

Winter 12-3-2017

# The Woods of Wander

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## Recommended Citation

Dinizio, Stephanie, "The Woods of Wander" (2017). *Master of Arts in Professional Writing Capstones*. 32.  
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Kennesaw State University  
Kennesaw, Georgia  
Certificate of Approval*

*This is to certify that the Capstone Project of*

Stephanie Dinizio

*has been approved by the committee  
for the capstone requirement for*

*the Master of Arts in Professional Writing  
in the Department of English*

December 2017  
*at the (month and year) graduation*

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Stephanie (Stevi) Dinizio  
Capstone reflection  
November 30, 2017

The Capstone process has been a long one, but well worth the time. I began with a vague children's novel idea, about twenty pages (thankfully already workshopped), no plans for the rest of the story, and an ambitious goal to write one hundred pages in two semesters. Naturally, all of this changed and became something better than what I expected. By the end of the two-semester Capstone process, I had written almost sixty pages, had plans for the rest of the Capstone, and received valuable feedback from my Capstone committee and from peers. The process has taught me patience to wait for good results, allowed me to expand my writing skills, and taught me the importance of consistency and hard work.

The idea for my Capstone project started in my undergraduate education. I was fascinated by the stories of Robin Hood, and how that character inspired so many with his heroic persona. Initially, I wanted to tell the story of a young Robin Hood who was not perfect, but had to somehow overcome his imperfections and insecurities in order to do something good. I began writing a short screenplay based on this. Years later, this small fascination with Robin Hood morphed into the story of a young fox who is marked inferior because he has a disability. This became my Capstone project. The title came from a late-night brainstorming session where I made a long list of possible titles. Out of this list, *The Woods of Wander* stuck with me.

The research for the Capstone involved reading children's literature, conducting market research, and studying animal facts. I read *Finding Serendipity* by Angelica Banks and *Pax* by Sara Pennypacker, both novels for elementary school audiences. In reading

these, I discovered that my Capstone novel was more appropriate for a younger audience (7-8 years old) and needed to include touches of family life in order to make the character relatable. After figuring out the age range of my audience, I looked at the most popular novels for that age range and used the knowledge I gained through every day, informal conversations with my own students. These informal conversations gave me information about children's fears, career plans, and favorite animals. All of this information helped me direct the novel's story elements to make it appealing to the intended audience. I also read various books on animals, specifically foxes, bears, wolves, and moles.

The process used to begin and end the capstone project was steady and consistent. I began by roughly planning out the novel, which took about two weeks, before writing the first draft. To finish the first draft, and the three drafts that came after, I planned to write every day for thirty minutes. With this strategy, I would push through the days I did not "feel" like writing and have a rough draft finished at the end of the first semester of the capstone. Although the strategy did not happen every day, as planned, it kept me accountable to writing thirty minutes for as many days as possible, which turned out to be about five days a week. At the end of the first semester, I was able to have a rough draft of the novel written plus the beginning of the next draft. By the end of the capstone process, spanning two semesters, four drafts were written because I kept to my steady and consistent plan as much as possible.

Reflecting on the past two semesters of the Capstone, I learned the importance of consistency and process. At the beginning of the Capstone project, my plan was to write a complete novel of about one hundred pages and have it ready to send to literary agents at the end of one year. Right now, I have completed that one year with almost sixty pages,

four drafts, and a few drafts away from sending the novel to a literary agent. Although the novel is not finished, I have seen that being consistent in my writing does not always mean I will type out as many pages as I hope or write the scene I thought I would write. Many nights, I sat in front of my laptop and open Word documents and wondered where my protagonist would go next in the story. I journaled and typed and retyped and thought through every possibility until bedtime. And then I picked up where I left off the next night. Sometimes I only wrote half a page over two nights. In these frustrating waiting periods, I learned a lot about my protagonist and my story changed, hopefully for the better. My protagonist became deeper and more human (although he is a fox) and I realized my story was more about my life than about a fictitious character's life. And after pushing through these frustrating times, I was able to compose an almost complete draft of the novel that I am content to show others and eager to finish.

After the Capstone project, and upon graduating from the Masters of Art in Professional Writing program, I plan to revise the novel as well as continue to receive feedback before sending a manuscript to literary agents. A part of this revision process is to give an almost completely revised draft to the intended audience: first and second graders. Two teachers, one in first and one in second grade, have agreed to allow their classes to read, discuss, and interact with the novel. This will provide me with valuable feedback on the specific audience (i.e. - boys, girls, or both) and which elements of the story work (i.e. - great characters) or do not work (i.e. - story too slow). This will also give insight into the teachers' perspectives, and whether or not they would provide this kind of novel for their classroom and if they could see their students picking this book from the library or book fairs. After speaking with these classes, I will revise based on the feedback I

receive and then compose a book proposal and send a fully revised manuscript to literary agents and hopefully be represented for publishing companies.

# The Woods of Wander

## Chapter 1 The Tree of Sent

The Tree of Sent was a very old, very large tree located in the center of the woods called Wander. The tree had grown like the other trees, and did not seem unusual. But, it grew bigger than the others and its roots overtook the roots of the surrounding trees, until only the Tree of Sent stood.

Birds flocked to the tree and made it their home. They built nests on the thick, sturdy branches and in deep, sunken parts of the trunk. The tree was so big, three kinds of birds peacefully lived on it: crows, owls, and cardinals.

One day, a wolf named Tysus, with his pack, found the tree. They had been looking for new land to make their territory. When Tysus saw the incredible tree, he immediately wanted it. The woods themselves were rich with wildlife to hunt and a wide river to provide water. The tree, though, was strong and stood out amongst the other trees in the woods as if it had real power living inside it. It was everything Tysus wanted to represent his pack. That is where the name 'Sent' came from: Tysus felt he and his pack were *sent* to the tree, that they were meant to find it.

Tysus and his pack demanded the birds in the tree leave. The birds refused, claiming that they had made their dwellings on the tree far before the wolves arrived in Wander. The tree was rightfully theirs.

But Tysus marked the tree, and said it would belong to the wolves, whether the birds liked it or not. True to his word, Tysus and his pack set to attacking the birds

whenever they ventured to the ground for food or water. The birds became use to the attacks, and were smart about when and where to fly to the ground.

However, an aging owl named Amos, who was revered among the birds for his wisdom and kindness, was killed by a wolf. He had gone to catch a worm in the late morning, and had thought the wolves would be asleep after a night of hunting.

The death of Amos was the moment that shook the birds of Wander. The cardinals wanted to leave, to find a new home. The crows argued that to leave would be admitting defeat. The owls, although upset by the death of Amos, simply wanted to find a new tree. One that was safe and sturdy and outside of the wolves' claimed territory.

So, the three flocks of birds separated. The cardinals went to a place outside of Wander. Now, no one saw cardinals anymore, except on rare occasions when one or two flew over the woods. The crows tried to stay in the Tree of Sent, but eventually died out. Their young, which learned to fly by being pushed out of the nest, were attacked by the wolves. The owls, however, moved to the south of Wander, to a line of trees that were thinner than, but just as sturdy as, the other trees in Wander. These trees were now called the Remarkable Trees.

The wolves lived peaceably in the woods for many generations. No other animal challenged them, and the wolves felt no need to leave.

But one day, a crow appeared in the Tree of Sent. The wolves woke up after a night of hunting and noticed the bird and its newly finished nest, safely tucked into the strong, thick branches of the tree.

The wolves feared this was a scheme set up by the birds. What if they were planning to take the tree back? They feared the bird, and feared more birds arriving. One day a young wolf decided to do something about it, and climbed the trunk of the tree.

When the young wolf arrived at the nest, he saw that the bird had laid eggs. As punishment for invading the wolves' territory, the young wolf tried to smash the eggs. But the wolf fell from the tree. As he fell, the young wolf managed to set one small egg loose from the others. The egg tumbled to the ground. When the young wolf hit the ground, one of his legs broke. While the wolves tried to help him, his mother found and fed him the egg.

Before the end of the day, the young wolf walked again. The wolves believed he was healed by the egg, and believed the other eggs, safe with their mother in the tree, must also be able to heal.

