of snake and have done them great harm for no reason.

When the people have run out, that is when we will enter their emptied homes and destroy everything. Gray and red squirrels, and chipmunks and ground squirrels, woodchucks and beavers and muskrats, all who are hurt by man will be there to chew apart whatever we can. There will be predators everywhere outside, with sharp teeth and claws, bears and wolves and wildcats, and foxes and weasels and badgers, all fiercely working to keep the weaponless men running and away from the deer and rabbits, and all the eaters of grains and greens, who will be ravaging their fields. In the end, man’s homes and fields will be destroyed and their settlements—all of them, for this will happen everywhere at once-- reduced to nothing, as if a hurricane hit them.”

“But the men themselves will still be here, somewhere, even if they have no food or weapons and their homes are trashed,” Squirrel Girl said.

“Yes,” the possum said, “but they will have no reason to stay in this particular place. We are hoping they will disperse along the coast, perhaps to towns we know exist far to the south or north, and that they will eventually give up and go back across the ocean when they have a chance. If they don’t die of starvation before that. At the very least, they will be much weaker.”

“The truth is that we don’t know what they’ll do,” the raccoon said. “We may

have to continue to make life miserable for them, let them build things up and then trash it all again. The plan is not perfect, but it is the best anyone can think of.”

“It is a wonderful plan,” said Palomita. “Chica did well.”

“Actually,” said the raccoon, “I remember now that she told us that most of the ideas came from other animals, and that Wolfgang, whose wolf pack lost all of its females and whelps, did most of the recruiting of predators.”

Squirrel Girl gasped. “Wolves like nothing better than to chase squirrels to their death. I hope I will not have to meet him.”

“Chica told us that he had promised a truce for any creature connected to our revolt. She believes him,” said Mama Possum. “It is hard to see, I must admit, how a creature being stalked for supper by this wolf, who might not even know she is being stalked, would identify herself as ineligible.”

“Ahem,” said Palomita, bobbing her head toward the ridge high above the other side of the stream. An enormous wolf stood there, watching them.

They all stared rather nervously up at the wolf.

“You don’t have to worry,” he called down to them. “I am Wolfgang, and I have come to lead Squirrel Girl and Palomita to where Chica is camped. It is not far. It is important that you get there, because Chica will not move forward with our plans until she discusses them with you.”

“Can’t you just give us directions?” Squirrel Girl asked.

“No. I want to be sure you get there quickly. Follow me now. We will walk along the top of the ridge for a while. There are no other wolves with me, and this is not a trap. I would not need a trap if I were hungry for you.”

Squirrel Girl shivered at that thought. And what was this about “our” plans, she asked herself. It was as if everything had been taken out of her hands, and now Chica and Wolfgang were in charge. She supposed she should be glad to share the burden, but



she felt like she had been found wanting. She stood there watching the wolf begin to walk away along the edge of the ridge.

The wolf turned. "What are you waiting for?" he asked. "Chica told me you were very courageous. All I see is a skinny, frightened squirrel with a deformed tail."

This made Squirrel Girl angry. "Go on, then," she called. "We're coming."

She and Palomita followed him for about a mile, keeping well behind. Then he stopped and called to them. "There is a deer trail through the woods here. It leads to the place where Chica's party is camping. I'm leaving you now. Chica knows that I will be returning to talk to her later."

Squirrel Girl approached the trail slowly, making sure Wolfgang was well on his way. To be doubly sure, Palomita flew around above her, to look for a possible ambush, although they both doubted that the wolf would go to all that trouble for a meal of skinny squirrel.

There was no trap, and after hiking for only a few more minutes, they heard the sounds ahead of them of Pedro's voice and that of a woman. They cautiously went forward, knowing that Chica could not greet them in front of the humans. And then there was the matter of the dogs. The place reeked of them.

"Are you two Squirrel Girl and Palomita?" asked a little voice coming from under a shadberry bush set back a bit from the trail.

"We certainly are," said Squirrel Girl. "Come out so we can see who you are."

"I am Gordo," said a fat puppy, squirming out into the open. "Wolfgang told me to keep a good lookout for you and to let Chica know you have arrived. But right now she's lying in Pedro's lap being brushed, and this is not a good time to disturb her. Can you wait a few minutes?"

"We can, but were you alone? The bush is moving."

Another pup, a little thinner, peeked out cautiously, showing only her head.

“Come on Bonita,” Gordo said. “There’s nothing to be afraid of. It’s just a pigeon and a skinny old squirrel with a broken tail.”

Squirrel Girl felt terrible. Everybody seemed to see her as a frail, broken-down old failure. And that was how she was starting to see herself too. She must have been dreaming to think that she could be a hero and do great things that would have made her mother proud.

“But Squirrel Girl is *famous*,” said Bonita, “and so is Palomita. They are very brave, and it was their idea to start a revolt among the animals.”

“Thank you, Bonita,” said Squirrel Girl, starting to feel a little better already.

“While we are waiting for Chica,” said Palomita, “can you tell us how dogs and a lady came to be traveling with Pedro and Chica? We have been very curious.”

“We were so cute,” said Gordo, “especially me, that Pedro could not resist buying us.”

“We were about to be cooked by a cruel master, and Pedro saved us,” said Bonita.”

Squirrel Girl and Palomita looked at each other and laughed.

“Which is it?” asked Palomita.

“Both, I believe,” Squirrel Girl suggested. “These pups *are* irresistably cute, especially to a sucker for cuteness like Pedro, who would have to save them if they were in trouble. And we both know that humans around here love to cook fat little animals. I would think that Gordo, especially, would have been ready to roast over a campfire.

Gordo winced.

“Our mama is with us too,” volunteered Bonita. “She is very thin and getting old, but she might have been turned to stew meat if Pedro hadn’t bought us. Our master was talking about breeding one of us to get some younger dogs, but he would have had to find a male somewhere.”

“We’re glad you all made it away from that place. Pedro seems to be a good man.”

“Oh, yes,” said Gordo, “and Chica is a good friend too. The mice and voles around here don’t like any of us though. We’ve all become good hunters, though Chica tells us she has always preferred to share Pedro’s food, rather than hunt. She has given up hunting birds altogether, since so many of them have volunteered to do anything they can to help the revolt. And also because of you, Palomita.”

“And Chica won’t eat squirrel anymore, either, because of knowing Squirrel Girl,” Bonita volunteered. “Pedro says he can’t understand how Chica became such a fussy eater. She won’t even eat rabbit meat, which used to be her favorite, because she had talked to a group of rabbits about helping to destroy settlers’ gardens.”

“Chica says that once she has had a pleasant conversation with an animal, it’s hard to just go break its neck and bite off its head,” said Gordo. “She’s drawn the line at small rodents, though, and says she has to be able to eat *some* kind of meat. She insists that others organize the mice, who are really important to the revolt, because if she does it, she will end up starving to death.”

Once again, Squirrel Girl felt thankful to be a squirrel. She could not imagine eating something that had a face and spoke to her. “What about you dogs?” she asked the pups. “Does it bother you to eat meat?”

“Us?” they both asked. They looked at each other and started chortling.

“There is nothing that Gordo won’t eat,” Bonita said, laughing. “Including shoes and wood. And I am almost as bad. We are both thankful for every bit of food that comes our way, and we don’t think a lot about what that food used to be.”

Palomita and Squirrel Girl both nodded thoughtfully.

Finally, Palomita said, “But you will not eat those who are working on the revolt, will you? Even the wolf said he wouldn’t.”

“No, no,” said Bonita. “We have sworn not to do that.”

“Although,” Gordo said mischievously, “otherwise we do consider dove and squirrel to be good eating. And even now, if James catches it, well, the animal is beyond help anyway, and there is no sense in wasting good food.”

“Chica told us to warn you to stay out of James’ sight,” Bonita said. “I almost forgot about that.”

“Let’s move off the trail then,” said Squirrel Girl. “It is not my goal in life to be turned into dog fat.”

When they had all moved to the other side of the shadberry, Palomita asked, “How did the woman come to be with all of you?”

“She was purchased too, for almost the same reason, from a different cruel master,” Gordo said.

Squirrel Girl was astonished. “You mean she was about to be cooked and eaten?”

Bonita and Gordo laughed, and then Bonita answered. “Of course not. That is the one cruel thing—maybe the only one—that people seldom do. Although we have heard that on rare occasions it happens among the Indians or when there is starvation in the land. But the woman who Pedro named Birdie was only badly treated and beaten, and she made so much trouble for her master, by resisting him, that he was glad to get rid of her.”

“Is she nice? Is she good to Chica?”

“Oh, yes,” Bonita continued. “Chica adores her. We all do. We are always talking among ourselves about how wonderful it would be if Birdie and Pedro would stay together and raise a family. But she wants to find an Indian tribe to live with, and Pedro wants to organize settlers against Finn, and so they cannot agree. I believe that each secretly wishes to be persuaded by the other to marry and make a new life together somewhere that would stay peaceful, if such a place exists.”

“It would be my dream come true,” said a voice from the path. And then Chica joined them. She greeted Squirrel Girl and Palomita warmly, then said, “I wish you could meet Birdie, but it is impossible. James is sure to be hunting for our dinner in a little while, and he is a good hunter. It is best if you don’t stay here long.”

“We have heard about your plan from a skunk and a raccoon and a possum. It is a marvelous plan, Chica,” said Squirrel Girl. “I wish I had thought of it.”

“You will have the responsibility, with helpers, of deciding on the best day, notifying me by a bird carrier, and then overseeing the event in the town where you last saw Finn, when I have spread the word and all have arrived,” said Chica. “I apologize, but I do not think I will be able to be there. Pedro is going in the opposite direction, and I must stay with him.”

“How will I know what is best to do? How will I be sure of each animal’s job?” Squirrel Girl said. “It is a very complicated plan. Will the animals listen to me, or will they just tell me I am a thin old squirrel with a broken tail?”

“Wolfgang and others will make sure that everyone listens to you. There are six towns in this part of the world, and all will have revolts, but you can only be in one place at a time, and so, when I hear from you that the time is right, I will notify the other leaders. We have a weasel, a mistreated dog that is half wolf, a raccoon, a garter snake, and, in one town, duties shared by a bat, a nighthawk, and a crow.”

“I am not sure what will be the best day, even in just one town. Is it better to do it with Finn there, before the ship leaves? That way others could try to leave. Or is it easier to do it with him gone? And how can I decide about other towns?” Squirrel Girl sounded very uncertain about her abilities.

“Palomita will help you coordinate, and other birds will help Palomita,” Chica answered, looking at Palomita, who vigorously nodded agreement. “All of the leaders, including Wolfgang, will be gathering information and sending it to me and to you, and

together, we will have to make a decision. No day will be perfect everywhere, and even with weapons hidden, some will be hurt, maybe killed. We will have to do our best. And you must forgive me for staying with Pedro and not risking my own life alongside all of you.”

“You have done more than I have,” Squirrel Girl said. “There is nothing to forgive.”

There was a thrashing of shrubbery, and Flaca had arrived. “I came to get Gordo and Bonita, as Birdie is wondering where everyone went and is about to go looking. She’s worried about you, too, Chica. You need to come back to the camp soon.”

