

Tales of Murburry Wood

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Eden watched as her mother lifted her shiny nose into the crisp sky. The autumn leaves crunched under Eden's delicate paws as the world around her unfolded.

"Mama," Eden breathed, "when did the world become so different?"

It was true. It seemed like just days ago when the magic of spring settled into Murburry Wood. Every creature had frolicked among the new colors, sights, and sounds of the forest. Now, however- everything seemed old- as if the trees were breathing in and out slowly for the last time.

"Oh, child. You are so young. Come with me. We are off to find sleepy rabbits." Eden grinned. Rabbits were her absolute favorite.

Soon, Eden sank her jaws into the tender, juicy rabbit meat. Her mother was the slyest, yet most patient fox Murburry had ever seen. Many of the male foxes brought food and little things to Eden's den, hoping to win her mother over. Nothing had ever worked though. For as long as Eden could remember, it was just she and Fiona against the world.

Suddenly, the crunch of leaves outside their small den alerted Fiona as she raised her head again. Her eyes widened with fear, "coyotes... Eden- get into the creek!" Eden had always loved their den- particularly because of its hidden entrance to a fresh, bubbling stream. It was deep and cool- and Eden could stare into it for hours, but now, Eden no longer felt like the queen of the forest with her hidden treasure of a place. She felt fear surging through her body as she slipped into the creek- praying that the waters would hide her scent.

Jasmine grinned as she munched on a berry she had discovered. They were rare treats this time of year- and she could feel the breath of the forest beginning to slow. Being a rabbit, the forest was her everything. She had heard stories of the dangers that lied within it- like coyotes with sinister grins, or sly foxes stalking you as you scavenge. Her mother had told her how violent and terrible predation was. But for a young rabbit like Jasmine, it was alien to her. Suddenly, she heard a cry in the distance. "Marigold?"

Jasmine's twin Marigold was like her other half. They were practically inseparable- and it took much nagging from her mother to convince the two to separate only for a moment to scavenge. "Marigold," Jasmine's voice became shaky and more worried, "where are you?"

No reply. Just the empty feeling growing in Jasmine's heart- making her feel sick and dizzy. "MARIGOLD!!! WHERE ARE YOU?" Suddenly, she saw her. A fox- sleek and regal with piercing eyes. Jasmine became mesmerized by the creature as her bushy auburn tail swayed back and fourth. Abruptly, another fox appeared. This one seemed younger- like a ball of energy. Gradually, Jasmine's eyes swayed toward the mother fox's mouth. *No. This wasn't happening.* Clenched between the fox's jaws, was Marigold's limp body. Mama had always warned Jasmine that she would one day see the horrors of predation. She just didn't think that day would be today. "Mama..." the younger fox whispered, seemingly mesmerized by the world around her. The world she was taking Marigold out of. Did she not know what she was doing? "How do you catch those rabbits?"

“Oh dear, it’s quite easy. Come back to the den and I’ll tell you while we eat.”

Jasmine’s stomach churned. *No. No. No, no no no no.* “NO!” Jasmine covered her mouth-shocked at how her own body had betrayed her. “Mama, there’s another! Can I try catching it?” Jasmine’s eyes widened. She was going to die.

“No dear, this is plenty. We should only take what we can eat. We’ll catch another when food becomes scarce.” Jasmine breathed as the younger fox trudged away. She might not have been caught, but her better half was. How could she return to the burrow now?

Cole lowered his head as his brother sneered at him. Ironically, Cole had always been the black sheep of his pack due to the color of his fur. His shaggy coat, unlike the grays and tans of the rest of the coyotes, was midnight black. His eyes were even darker- and it made one rather uncomfortable to stare into them. It was almost as if you were staring into nothing itself. “Cole, you know you won’t catch the foxes. You might as well stay behind.” Cole winced as his older brother Kel snickered at him.

“Leave him alone, Kel. You haven’t even managed to catch a mere rabbit in three days. Leave it to the female to be the best hunter Murburry has ever seen.”

Cole smiled to see his sister Artemis standing confidently on a rock behind them. “Oh, hush up, Artemis. It was only because those stupid foxes beat us to it. They’re our main competition out here. And that’s why we’re going to take them out.”

