

Chapter Thirty-Four

Firnax

After several trips to gather a stash of dry wood, Quill cleared a circle on the ground, laid a ring of stones, and struck a nice campfire. There was enough wood in the stash to bank the fire so it would last till dawn. As the branches caught, he poked at them till they were burning to his satisfaction. Done with the efforts of the day, he dropped his tired body next to Pippin who was stretched out and enjoying the glow.

Timbit joined them. "I'm exhausted," he said to his friends, "but I'm not sleepy."

"I feel the same way," Quill said.

Distant howls echoing from across the lake pierced the silence.

Timbit's head snapped up. "Wolves," he said. "I heard them earlier but they were a lot further away."

"How much further?" asked Quill, glancing at the tree line.

"Far enough that I didn't give them a second thought—until now."

No one spoke. They listened for any other sound of the predators. Pippin took Timbit's paw in one hand and Quill's in another. She squeezed.

After several minutes, Pippin relaxed. Let the boys go. Stared into the fire. "What is it about a fire? Today, one almost killed us. Now we're warming ourselves by one."

"Maybe because it never stops moving?" said Timbit. "I can hardly take my eyes away."

"I'm scared," Pippin said with no preamble.

"I'm not surprised," said Quill. "Those wolf calls would chill anyone's spine."

"That's not what I mean," she said.

Timbit extended his paw and placed it on her knee. "Why are you scared?"

"The last time I was out like this, there wasn't a warm fire and there were no friends surrounding me." She looked away from the fire and into the darkness, then back to her friends. "I want to tell you a story. Before..."

The sound of a different wolf ricocheted off the calm of the lake. Coming from a different direction.

"They're assembling," said Quill. "The Alpha's calling them together."

"Are they coming after us?" Pippin said with a tremble of fear.

"I don't think so," said Quill. "We've got a good fire going."

"Then let me tell you while I can," she said.

"In all our picnics, what could you possibly have left out?" Quill said, light-hearted snark in his voice.

"Stop," said Timbit. "Let her talk. Something's on her mind."

"You know I lost my family," she started. "To foxes."

The boys nodded their heads but didn't interrupt.

"I told you about them, but I never told you about me."

Pippin was orphaned when foxes attacked her people's warren. Their village, Lapinshire, wasn't far from Havenbrook, but too far away for anyone to help when the attacks came. One night, a small skulk loped into the village to seize and carry off unsuspecting members of her warren. As the foxes sank their teeth into soft rabbit necks, the victims wailed in pain. Their tormented cries stayed in Pippin's ears long after they'd disappeared with raiders into the dark forest.

The terror extended beyond that one attack. Night after night the foxes raided until they exterminated the entire warren—every rabbit but Pippin.

The horror of the onslaught threatened to paralyze Pippin as she watched her family and her neighbors carried away. But despite her fear, she remained defiant as the attackers surged. Without regard for her own life, she would grab the nearest shovel, rake, or other blunt instrument to fend off the attackers. It was enough of a fight to keep them away from her. Her weapon was too much trouble for a fox to bother with, but it was not enough to keep them from her people.

On the night of the last raid, shortly after the foxes had scrambled away with the last of the warren, a grief like she'd never known overwhelmed her. She collapsed

onto the porch of her family cottage, curled into a fetal ball, and sobbed—for her terrible loss, for the pain her family suffered, for the injustice of it all.

At midnight, while Pippin still lay in the open air, a single fox came sneaking back into the village.

Pippin looked up to stare at the place in the trees that she'd last seen her family. Through her tears, she saw a dark shape lurking at the edge of the woods in that same spot.

A predator preparing to strike, the fox slowed its movement even more. This one was a litter runt, the last one to feed. He'd been forced to wait until the others had their fill, and now was his chance. There was only one rabbit left, one scrawny coney that none of the others wanted. A stealthy approach and a quick snap of his jaws, and he'd have food enough for two days.

A jolt tore through Pippin's body like a bolt of lightning through a dead tree. Her first reaction was shock. It froze her with fright. Her eyes locked on the blackish form. But as she saw it creeping toward her, she thought of her family and rage thawed her frozen fear. She leapt up and grabbed a hoe, the closest implement at hand.

The fox saw the sudden move and rushed forward to pounce before the prey escaped. He sprung toward Pippin, jaws opened wide to do the deed. But instead of soft fur and crunchy bones, he felt a sharp pain in the roof of his mouth that caused him to squeal in pain. Something hard and sharp lodged in the roof of his mouth.

Pippin had swung the hoe at the gaping mouth with all her might and landed the blade of the hoe into the jaws of death.

The fox jerked his head violently to rid himself of the pain, gagging as he spit at the hard shaft digging into his mouth.

"I pushed the handle hard," she said as tears filled her eyes. She was reliving that horrible scene. "Then I pulled it back. Then pushed it, then pulled it again. I wanted it to hurt. I wanted whatever pain that fox was feeling to be magnified a hundred times."

With every push and every pull, she thought of the awful suffering her family had endured. Anger and adrenaline inflamed her strength.