Chica introduced Flaca to Squirrel Girl and Palomita, who looked not completely comfortable with this dog who was almost as big as a wolf, even if she did not look so strong.

“I am very happy to know any friends of Chica,” Flaca said. Then she and the pups hurried back to the camp.

“I will be sure we keep in touch,” said Palomita to Chica.

“I know you will,” Chica answered. “Will you be heading back to the town where you saw Finn?”

“We will,” said Squirrel Girl. “But the barnyard animals told us nothing that encouraged us the last time we were there.”

“Many have approached them since then. And they are prepared to be bribed into silence. They believe we will fail, and that in the end they will still have the benefits of man’s food. And so they don’t mind enjoying a bribe. It isn’t as if they love humans; they just want to use them.”

“But you are sure they will cooperate with us?” asked Palomita.

“That is what our bird messengers have told us,” Chica answered.

“Well then,” said Palomita, “good-bye until we see each other again. I expect to

see you often during the planning.”

“And I will seek you out after the victory,” said Squirrel Girl, trying to put a good face on things, even if victory seemed to her unlikely. It was also possible, she thought, that after it was all over, victory or not, she would be dead.

“I will look forward to celebrating together,” said Chica to both of them. And then she turned and was gone up the trail to Pedro’s camp.

## Chapter 12

“As you can see, the flower is long gone on this ginger—it bloomed in the spring,” Birdie said. She looked under the leaf where a dried-up remnant of three sepals hung on. “But the plant can be used at any time to ease an upset stomach.”

She and Pedro were crouched close together in a damp woods with many openings to the sun, examining an abundant low plant with heart-shaped leaves.

“It is the root of the ginger that is useful. It can be chewed as is, or dried and ground up into a powder for cooking or teas, or simmered in sugar for a delicious, spicy treat. Some say it is also good for a cough.”

She stood up then and walked to a nearby tree. “For sore throats, the stringy inner bark of slippery elm makes a tea that soothes both the throat and the stomach.”

Pedro peeled off a bit of bark and examined it. “It sounds as though with ginger and elm, a person can take care of two of the most common ailments. If I add these to the plants you have recommended for headache, fever, wounds, toothache, and rheumatism, I will have little need of a doctor. Since most of them seem to be charlatans more likely to kill you than cure you, this is a life-saving education you have given me.”

“Oh, there is much more to learn,” said Birdie, “because, unless you carry bits of all these plants with you, you will not always be near what you need, or in the right season, and must know alternative plants.”

“There is one plant I am most desperate to find,” said Pedro. “I need its strong medicine.”

“What would that be?” Birdie asked. “Perhaps it is around here.”



Pedro hesitated, then smiled shyly. “I hope so. It is the plant that will make you want to love me and stay with me and forget your ideas about living with a tribe.”

“Oh,” she said, blushing. “That is the kind of magic shamans like to think they can do, and some medicine women, but I am not of that belief. I only work on cures and preventions related to physical sickness.”

“Not love sickness, then?” Pedro teased.

She laughed. “Pedro, I do love you, and not just because you saved me from a miserable bondage. When I think about that, I realize I could have run away on my own, but I lacked the courage. You gave me freedom and health and helped me find my own courage. But I can’t be wandering around the woods with you, trying to foment rebellion and resistance. I was raised in a tribe that was not at war when I was with them, and even if that tribe did not love me and keep me, I loved the life I led there, which was both free and stable. I was safe, comfortable in my spirit.”

“From what has happened to that tribe since then, you must know you were not really safe. In fact, no Indian in this land today is truly and permanently safe, not as long as the new settlers keep coming and taking everything from them.”

“You’re right, Pedro, and I admire you for wanting to fight it, but it is like trying to stop winter from coming, because you love the autumn. It is impossible.”

“Seasons are inevitable, Birdie, and they have their place in life, always leading back to spring and new hope. The settlements are not part of a cycle of renewal. They bring destruction and change. After the winter of their coming, spring will only be for them, not for your people, not for the animals of the forests that are gone.”

“I cannot argue, and if many others would join you, and there seemed some chance of success, I would be with you too. But I have just this short life, much of which has already been wasted in suffering. I want children. I want to live in peace with them and teach them about the plants and animals and seasons. I want a man who will be

strong if trouble comes, but who doesn't seek it out. Can't you understand that, Pedro?"

"I understand. And it is possible that the day will come when I will give up trying to make the world a little more fair, a little less cruel. So far I have accomplished little, anyway. When that day comes, I will look for you, and if you are still free to be with me, we can try to make ourselves a little sheltered earthly paradise. The trouble is that this world does not like to let people hide in their private paradise. It seeks them out and surrounds them with all the troubles and injustices of the broader world and in no time steals their heaven."

"When you talk like that I want to cover my ears," Birdie said. "I know you are right, that the evil in the world gets worse when good people pretend it is not there. But I don't want to fight that evil. Most people don't. That's why you are having so much trouble finding people who will join you. Life is short and difficult enough, without making it harder."

"All right. Let's not ruin this beautiful day with quarreling. But at this moment, we are moving aimlessly through these woods, not even knowing if we are looking for a tribe for you to live in peacefully or one for me to convince to make war against Finn. In fact, with James gone his own way, we are not all that sure where we are or where we are going." Pedro was as upset as Chica had ever seen him, at least since Birdie had come into their life.

"I am enjoying our time together," Birdie said. "And I know that if we continue west we will pass cabins of settlers who have fled Finn. And sooner or later we will cross paths with Indians. When either of those things happen, we can decide what to do."

This clearly did not satisfy Pedro. Sorry for him, Chica rubbed against his leg until Pedro picked her up. She had been trying to comfort and distract him, but she began to regret it. He began to stroke her so hard that it was practically a pummeling.

They traveled in near-silence for the next hour. The woods were just as lovely as

before, and Birdie pointed out a few plants, and Pedro asked a few questions about bird calls, but their heart was not in it anymore.

Then, unexpectedly, they noticed smoke ahead, and soon after they came to a small clearing. A neat little house, built mostly of field stone, was surrounded by a large cottage garden where vegetables and flowers were flourishing all mixed together in a thick cacophony of colors. A dog was sleeping draped across the doorstep to the house, and a cat lounged in a rocker to the side of the door. The house even had a pretty little open porch, the thatch roof of which was creating shade for the dog and cat.

To the side of all this, Pedro was astounded to see the source of the smoke. A man was using it for protection as he tended bee hives. Pedro knew of this practice in Europe, and had always enjoyed honey, but he was amazed to see it here.

In fact, he was amazed at everything he saw here--the house and the cottage garden seemed to have been lifted whole from England, and the forest behind could have been on the estate of some fox-hunting English lord. They would have been charming but quite ordinary across the ocean. In this wild land, they seemed the height of civilization and luxury.

The dog in the doorway began to bark as they approached. The man looked up, startled, and quickly closed the hive he was working on, and approached them, removing, as he came, his hood and some other protective coverings he wore. He used some water from a bucket to put out the smoking fire. Then he greeted them.

“Welcome,” he said. “My name is William. Excuse my surprise, but I have had visitors only once or twice a year since I came here. What brings you here? And where are you headed?”

“We are exploring more than going toward any specific place,” Pedro answered. “Do you live here alone?”

The man’s happy face saddened. “I came here with my wife, Mary, and we built

this house and garden together. We had a little girl, Sara. Sara is four now, but my wife died delivering a second child, a boy. Sara and the boychild, Bruce, are living with my sister-in-law, in a settlement far to the south. I got help from some Indians, through a trapper, to get Bruce a wet-nurse who traveled with us to take the children to my sister-in-law.”

“I’m so sorry about your wife,” said Pedro.

“It happened two years ago, and I am still just as sad. But things will be better soon. My sister-in-law, who is named Jane, recently lost her own husband, who was very much older than her, and she has agreed to come and live with me here, and be my wife, and we will raise Sara and Bruce together.”

“You have made a beautiful place for them,” Birdie said.

“It is like what we left in England. Perhaps we should all have stayed there, and my wife Mary, and Jane’s husband, might still be alive.”

“Childbirth would have been the same there, and Jane’s husband would have still grown old,” Birdie pointed out.

“Yes,” William said, “but a midwife might have been able to give more help to Mary than I could. And Jane’s husband would have had an easier life and a doctor to come when he fell ill.” He brooded a bit in silence, then looked up and smiled at them. “Mary always welcomed guests, and she would expect me to do the same. I have bread from my own wheat, a refreshing drink from sumac berries, and I have sweetened both of them with my own honey. If you come inside, we will be able to sit at a table.”

And so the four went into the cottage, leaving their animals outside to get acquainted. But William’s pets had wasted no time and were already working on this, being males who had long been wondering where the females were in this wilderness.

While the humans had been getting to know each other, William’s cat, which was a tiger-striped longhair, featuring black stripes on a warm tan background, had been

giving Chica the eye. Chica had been staring brazenly back, suddenly realizing how long it had been since she had seen another cat, particularly a male. The dogs had moved much faster to satisfy their curiosity, and William's hound had already sniffed Flaca and Gordo and Bonita from nose to tail, and they had returned the favor.

"I am Sam," the hound said, "and my cat friend here is called Christopher. We haven't seen our own kind since we moved to this woods, and we were starting to think we were the only dogs and cats in this strange new world." He turned to Chica. "Christopher and I had heard of calico cats, but you are the first we have ever seen. Your coat is very beautiful."

Chica, blushing under her fur, and very pleased, thanked Sam. Then she introduced the Flaca and her pups, thinking all the while what a fine, handsome fellow this Christopher was. He offered to lead the newcomers on a tour of the place, and his offer was quickly accepted, with Chica's "Please do" being the quickest response.

But they had no sooner gotten around to the back side of the house when a bluejay started screeching at Chica. There was someone in the woods who needed to talk to her. In fact, it was quite a large bear, the jay said, but there was nothing to fear. It was just another volunteer leader.

Chica excused herself, telling Flaca to explain, and went into the woods.

It was a black bear, much bigger than Pedro had he stood on his hind legs, and perfectly capable of killing Chica with a single swat. Chica kept her distance, as she knew these bears could have bad tempers.

"I've been talking to Wolfgang," the bear began, not wasting any time but jumping right into the matter at hand, "and he claims that if I terrorize the settlers after snakes have driven them out of the house, they will not have any guns to kill me. Can you swear to this?"

"I can't swear to it, because no one can be sure that our plan will work. We do

plan to destroy their ammunition and bury their weapons, before we do anything else. But something could go wrong. If you are afraid, perhaps you had better not get involved.” Chica knew she was being snippy toward an animal that tended to be violent, but at the moment, what she really wanted to do was to go back and join Christopher and the dogs. She also wanted to know what was going on with Pedro and Birdie. This organizing thing was getting quite tiresome.

The bear growled threateningly. “I am afraid of nothing,” he said. “But there just better not be loaded muskets. If there are, and I escape with my life, I will be visiting you, and Wolfgang too, and I can be very unfriendly.”