From then on, the wolves did all they could to protect the tree and the mother bird who lived there. Apparently, a few of the eggs hatched, and the wolves helped raise the birds so they could one day lay their own eggs.

Word got out in Wander about the eggs. All the animals of Wander wondered if the Tree of Sent truly housed a certain power, or magic, inside of it.

There had been three generations of wolves since the appearance of the bird, and this rumor had become only an entertaining legend.

## Chapter 2

### The Field

Looking out from the edge of the field, Claude had the perfect view of the border of Wander. His home, the foxes' territory, was on the very western tip of the woods. Here, the trees ended and a grassy field began. Beyond the field stretched hills upon grassy hills. Claude did not know life outside the field and the woods – he thought little of the hills beyond – but noticed them more and more as he matured into a full-grown fox.

He walked around the edge of the field, where the yellowing, brittle grass met the line of trees. Claude smelled the bushes, the trees, the hard, pale raspberries beginning to bloom. He loved this time of day, when no one was around yet, when he was unbothered.

In seemingly no time, the sun burned its brightest over Wander and the foxes of the woods ventured from their dens. Claude sensed their presences, and smelled them on the wind. Claude quickly spotted the gnarled and protruding roots of a nearby tree.

“Claude?” called a voice. The young fox knew it was one of his brothers, Georgie, and silently crawled to the roots.

“Where is he?” said another voice. It was Claude's other brother, Winston. Claude tucked himself behind the roots and laid still.

“He's hiding again, obviously,” said the voice of Claude's sister, Salem. “He'll come out when he wants to.”

There were a few moments of silence. Claude assumed his siblings had left to play games in the field.

“Claude!” called Georgie again.

“Don't bother,” said Winston. “He'll come when he wants to. You're bothering him.”

“We’re playing in the field, Claude! Come out and join us!” Georgie never seemed to understand why anyone, even a fox with a lame leg, would not want to race and tackle and unwillingly hurt himself every afternoon.

But Georgie did not try to find Claude anymore, and the young fox was grateful. After a few moments, he looked over the roots. He could see into the field from here and, as he had guessed, the fox saw his three siblings leaping into the center where a group of young foxes gathered. They slipped around the other foxes effortlessly, tumbled on the ground and got back to their feet with ease. It was time for games.

First there was racing. Claude knew he was not fit for this game; he would surely lose. As usual, Winston won this game. Claude’s brother was slightly longer than the other pups, and slightly older. The fox siblings were getting close to the age where they would leave their den and begin their own families.

Then there was a competition to see who could jump the highest. Like the first game, Claude knew he was not fit for this one either. Georgie tried his hardest to jump high, but fell after most attempts. Thomas, a neighboring fox, just about the age of Claude and his siblings, won this game. He was almost as long as Winston, but slenderer and, therefore, light on his paws.

Currently, the other foxes looked like they were arguing. A group made a circle and two of the foxes, Beatrice and Todd, stood in the center. It was not long until Salem, clever for her age, stepped in between the two foxes with her snout held high. She then closed her eyes and the others spread out. Claude knew he could play this game. All he needed to do was be quiet and not get caught; he was good at those.

Claude looked back at his leg. It was stiff like a branch, unlike the rest of his legs, which were nimble and springy. Claude put a small amount of pressure on this leg. It ached just slightly, but he convinced himself he could handle a game that required tact and not strength. He took a deep breath.

Into the field Claude limped. He was slow as he dragged his leg behind him. When he reached the center of the field only two foxes had been tagged by Salem and forced to stand still until the end of the game. Winston, one of Claude's brothers, silently passed in front of Claude.

"Hey," Claude whispered. "Can I join?"

"Of course," Winston whispered over his shoulder.

A couple of the other foxes looked from Winston to Claude and grimaced or rolled their eyes. Normally this bothered Claude, but in this moment, he was trying to concentrate on not getting tagged by the sightless Salem.

Claude was as quiet as he could be, but when Salem came too close to him he panicked and dove out of the way. His back leg caught in a small hole and Claude fell headlong into another fox. This fox fell and, grabbing at air to avoid hitting the ground, accidentally scratched the side of a passing fox. There was a high-pitched yelp.

The fox Claude had run into, Thomas, groaned. Claude used his front paws to push himself up and gazed down at Thomas with dread.

"I- I'm-," said Claude.

"Sorry?" The fox who had been scratched, Beatrice, a skinny fox who happened to be Thomas's sister, finished Claude's sentence. She approached Claude, her thin face made

thinner by her furrowed brow and tight lips. Claude noticed a fine, short red line on her lower torso.

“You should be sorry,” Beatrice spat. “Just wait until my parents see Thomas’s bloody snout.” – Claude noticed a thin drop of blood trickle out of Thomas’s snout as he rolled onto his back, holding one paw gingerly to his chest. – “Your leg didn’t become lame yesterday, did it?” She looked from Salem to Georgie. “And why can’t you keep a closer watch on your brother? For all of our sakes?”

Winston had just joined them, along with the other dozen young foxes who had been playing in the field.

Winston looked down at Thomas and scowled. “He’s fine. Right, Thomas?”

Thomas pushed himself up to a sitting position. He placed his paw on the ground and quickly retracted it.

“Is it broken?” said Beatrice, suddenly softhearted and running to her brother’s side.

Thomas nodded in a dazed way. “I think so.”

“You couldn’t have broken your paw,” said Winston. “You two hardly hit each other and you didn’t hit the ground that hard.”

Beatrice furrowed her brow again. “We’ll see who’s the proper judge of that!” she said, tossing up her snout. “Come on, Thomas.” Beatrice turned and sashayed away. Thomas followed obediently.

“I don’t know why you think you can play all of a sudden.” Claude looked over to see Todd staring at him. Todd was a thick fox, born the same month as Claude and his siblings, and had prominent black marks on his snout and ears. “You’re clearly a danger to us all.”

“Eat dirt, Todd,” Winston said tensely.

Todd's ears twitched. "Sticking up for your brother again? When will *that* stop?"

"Lay off him," said Georgie. "No one wants to hear you talk anyways."

"When will you realize your brother is nothing but a poor excuse for a fox? And all of you sticking up for him only proves my point." From behind Todd, Claude saw a few of the others nod.

The fur on Winston's back began to rise as he took a few steps toward Todd. For a moment, Claude was afraid his brother would try something he would regret. But Salem stepped in between them.

"Listen, now, Todd," she said, as if she were already bored with the conversation. "It would be foolish of you to take out your frustration on my poor brother." Todd unfurrowed his brow and now stared quizzically at Salem, as if she had made him forget what he was about to do.

"Claude will already be in enough trouble with our father," she continued, "would you like to be in trouble with him, too? If so, be our guest. Better you than me." Salem flashed a humorless smile.

Todd opened and closed his mouth as if he would like to say something but thought better of it. He then stiffened and looked down his snout at Claude. "I better not see you down here again," he said curtly, and turned to leave. The fox took a couple of steps before pausing a moment. Claude was afraid Todd had come up with a good reason to stay, but then the fox headed toward the other end of the field.

The other young foxes threw a few angry looks at Claude and his siblings before migrating to another part of the field and resumed their games.

Claude hung his head and turned toward the edge of the field where he had laid

hidden before. He walked away feeling not only embarrassed, but ashamed of himself. All of his siblings had tried to stick up for him, but Claude believed Todd was right: he was a poor excuse for a fox. His leg, the one that got caught in the ground, got him into trouble now, but Claude knew the trouble would only get worse as he got older. How would he hunt? How would he provide food for his family? How would he elude predators?

At least on the edge of the field he could be embarrassed and ashamed all by himself. Before he could take more than a few steps, though, Salem stopped him.

"Claude, I hate to say it, but you're only making things worse by embarrassing yourself," she said in a matter-of-fact tone.

"*Salem!*" said Winston, catching up with them. "Insulting your own brother won't help anything, either."

Salem shrugged. "I just don't want him to get into more trouble, that's all."

Winston ignored her and turned to Claude.

"Sorry I ruined the game," Claude said, eyes towards the ground. "I just haven't played in a long time."

"I know," said Winston.

"He's mostly being dramatic, you know," said Georgie, coming up behind Winston.