“Yes. And Cole is going to accompany us while we take them out. So, what if he’s a little-different. It’s still his job to hunt and protect the pack, just like the rest of us.”

“Please, Artemis. You sound like mom. Besides, we can’t get them if we have dead weight like Cole.”

This was it. The perfect time for a slick comeback like Artemis always made. Cole glanced his excited sister, nodding her head in approval. Cole had been planning to stand up to his brother like this for months. It was finally time. “No. I’m not dead weight, Kel. One look into my eyes and the foxes will be running for cover, just like you do,” Cole whispered.

“Yeah, tell him, Cole!”

“Did I hear something? No- it must have been the wind.”

Cole grimaced as Kel sashayed away- his obnoxiously normal colored fur and eyes mocking him. “Don’t worry, Cole. You’ll get him next time,” Artemis cooed.

Eden watched as the sun shone on the surface of the river. She had spent what felt like hours under the water- surviving off an air bubble attached to an ancient-looking rock. When would her mother return? Would she be able to fight the Coyotes herself? Should Eden have stayed to help? Suddenly, the sun was blocked by a nearby figure. Eden’s body surged with fear as she sank deeper into the river. A coyote. But this one was unlike anything she had ever seen. Her mother had warned her what they looked like- great wolf-like creatures with tan pelts and shaggy tails. But this one was blacker than a moonless night- with eyes like great pools of eerie darkness. The coyote’s eyes met hers as Eden shook under the water. “Do you see any, Cole?”

Another coyote appeared- this one with a tan coat. The black coyote looked at her again. “No, Kel. We got them all. Let’s go home.”

The tan coyote turned away in pride. “No more foxes to slow us down. We will have full bellies this winter!”

Eden gasped under the water. The black coyote looked at her one last time before mouthing, ‘I’m sorry.’ Eden’s fear surged again- not for her this time, but for her mother. Where was Fiona?

Windy smiled softly to herself as she rested in her wonderfully soft nest. She was so grateful for her parents, her sisters, their delicious worms, and minnows to eat, and the shelter she received from her nest in Winding Tree. She was grateful because without the commensalism she and Winding Tree shared, she didn’t know where she would be.

Jasmine buried her head in the cool moss as it soaked up her tears. Marigold was gone. And it was her fault. She shouldn’t have separated from her. “Why didn’t they take me instead,” she whispered, “Marigold was the good one- always following the rules. Mama would need her more than me. They should have taken me.”

Suddenly, she heard a crunch behind her. Horrified, Jasmine turned around- praying her wish wasn’t about to come true. But instead, she saw a slimy-looking toad with one missing eye. Still horrifying, but not able to take Jasmine’s life. “Little bunny- why so glum?”

“What is there not to be glum about? I have just lost everything. And don’t call me little bunny. My name is Jasmine.”

“Well, Jasmine. I don’t know what you’ve lost. But I do know that you haven’t lost everything. Look around, child. You’re still breathing!” the frog chortled, “You still have Murburry. It can be ruthless at times, yes indeed. But at the end of the day, this place is more beautiful than anywhere else.”

It was true. Murburry had always been beautiful, but Jasmine had never paid this much attention. Murburry Wood was a boreal forest with tall conifers that stretched into the sunlight. Lean, skinny birches gently lay their leaves to rest on an earthy ground where the little creatures resided. Rocks and moss-covered roots stuck out for the perfect play-place. Little holes here and there were the entrances to cozy, warm rabbit burrows. For a little rabbit like Jasmine, Murburry was truly incredible. The toad led Jasmine to a nearby root where they sat. “Stay here, girl.”

Soon, the toad had returned with two delightfully perfect berries that glinted in the sunlight. “How did you find this?”

The toad grinned. “Well, miss Jasmine, I have my froggy ways. Besides, this forest is ruthless enough. I think it’s time it had a little cooperation in it’s midst,” she winked.

“Wow. The rabbits really need to learn how to find these quicker. The cold months are creeping in.”

“Well, you know what, miss Jasmine? Down by the lake it’s mighty cold, too. How about you and I go off looking for berries, and we bring back our findings to have ourselves a little before-winter feast. Does that sound nice?”