“Do as you please,” Chica said gamely, secretly worried. “Although I would think that if you’re really brave you would pick on someone your own size, which would be a man, not a tiny cat or even a wolf.”

“I’m going to think all of this over,” the bear said. “I don’t like your attitude. On the other hand, half my relatives have been turned into rugs and winter coats, and I am starting to work myself into a rage. I would be very happy to fight men if it were a fair contest. But they hide their weakness behind guns. I will not promise to help, but I will not rule it out either. When the time comes, I will make a decision.”

Then, without even saying good-by, he turned and was gone into the forest.

The jay had been listening. “I wouldn’t count on that one,” she said. “I’m not sure I would even want his help.”

“I agree,” said Chica. “Thank you for being a messenger, though.” That said, she went to find the dogs and Christopher.

She found them touring the garden, sniffing everything, but following Sam’s admonition not to pee on things. William would think Sam did it and get mad at him, something Sam would never want to happen, not out of fear of repercussions but because he adored William. Besides, Sam explained, many of the plants growing in the garden

were food, or growing next to food, and peeing on food was simply not done by any animal with a grain of sense, not to mention manners.

“There is one place in the garden that is for me, though,” Christopher said, “even if William does sometimes take a few leaves for tea. Follow me, Chica, you are going to like this.”

*I hope this is what I think it is,* Chica thought. *Yes! Yes!* She threw her body down into the large patch of catnip Christopher had led her to. She rolled in it, she licked it, she ate an entire flower head.

Christopher stood at the edge of the patch watching her. “I was here already today,” he said. “And anyway, when catnip is always around, it is still enjoyable but less exciting.”

Chica nodded, hardly hearing him. This patch was *huge!* She had never known a human who was deliberately growing catnip for the pleasure of his cat. Christopher did not seem to appreciate, as she would have, that he was living in a cat heaven.

Pedro, Birdie, and William had come back outside while Chica was rolling in the mildly narcotic mint. They were standing there grinning, enjoying the show she was putting on.

“You have catnip!” Birdie exclaimed. “One of the few things the settlers brought that I like! It makes a healthy tea. If you wouldn’t mind, I would love to take some leaves with me when we go.”

“Of course,” said William. “I’m sure Christopher can spare some. Although if you’re traveling with Chica, you had better brew your tea quickly, before she eats every leaf. Look at her!” Chica was now spinning around, chasing her tail and making little leaps. “But I hope you two will stay a few days. I have been alone for so long, and so lonesome for good company.”

“Oh, please, Pedro, I would like to stay here a bit, at least until I have heard the

names of all these garden plants.”

Pedro looked at the garden, which was more like a big, varied field, with a house in its center. Everything was intermingled and profuse, in amounts that one family might use. There were probably hundreds of species there, even with spring bloomers gone and autumn ones still to come. “To know all these plants would take weeks,” he laughed. “But I am interested too. Perhaps we can do William some service, some work to pay our way, and in the meantime learn not just about his garden but also what he knows about this land and its native peoples.”

“You can see I have plenty here,” William said, sweeping his hand to indicate his vegetable riches, “everything but company. Your company is all the repayment I need.”

“But have you no chores undone that extra hands could do?” Pedro persisted.

“Oh, I have one never-ending and possibly futile task. If you like, you can help with that.”

“What is it?” Birdie asked. “Will I be able to help too?”

“Oh, yes,” William answered. “The task is to mark the borders of my property with signs and eventually with fencing. I was given a huge holding here by my father, who sent me to America to keep me from prison and a probable beheading, for writing pamphlets advocating religious freedom. My father had much earlier been given the land by the king, who of course did not really own it, since tribes of Indians were already living on it.”

“When I arrived, and had surveyed the corners of my land that was not really mine, I told the Indians I intended to just use this small part and leave the forest alone, where they could continue to live as before. I was embarrassed to be saying such things, because from their point of view, I was coming to live in their hunting area and had no real right to tell them anything about where they might stay or not .”

“Are any still here?” Pedro asked.



“No. Some of their tribe were curious and could not resist the lure of the settlements and, eventually, the whiskey the settlers brought and then made here. Eventually, the Indians passed on disease and alcoholism to the rest of the tribe, destroying it. Those who were left joined others who went west, vowing to have no more traffic with Europeans.”

“Now that there is no reason to leave the land for Indian use, and I see so many forests being cut down for timber and farms, I am determined to keep my property as I found it and save its animals from hunting, as well. I doubt that I can succeed, since people squat on land and start farms wherever they please, with no government strong enough to protect property or stop poaching. But I will post signs proclaiming my ownership and, little by little, try to put up some fencing. My hope is that with so much land for the taking, potential settlers will keep on going.”

“It is a noble cause,” Pedro said. “Saving one forest and its creatures is much better than saving none at all. Your plan is modest, compared to mine—which is to save the whole land—but it amounts to much more than mine, if you succeed and I fail.”

“There is something between succeeding and failing that you have already achieved. Let me give you an example. In England, many people have read my pamphlets and now believe that religious freedom is important. These people have no power, and neither do I. In fact, I had to leave the country to save my life. But that doesn’t mean I have failed. I have passed on my ideas, and so will those who have read them, and some day, perhaps long after I am gone, they will—I like to believe--triumph. That is not failure, although at the moment it may seem so.”

“I understand,” said Pedro. “You are saying that even if I cannot point to a single acre of land or group of animals or Indian tribe that I have made safe, simply by speaking for them, and setting an example when I can, I am not failing, even if I am not succeeding as I wish to.”

William nodded.

“You are both admirable,” Birdie said, “always thinking of how you can make the world a better place. I confess my only dream is to find a refuge, a peaceful life among my people.”

“You say that, as if you are selfish,” Pedro said, “but you are kind in everything you do and say. You use your skills to heal, and you even draw the wild animals to you, singing their songs. Chica and the dogs adore you, and being around you makes life sweeter. I may talk of a better world, but you make one where you are.”

Birdie blushed but looked please.

“You are fortunate to have such a devoted and articulate husband,” William said to Birdie, “few men are able to express the devotion they feel for their wives. Let me correct that and say that few men are even able to *feel* such devotion. But I am confused. Do you two eventually plan to live with an Indian tribe?”

“We are not husband and wife,” Pedro said. “Although I want us to be. But I am determined to continue my quest to prevent some of the destruction that has already started here. And Birdie, as she said, wants a more peaceful life, which she deserves to have.”

William nodded. “I am sorry to have assumed you were married. You just seem as if you should be.”

Pedro looked meaningfully at Birdie, as if to say, *See? See?* She smiled back and then looked away.

Chica had been following all this with great interest. She wished with all her heart that Birdie would stay with them. She clearly made Pedro very happy, and she made Chica and the dogs happy too, stroking them, playing with them, and amusing them with her bird calls. She cooked well too, and she always made sure they had plenty to eat.

A nudge from Flaca's cold nose broke into her musings. "Do you know that crow?" the dog asked, indicating a bird high in a tree behind the people, where it could not be noticed by them. It was behaving very strangely, jumping up and down.

"No," said Chica, puzzled. "Wait, it must be a messenger." She reluctantly left the catnip patch and moved out of view of the humans, circling around them until she reached the tree the crow had been in.

The crow was now much closer to the ground. "About time you noticed me," it said with annoyance. "If you're expecting crows to carry messages, you need to be much more alert. We have other things to do, you know!"

"I apologize," Chica said, thinking to herself that crows were always crabby, but this one took the prize.

"I brought someone to see you," the crow said. "He is keeping out of sight, because this is not his territory, and he didn't want to draw the humans' attention." The crow flew up in the air, flapping in an exaggerated way, apparently a sign, for when the crow came down, it was joined by a gull.

The gull was quite as large as Chica and showed no fear. It came down on the ground and began to speak immediately. "I had expected someone larger," the gull said. "I had assumed I would be talking to a wildcat, not a little mouser."

"Never mind the insults," Chica snapped. "What's your message?"

"Word of the rebellion you—and hopefully others who are much stronger—are planning has spread, even into the sea. The sharks have offered their help, if Finn or any other sailor should fall within their reach when men are attempting to reach their ship and escape. I was told by the wolf to ask you."

Chica was shocked. Up to this point, the plan had been to frighten men away and destroy their property. This question was about killing them. And now this irritating gull was waiting for an answer. Luckily she thought of a way to get off the hook.

“I am not the one deciding which day the rebellion will take place. If the sharks are to be involved, it will have to happen before Finn and his crew leave. The only ones who can tell you that are Squirrel Girl and Palomita Passenger Pigeon, who are coordinating events in all six towns. Do you know how to find them?”

“A squirrel? A pigeon?” The gull sounded as if it could not believe its ears. “These little animals and you are telling wolves and sharks what to do?”

The crow broke in. “It is not that simple. The predators all have made their own plans. Squirrel Girl and Palomita are just making sure everything happens at the right time. I can take you to them.”

“Then please do.” And with that, the gull rose into the air, not even saying a thank-you or good-bye to Chica. The crow gave Chica a dirty look and then followed the gull.

“Strange friends,” Christopher commented. He had followed Chica and watched from the bushes.

“It’s a long story,” Chica said. “Let’s go back to the catnip bed and relax, and I’ll tell you all about it.”

As they strolled back, Chica thought about how contented and full she had felt before, after eating the catnip. And how upset she felt now, thinking about the dangers ahead for Squirrel Girl and Palomita and even about the possibility of sharks eating sailors, some of whom were most likely just victims. Maybe she was becoming like Birdie, wanting only to live in peace and comfort. She hardly wanted to kill things anymore, afraid she would eat someone who was working for the rebellion. Which was completely ridiculous. As good as some greens were, most particularly catnip, cats could not be vegetarians.

## Chapter 13

Squirrel Girl had been sitting very quietly ever since the jay had brought his message from Wolfgang. Palomita had returned from her survey of the other five coastal towns the day before, and last night Chica had sent word by crow. With Wolfgang's assurances that the predators were ready, and that the black bears had made a commitment to join the fray, every group was saying it was ready. The rabbits and birds had even collected the bribing materials, all but those that had to be gathered at the last minute, to be fresh, as they had promised.

Now it was up to her to set the date, which would certainly be very soon, and to decide if it would be better to attack before or after Finn's departure. And there was the disturbing and unresolved question from the sharks.

"This is too big for me," Squirrel Girl said. "I wish someone else were in charge, and I just had to do my bit."

"You can handle it," Palomita assured her. "Look at all that has been accomplished so far. Thousands of animals have been recruited and are ready to follow you."

"Not me. Chica and Wolfgang and all the others they talked to are the ones who got them involved. They don't know anything about me. If they got a look at me, they might even drop out. I just had the idea in the beginning and got it started. Others took

over and did much better than I.”

“I think that’s what leaders do. They get things started in the right direction, and then they let others provide good ideas and keep things moving and spread the word. As for your being small, well, I’m even smaller. We’re not doing any fighting, so it’s thinking ability and a good heart that count, not size.”

“The trouble is, I’m not that good at thinking either. They’ve left some big things for me to decide, and I can’t. They should be decided by someone smarter than I am. I don’t know enough.”