"Really. I wouldn't worry about it. Thomas and Beatrice and Todd just want attention. We all know that."

Claude shrugged, not wanting to argue. "Sure," was all he could say before leaving his siblings behind in the field.

## Chapter 3

### Ty

Claude focused on the falling sun, which was now low in the sky and almost touched the edge of the earth. At least here, far from the others, Claude could not be a bother.

He knew his siblings meant well, and did not intend to hurt their brother. But Claude knew they were embarrassed by him. Although Salem had no problem making her opinion heard, Winston and Georgie tried their best to not blame Claude for being born with a lame leg. But it was the fact that they easily walked away from their brother, usually did not invite him to play in the field, that hurt Claude the most.

Claude looked back at his leg. A part of him hated it, the other part felt sorry for it. The young fox stood and slowly shifted his weight to his back leg. The leg bent a little, but a sharp pain shot up it and into his back. He winced, but stubbornly tried to bend the leg more, hoping the pain would stop, that he would but eventually the pain increased and became too much for him. Claude toppled over and landed on his back. He lay there for a few moments, and then slammed one of his good, front paws on the ground.

“Can’t I just be normal?” he groaned to the sky. “Can’t I just do fox things and be left alone?”

A wind blew. Claude’s fur ruffled and he turned to face the oncoming wind. He closed his eyes. The wind on his face was cool and, to the young fox, calming. He caught the scent of pine and honeysuckle and...something else.

Claude sat up. Other animals, besides foxes, rarely came into the foxes’ territory. Occasionally a bird could be seen sweeping through the treetops or a rabbit hopping by the edge of the field. Sometimes wolves were seen lurking amongst the trees.

But this, whatever it was, smelled nothing like the dusty wolf or earthy rabbit. It was much cleaner.

Claude thought about running, but he could not move fast with his bad leg, and, besides, he did not sense any danger. But he felt nervous, uncomfortable knowing he was alone in this space. His siblings and his father, who was probably sleeping in their family's den, would not be paying attention to where Claude had gone.

The fox looked around and spotted a thin raspberry bush. It was not much, but it was close enough and good enough for Claude to do what all foxes did best - hide.

Claude staggered as fast as he could to the bush, dragging his leg behind him. The bush was only a few bounds away, but Claude only made it halfway when the creature burst through a bush. Claude immediately laid low on the ground and relaxed his muscles to make himself as insignificant and unseen as possible. Where his ears had been upright and straight, he let them flop down and rest against his head. Claude's head sat on his front paws while his tail laid neatly underneath his body. Claude was naturally small for his age - probably because he could not move and build muscle like other foxes - but this occasionally worked to his advantage.

Out of the corner of the fox's eye was a shaggy, brown head poking out of a bush. It looked around furiously, like it desperately needed something, and spotted the raspberry bushes. As the rest of its body emerged, Claude realized it was a bear cub, about his own age, but larger in size. The cub must have wandered a long way from its home.

The bear wobbled to the raspberry bushes, only a few paces from Claude, and grabbed at the berries with her teeth, gobbling them up. Claude had seen a few bears

before and knew how big they were, and now he suspected their size was due to how much they ate.

The cub made its way down the line of bushes, unknowingly closer and closer to Claude, and continued to gobble up raspberries. A few times she even pushed up onto his back legs and reached up for the raspberries on the higher branches. Claude thought about making an escape at these points, seeing as the bear seemed oblivious to the fox's presence, but Claude feared his back leg would catch on something or create a disturbance that would attract the cub.

Instead, Claude decided to remain hidden as the cub came closer.

It basically inhaled a few of the raspberries at the bush closest to Claude. The fox wondered how the bear had not noticed him by now. Then, still munching raspberries, the cub looked right at him.

Claude almost gasped, but instinctively stayed very still in the hope that bears had poor eyesight. But the cub's eyes grew wide and it took a step back. Without thinking, Claude's ears pulled back, his eyes became narrow slits, and he bared his teeth. He got to his paws to appear aggressive. It was something he had seen his father do when a lone snake tried to slither into their family's den.

"I'm- I'm so sorry if I scared you," the cub said in a tinny voice. "I was just hungry. Raspberries are my favorite, you know. We don't have any close to our cave, but they're my favorite. I'm sorry if they belong to you. I would give them back, honestly I would, but I don't know if I could now. I feel so bad. I'm just lost, you see... My name's Ty, by the way."

Claude's ears pricked up but he continued to bare his teeth. The cub seemed intimidated, but why would she not run away? This was the fox's territory, after all.

“My papa really wanted a boy, that’s why my mama named me ‘Ty.’ That’s probably strange for me to say. I mean, I just came into your territory. Sorry.” Ty looked at the ground and shifted her large paws. “I’m looking for the wolves’ territory anyways, not the foxes.”

“And why would you want to find their territory? Do you want to get yourself killed?” Claude said behind narrow eyes.

“Oh, no, definitely not.” Ty smiled uncomfortably. “I’m looking for, you know, something...”

“No, I don’t know what ‘something’ is.”

“Well,” Ty moved her head from side to side, like she was unsure of what to say next. “You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

To Claude, this felt like an attempt to be alluring. “Probably not. So why don’t you just leave?”

Claude tried to intimidate Ty by staring her down, but the cub seemed preoccupied as she looked past the young fox.

“What’s wrong with your leg?” she said.

Claude moved to try to block his back leg from Ty’s sight.

“Who said there’s anything wrong with my leg? And why aren’t you leaving?”

Ty shrugged. “I was just wondering what’s wrong.”

“I asked you first.”

Ty shifted her eyes as if she were uncomfortable. “About the leaving?”

Claude nodded once.

“I guess I’m not leaving because I know what you can do to help that stiff-looking leg of yours.”

“You can leave now.”

“No! Really. I’m looking for something that can heal your leg. That’s what I said I’m looking for but I know you won’t believe me.”

“And I won’t believe you. Get out of my territory or I’ll call the other foxes.”

“I can’t smell anything. I had an accident when I was born where I fell from a tree and smashed my nose. Hey, where are you going?”

Claude had had enough. He had turned and was walking away. He was not in a great mood anyways, and an annoying cub was not helpful either.

“There are healing eggs in the Tree of Sent!” Ty called from behind the young fox. “You know, the tree where the wolves live!”

Claude had heard of the Tree of Sent, and knew the legend like everyone else in Wander. However, the story was just that – a legend. He did not turn back to acknowledge the bear, but walked toward his family’s den. Thankfully, the cub did not follow him.

## Chapter 4

### Father

Claude had walked toward the southern edge of the field, and again hid under the roots of a tree. Lying down, his paws over his head, a few silent tears escaped down his whiskers and snout and neck. He did not want to look at his back leg, but was instead unwillingly aware of it. It felt like his other leg, not hurting, not uncomfortable, not painful. If Claude laid down all the time, he would not be hiding under roots or feeling ashamed of any part of him. Claude wished his back leg could always feel like it did now.

But his leg would hurt again. It would get in his way, and someone else's way, again. It would hold Claude back from playing with the other foxes. The leg would twinge and cause the young fox to stop whatever he was doing. Hunting would be hard. Making friends would be hard. His family would continue to be ashamed of him. He would live a life of embarrassment and pain and loneliness. Claude tried to convince himself that it was not so bad, that his life and his leg could be worse. But nothing felt worse than hiding.

Claude felt a boiling under his skin. He felt anger, with himself and with his family and with the other foxes for how rejected they made him feel. Claude uncovered his snout with his paws and pounded the ground. He hated who he was and where he was. He just wanted to be happy.

He noticed the space around him was dark.

Claude froze and looked up. A tall figure stood before him – his father. The father fox was sinewy and lean with a hard face. A face that was not unkind, but did not smile much.

Claude, though, almost recoiled at the sudden sight of his father.

“I’m sorry if I scared you,” the father fox said, “but I’ve been looking for you.” He sat down next to Claude.

“Why?” said Claude, not meeting his father’s eyes and quickly brushing away his tears.

“I want to talk to you about hunting. I want you – and I’m sure you’ll agree – to finally learn to hunt.”

Claude’s ears pricked up at this, and his heart beat faster.