The fox shrieked over and over till it finally tore the shaft from Pippin's grasp. It hurtled back towards the woods, hoe protruded from his mouth. It had to run with its head pointed back toward Pippin to keep the hoe handle protruding backwards, otherwise every step jammed it harder. It bounced up and down as he ran. Every time it caught on a low branch or a shrub, the fox shrieked again. Shrieked until the sound of pain disappeared into the darkness that had swallowed the cries of her family.

The last glimpse she had of the fox was its eyes, turned back to her in torment, confusion and fear.

She stopped talking, but the boys knew she hadn't finished her story. They remained quiet.

Finally, Pippin said, "I'm sorry I did that. I'm sorry to have caused another creature so much misery. At night, in the dark, I see my family being carried off, one by one, and I see the look in that fox's eyes."

She paused for another long moment.

"Sometimes I wish they had killed me instead of my family. I feel like a monster for doing what I did."

"Oh, that's ridiculous," snapped Quill.

"You shouldn't think that way," said Timbit.

She held up her paw. "Let me finish."

The boys settled back from their agitated poses.

"Why wasn't I killed? Why was I the only one left? Sometimes I think that maybe a Higher Power saved me, maybe chose me for something good to do in my life."

She paused another long moment. Tears welled again.

She whimpered her next words, holding back her emotion. "But then I think, 'how could a higher power ever use a monster like me?'"

The boys knew better than to talk at that moment. Instead, they scooted next to her on either side and just held her.

The three sat mute for a long time. Long enough for Pippin to stop whimpering. For her tears to dry and for her body to relax into their arms.

Quill broke the silence. "I don't want to take away from your story, Pip, but have you noticed that the wolf calls have stopped?"

The others listened, then nodded agreement.

“That means they’re closing in on prey.”

“Us?” said Pippin with a start.

“I don’t think so,” said Quill. “Their last calls when they were all together were still pretty far away.”

“Let’s make sure,” Timbit said as he rose and tossed logs on the fire. It blazed. The fire rose up and lit the underside of the leaves in the surrounding trees. A loud crack sounded above the normal crackling as a pocket of wood gas exploded, sending a small volcano of sparks up the minaret of smoke that reached into the night sky.

“Firnax,” whispered Pippin, as Tim sat back down. She was watching the sparks glide upward.

“Firnax?” Timbit asked.

She shook her head up and down. “That’s what my family told me it was called at the time of the First Rabbits, when the stars were placed in the sky.”

“Tell me.”

With her eyes still gazing upward, Pippin’s voice became reverent. “The First Rabbits were more like animals than people. But over time, they learned new ways and began to change. One day, after they’d left the old ways behind, they were visited by Lapinastra. He was an ancient rabbit that the old does told stories about. They believed he’d been alive for ages and that he lived in a world different from theirs because no one had ever seen him.

“Lapinastra ordered the first rabbits to collect all the dead wood they could find and pile it in a great heap in the middle of their meadow. The heap of wood grew and grew, so much that the larger rabbits had to boost the lighter rabbits up the sides so they could place the chunks higher and higher. They worked on this hillock of wood for three days. All that time, Lapinastra sat on the edge of the meadow quietly watching the warren’s moil.

“When the warren had collected all the dead wood that they could find and had stacked it very high, the head rabbit went to Lapinastra. ‘Our task is complete,’ she said, then bowed and backed away from the sage.

“Lapinastra slowly rose and walked to the great heap. He leaned toward it and slipped his paws into the maze of logs and branches for long moments, then simply returned to the spot where he’d been sitting for those three days.

“A tickle of flame danced around inside the mound. Then as if it were rabbits coming from the woods to dance in the center of the meadow, other flames appeared, frolicking up the wood as the inferno developed. As the fire grew, it lit the meadow and the surrounding forest edge, finally reaching a licking blaze above the treetops.

“As the warren stood in amazement, gaping at the giant conflagration, a thunderous blast of heat and fire blew a river of sparks up through the flames. The fire roared and filled the air above the meadow in glistening sparks. The sparks rose and rose. Their glow didn’t fade as they floated higher—they gleamed ever brighter. As they passed the treetops and wafted into the black of the night sky, each spark found a special place and lodged themselves into dark new homes.

“Firnax. That’s the rabbit word we’ve always used when we talk about the amazing spray of stars that cover us at night.”

Timbit stared at the campfire’s flames as Pippin told her story. He could imagine Lapinastra as he watched sparks that floated above their own fire. His eyes followed them up till he stared at the first sparks that were dazzling above his head.

“That’s beautiful,” said Timbit. “I always wondered where the stars came from and how they got there.”

Pippin smiled with pleasure that her friend had appreciated her story.

“So when I think back to that awful time and am scared, I think about Lapinastra and the first warren and the warmth of a fire and the security of family.”

She turned to Timbit with tears in her eyes. “I’m at a warm fire now, with my Mingle family. I’m trying to let the guilt and fear go up and away with the smoke.”

She put her head on his shoulder. He reached up, brushed her ears back, and leaned his head on hers.

What a world, he thought.



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