“You’re worried about setting a day for the revolt. And about deciding if you should ask the sharks to attack Finn and his men as they row out to their ship.”

“Yes.”

“Do you want to get other opinions?”

“I have brought the subject up often, and I think I know what answers I will get. Wolfgang and all the other predators are, I believe, in favor of having the revolt right before Finn is ready to leave. They think it will be fine if the sharks get him. Many of the predators, including the snakes, are wanting to do some killing themselves.”

Palomita shuddered slightly. “It could turn into a bloodbath, since the men will not be able to defend themselves. Not all of the men are bad, even if we don’t want them here. The idea was to scare them.”

“I know,” Squirrel Girl said. “The predators say I’m in charge, but I am afraid that when the day comes, they will do whatever they please.”

“What does Wolfgang say?”

“That he and the wolves will promise not to kill. He is afraid that other men will come to take revenge if there is a lot of killing. But he is also afraid that other men will come even if there is not a lot of killing. Wolfgang wants our plan to work, but he doesn’t believe it will.”

Palomita pondered all this. “Do the other animals have any opinions?”

“Nobody speaks in favor of men except those he feeds. The others don’t care if he dies or just leaves. But many say that if the predators kill men, it will bring more trouble. The sharks are a little different though, because that may seem more accidental, and perhaps we could get them to target Finn and leave others alone.” Squirrel Girl looked doubtful.

“Would you trust sharks to keep their word?” Palomita asked.

“No.” Squirrel Girl looked more dejected than ever.

“Men, even good ones, do not hesitate to kill their enemies in battle,” Palomita said. “I wonder what advice Pedro would give if Chica were able to discuss it with him?”

“I am going to make a guess, based on little besides what Chica has said. I think Pedro might kill to defend himself or Chica or Birdie or any good people or animal friends. But that is not the same thing as killing to prevent possible bad things from happening in the future. Pedro tries to convince settlers and Indians to rebel against Finn’s rule, but I’m not sure that has to mean they must kill him. They could rebel by taking away Finn’s weapons and not following his orders, couldn’t they?” Squirrel Girl’s face was as wrinkled as a walnut, it was so screwed up in thought.

“Maybe, but they haven’t done it yet, although many have simply run away from Finn’s weapons and his orders.” Palomita said. “Some of the Indians tried first to help and then to ignore the settlers, and all they got for their trouble were massacres of their women and children. Because of all the suffering Finn has caused, I think there are probably a lot of people, both Indians and Europeans, and a lot of animals too, who would like to see Finn killed, even if they would not do it themselves.”

“So,” Squirrel Girl asked, “if that is true, do you think we should let the sharks try to get Finn?”

“I’m a bird of peace. I find these choices as hard as you do.”

“I’m used to killing things that don’t scream or bleed, like nuts. And I probably plant as many as I eat.”

At this point a crow who had been listening broke into the conversation. “I know for a fact that the sharks intend to kill at least Finn, if not others, no matter what you say. That’s if he’s not killed first by poisonous snakes or any of the other predators, who say to you now that they won’t kill, but among themselves have a different story.”

Squirrel Girl looked at Palomita. “It looks like we can’t control this anyway. And I don’t think we can stop it, even if I wanted to, which I don’t.”

Palomita waited. So did the crow.

“All right,” Squirrel Girl said. “I have made a decision. Or it has been made *for* me. Finn is due to ship out in three days, if the good weather holds. The night before that, we will put our plan in action. You can let all our messengers know so they can start to spread the word.”

Palomita nodded and flew off. She would have a great deal of work to do.

“I will let the sharks know,” said the crow.

“Tell them to target Finn and let the others go,” Squirrel Girl said.

“Whatever you say,” the crow said.

Squirrel Girl did not believe the crow would get it right or that the sharks would stop with Finn. And she was also afraid that there would be a great deal of other killing, on land, which explained the crow’s interest. Everyone knew that crows loved to feed on dead bodies. She had heard that when men had wars, the greatest winners were the crows, who covered the corpses with a moving black blanket that had nothing to do with mourning.



## Chapter 14

Sometimes, if you want to know if an idea will work, you just have to try it and see. Squirrel Girl knew, and Chica knew, and probably every other animal involved knew, that there were parts of their plan for revolt that were probably going to succeed and that there were other parts that were going to fail miserably and cause deadly consequences. The trouble was, they didn't know which parts were which or what to do about it.

The strategy they worried about the most was getting rid of the ammunition and other weapons, because if they failed there it would be fatal for many who were helping. The strategy they didn't worry about too much was the invasion of the snakes. That seemed guaranteed to drive the men out of their homes and maybe even keep them from grabbing any weapons that had escaped the animals' notice.

They didn't worry too much about the destruction, or eating, of the crops. The animals who were going to be doing this were really looking forward to it, as if it were a party, and they had the right skills to do a thorough job of destroying the settlers' future food supply.

The final phases of the attack were problematical. They weren't too sure the predators would be able to herd Finn and his cronies toward the ship. Wolves and bears

and wildcats had no experience at such things. When they chased it was to kill, but that wasn't what Squirrel Girl wanted to happen. She kept thinking about the man she had seen beaten, Abraham, and his son. She hoped they would not be attacked. She didn't think they were ones to run toward the ship, and thereby risk a shark attack, but they might run toward the woods, where all sorts of dangerous beasts would be waiting, ones that under other circumstances would have killed Squirrel Girl and her friends for a snack. A few hours before dark, right before the attack, Squirrel Girl managed to circulate a description of Abraham and his son, making a plea for the predators to let those two go unharmed. She doubted that anyone would remember, or even pay attention to, her request.

The hardest thing, that last evening, was waiting for dark, and then waiting for the men to sleep, so that the action could begin. No one could have predicted that Finn would make a last-minute decision to provide whiskey for everybody that evening a kind of *bon voyage* party before his departure the next day. He even made a speech, a pep talk about taking care of things while he was gone, although everyone knew that those he had put in charge had his permission to punish, and even shoot to kill, anyone who caused trouble or tried to run off.

The men drank and bragged, or moaned to each others about their troubles, until long past their usual bedtimes. Squirrel Girl knew that an army of small to medium mammals, herbivores and omnivores, had gathered in the fields around the village and was already at work on destroying them. Another army of those with talented beaks and front paws waited for sleep to cover up their work to remove all weapons. And snakes by the thousands were already massed, waiting for their cue. And beyond all that the predators, separated into groups by species, sat and watched and waited for their time. Squirrel Girl supposed that even the sharks were ready.

Finally, the whiskey began to work, and the men flopped on their straw beds, for

once hardly noticing that the straw was practically moving, it was so full of all sorts of vermin. They barely closed their eyes before the snoring began, as if turning off the eyes turned on the snores. When the last candle had been blown out, and every man in the settlement seemed to be sound asleep, or, in some cases of heavier drinking, had passed out, there was a rustle as if the wind had started to blow.

Dogs and cats and poultry and livestock moved uneasily and munched on their bribes, keeping their promise to set off no alarms, as hundreds of rodents and birds and raccoons and possums went to work, first destroying the ammunition and trying to blow away the gunpowder as best they could, so it was beyond retrieval. Then the guns and knives and axes were thrown into a swamp just beyond some dunes that separated them from the beach and ocean.

*So far, so good*, Squirrel Girl thought, as Palomita brought her reports. *If we didn't get all the weapons, we got most of them.* Palomita reported that in the ruined fields, where the predators were now gathering, there was a feeling of exultation, of certain victory. Those who had eaten in the fields or who had broken stems there, and those who had helped to find and hide the weapons, were now moving away, as far into the wilderness as they could get, alarmed by the excitement and apparent bloodthirstiness of the predators. The sight of masses of writhing snakes slithering toward the settlers' shacks put wings on the feet of those whose parts had already been played.

Squirrel Girl and Palomita, observing at first from roofs--though later they would have to peer in windows--were not prepared for what they felt when they saw the ground and everything on it seem to move. As the snakes approached, it was like a living tide coming in. Squirrel Girl recoiled, and Palomita flew higher.

*These snakes are on our side*, Squirrel Girl kept saying to herself over and over. *They are not trying to kill me. Just stay where you are, Squirrel Girl, and don't make a fool of yourself by running away. It will soon be over. They're on our side, on our side,*

*on our side...*”

Palomita, for her part, eventually put her head under her wing and took it out only when Squirrel Girl insisted she come along to some new observation point. Both of them stayed high above the serpents.

“I don’t want to watch either,” Squirrel Girl said, “but we have to.”

The snakes had been told to stay clear of the barns and henhouses, so as to not set off any alarms from the dogs or hens or livestock, who knew what was going to happen, and who had been thoroughly bribed, but who nevertheless could still not really be trusted. The barn cats for their part posed no danger to the plan, because they would not warn anyone of anything.

Later, the roosters and hens and the livestock would apologize, but would claim that the uproar they had raised had had nothing to do with being afraid. They said they started crowing and clucking and bawling and squealing not out of fear of the snakes (although Palomita said she had seen their eyes rolling in their heads with fear), but because the crows had come to tell them they had been tricked and now would not have food when winter came.

And indeed, a flock of crows had come flying in right as the snakes were entering the houses, screaming CAW CAW CAW as if they had come across an owl near their nests. And when the full story came out, the crows *did* believe that they had been tricked into doing something not for their benefit.

It was the destruction of some fields before their grain was ripe that had changed the crows’ minds. Until they actually saw these fields being ruined, it hadn’t occurred to them that there would be no crop to enjoy this year, no abundant harvest time. The word spread among them like a flash of lightning, followed by cawing loud as thunder. And then they went after the spoilers, going for their eyes and driving them out of the fields. Beavers and deer and skunks and squirrels, any animals that could break stalks, stopped

what they were doing when that storm of crows whirled toward them. And so, it turned out, at least some of the crops had been saved for winter food.

But the crows were furious, instantly having become counter-revolutionaries, and their first act for the other side was to start off a warning clamor of their own and get the livestock to join them.

And so the snakes were just entering the houses when the warning cries began to wake up the men, some of whom were developing terrible hangovers from drinking too much and thought they were hallucinating.

Although the plan had been for the men to wake up with snakes in their beds, and the snakes hurried to try to get to those beds, many of the men jumped out of bed before that happened, screaming as if their pants were on fire. It was rumored later that many of those men had in fact wet their pants in terror as they woke to sights and sounds that many claimed made them think they had died and gone to hell. The fact that it was dark made it worse, for they could see well enough from the moonlight through their doors and windows to know they were surrounded by snakes, but not well enough to pick out the least treacherous way to escape. One man fainted and woke up after the snakes had given up on him and left.

The majority of the men came barreling out of their shelters, screaming like devils were after them. They came out without shoes, if they ever had any in the first place, not able to avoid running with bare feet across snakes. They came out half-dressed, half-crazed, and without stopping to look for weapons, had there been any left to find. Some said they had been bitten and were crying that they were going to die now. Squirrel Girl could see that the bites were real, but she doubted that any would die. No poisonous snakes had been recruited, or at least so she had been told.