“Can I please? I know I can do it! I’m not fast, but I’m sneaky. Even Salem and Winston and Georgie could tell you that.”

His father nodded. “I agree. You are sneaky, which is very important for a fox on the hunt...”

*Finally,* thought Claude, *someone believes I can do something like any other fox.*

“But I want to know,” said the father fox, “if I can trust you being on your own.”

“Of course you can, Father.”

“Then why did you leave our den last night?”

Claude felt his stomach go cold – so this was why his father wanted to talk to him.

The young fox shrugged to seem casual. “I just went into the field to look at the stars and didn’t get back until you left to hunt.”

His father gave him a look, the kind that said, “don’t try to weasel your way out of this.”

“But I did! I’m sorry if it worried you,” Claude added in a mumble, knowing he was in trouble no matter how he justified himself.

“If you were out in the field, then why did I pick up on your scent in the woods? I could barely find the scent of the path you took.”

Claude wanted to say, *Maybe you should have come after me then*, but seeing the serious look on his father’s face made him think twice.

“I wanted to see how far I could walk. My leg’s been feeling better.”

His father looked at him for a long moment, then sighed.

“Please don’t wander that far again, not without my permission. You’ll be grown soon and I just want you to be safe. You know how I feel about wandering into the wrong parts of the woods, no matter how safe you feel. I don’t want you to end up like your mother.”

Claude looked up at his father, suddenly annoyed.

“Just because I wandered away from the den? I didn’t leave our territory. Even you said you could still find my scent. And why didn’t you come after me then, if you were so worried that I’d end up dead?”

His father took a deep breath and closed his eyes for a moment. It looked like he was trying not to get angry. His eyes became narrow for a moment, then soft again. But his voice became sharp and harsh.

“I sensed you were in no danger... but last night made me question whether or not you are ready to hunt on your own. If you can’t make safe decisions now, I wonder how you’ll do on your own, when I or your siblings are not around to help you.”

“None of you are there to help me in the den all night while you hunt. You don’t seem worried then that a snake will find its way into the den.”

“I know you can handle a snake, Claude.” The father fox was trying to make Claude feel better, but it did not work.

“This isn’t about me making “safe decisions” or being by myself, is it? It’s about my leg.” His father did not answer. “Am I right?”

The father fox sighed, like his breath would dissolve Claude’s anger.

“I’m concerned about it, yes, but I know that with some help you can be a decent hunter. As long as you stay around here-.”

“Decent?” What is that supposed to mean? I’m never going to be as good as Salem or Winston or Georgie? Or you?”

His father’s face became stern. “That’s not what I meant.”

Claude looked at the ground, too angry and ashamed of himself to continue arguing with his father.

“I don’t think you’ll end up dead. I don’t think you’ll end up like your mother.” He continued as if his words were as fragile as an egg. “But I do worry that you won’t be able to provide for yourself. For a family. To catch food. Dig your own den...”

“Or do anything?”

“Claude, you misunderstand what I’m-.”

“No, Father, I understand. I understand what you and everyone else says about me,” Claude’s voice almost broke, but he set his jaws and held the tears back, “I’ll never be a normal fox.”

“You’re not *not* normal. You’re just...” Claude’s father seemed at a loss for words.

“Not good enough?”

The fox father’s voice become soft. “Claude, don’t be so harsh on yourself.”

“But it’s true, and you’re not denying it.”

Claude’s father had looked him in the eye until this moment. He broke his gaze and looked at the ground.

The gesture was all Claude needed – he felt everything inside him, every muscle and bone, shut down. Something warm but frigid, like fall rain, covered the insides of his body. Claude felt worse than hurt or embarrassment from his father – he felt rejection.

Claude turned and left for the cover of the woods. His father did not come after him.

## Chapter 5 The Mole

Claude did not pay attention to where or how long he walked. He kept going until the pain in his back leg became unbearable and he collapsed on the ground.

Where he had been angry before, Claude felt nothing. Maybe he did not want to deal with the anger anymore, maybe he had walked too far to have any more anger – either way, Claude felt tired. He was not tired like he normally was at the end of each night when his father returned to the den with meat for his pups; instead, Claude felt an emotional exhaustion.

A sudden and strong breeze blew over him. The woods were darkening.

And then something bumped against Claude's belly. He stood quickly and scurried away, and then turned back to see what was happening.

A small mound of dirt had formed where the young fox had laid. He wanted to sniff it, to understand what it was and why it was there. The mound moved as if someone was underneath it, pushing the dirt up.

The mound moved again, and this time a dark head pushed its way out, followed by two sets of long claws. The claws were a part of two dark, broad paws that held on to the ground while its head scanned the woods around it. The head had a pointed snout with the strangest and ugliest nose Claude had ever seen: it was pale pink and fleshy, and shaped like a small claw. As for the creature's eyes, Claude could not see them, but assumed that he was being looked at when the fleshy nose pointed right at him.

"What are you doing here?" the creature croaked, as if he had not spoken in a long time. "And what are you?"

Claude swallowed. He was still staring very intently at the creature's nose. "I- I'm a fox."

"You're far from home. You should go back. This is my territory." The creature pulled itself completely out of the hole in the ground. Its entire body was a sleek, dark gray and was shaped like a wide, fat leaf.

"And what are you?" said Claude.

Again, the strange nose pointed at the young fox.

"Well, I'm a mole." The mole turned around and began to lumber away.

Claude had heard about the moles from his father but had never gotten the chance to see one before. He watched its body sway from side to side as it walked away, thinking it a truly unusual animal, when he noticed the hole from which it came.

The young fox approached the hole and looked down and into it. He had heard about these, too, from his father. Moles dig tunnels, and while other animals in Wander establish territories, the moles reign in the underground. According to Claude's father, the mole tunnels run all over - *or under*, thought Claude - Wander.

The entrance to the tunnel gave him an idea.

"Excuse me!" Claude called after the mole. When the mole did not respond, Claude scurried toward it. He was gaining on the mole, but lost his strength as his back leg, not properly rested, began to ache. He tried to get the mole's attention again. "Wait!"

The mole turned his head but kept moving. "I don't have time," was all it said as it continued to waddle away.

"But wait! Where are you going?" Claude slowed his pace.

"To get- It's none of your business."

“Can I use your tunnel?”

Finally, the mole stopped and turned around.

“What business do you have with my tunnel?”

“I need it to- to get somewhere. And I need to get there quickly.”

The mole turned its head slightly, and for the first time Claude noticed a beady little black eye on the side of the mole’s head. Although Claude could barely see the eye, it seemed to look right at him, studying him.

“That’s a woolly reason,” the mole scoffed. “You don’t hear me asking to use your den for any reason. Don’t go near my tunnel, or I and the other moles will be unforgiving.” The mole began to turn around again, but Claude was desperate for help, so he tried the only other tactic he could think of to convince the mole to use the tunnel.

“I need to find these healing eggs in the Tree of Sent and I think the best way for me to get there is through one of your tunnels.” Claude blurted out the honest words before he could think twice.

When the mole showed no outer response, Claude began to feel the creeping sensation of doubt and added, “And the tree is in the wolves’ territory, so it’s dangerous...”

“I know where the Tree of Sent is. But what are these eggs? Have you seen them?”

Claude shook his head. “No, not yet.”

“Then how do you know they’re real? Not too good to be true?”

“I- I- I don’t. A friend told me about them, and he would know.” Claude knew this was not true. He had little faith in Ty’s accurate knowledge of the eggs, but wanted, *needed*, to know if such eggs were real.

The mole stared at Claude for a long moment, then turned around and continued to lumber away.

Claude tried to leap after him, but his back leg held him down like a dead weight, preventing the fox from moving very far. Instead, Claude pushed forward and dragged the leg behind him.

“You can get to them easily, can’t you?” said Claude.

The mole did not answer, but continued to walk ahead.

“And you’re a mole! No one would suspect you, or us.”

Again, the mole did not answer.

“But don’t you want to see them?” he desperately called after the mole.

“No,” the mole said abruptly.

“You don’t believe me?”

“Of course not.”

Claude was neck and neck with the mole now, but beginning to tire out.