Jasmine smiled- forgetting for a moment that Marigold was gone. She shook off the memory. If she wanted to be warm this winter, she needed to leave Marigold in the blizzard of her mind. “Sure thing, Miss Toad. Let’s meet back here at sunset.”

Windy shut her eyes as the wind continued to blow. It had been weeks since she basked in her once-warm nest- counting all of the things she was grateful for. Now, the biting cold kept her wishing for more. “Windy- the weather matches your name!”

Windy grimaced at her overly positive sister, Reign. “In the spring it matched mine, and now it matches yours!”

“When is it going to match mine? I’ve waited all year,” whined Haily.

“I pray the weather never matches your name, Haily. Our nest would be knocked right out of Winding Tree!”

Suddenly, Windy noticed something small struggling up Winding Tree’s branches as the wind blew. “They look like the ants from Spring,” said an innocent Reign.

“But scary,” whispered Haily.

It was true. These bugs were a dark brown with thin bodies. But the thing that terrified Windy was their terribly sharp pincers. They looked as though they could tear through everything Windy loved. Tear straight through Winding Tree.

Suddenly, Windy’s parents returned to the nest- squinting in the wind. “Windy- your first windstorm,” cooed her mother, Amaryllis.

“I don’t think I like windstorms, Mama.”

“I do like windstorms,” said Windy’s father, Lightning. “Your mother and I met in one. I was a young hawk- flying this way and that though the strong winds. I flew straight into your mother’s nest. We became friends and soon, lovers.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah. I would congratulate you for finding love, Papa, but there are creepy bugs marching up Winding Tree,” remarked Haily.

Lightning’s calm face turned into a worried one as he saw the bugs. “Amaryllis. The Earwigs are back.”

Windy watched as her mother’s face folded into worry. “What’s so wrong with Earwigs,” Reign asked, “their names are funny!”

“Girls, do you know why we left our old tree? All our family was there. We wanted you to live in Willow Ward,” Amaryllis said- her voice breaking. “But these bugs came. They destroyed everything. We had never seen anything like it, so we didn’t know what to do. We had never known of parasitism like that. But now, we do.”

“So how do we stop it,” asked a worried Windy. She didn’t want to lose Winding Tree. It was her home.

“Kids, Winding Tree has provided us shelter since you were eggs. And now, we will protect it. We will return the gift that Winding Tree gave us.”

“How?”

“We eat.”

With that, Lightning and Amaryllis flew to the branch where the Earwigs resided and began picking them off. “Anything for food,” Haily cried, joining her parents.

“I want to help Winding Tree. I want my chicks to live in the place where I lived,” said Reign, flapping her wings. Windy just stood in awe at the bravery of her family.

“Thank you, Winding Tree,” she whispered, “I promise I’ll protect you as you did for me.” Windy rubbed her feathers on the bark she had always knew before joining her family for a feast of mutuality.

Cole hid his tears, ashamed of what he had done. He had no idea that fox was a mother. And now, that little fox was all alone.

“Well, you did good, Cole. I was wrong about you. You may be really weird looking, but you sure are a good hunter,” said Kel.

Cole had dreamed of acceptance since the day he was born. It was finally here. So why did he feel so terrible?

Eden whimpered. The den was eerily quiet, and Eden was scared to go inside. Suddenly, she heard a weak wheeze echoing in the cave. “Mama?”

“Flower. Come in here,” breathed a voice. Eden ran inside faster than lightning, to find her beautiful mother on the ground. “Oh, mama,” Eden whispered shakily. Her mother had been slashed and bitten by the coyotes. Blood trickled from gashes all over her body. However, none of them fatal. “Mama, how are you al-”

“Flower- every fox knows how to get out of a sticky situation. Play opossum.”

Eden grinned. She remembered seeing a frightened opossum play dead while out hunting. She and Fiona knew it wasn’t dead, but the smell it omitted was so repulsive they let it be.

“I need rest, but I should heal up soon.”

“Oh mama. I was scared you were gone. I don’t know what I’d have done without you.”

Fiona grinned, “Well, dear, I guess you’ll never find out.”

Eden smiled, proud that her mother was truly the slyest fox of Murburry wood. And one day, she’d be just like her.

THE END