And so the crows' treachery, or common sense decision made in self-interest, depending on your point of view, did not really change anything much. The settlers were

outside their shelters without weapons or things they needed to be less vulnerable, and they could see that their fields seemed to have been attacked and ruined. Nothing could have convinced them to go back where the snakes were. And so they started running away from the snakes, which is what they were supposed to be doing, according to the plan.

And that is when the wolves and bears and wildcats, and even the smaller predators, like foxes and coyotes, began to appear, creating an impenetrable partial circle that grew ever smaller and forced the men back from the woods and fields toward the beach, where rowboats to reach Finn's ship waited. Squirrel Girl saw, to her delight, that Abraham and his son were allowed to go through the shrinking half-ring of predators, and she watched the two vanish into the woods. Others trying to follow them were driven back.

All seemed to be going according to plan until Finn, who always kept a gun on his person, even when he slept, pulled it out and made a wild shot in the direction of a bear. The bear seemed only to have been nicked on a shoulder, but he screamed and went after Finn faster than anyone would imagine a fat bear could run.

Finn lit out for one of the rowboats, followed by a throng of others who suddenly had the same idea. *Great, that's what we want you to do*, thought Squirrel Girl.

But not all of the men wanted to go for the boats, especially in company with Finn and an angry bear, even though they now could see their lives were really endangered. Finn's shot had made all the predators, not just the bear, angry and looking like they were ready to stop herding and start killing.

As the animals began to attack in earnest, the men picked up anything they could find that might be a weapon, things like rocks and chunks of firewood. Wolfgang called his wolves back, but all the other animals were pouncing and biting and blood was flowing, both human and animal.

“No! No!” Squirrel Girl cried, but of course no one was listening. This was the very thing she had been afraid of. She ought to do something, but what could she possibly do?

Screams from the beach turned her attention back that way. Everyone in the crowd there was shouting something, but the words “Finn” and “shark” stood out. And, sure enough, from what she could see, Finn, who was howling curses, was in the rowboat but had one leg hanging out and blood spurting from the end of it, where a foot used to be.

The boat was too full and riding low, and one man beat the bloody water with an oar, in a place where a dark shape lurked. Another man used a second oar to push against the sandy bottom and propel the boat back toward the beach.

“Bind it up! Stop the bleeding!” Squirrel Girl heard someone scream. They were pulling off Finn’s shirt.

They tied the shirt tightly around the stump just below the calf. The spurting blood colored the shirt quickly but then seemed reduced to something too slight for Squirrel Girl to see from her rather distant seat on a roof. She came down and moved closer. Nothing more seemed to be dripping into what must have been a pool of blood in the boat. Finn seemed to have fainted.

They got the boat back to shore and lay Finn, who was now starting to moan, on the beach. The bear who had chased Finn toward the boat in the first place was now pummeling a different settler, who was desperately trying to escape. The bear paused to consider the sight, perhaps, to his way of thinking, appetizing, of Finn stretched out on the ground, helpless. With his attention turned toward Finn, the bear was unprepared for the rock that came crashing down on his head. He fell, stunned but not quite unconscious.

With the terrible battle between animals and the other settlers approaching them

from one side and the shark waiting on the other side, those who had been in the boat moved away from the beach, heading for a place where they could find things to throw. They left Finn to his own inadequate devices for the time being.

That's when the realization hit Squirrel Girl that no one would go to the boat now, not with a shark waiting. And Finn himself would not be leaving. Maybe they would still all go tomorrow, she thought, when the shark went away. She had doubts.

This was going wrong. She hoped things had gone better in the other five towns, that by now the settlers had abandoned those towns altogether. But if they had, and didn't find some way to return to return across the ocean, what harm would they end up doing to the woods? Was this revolt just spreading problems to the west faster? Suddenly she was certain this whole enterprise was a mistake. Instead of doing something to make the world better, she had probably made it worse. *I'm sorry, Mother,* she said to herself, *I have been trying hard to make you proud, but now I'm thinking I might please you more, if you could know what I'm doing, if I just minded my own business and had babies and tried to be a good mother to them. You never went looking for ways to be heroic. But you were brave when danger came to you. Maybe it's only some kind of arrogance for me to think I can change the world.*

Despondent, Squirrel Girl was ignoring what was going on around her. Suddenly realizing this, she looked around her and realized she was standing in the thick of things.

There were some men sprawling hurt on the ground not too far from her now, but at least no animal was eating them. Some of the predators were hurt too, lying on the ground and possibly dead, or limping off and disappearing into the woods. The fighting had spread as the men from the boat had joined in. She wanted to see the whole battlefield and needed to move to a higher and safer place. Palomita was flying above her now, just out of reach of rocks and blows, calling frantically that Squirrel Girl should move toward the woods.



Squirrel Girl turned and looked toward the woods. There was no clear path to get there, and an apparently dying coyote lay very near her, panting and blinking its eyes. She was no friend of coyotes, but this one was suffering because of what Squirrel Girl had set in motion.

“Where are you hurt?” she asked the coyote. “Do you need water? Is there some bleeding I can try to stop?”

She moved toward the coyote, trying to think of some way to help, and as she did, she felt a tremendous pain in her head. And then nothing.

## Chapter 15

Chica was a tiny bit ashamed of herself, for being so happy and safe at a time when she knew that Squirrel Girl and Palomita and armies of other creatures were facing danger and perhaps death. But cats are not given to self-recrimination, to put it mildly, and overall she was feeling extremely pleased with herself and her life these days.

And why wouldn't she be happy? They were all still camped on William's land, where each day brought new joys, and Pedro and William were planning projects which would take weeks, maybe months to complete, like building a barn for William's milk cows and horses, and a hen house for the egg layers, and adding to the great fence around the property. They were not going to be leaving this wonderful place anytime soon.

There was even some talk of Pedro and Birdie staying on permanently, although it was mostly William who was pushing this idea. He was offering Pedro land and help with establishing a small farm to grow what he and Birdie would need. In return, Pedro and Birdie would help William to protect the woods and their wildlife.

If it were up to Chica, a contract would have been signed, and they would already be in their new house, instead of still camping out. But Chica could see that Pedro was wavering, seriously thinking that maybe the best way to save the world was one small step at a time, by example, and by persuasion when the inevitable new neighbors arrived.

Birdie's unwillingness to give up her idea of finding a tribe to live with was still a big obstacle to her staying with Pedro, but Chica could see that dream was also fading

with each passing day. William kept telling her that the tribes had fallen apart, lost their center and focus as their leaders died or were corrupted by drink and European civilization, and she would not find the life she was looking for, because it had disappeared into history.

Birdie was devoted to the animals, too, and Chica played on her part in that, trying to build an attachment between herself and Birdie that the woman would miss if she left. As for Flaca and the pups, Bonita and Gordo, they were like children to Birdie, adored by her and giving adoration right back. And when it came to Pedro, well, if Birdie wasn't in love with Pedro, and Pedro wasn't in love with Birdie, then Chica was no cat and birds didn't fly.

In Chica's mind, there were so many reasons why they should stay here. For one thing, they all got along well with William, and with his dog Sam and his cat Christopher. Sam followed Flaca and her children everywhere they went, which was usually wherever Birdie went. And Christopher stayed close to Chica.

Christopher was the most gorgeous, kindest, bravest cat she had ever known. After all the years of wondering what everyone's mating obsession was all about, what was behind the attraction and excitement, Chica had been blown over by it, like a willow in a windstorm. She was in love, and, what's more, though she didn't think anyone else realized it yet, not Christopher nor Pedro nor the dogs nor Birdie, she believed she might be going to have some kittens.

Amid the joy of this, she felt a flicker of worry. She would need to be settled in some safe place when her kittens came, some place like William's. What if Pedro would not stay here? Would she, Chica, have the courage to remain if Pedro didn't? Would Pedro carry her along anyway, or keep coming back to get her if she ran away and returned to William's? And might that make Pedro change his mind about leaving?

She couldn't stand to think about this dilemma for very long. She would count on

Pedro and Birdie staying and marrying and having children who would play with Chica's kittens. Well, come to think of it, her babies would be here too soon for that. But then she remembered. William's children would be coming, along with his sister-in-law Jane, and they would surely want to play with the adorable kittens that handsome parents like Chica and Christopher would produce.

The only little cloud in the bright blue sky of Chica's happiness was her concern about how Squirrel Girl's revolt was going. Chica had been deeply involved in the planning, up to the very last day, when the animals were all on the move toward settlements and the active participants were sending messages by birds.

Now it was almost noon on the morning after the revolt had begun. Reports had started coming in, and they were contradictory. There had been no arrangements made for anyone to let Chica know what had happened. Since she was essentially retiring from the project and remaining in safety, she had not wanted to make requests of those who were bravely going forward to meet danger.

Nevertheless, the earthfolk were as curious and as inclined to gossip as people, and it was inevitable that news would travel to Chica, even if she had been too ashamed to ask for reports.

The birds were naturally best of all at tale-telling and passing on information, but when they were gossiping, some species were not above spicing up their stories or passing on as truth what was really only their own interpretations. And so Chica could not be completely sure that what she was hearing was true.

For instance, she had been told that all the ammunition and weapons had been successfully removed in all the towns. She had also heard that in one town there was a cache of weapons that no one had known about, and it had been used to slaughter dozens of animals.

She had heard that Finn had been seen running toward his ship, with the very bear

who had come to see Chica in hot pursuit. And she had heard that he had died from blood loss after a shark bite. And from still another source, she had heard that the ship was still anchored offshore, and that Finn would probably be leaving soon.

Chica had heard horrific descriptions of the snakes, who had done their job well but were reviled anyway, because there was such widespread fear of them. Chica personally had always steered clear of snakes, especially when she and Pedro were in the tropics and so many of them boasted of fatal bites. The idea of thousands of wriggling snakes all in one place made Chica a little nauseous.

The crows, Chica had been told, had turned traitor. The way one jay put it, the crows had gone along with the idea that all the inevitable dead bodies would provide a lot of food. But then when they saw the unripe grains being broken in the fields and thought of how they would miss those grains come winter, the crows cursed themselves for being fools and commenced to break all their promises.

There was some logic in this. Both Chica and the jay admitted that it would be a hardship for some birds and for all the farm animals if there were no crops to harvest in the fall. Their only food would then be hay from the few meadows that had been cleared but not planted.

Chica had passed all this news on to Flaca, not because the dog was much interested, now that her own life had turned to a heaven on Earth, but because Chica felt the need to talk about it all.

“Oh, I’m sorry,” Flaca said, after listening to all Chica had to say, “I forgot to tell you that a coyote came by with a message for you about Squirrel Girl.”

“WHEN?” Chica said loudly, upset to have not gotten this message. But there was no use getting angry at Flaca, who had never been involved in the revolt, and whose dog brain was completely and justifiably focused on her unbelievable new happiness, after a lifetime of suffering.

“Oh, let’s see...oh, I’m so sorry...I can tell that it mattered a lot to you...and I like Squirrel Girl myself...and Palomita too...I had forgotten they were in danger...I just was so wrapped up in this new new trick Bonita and Gordo are learning—

“WHEN?” Chica repeated.