“But don’t you want to find out if they’re real? What if the eggs are there, in the tree? Waiting for us?” When the mole did not respond, but instead kept looking out in front of him, Claude nudged him with a paw.

The mole spun around and bared his teeth at the young fox. His teeth were long and broad like his paws. His growl was deep. Claude shrunk back, losing his balance and falling on his back. He quickly righted himself.

“Leave me alone!” the mole growled through clenched teeth, and stepped toward the young fox. “And stay away from my tunnel. You are not to use it!”

Claude just nodded, and then the mole turned and began walking away again. When the mole was a few fox leaps away, Claude tried to persuade him again.

“I need them! And I need you to help me! Well, I need your tunnels. And what if there are eggs in the Tree of Sent? And what if they can heal? They can heal your nose!”

The mole stopped abruptly and turned its head.

“And what’s wrong with my nose?”

Claude wished he had not said that. He swallowed hard as the mole took a step toward him.

“Nothing.”

“Nothing?” Why would you think there was something wrong with my nose?”

Claude shook his head, afraid to answer. But then the mole added, “It looks weird, doesn’t it?”

Claude opened his mouth to say something, but was not sure what was safe to say. Fortunately, the mole kept talking.

“How did you know?”

“That your nose looks weird?” Claude said slowly.

“No, no, how did you know there was something wrong with my nose? I don’t see why you would have asked me to help you find healing eggs if there was nothing wrong with me. So how did you know?”

Surprised, Claude was not sure if he should admit he had no idea there was anything else wrong with the mole (except for his unusual and slightly disturbing nose) or just lie.

“I don’t know... Just sensed it, I guess. Foxes are good at that.”

“Hmmm,” the mole said thoughtfully. “Yes, foxes can be good at those kinds of things. At least, that’s the talk underground. Do you know what’s wrong with my nose?”

Claude shook his head.

“Foxes aren’t good at everything, I guess.” Claude felt a slight flush of irritation at the mention that foxes, particularly Claude in this instance, was not good at something.

“Well, in this case, I’ll tell you. I’m a fantastic digger. In my opinion, the best digger under these woods. No mole digs a straighter, more invisible tunnel than me. But, the other moles overlook my talent because my nose is like this,” he gestured to his fleshy nose with a paw, “They have smaller, darker noses that help them sense enemies. Mine doesn’t sense enemies, which has put me into a few bad situations, but I do sense the whole of the underground, which leads me to good places to dig my tunnels. Other moles like to focus on the latter.

“But just between you and me: I want to leave Wander, but I’m afraid I won’t survive in unknown territory if my nose doesn’t work right.”

Claude wanted to say he understood the other moles concern with this mole’s nose, but then he felt something different – sympathy. The young fox knew what it was like to hear about how different he was and never how good he was.

“I know how you feel,” Claude said quietly.

“I’m sure.” The mole looked at Claude’s back leg. “I bet your friends and family don’t like that leg of yours.”

“No... No, they don’t.”

“But I’m sure you’re good at other things, right? What are you good at?”

Claude had never thought about being good at anything before. He cocked his head to one side. "I don't think I'm good at anything."

"That can't be true. What about being quiet? I didn't know you were just outside my tunnel until I came out."

Claude nodded slowly. "I guess so..."

"My name's Dieter, by the way. Yours?"

"Claude."

"I guess you want your leg healed, right Claude? And I want my nose healed. So how do you plan to use my tunnel to get to the Tree of Sent?"

## Chapter 6

### Lost

The day had become night when Claude and Dieter started on their journey to the Tree of Sent.

Claude explained that, because the wolves were very territorial, the only way to get to the Tree of Sent was through the air or under the ground. The only way to get through the air would entail being carried by a bird. Since there was no bird around, Claude reminded Dieter that no one could fall to the ground when tunneling and he was not keen to hurt his back leg or any other part of himself.

Dieter agreed – underground tunneling was a safer option.

The goal was to dig a new tunnel to the Tree of Sent by the end of the next day. At least, Dieter assumed it would be the end of the next day. He explained that moles could not tell if it was day or night while in the tunnels. However, Dieter was, of course, confident in his ability to dig well and dig fast.

As Claude followed Dieter into the tunnel, the young fox felt a panging in his stomach, a pang he assumed to be nervousness. He looked down into the tunnel entrance, into the darkness that was blacker than the night around him. Although Claude, as all foxes, could see well in both the day and night, the all-consuming darkness of the underground was a new experience. Even his family's den was not as dark as a mole tunnel because dens only went so far into the ground. A tunnel, however, extended further.

Down under, Claude found the tunnel to be exactly the right height for him, and his head only brushed the top of the tunnel a few times. Claude's eyes adjusted quickly to the darkness, and after a while he forgot how far they had traveled.

For what seemed the entire night, Dieter dug and dug, hitting Claude in the face with dirt. Claude learned to move out of the way or block the dirt with a paw. Finally, Dieter plopped down on the spot.

“It’s time to sleep,” Dieter said. Claude did not mind. He was getting sleepy and he was tired of dodging dirt. “I’ll keep going in a few hours. And then you’ll dig some. Don’t think that I don’t know that foxes are good diggers, too. All you need are your front paws.”

Claude agreed, and they both fell asleep. However, it seemed like no time before the mole was waking the young fox with a nudge to his ribs.

“Let’s go. No time to waste,” the mole grunted.

Claude looked up and almost jumped at the sight of Dieter’s fleshy pink, claw-like nose hovering only a breath away from his face.

The mole began to dig, picking up where he left off.

A few times, Dieter hit roots, probably from trees or bushes above them. The roots crept through the ceiling like skinny dirt-colored snakes. Dieter was able to dig around them, maybe because he was used to this. At one point Dieter hit a few thick roots that took some effort from both animals to maneuver around.

“Dieter, where are we?” Claude finally asked.

“Hm?” the mole croaked over his shoulder, as if he were not really listening.

“Do you know where we are?” Claude sniffed, trying to pick up any scent he could. All he smelled was the musty scent of dirt.

“I know we’re headed east. We’ll be in the wolves’ territory soon.”

“But do you think we could already be there?” Claude looked longingly at the dirt above him. He was worried they would miss the wolves’ territory and end up on the other side of Wander.

Dieter shook his head and said nothing else. Claude tried to trust the mole and did not push him any further.

Eventually, Dieter made Claude dig for a while. The young fox was happy to show that he was good at something, and despite his bad back leg, his front legs were perfectly useable.

When his paws ached, Claude stopped and turned to the mole.

“Do you think we’re there now?”

The mole looked up and touched the ceiling of dirt with the end of his fleshy nose. He moved his head from side to side, as if deciding what to say next, and then nodded.

With precision and swiftness, Dieter dug at an angle that created a slope upwards. Claude followed after him. For the first time since taking the first step into the tunnel, Claude was anxious for what was on the other side of the dirt.

A tiny beam of light, as thin as a pine needle, poked through the dirt in front of Dieter. As the mole continued to dig, more and more light showed through until a narrow hole gaped open before the two animals. And then they both sat still.

Claude knew Dieter was sensing for danger or others outside. Claude, too, tried to catch the scent of anyone who may be around the hole. There was no one. Claude wondered why Dieter was not moving.

“Are we not there yet?” said Claude quietly.

“Hm?” It sounded like the mole had been deep in thought. “Oh, I don’t know. But there are a lot of trees here. Did you notice how damp the dirt is?” Claude shook his head.

*Of course I didn’t notice the dirt, thought Claude, because it’s all the same.*

He wondered why many trees could be important when they were looking for one tree, the Tree of Sent.

Either way, Claude followed Dieter as he finally exited the tunnel.

They both looked around.

“So where are we?” said Claude. “I don’t smell wolf.”

“That’s because we’re not in their territory,” Dieter said matter-of-factly and like everyone should know this.

Claude almost rolled his eyes, knowing that Dieter did not mean to be sarcastic, but he was still annoyed. “Thought so.”

“We’re east of the wolves. Must have gone under the Tree of Sent.”

Claude thought about the thick tangle of roots they had moved their way through while in the tunnel.

“Now what?”

“Try again, of course. We’ll probably overshoot the Tree again, but we’ll get closer.”

Claude felt more annoyed with the mole. He hated how blunt and unhurried Dieter could be. Plus, Claude had chosen to leave home for the dangers of the wolves’ territory; he had dug a tunnel and followed a strange mole through the underground of Wander – the young fox wanted a sure way to find the Tree and these eggs.

Despite his feelings, Claude followed the mole through a cluster of bushes and over a fallen tree. His ears pricked up as they walked up a slight hill. At the top, Claude saw the

skittering waters of the only river in Wander, the Fellows River. Dieter was already lumbering down the hill to the edge of the river.

He turned around and looked at Claude, still standing at the top of the hill. "Come on! Don't waste time."

Claude started down the hill, cautiously stepping in places without loose dirt that could cause him to slip. The biggest problem with slipping was that Claude would not be able to stop himself from sliding, rather ungracefully, down the entire hill. Again, Claude felt the disadvantage of having only three useful legs.

Ahead of him, Claude saw Dieter slip head first into the water.

"Wait!" called Claude.

Dieter's head popped above the surface of the river. Although he was wet, Dieter's head of dark fur looked the same as when he was dry.

Claude had now found his way to the river's edge. "Where are you going?"

"To my other tunnel."

"In the river?"

"Yes," he nodded. Dieter said it as if all animals knew about tunnels in rivers.

"But I- I can't swim."

Dieter pulled his head back and tilted it to the side. His brow furrowed.

"It's my leg. I can kind of swim but I mostly drown." When Dieter continued to look in disbelief at Claude, he added, "It's happened before."

"Then I'll go on without you. I'll bring you back an egg. Promise." He turned around and was about to dip his head back under the water.

“Really?” said Claude, both incredulous and desperate to not be left alone on this journey. Dieter turned back around. “You’re just going to leave me? Here? By myself? When I was the one who told you about the eggs? How do I know I can trust you to bring me an egg? How do you know I won’t die out here? I don’t even know where I am!”

“I’ve gotten you this far. Of course you can trust me.” And with the same bluntness, Dieter disappeared under the water.

“But,” Claude said to the water, “but wait! Dieter! Come back!” Claude put one front paw into the flowing water, hesitated, then tried to dive into the river. The dive felt more like a flop as Claude smacked into the surface of the water and was quickly submerged.

Claude paddled his paws as hard as he could, his one back leg hardly moving, and reached the air above. He managed to stay afloat for a few moments before sinking. A current of energy spread throughout the young fox’s body, and he began to panic. His legs kicked as hard as they could. He wanted to get to the surface. He wanted to breathe. He started to regret his decision to follow the mole.

Claude realized he was getting nowhere. For every kick toward the surface, the river seemed to push him down, or sideways, or in any direction that was not up. But something grabbed at his stomach and then pulled at the scruff of his neck. Whatever it was, it lurched him backwards and Claude felt frigid wind as he emerged from the river.

## Chapter 7

### The Plan

Claude coughed up a mouth-full of water and laid panting on the ground. His red fur was soaked, and the air felt cold, colder than he remembered.

“So sorry, but it looked like you were drowning. I had to save you.”

Panting, Claude looked up and blinked. It was Ty.

“Were you drowning?” she asked desperately. “Can you swim? If you were just swimming, I’m sorry for ruining it. I saw your legs flailing around and I thought, ‘Either he’s drowning, or this is how foxes swim.’ I didn’t mean to insult you if that’s how fox’s swim.”

“No, no,” Claude blurted out between deep breaths. “I really was drowning. Thanks. Why are you here?”

“I’m trying to find the eggs, of course. Well, trying to find the wolves’ territory – it’s hard to do when you can’t smell anything. Oh, and I’m trying to find the Tree of Sent, of course. What are you doing here?”

“Same thing. Lucky you saw me.” Claude’s breathing finally steadied.

“Oh, it wasn’t too hard. I can see really well, you know. I just happened to be swimming by and saw you.” For the first time, Claude noticed the wetness of Ty’s fur – it was a dark brown, almost black, and droplets of water dripped off the edges of her fur. “I’m also a really good swimmer. This river is right by the cave I live in, so I’ve been practicing for a while now. Well, hey, if we’re both looking for the wolves’ territory and the tree and the eggs, why don’t we go together? I really didn’t think I would see you again! It would be really great to have someone else-.”

“Yes, I would love to go together,” Claude said quickly, remembering how fast-paced Ty could be. “I need help. The mole I was with left me.”

“No surprise there. Moles don’t play well with others. That’s what my papa says. I think he means they don’t like other animals very much. I don’t even think they like each other...”

“Yeah, sure, so how do think we can get to the wolves’ territory?”

“That’s easy. Well, easy for me, not so much for you. Maybe we’ll have to find another way?”

“What do you mean?”

“Like maybe we can find a way so the wolves can’t smell us. Or maybe we can find a really big bird to carry us into their territory...”

“No, wait, listen. What do you mean it’s easy for you and not for me?”

“I just mean swimming to the tree. I know that’s probably not your favorite idea.”

“We can swim?”

“Well, yeah.” Ty said it like it was an obvious fact. “Do you not know? The Fellows River goes through the middle of the wolves’ territory and right by the Tree of Sent. How do you think...”

Claude had stopped listening. His heart leapt. He was thrilled to know that there was a way to the tree, and the way could cover their scents.

In his mind, Claude was working out a plan: Take the river downstream when the wolves were either asleep or out hunting. Look for the Tree of Sent. Quickly climb the tree, find the eggs, and get back to the river as soon as possible.

Claude knew the plan could go wrong, but he pushed those thoughts out of his mind before he second-guessed himself.

Ty was talking about the geography of Wander when Claude interrupted him.

“Let’s swim there, then.”

Ty stopped speaking and looked at Claude with a puzzled expression. “Where?”

“The wolves’ territory. To the Tree of Sent. You said we can swim in the river, so let’s do it. You can swim with me on your back, right?”

“I don’t...”

“You’re a bear. That means you’re strong. And I’m small for a fox my age.”

The fox and bear looked at each other for a few moments. Ty smiled and nodded.

The plan was this: When the sun went down and most of the wolves had gone hunting for the night, Ty would swim, with Claude on her back, downstream in the Fellows River. Both animals agreed that the Tree of Sent would have to be close to the river in order to grow large and strong, so they would look carefully for the tree. When the Tree of Sent was within their sight, Claude would find them a safe place to exit the river and get to the tree, where Ty would climb to the tree’s first branch while Claude remained hidden below. Ty would find the eggs and, when Claude gave a signal that all was clear, the cub would climb down and the two young animals would float downstream again and out of the wolves’ territory.

The sun had just gone down when Claude secured himself on Ty’s back. He scratched Ty a couple of times climbing on, and was now careful to hold on tight but not too tight. Even as Ty began to swim, in neat smooth strokes down the river, the two still

disagreed about a signal Claude should make. The signal would tell Ty it was clear to descend from the Tree of Sent.

“If it’s safe,” said Claude, “I’ll fold one of my ears down.”

“Mmmm, I don’t know,” said Ty, “I might not see you. Can’t you bark once?”

“No, the wolves will hear me and know where I am and that I’m a fox.”

“How about you hit the tree three times? My papa does that when I’ve been climbing too long...”

“You want me to hit a tree? What’s that going to do?”

“I’ll feel the vibrations.”

“I know you can’t see me right now” – Claude was still on Ty’s back – “but I’m a lot smaller than you and have only three working legs. There’s no way I can hit a tree hard enough for you to feel it.”

“What if you, you know, marked the tree? That might make sense if everything wasn’t clear...”

“No,” said Claude sharply.

Finally, they both agreed that Claude, from a hidden place near the river, would fold one ear to show that all was clear.

All around the young fox and cub, crickets called to one another in their high-pitched song. Claude knew this was when foxes liked to hunt, and felt sure the wolves would be doing the same.

It seemed like a long time before Claude noticed they were swimming into the wolves’ territory.

"I can smell their scents," whispered Claude into Ty's ear. Ty jumped.

"I almost forgot you were there!"

"Shhh.... Someone may be close by. And keep your eyes open for the tree." Ty nodded.