“A few hours ago, I think...or it could have been earlier...I’m just not sure. Anyway, the coyote said you could find him sleeping under the hawthorn next to the pasture.”

Chica started running toward the pasture.

Christopher came right after her. “If you must go to meet with a coyote,” he called, “let me come along for protection.” He caught up and loped alongside her. “I’ll be glad when this whole dangerous revolt thing is over.”

For the first time, Chica felt anger toward Christopher. She stopped running and turned to face him. “You’ve lived a sheltered life and know nothing of the pain and suffering that is so common in the world. My Pedro has always worked to try to change things, and now I have done my part. And I’m proud of it. Now if you don’t want to be involved, you can just go back and lounge in the sun and scratch yourself.” And with that she turned and headed for the hawthorn.

Christopher sighed and said nothing. But he trailed right behind Chica and sat next to her, listening, when she and the coyote began to talk.

“I came to tell you that Squirrel Girl has been wounded in battle,” the coyote began, “perhaps mortally, but she was alive when last I saw her. She was hit in the head with a rock, and friends came and carried her away to the burrow of Granny Groundhog, where I’m sure she is being cared for very well, if she survived. Palomita said she would have come to tell you herself, but she had to stay with Squirrel Girl.”

“But why did *you* bring this message? Why would Palomita send a coyote and not another bird?”

“Palomita was beside herself with worry, and I was lying very near to Squirrel Girl, recovering from a bad blow a settler had given me with a piece of kindling. I was just getting my legs back to working when they were carrying Squirrel Girl away, and Palomita asked me, all in a hurry, if I would ask the birds to deliver this message to you.”

“Well, then,” Chica persisted. “I still have the same question. Why are *you* here?”

“Because the last words Squirrel Girl said were to me. She was coming toward me, offering to help, if she could, when the rock hit her.” The coyote looked distressed. “I wanted to do something to help her. But maybe it would have helped more to get the message to you faster, by bird.”

“I will have to go to her,” Chica said. “I have to know if she is alive and if there is anything I can do.”

“No, no,” Christopher said, “you can’t do that. There’s no way you can care for her any better than those who are helping her now. And birds will go check on her for you, if you will ask. Squirrel Girl is well loved by many. The earthfolk are always talking about her and Palomita, and about you as well, Chica. Please, send a messenger. You will make Pedro—and me, as well--crazy with worry if you disappear.”

Chica thought about her unborn kittens, which she did not really want to carry into danger. She thought about Pedro, searching the woods for her and calling her name, probably crying when she did not come. Thinking she must be dead somewhere. She would miss Christopher too, but right now that was a smaller thing.

“All right,” Chica said. “I will send a messenger.”

“I know where to find one right now,” said Christopher. “The jay in the pine behind the house asked this morning if she could be of service.” He headed back toward that pine.

“Thank you,” Chica called after him. It was good of him to offer to help,

considering the way he felt. She wondered if she could trust him to really do it. She watched him reach the pine, call the bluejay, converse, and head back toward her after the bluejay took off. Satisfied, she felt more confidence in him. Still, why hadn't he told her before that the jay had offered to help?"

"I'll be going now," the coyote said. "I don't live far from here, and if we meet again, I will try to remember that you are a friend. Meat-eaters should not make so many new friends, I think. We will end up with nothing we want to eat."

Chica nodded. She understood that very well and was hunting much less these days, for the same reason. "Thank you," she said to the coyote. "If Squirrel Girl is still alive, I will tell her that you survived and that you did us this favor."

The coyote nodded and loped away.

Christopher reached her. "The jay knows where Granny Groundhog lives. She was an organizer of the groundhogs for the revolt. The jay, whose name is Hyacinth, will find Palomita and get news and then fly right back to let you know what is going on."

"Thank you," Chica said again. "You were right to suggest sending her." She was softening again toward Christopher, who really did seem to be doing his best to be helpful. *If only he weren't so bossy!*

When they got back to the house, there was a visitor, the trapper James, the same man who had accompanied Chica and Pedro for so many days. He was telling Pedro and Birdie and William about the unbelievable events in the towns along the coastline.

"Devils are abroad," he was saying, "and witches and wizards are casting spells. The animals are all bewitched and armies of snakes are filling the houses. Bears and wildcats and wolves are attacking together, like brigades all serving the same Devil. All the weapons have disappeared from the houses and can't be found anywhere. A shark leaped out of the sea and took Finn's foot off with a single bite." James stopped for breath.



Pedro raised his eyebrows and looked at William, as if to say, *What do you two make of this madman who used to be just James?*

“Is Finn alive?” William asked.

“Barely. He lost a lot of blood. He blames it all on Indian shamans, who he says are getting revenge by casting spells. And on Indian squaws, who he claims are usually witches.” Here James looked nervously at Birdie. “Not you, ma’am, I’m sure.” he said. “Anyway, no one knows you’re here, and I’m not going to be the one to tell Finn anything.”

It occurred to Chica that if anyone should be afraid of animals in revolt, it would be James, who had been cruelly trapping them for years.

“Are you sure,” asked Pedro, “that all this is true? Did you see it for yourself or did someone tell you?”

“I didn’t see it, but the woods are full of men running from the settlements. Six settlements altogether had the same experience, although in one they found some weapons stored outside and were able to kill a lot of the crazed animals. There are going to be more things made of snakeskin than anyone has ever seen around here before.”

“Do you know if any of the larger, older settlements to the south were hit? The ones started before Finn got in the business?”

“No word on those,” James said. “But all this just happened last night. There wouldn’t be time for the word to get here.”

*Oh, no, Chica thought. None of us even knew those existed.*

“Were many men killed?” Pedro asked.

“Some. More were injured. And even more took off into the woods. They’ll be going west, looking for land of their own. If I were you,” James said to William, “I’d keep an eye out for squatters on your property. And some of them are dangerous. Your best strategy, I think, would be to offer them a meal and some food to carry on their way

further west. If you kick them off in a rough way, they might come back and get even.”

Chica shuddered. There was no escape, no safe haven. If Pedro moved on or stayed here, either way, there would be challenges and danger. Of course, that very thing might make Pedro decide that he might as well stay and make a stand right here.

“I’m hoping Pedro and Birdie will soon decide to settle and work the outer borders of my land,” William said.

“Even if we don’t,” Pedro said. “We’ll help you now, if any squatters do come.” He turned to James again. “If Finn is blaming Indians for the trouble, do you think Birdie here is in any danger?”

“Like I said,” James responded, “no one even knows she’s here. It helps that she’s not wearing Indian clothes and is living with Europeans. They’ll go after any tribes or Indians still following their old ways. I’m headed for the shaman, to warn him. When Finn gets back in action, the shaman is the first one he’ll be after, though I can tell you right now that if the shaman had such strong powers, he would have used them long ago.

“What will you do after that?” Pedro asked.

“Then I’m headed far north, out of the whole area for good. A trapper doesn’t need to be in a place where the animals, bewitched or whatever, have lost their fear of man and are making a stand against him.”

“It’s been quiet here,” William said. “For a while it did seem like there were a lot of animals on the move, but they weren’t aggressive, and they’re gone now. I hunt and fish, but not much, because I only take what I can use, never any for selling.”

“What condition are the towns in now?” Pedro asked. “Are they completely destroyed? Deserted?”

“Oh, no,” James scoffed. “They’ll be back in business before you know it. There wasn’t much damage to buildings. They lost a lot of crops, but they also lost a lot of residents to eat those crops. They’re short on weapons, but that’s temporary. The King’s

regiments may be coming north, bringing more weapons, or at least that's what Finn is hoping. First thing he did, according to what I've been told, was send a man on horseback south."

*So much for our grand plan, Chica thought. If Squirrel Girl lives, she'll be sad to know it was all of so little use. And poor Palomita. There will hardly be a break before the passenger pigeon flocks are hunted again.*

"Nobody's giving up and just going back to England?" Pedro asked.

"I don't think anyone even gave a thought to that," James answered. "Finn will go back for more servants, or maybe slaves, this time, but the other men will either stay in his settlements or run from them and settle the West."

Pedro nodded, deep in thought. "It's a strange thing, this odd behavior from the animals. I've heard that animals will run in crowds of different species like that in front of a fire, or when an earthquake is going to happen. Maybe there will be a quake soon."

"I personally think these tales have been exaggerated in the telling," said William.

Birdie spoke up, in tears that hadn't been noticed before. "The Indians, who have no power to do such things, will pay for this. It will be used to justify raids on them, although so few are still around they cannot possibly be affecting Finn's plans. Soon there will be none, and if I go west in search of them, I think I will only find displaced tribes that I don't understand."

Pedro patted her hand. There was not much to say to comfort her, Chica thought, since she was right.

Birdie wiped her eyes. "Pedro," she said, "you have often asked me to give up my dream of living with other Indians, and take on a new dream of living with you and having a family. I am ready to do that now."

Pedro went over to Birdie and took her in his arms and held her there. They were

both crying. Chica felt like crying herself, and she didn't know if it were in happiness for Pedro and Birdie and herself, or in grief for Squirrel Girl and Palomita and the earthfolk.

## Chapter 16

If it weren't for the dizzy headaches she still endured, Squirrel Girl would have left Granny Groundhog's burrow days ago. Not that the burrow was uncomfortable. On the contrary, Granny's home was cozy as could be, and Granny was unsurpassed as a nurse, making sure Squirrel Girl had everything she needed before she even knew she needed it. The trouble was that there was one thing that Squirrel Girl didn't exactly need but really wanted, even though her dizziness made it impossible. That was to leap around in the trees, soaking in sunshine. Squirrels just aren't meant to live in burrows.

As soon as she felt up to it, she and Palomita intended to visit Chica and her companions. She and Chica had been exchanging messages about it for a week, each day hoping that the visit would be possible on the following day. But the headaches lingered.

Sometimes she wondered if the headaches were really caused by the rock that knocked her out. She had suffered from them ever since she had regained consciousness, but she seemed to remember that her head was already hurting right before she was struck. Hurting because she had suddenly come to believe that the revolt she had started had done more damage than good.

Not that anyone was blaming her. She had been receiving praise all week from visitors ushered in by Palomita, who did not like to be in a burrow and was perched on guard in a tree that shaded Granny's entrance. Maybe, she thought, Palomita was only

letting in the visitors who would compliment Squirrel Girl and cheer her up. But when she asked Granny and the visitors about those who were angry with her for stirring up trouble, they all said that there were none but the crows and farm animals. Otherwise, only Finn and the settlers were angry, and they knew nothing about Squirrel Girl's role. They were blaming Indian shamans and devils and were planning reprisals against any Indians they could find.

The news that the Indians were being blamed plunged Squirrel Girl deeper into despair. Here was yet another group she had hurt! And then she started to worry about the Indian woman now with Chica's Pedro, the woman called Birdie. *Woe is me, she thought, the more I try to do good, the more I do bad.*

Still, from what she was hearing, there were many who had enjoyed the revolt. None of the predators had visited her, not wanting to frighten anyone, but Wolfgang and others had passed on messages thanking her. They said that getting a little revenge felt wonderful, and that they were already creating legends about their own valor to pass on to their descendents. Their dead had become heroes, mourned now and remembered for generations to come.