The cub stopped paddling her paws and allowed them to be carried by the gentle current of the river. They searched, their heads twisting back and forth, for the tree. However, a couple of times they spotted a wolf or two, not far off, and the two young animals ducked their heads just below the surface of the water. Ty even swore she saw one of the young wolves, which neither cub nor fox had seen before.

"Can they swim yet?" Claude whispered.

"Of course they can! All wolves can swim."

"Can they climb?"

"Yes! Well... I'm not sure yet."

"Yet?"

"I haven't asked my papa yet, but I'm sure they can."

Claude was grateful that Ty could not see the young fox roll his eyes.

"Claude..."

"What?"

"Look over there." Claude almost fell off of Ty's back as she tried to point at something and her whole body shifted to one side in the water.

Claude almost yelled from surprise, but was able to right himself. When he had, Claude looked where Ty had pointed and saw it: the Tree of Sent.

## Chapter 8 The Wolves

The tree was set back among a few other trees. The others seemed so fragile compared to this one. The woods may have become dark, but Claude's eyes could still behold the gigantic size of the Tree of Sent. Its trunk was wider than the lengths of Claude, his father, and his three siblings combined. The bark lining the tree was thick, too. The top of the tree was barely seen because it was so high and obscured by the leaves of the surrounding trees.

It was unlike anything Claude had seen before. The other trees in Wander were usually skinny or just thick enough for a fox to go around in two or three leaps. But the Tree of Sent was as huge as he imagined. Claude could see why the wolves, according to Ty's story, were so protective of the tree and believed it possessed a certain magic. In that moment, Claude himself felt empowered, even hopeful, that he could do anything, even climb the thick trunk.

"Should we stop?" whispered Ty, breaking Claude's thoughts.

Claude looked around them and pointed to a cluster of rocks leading to the shore.

"Swim there," he said.

Ty angled them towards the rocks and floated to them. He caught the edge of a rock and held on while Claude jumped off the cub's back and safely to a rock. Claude's good back foot slipped and he had to hold on to the jagged top of the rock to keep from falling. He carefully lifted his head and checked out their surroundings while Ty pulled herself onto the rocks.

Claude turned his head to whisper to Ty. "I don't see anyone, but that doesn't mean the wolves aren't close by."

"How can you tell if they are? Wish I could help you with this scent stuff..."

Ty stood on the edge of her toes to get a good look at the area around the Tree of Sent.

"You'll be seen!" Claude said in a loud whisper.

Ty ducked her head.

"And it's more than just scent I pick up on. It's *sensing*. I can just *tell*, you know?"

"Not really..."

"Wolves are close." Claude was sure of it.

"They're probably eating."

Claude thought about what to do. There was a chance that Ty could get caught before getting to the tree, and who knew what the wolves would do to her. But if they waited in the river any longer, the other wolves would eventually come back from hunting and then there would be a lot more to worry about until they went hunting again the next night. This may be Ty's best chance.

"Get to the tree," whispered Claude. "I'll howl if a wolf is coming and then hide downstream. If no one comes, then I'll wait for you here until you get back with the eggs. Can you do that?"

Ty opened her mouth and hesitated. "Are you sure there aren't any wolves? Are you sure they won't get me?"

Claude tried not to sound desperate - he really wanted those eggs. "Of course they won't. I can sense if they're coming, and you're too fast to catch anyways. You'll be fine."

Although Claude hardly convinced himself, Ty seemed satisfied.

“You’ll wait here, right?”

“Of course.”

Ty looked toward the tree and narrowed her eyes. It reminded Claude of his sister Salem, when she was about to race another fox. She usually won.

Ty kept her head low to the ground as she marched across the brittle grass, leaving a faint trail of paw prints. Claude watched her figure become smaller and smaller until she reached the bottom of the tree. The tree seemed even larger compared to the miniscule figure of the cub, but with incredible ease she reached up with one paw and began to climb the trunk. She was slow – Claude figured she must be tired from swimming – but Ty continued to reach one paw over the other.

The wind blew and Claude still smelled a weak scent of wolf just as before. Still, he held his breath while watching his friend. Ty let go of the tree at one point, and her paw swung down and dangled at her side for a moment. Claude took a sharp breath and pressed his paws into the rocks below him. But Ty took hold of the trunk again and proceeded to climb and finally make it to the lowest of the branches. Here, she became obscured by trees and disappeared from Claude’s sight.

Now Claude felt uncomfortable, as if ants were crawling all over his chest. They were so close, he was so close, to getting those eggs, but the plan could fall apart easily. If Ty could not find the eggs, or if she could not get down from the tree, or even if the wolves caught them, what would Claude do? Be killed? Captured? Or, go home? Go back to the only life he’s ever known? Back to being a sorry excuse for a fox?

A restless anxiousness threatened to make Claude run to the tree and try to climb it himself.

*What's taking her so long?* Claude thought.

The ants crawling all over his chest seemed to scurry faster as Claude waited half the night for Ty. His fur dried from his journey in the river, but the young fox's anxiousness slowly turned to worry for the cub. The fox tried to assure himself that she was alright, just trying to find the eggs.

*But what if-*, Claude stopped himself from finishing the thought.

And then the wind blew. There was a clear scent of a wolf, and it was not coming from the same area where the other scents had come from. This one was much closer and somewhere behind him.

Claude instinctively crouched low, keeping his face close to the rocks, and turned around. He moved forward and between two larger rocks to conceal himself. He held his breath and drew himself in. For several moments, the young fox did not breathe, but waited, and hoped the wolf would walk right by.

For a few moments, he thought the wolf did, and was about to let out his breath when he was grabbed from behind. Claude was lifted by the scruff of his neck and flung across the ground. He rolled and eventually landed on his back. He had completely lost his bearings - the whole woods seemed to tilt in and out of focus. Even the pair of paws standing right in front of him would not come into focus at first.

"Poor thing," said a soft voice. "So scared because he never thought he'd actually see a wolf in the wolves' territory. How young, how dumb."

Claude rolled onto his side and looked up to see the stern and foreboding face of a wolf. Her fur was mostly a light gray, but it had neat tufts of dark gray tucked all over its face, chest, and body. The wolf's unemotional face truly intimidated Claude - he could not tell if the wolf would have mercy on a young fox or attack him.

"You do realize, young fox, that us wolves do not take trespassing lightly?"

The wolf waited, staring down on Claude, until he answered with a tiny nod.

"Then why, you young, dumb creature, would you come here?"

Again, she stared down on him until he answered, this time in a tiny voice.

"I-. Well, I-," Claude did not know what to say. He wanted to lie, to say anything but the truth, but his mind had gone blank.

"Stalling won't help," the wolf said. "But I know something that will."

The wolf swatted Claude across the snout. As a result, Claude turned his face while the wolf swiftly picked the fox up by the scruff of his neck.

Claude hung from the wolf's mouth, unable to get away.

## Chapter 9

### Help

The wolf dropped Claude among a pack of a dozen other wolves. A few wolf pups leaned their snouts closer to get a good smell of the young fox. The older wolves looked down on Claude with disdain.

“Where did you find it, Delta?” one of the wolves said, eyeing the young fox.

“The real question is – Why did I find it?”

“Well?” A wolf swiped at Claude’s head. “Why are you here?”

“Did you just wander away from home?” said another wolf, licking its lips.

Claude’s mind was still blank. He felt something worse than crawling ants – he now felt a cold paw clutching at his chest. Claude managed to shake his head.

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It’s all I’ve gotten from him so far. But we need to figure out what to do with him first. Then we can ask questions.”

“We can’t let him go. Alpha Macon won’t like that.”

“Well, we haven’t eaten yet tonight. Why not a little fox?”

“I’ve never had fox,” said a wolf pup, “but I’m sure I’d like it.”

“No, no,” said Delta. “I think we can use him. We may be able to feast very soon. Fox.” She turned and looked down at him. “Can you run very fast?”

Claude shook his head.

“I thought not. Yes, we’ll keep you alive for tonight, so you can breathe now. We’ll need you to catch a bear.”

Claude shook his head. Delta raised her eyebrows. “Speak,” she said.

“B-b-but I can’t run. M-my...” Claude looked back at his leg.