The coyote whom she had thought was dying, the one who visited Chica with news of Squirrel Girl's injury, sent get-well wishes every day by bird. He claimed he could no longer in good conscience chase squirrels, but she imagined that he would still be chasing mice and chipmunks, and eating them too.

Those who had feasted in the farm fields, and ruined the crops to come, had been visiting Squirrel Girl often, particularly the rabbits, great admirers of the improvements that Granny had made in her burrow. The plant-eaters and wreckers had also apparently had a grand time the night of the revolt, enjoying the food and the vengeance in equal amounts. They too were starting legends to pass on and had made heroes of those who fell in battle.

The snakes had found the evening extremely amusing and for months would be laughing and asking each other if they had seen the horror on this face or that face. They had experienced few casualties, except in the town where a cache of weapons outside had been missed. Survivors there took a more sober view and were starting legends about *their* heroes. Squirrel Girl was happy to say that the snakes' reaction had been passed on without a visit, in deference to her fear of snakes. But Palomita had told her that the snakes couldn't stop laughing at *her* for hiding her face under her wing, and Squirrel Girl, aware that her own face must have registered horror of comic proportions, was certain the snakes were having a good time making fun of her too.

Those who had found and hidden all the weapons could not stop bragging about their success and were becoming insufferable. Many visited Squirrel Girl, and she had thanked them repeatedly, prudently avoiding mention of the fact—reported by Palomita—that the King's army, which had arrived very quickly from the South, had already replenished the supply of weapons.

Squirrel Girl had not even been aware before this that there were other towns to the south of the ones Finn had settled. For all she knew, there might be more to the north as well. Had she known, she would have realized that it was too late to fight and all that remained was flight. But all these animals were rejoicing in what they called a victory—meaning that they had as a group caused Finn his foot and had terrified and even hurt or killed some settlers, as well as destroying most of the fields. It seemed no victory to Squirrel Girl or Palomita, who had loftier goals than revenge or temporary disruption.

From the viewpoint of most of the animals, who had been watching human settlement their whole lives and had first-hand knowledge of displacement, expanding settlement was inevitable. They felt lucky that they had been able to express their outrage, but they had never expected humans to turn tail and go back across the ocean.

The crows and the farm animals, who stood to lose some food because of the

damage to fields, were the only ones complaining, although the crows had stuffed themselves on corpses to the point of making themselves sick. Squirrel Girl could see that she had in fact made it possible that the farm animals, if not the crows, might face hunger and even starvation if the winter was a bad one. And she had heard that many other birds who feasted in the fields were also upset, the blackbirds and wild ducks and many migrants. Squirrel Girl had hoped to balance their loss with the advantage of not being hunted as they pillaged fields. But now hunting was sure to continue everywhere, perhaps more than ever, if that were possible, since the settlers were even fonder of vengeance than the animals.

She had heard, though, that some of the fields were already being replanted with quick-growing crops, including vegetables that would be fine until the ground froze, barring some unusual catastrophe like hail. And other spoiled fields were going to be left to grow up in meadow grasses, which should be ready to harvest for hay before the cold weather. The British soldiers were helping with all this, and they had even brought extra seeds and some food supplies, for both men and livestock, from unaffected towns. In fact, the settlements were bustling.

Finn had departed yesterday, but he would be back eventually, with more settlers for his vacant shacks and with supplies and probably a new wooden foot. He had talked to the soldiers about how slaves were working out in the South, and he was heard to say that slavery was something he might try later on, perhaps not for his settlements but for profit in the slave trade. He was already dabbling in the whiskey trade, and he claimed he could combine that with trade in sugar from the islands and slaves from Africa. He was already a rich man and was confident he would keep getting richer. In fact, he spoke with great pride of himself as “one of the founders of this great country.”

Squirrel Girl had been receiving daily reports on all this from Palomita, who still had spies watching Finn and anyone else who did something of potential interest to



Squirrel Girl. Some of the animals had developed the habit of eavesdropping on humans and then gossiping about them, and they were glad to keep on doing this for Palomita and Squirrel Girl. But Palomita and Squirrel Girl were anything but glad to receive all this news, even though they kept requesting it. The news was all bad. It was as if settlement had been invigorated, not harmed, by the revolt.

When Squirrel Girl sat out in the sun, she and Palomita had many conversations with songbirds, who knew from their migrations about all the towns along the east coast. They said that in general, at least some of the towns still provided places for birds to nest and other animals to live. There were decorative plantings and gardens and weed patches, and the biggest danger was usually boys with slingshots. The birds and animals who needed deep and wide woods were hurt the most by settlement. Unfortunately, Palomita was told, passenger pigeons were among the first to disappear, partly because of loss of their habitat but mostly because they were considered tasty.

Carolina parakeets, who like passenger pigeons flew in gigantic flocks, were also suffering great losses. This was according to the sad accounts of the warblers, who were taking the decline of this beautiful little bird very much to heart. Some of the parakeets were being shot for fun or captured to be caged as pets, but their main problem was that they settled in grain fields and orchards and ate until there was nothing left. When farmers shot at them, those who were not hit stayed to mourn their dead until they too were shot.

“What about squirrels?” Palomita asked. Squirrel Girl herself had been afraid to ask, afraid of the answer.

“In town, if there are trees, there are also squirrels and their nests. In older towns, where there are not just men but also their women and children, there are often tree plantings for shade and beauty around houses and even in parks. Sometimes the original old forest trees were saved. Outside town, squirrels are hunted in woods that are still

wild, but squirrels still flourish nevertheless, since they are not a favorite food. Most farms have large woodlots, where some trees are cut for their wood but others are planted in their place, and these are full of squirrels.”

Squirrel Girl felt a little better. “Do these woodlots have other animals?” she asked a nuthatch.

“Oh, yes, only the animals that must have very big ranges, like the woodland buffalo that used to browse all along the coast, are gone. The buffalo, like passenger pigeons, were tasty, and their coats were also considered valuable, and so they quickly disappeared everywhere that people hunt. They are scarce even in inland woods that extend for miles. These days they are only numerous far to the west, where they live on prairies and plains. But it is probably only a matter of time until settlers get there, and I suppose that will be the end of them.”

This was reported by a cowbird, who had once ridden the backs of buffalo but now, in the East, perched on cattle. Since the cowbird had been a gypsy, traveling with the buffalo, females never had bothered to make nests but simply dumped their eggs, which would crack open to reveal large murderous chicks, into the nests of smaller birds. Cowbirds no longer traveled and now had no excuse for this habit, which made them pariahs of the bird communities.

Squirrel Girl had never seen a buffalo herself, but she had heard about them and the days when they were common and only Indians hunted them, never taking their calves or killing in great numbers.

“Animals like deer and skunks, raccoons and possums, and all the smaller mammals, still thrive in woods to the south,” a cardinal told Squirrel Girl. “There are many places too mountainous or too wet for clearing, as there are to the north and in some places to the west. All of these places—north, south, and west-- form refuges, places where animals breed and are sometimes, but not continuously, hunted, because

nearby human populations are small. All is not lost yet, but I fear for the future.”

“So those animals who now live in places that might make good farms are in the most danger.” Squirrel Girl knew that Mapleway Woods would make a good farm and was doomed. “But when towns form near those woods, or the farms have nice, large woodlots, some animals—squirrels, for instance, can survive,” she continued.

“That’s right,” some goldfinches chorused, “but it isn’t a matter of just moving from cleared land onto a woodlot or to a town. When settlers come to clear land, they hunt their food for a long time, until they harvest crops and start to raise chickens and livestock, and they may end up killing almost everything edible in their woods. So the animals that eventually live on a woodlot or in a town may be ones that migrated in later, not the original inhabitants.”

“I understand,” said Squirrel Girl. And she did. Everyone must eventually leave Mapleway Woods, that was clear, and as soon as possible, while the choice could still be made. And they must continue to move to whatever place was safe, even if that meant someday moving back east to towns and parks and woodlots. The main thing was to survive.

Alone with Palomita, Squirrel Girl said, “I know now what I must do next. I must get back to Mapleway Woods and insist that those who wish to save their lives move on. And I will go with them.”

“What about your headache?” Palomita asked.

Squirrel Girl was startled by the question. “It’s gone,” she said in surprise. Maybe it *was* caused more by worry than by her injury. She felt good now. But there was no time to lose. “We will need to stop and see Chica and thank her,” Squirrel Girl told Palomita. “Can you get a message to her that we are on our way? In the meantime, I must thank Granny and say good-bye to her and all our friends here.”

Palomita nodded. “I’ll see if a jay is available,” she said, and went off.

Squirrel Girl hurried down into Granny Groundhog's den, eager to begin. Once more she had a mission, this time one that could be successful, one that might even lead her, she hoped, to live a normal life and raise a family in peace.

## Chapter 17

Squirrel Girl and Palomita did not stay long with Chica, less than half a day. Chica was so happy, and had so much news to share, that they could hardly get a word in. But they were delighted to know that at least for several cats and one family of dogs, life seemed perfect. But Squirrel Girl did feel a twinge of jealousy at the news that kittens were on the way. *When, she thought, will I be sharing news like that about my own babies to come?* She looked at the wistful expression on Palomita's face and knew her friend had the same thoughts.

Chica introduced them to Christopher and Sam, and Flaca told them about all the cute things that Bonita and Gordo had been doing, and then they all went on a little tour, to see where Pedro and Birdie were camped and where their new house would be built. After that, they walked to a rise where Chica could show them how big the woods were that Pedro would be helping to save.

They could see Pedro, tiny in the distance, working on a low stone fence, easy enough to jump over, according to Chica, but built there to show the boundary of William's property. Two men were helping to stack the stones into a fence.

The men looked familiar to Squirrel Girl, and she knew she had seen them in town. And then it hit her. They looked different, because like Pedro they had taken off their shirts to do the sweaty work of hauling rocks, but it was definitely Abraham and his son. The little caps they wore, and the ringlets in front of their ears, could belong to no one else.

“That’s Abraham and his son,” Squirrel Girl said in amazement. “Are they living here with you now?” She had wondered about those two several times, not sure if they would be able to take care of themselves alone in the woods.

“No,” Chica said, “Abraham and Saul are our friends now, even to the animals, and they are going to be our neighbors. I guess you’d say they’re squatters on the land next to William’s, but just about everybody here except William is a squatter anyway.”

“Pedro is glad they’ll be living there because it will be a buffer for his forest,” Chica continued. “Anyway, Abraham and Saul are going to keep a lot of their forest as it is, just like us. They are woodcarvers and plan to make fine furniture to sell in the towns of the South. They will have to cut trees to make space and have materials for a house, but after that, they say just one big tree will give them materials for many pieces of fine furniture, and will keep them busy for a long time. And for every tree they cut, they will be sure a new one is planted. I think they’re going to be very good neighbors.”