Delta looked, too, then smirked. “That’s even better. We need you for live bait.”

Claude swallowed hard.

“But like I said, we’ll keep you alive for tonight.”

Delta stood guard over Claude for the rest of the night. Many other wolves arrived, with various prey that they gave to the others and to their pups. Delta told them about her plan to use Claude, and they all seemed pleased.

After the wolves had eaten, they all fell asleep quickly. Within minutes, old and young wolves laid down, rested their heads on their paws, and began to breath heavily. Even Delta had laid down beside Claude. The fox had been sitting still for a long time, too afraid to move in the presence of the wolves. But now, he breathed a little easier.

Claude’s eyelids became heavy, and he allowed them to close. He wanted to be alert, to not be caught off guard by the wolves, but he felt safe just resting for a few minutes.

Something touched the young fox’s front leg. Claude’s eyes snapped open. It was Delta. She gestured to someplace behind Claude, and then she stood and walked past him. Claude hesitated, confused about what the wolf was doing, but followed.

She took them to the other side of the Tree of Sent. Here, she stopped and turned around.

“I haven’t killed you yet because I do need you around for something, but it’s not to catch a bear. I need you to catch a bird. You can climb, right?”

Claude nodded. He did not sense any danger now, which perplexed him, but he still lied to the wolf about climbing because he was afraid of the consequences of letting her

down. Delta did not seem as intimidating, as willing to make Claude uncomfortable and scared.

“What’s your name?” she said.

“Claude.”

“I’m Delta, and I’m a leader among the wolves. I work closely with the Alpha. I know of a bird in that tree,” - she gestured to the Tree of Sent - “and she needs help getting out. She’s broken one of her wings, and it hasn’t healed right. She can’t fly anymore. She’s just laid eggs, and I’m afraid she doesn’t want to leave before they hatch.”

Claude’s heart leapt. The bird *just laid eggs*. So there were eggs in the Tree of Sent!

“I need you to get her out. You’re small, but I’m sure you can do it. I’m sure you’re wondering why. Have you noticed the tree? It’s dying.”

Both Claude and Delta looked at the trunk of the tree. The bark was sparse. While so many other trees were covered in thick, dark bark, the Tree of Sent looked like the patches in the fox field that did not have grass.

“It’s been that way for a while. And if you get her out, I’ll let you go home. You can climb even with that stiff leg, right?”

Claude nodded. “But I’ll need help getting to the first branches.”

“Of course. How did you get that leg anyways?”

It was not a story Claude wanted to explain. Instead, he said, “I was born this way.”

“Well, I’m sorry. That must be terrible. I had a cub born with something wrong, too. It was one of his eyes...” Delta stared at Claude for a moment without really seeing him. Then, she seemed to realize the young fox was standing right in front of her. “I’ll help you

to the lowest branches, then you'll have to climb a little. But don't worry, the bird isn't much further up from there."

Delta found a protruding root close to the trunk of the tree. She stretched herself as far up the trunk as possible. Claude climbed onto her hind legs, her back, her shoulders, and then her head. At this point, he was not far from the lowest branches of the tree.

"I don't know if I can reach them," he said.

"You have to try," came Delta's muffled voice – since Claude was standing on her head.

Claude had seen his father climb a tree before. He tried to remember how he had done it.

"Don't move," Claude said to Delta. "I'm getting a running start."

He got back to the ground, backed up a few paces, then ran – as fast as a fox with only three working legs could – up Delta's legs, back, shoulders, and head and scurried up the bark of the tree, digging his claws into the trunk as he went.

Claude took one, two, three upward steps and then swiped at the first branch he could, catching it. He then held on and dangled for a moment before swinging his body and pulling himself onto the branch, which was thick and strong enough to hold the young fox's weight.

He looked down at Delta, who was now looking up at him.

"Now what?" he said.

"Find the bird. Get her down. She's up there. Somewhere. In a nest."

"What's her name?"

"Rosemary."

## Chapter 10

### Rosemary

Claude looked above him. He was skeptical about the mission Delta had sent him on, even if it was a convenient way for him to get the eggs. He was not sure if he could find the bird, or why a wolf would help a bird in the first place. But he did not have time to think.

Claude was not confident in his climbing abilities, even if he had just scaled the bottom of a tree. Fortunately, the branches on the Tree of Sent were all as thick as the one Claude balanced himself on, and they had grown pretty close together.

The young fox started a slow, cautious climb. He only used his one good back foot to hold his weight when needed. Besides that, Claude used his front legs to climb from branch to branch.

He had made this way up about a dozen branches when his stiff back leg began to throb and the good one cramped up. Claude stopped and looked at his back legs. They looked normal, but the pain made Claude wince.

Claude took a few deep breaths and looked up. It was still a long way to the top, but Delta said the bird, Rosemary, should not be too far up.

And then Claude's eyes focused on a nest.

It was only three branches up. A small, dark-colored scramble of sticks and leaves all spun into a spiral.

Claude smiled, relieved he was finally close. He tried reaching up to the next branch, but his good back leg gave out. He lost his balance and almost tumbled off his branch but was able to catch himself by digging his claws into the trunk.

Once he had regained his balance, Claude called to the nest above. "Excuse me? Excuse me! Anyone there?"

No reply.

Claude sighed, exasperated. He was thinking this was not the nest, and that he would have to climb further.

But then he noticed a small head peeking out from the nest. It was darker than the nest – black. Its beak, slender and long, as well as its tiny eyes were black, too.

Claude and the bird looked at each other for several moments. He waited for it to speak until he felt too uncomfortable for the silence to continue.

"Hello?" he said. "Are you Rosemary?"

The bird nodded.

"Your friend Delta sent me to get you." He paused for a moment, hoping the bird would say something. When she did not, Claude continued. "She said this tree is dying. I think that means it's going to fall over or something. Delta wants me to help you get down."

Rosemary said something quietly.

"What did you say?"

"Your name?" The bird spoke in a tiny, scratchy kind of voice.

"It's Claude."

"I can't leave. I'm about to lay another egg."

So there really were eggs! Ty was right! But now Claude was faced with another challenge – getting the eggs from the bird.

"Listen," he said, "I can't come down without you. Delta won't be happy."

The bird shook her head. "Not without my hatchlings."

“We can find another way for them to get down. Maybe you can fly them down? Or someone else can?”

The bird shook her head.

“Then I’ll help you. Throw the eggs down to me and we’ll get out together. I’m telling you – Delta wants you out of here.”

Rosemary’s head withdrew into the nest.

Claude sighed. He knew he was going to have to climb the next three branches and take the bird and her eggs himself. But his legs were sore and still hurt. He was not looking forward to this.

But then came a twitter from above.

Claude looked up to see an egg being pushed to the edge of the nest.

“Catch,” came a faint voice, and the egg rolled over the edge of the nest and tumbled straight toward the young fox.

Claude kept his eyes on the egg. He quickly took three steps out on the branch and caught the egg in his mouth. He slowly moved back to the trunk and placed the egg in a smooth nook.

Above him, Rosemary fluttered down, one branch at a time, and landed a few paces from Claude.

Then Claude understood why the bird spoke quietly and could not fly out of the nest herself – a vicious-looking scar ran from Rosemary’s beak and onto her wing.

Rosemary caught Claude looking at her scar.

“It’s from a wolf,” she said in almost a whisper. “It attacked me when I was trying to get a worm. I only just got away. I was really hurt, though. Delta found me and helped me get well again. She helped me get into this tree to hide me.”

“What about the egg?”

“She didn’t know I was about to lay an egg. And now I’m about to lay a second one. But if you can help me get my first egg down, I would be grateful.”

“Yeah, of course.” Claude suddenly felt guilty. He wanted the egg, but he did not want to take it from its mother.

“Can I ask you something?” said Claude, and shook his head. “This seems really dumb... Is your egg...special, or something?”

Rosemary blinked and tilted her head to one side.

“You know, like can it heal? I know, it’s dumb, but it’s something I’ve heard about and was just wondering if it could be true.”

Rosemary stared at him for a few moments, then shook her head once.

Claude shrugged, embarrassed. “Oh, okay, just asking.” He wondered what was so important about the bird, and why Delta wanted to save it.