Chica turned to Squirrel Girl and Palomita. “I will be glad when we are surrounded here by neighbors that we can trust. People are not so bad, or maybe I should make that ‘*some* people.’ I know I’m just chattering on and on and hardly giving you a chance to say a word, but I’ve never been so excited. The only way I could be happier is if you two would stay and live in our woods. Is there any chance of that?”

“I’m honored,” Squirrel Girl said, “but I must go back to Mapleway Woods and persuade any who are still there to go west with me.”

“And I must find a flock to join, while there is still time for me to raise a family,” Palomita said. “a flock that is willing to move many miles to the west, so I will not be committing suicide if I join them.”

“I’ve heard,” Chica said, “that there is a flock moving through just southwest of here. They’re relocating farther west. You might be able to catch up with them.”

Palomita looked like she wanted to leave right that minute, but she said, “I’m

going to travel a short way with Squirrel Girl, to be sure her headache and dizziness are really gone, and then I will trail that flock until I find them.”

Squirrel Girl had known this was coming. She was already missing Palomita. They had been through so much together. She had no doubts at all that Palomita would find the flock, since Passenger Pigeons traveled in such large numbers that when they fed and roosted at night, they left behind a wide trail of horrendous messes.

They all wished each other wonderful luck, and then Squirrel Girl and Palomita left. When they were out of sight and hearing of Chica and the others, who had been standing together and watching them depart, Squirrel Girl quietly said to Palomita, “Pedro will have a hard time keeping hunters out of that big forest.”

“I thought the same thing,” Palomita answered. “And settlers will try to build on his land too. He will constantly be defending it, at least until the land around is all settled and everybody knows who owns what.”

“That will probably happen very quickly. Then I think his forest will become an island of trees in the middle of farm fields,” Squirrel Girl said. “But I think that could take a while to happen, and, in the meantime, Chica should be able to raise a family in peace. I can imagine her playing with the children that Birdie and Pedro have, and being petted by them, and having a marvelous time. It will be a good life.”

Palomita nodded agreement. Then they dropped the subject and were quiet, as they began to concentrate on their own separate thoughts about the future, hurrying toward it as fast as they were able. Palomita flew higher, over the treetops, and then waited and foraged while Squirrel Girl caught up.

They knew, having made the trip a few times, the shortest, easiest way for Squirrel Girl to get back to Mapleway Woods without going through any wet or difficult places, and by the next evening Squirrel Girl was not far from home.

Wanting to say their good-bys while they were still alone, they stopped and

looked at each other, fighting tears but losing that battle.

“I’ll never forget you,” Squirrel Girl said. “You saved my life, and you’ve been the best friend anyone could ever have.”

“Before I met you,” Palomita said, “no one ever paid attention to me. No one cared that my kind were being slaughtered. You gave me hope and courage.”

And then, because they could not stand to continue talking and crying and hurting, all at the same time, they hugged each other, hugged each other a second time, and wished each other luck. Then Palomita flew off, looking back more than once before she was out of sight.

Squirrel Girl waited until Palomita was completely gone, and then she just sat there and bawled until she was out of tears. After a few minutes of choking back dry sobs and hiccups, she bathed her eyes in a little creek and wiped her face on some very soft grass. When she opened her eyes again, she saw a male squirrel, a stranger, watching her.

“Are you by any chance called Squirrel Girl?” he asked.

She nodded.

“We heard you were coming, and I came to look for you. I wanted to talk to you about moving the animals of Mapleway west before the winter. I especially would like to get Victoria and some of the very young or very old moved, if not everyone. Do you think that’s a good idea?”

*Did she think it was a good idea! He had taken that stupendous idea right out of her mouth!* But she didn’t say that. He was a handsome fellow, and somehow that made her feel a bit shy. All she said was, “Yes, I think that is a very good idea. And the sooner we start the better.”

He nodded happily. “That’s what I was hoping you would say. Victoria said you might want to fight some more, but I came from the East myself, and I believe that more



resistance would be useless.” He stopped and took a closer look at her. “You’ve been wounded, haven’t you? Are you all right now?”

She felt more than all right. For some reason, she was feeling better by the minute. “I had some headaches for a while,” she said, “but I think I’m fine now. I will tell you all about it while we are traveling west.” At that moment she remembered the belligerent young male squirrels who had been there when she left. “There was a gang of young males here,” she began.

He interrupted her. “Don’t worry about them. When I arrived they had become very bossy, so full of their own selves and thinking they were very wonderful and powerful, that I and some other older squirrels had to tell them what was what. They didn’t like that, and one day they just left, gone north according to the birds. They won’t be missed.”

*No, she thought dreamily, they won’t be missed.*

“My name is Nutcracker,” he continued. “Are you sure you’re all right?” He hesitated. “You were crying pretty hard there for a while. I heard you say good-by to your friend, and so I understand. I didn’t mean to spy on you, but I didn’t want to butt in either. It was a time when you two needed to be alone to say your farewells.”

She nodded, but then she stumbled a bit. She really was feeling a bit light headed. Two days earlier she had still been convalescing. And then there was the long journey, hurrying all the way, and the hard cry and sadness of separating from Palomita, and now here was this handsome squirrel gentleman being so kind and helpful. It was a little too much. She was happy, but she thought she just might start crying again.

“Here, sit down,” Nutcracker said, helping her to a stump. “You know what,” he said, “until you are completely recovered, I’m going to take care of our move. You just rest until you’re yourself again.”

*Hallelujah!* Squirrel Girl thought, sighing deeply, *a vacation from responsibility.*

At that moment, the bushes ahead of them shook and Victoria came through them, hobbling worse than Squirrel Girl remembered. “Squirrel Girl!” she said. “I was getting worried. A flock of goldfinches flew through this morning to pass on the news that they had seen you coming this way.” She gave Squirrel Girl a long, loving hug. “I’ve been keeping track of you. For a while after you left, I was afraid we’d never see each other again, and I finally persuaded some cedar waxwings to try to find out what was going on. They got so excited when they heard about your revolt, and they’re such gossipy things, that they kept me pretty well informed. But, oh, when I heard you were hurt...oh, oh, oh, I was so worried.” She wiped her eyes. “But here you are, safe and sound.”

“She still needs to do some healing,” Nutcracker said, “Let’s let her rest, and I’ll take care of everything.”

What exhausted person would not want to hear those words? Squirrel Girl almost swooned. *Yes, she thought, now I know why Chica has gone so goo-goo eyed over Christopher. How lovely, for a change, to be taken care of and not have the weight of the world on my shoulders.*

“Poor darling,” Victoria said, “I’m going to go ahead to the clearing and get some food ready for you, Squirrel Girl. You should sit there and rest for a few minutes. And I’m going to tell all the others to give you some peace. There will be plenty of time for stories when we reach our new home. Nutcracker has already found a good place for us to go.”

Victoria turned to go back to the gathering place within Mapleway, the opening where all meetings were held and where Squirrel Girl’s mother had died protecting her. Suddenly Victoria seemed to remember something and turned around. “I’ve been waiting to tell you again, because I think you need to know it, to believe it,” she said, “how very proud your mother would be of you, if she knew of all you have done. Perhaps people are right, and there is a heaven where good souls go, and your dear mother is there

right now watching you, bursting with pride, and wanting you to be happy.”

Squirrel Girl was about to say that she had failed, that it had all been for nothing, that she might even have made things worse. And then something stopped her. No. She had done her best and she would now accept what Victoria was saying. She willed herself to believe that yes, indeed, her mother would be very proud of her.

And with that, she felt stronger, ready to go forward and find whatever was ahead. She stood up, and Nutcracker came over beside her, ready to assist if he were needed. Life was as sweet as raspberries found in wild, wild woods on a dew-drenched and sunny summer morning.

THE END

## Afterword

It had stopped raining long before, but Bertie hadn't even noticed, he had been so engrossed in his Great-Grandma's story about Squirrel Girl and all her friends.

"Great-Grandma," he said, "everybody was happy at the end of the story, but when you really think about it, they lost. Finn won. And most of the woods got cut down. Right?"

"Oh, I don't know about that," Great-Grandma said. "Finn did lose a foot, you remember, and I had heard, when *my* Great-Great-Grandma told me this story, that for the rest of his life he felt like he had pains coming from that foot. Besides, I don't believe he was a happy man. Being mean and hated doesn't make people happy, even if they can buy everything they need."

"Why did you skip the part about the foot pains?" Bertie asked. "What else did you skip?"

"It just slipped my mind. If I remember anything more, I'll let you know."

"Try to think of more now," Bertie said. "What about Squirrel Girl losing and the woods being cut down? And what about Palomita?"

"The sad part about Palomita comes after the end of the story. Her worst fears came true, and the last passenger pigeon died over a hundred years ago, but Palomita died of old age about two hundred years before that happened. So I like to think that she and her flock managed to raise their squabs in peace and live a good life. It is not part of the story that was passed on, and so I don't really know. But if I have to imagine what

came next for Palomita, I am definitely going to imagine her happy.”

“Hmmm,” said Bertie, “you’re probably right, but guessing isn’t the same as knowing.”

“That’s true enough,” Great-Grandma said, “but at least we do know for sure that there are still *mourning* doves, who are lovely birds and very close relatives of Palomita’s species. Listen. We can hear their soft, sad voices right now. Perhaps their mourning is for their cousins, the passenger pigeons.”

They listened. The doves were in their usual spot on a rooftop, cooing either sadly or contentedly, depending on the listener’s interpretation. Bertie had talked to them often, and knew all their names, for squirrels and birds all got sunflower seeds from the same bird feeder. From time to time, they had asked him to please not be so greedy, and save something for somebody else. He was ashamed to admit that he had paid absolutely no attention to this request.

“Well, Great-Grandma,” Bertie said, “it is good that these doves are around, and it is good that Finn suffered, after doing so much evil, but you can’t deny that those wonderful forests are gone.”

“No, I can’t deny that, and it is truly very sad. But they were not yet gone when Squirrel Girl moved to her new home, or for many years after, longer than a squirrel can live. So I believe she was happy for the rest of her days, and deservedly so.”

“Then maybe,” Bertie said, “we are the ones with the unhappy ending, for we have never even had a chance to see such forests. We’re lucky to have barely acceptable trees for our nests. All we have are stories and dreams.”

“Which are two excellent things to have. Not everybody can find comfort in stories and dreams. Tell me this, Bertie,” Great-Grandma said. “Are you ever hungry?”

“Always. But I know what you mean. You mean *really* hungry, starving. And the answer is no.”

“Have you ever been without a nest to shelter you in bad weather?”

“Never.”

“Do you or do you not have a loving family and dozens of friends that you play with all day long?”

“I do.”

“Well, if Squirrel Girl’s final goal was to help squirrels survive, to live on without suffering, and not become extinct, as passenger pigeons did, was she successful or not?”

“Successful,” Bertie admitted.

“I rest my case,” Great-Grandma said. “Survival without suffering is success.”

And with that, she shooed Bertie out of her nest, giving him strict orders to go straight home and let his mother know he was all right. And he was. In fact, he was beginning to realize, he was better than all right.