

The Scavengers and the Storm

ECHOES OF SILVA ISLAND
BOOK ONE

G. S. TELLER

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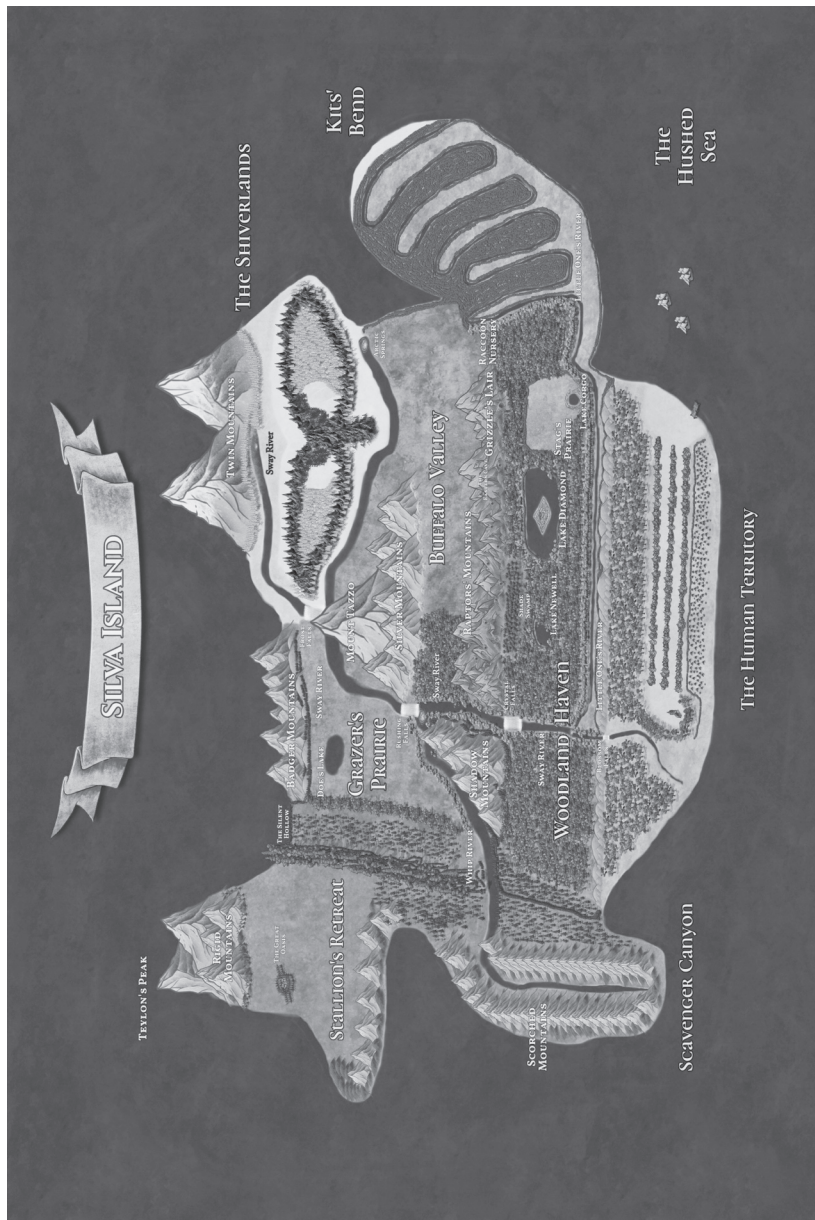
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To the kits, their kits, and their kits' kits



Preface

Dear Reader,

If you've read my first book (which is the second book in this series—yes, that was on purpose)—you may remember my fondness of maps. I'm still greatly fond of them and encourage you to use one with this book.

However, before reading, you need to know something about this book. Like the first book (again, book two in this series), the first chapter may seem a bit slow. Unlike the previous book, you'll notice that this “slowness” is not due to what some have referred to in the previous book as “tiresome dialogue.” No, but the “slowness” you may sense in this book's first chapter will have more to do with the descriptions and historical accounts of some of the characters.

Nonetheless, just as in the previous book it was important to hear the “tiresome dialogue” (in order to understand the characters better and so more appreciate their actions throughout the story), so in this book, it's necessary—and good—to hear *about* the history and personalities of the beginning characters.

I hope this is helpful to you. ... Enjoy!

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Scavenging...for Hope

NOW THAT THE RAIN had finally subsided, Flint ran through the woods rummaging through the debris as his daughters watched in bewilderment. They had never seen him move that quickly or run that fast before, and they weren't sure what to make of it.

"Daddy!" Flurry cried. "Daddy, what should *we* do?"

Flint didn't respond at first. He was frantically overturning the demolished pieces of what was once their home. It had now been three weeks since The Great Storm took Mya from them. And the same Storm had now, for the fourth time, taken away what they tried to call home. This wasn't the best built of them. Flint knew that. But he thought it could serve as a good start. ... "It doesn't matter now, anyway," he thought.

Flint—a raccoon—had married Mya over a decade ago. And they had lived at various times all over Silva Island (it's at this point of the story where I'll suggest you have a map handy). For several reasons, Flint and Mya had managed to move from Raccoon Nursery, where Mya was born and raised, to Buffalo Valley, to Woodland Haven, to Grazer's Prairie. Though they never lived there, they spent some time in The

Shiverlands and just south of Stallion's Retreat (where Flint was raised).

Once they started having kits (the three they had were Flurry, Picnic, and Tickle), they had settled in a nice spot in the woods of Buffalo Valley, which are on the eastern side of the Sway River, and just south of the Silver Mountains. They had lived here for a good six years when what came to be known as The Great Storm destroyed their entire world.

Flint and Mya had lived through several storms during their time. But there was nothing quite like this one. This storm came off the west coast of the island and looked like it was going to move south through part of Scavenger Canyon and Woodland Haven. Instead, it took a turn northeast, following Whip River, crossed the Sway River, and simply demolished the woods south of the Silver Mountains.

And as it demolished those woods, it wreaked great and horrifying havoc on the homes of the woodland creatures living there—including, and especially, the home of Flint and Mya and their three girls. It was a most terrifying time for all of them.

Now bear in mind, dear reader, I don't want to dissuade you from continuing this story. I assure you, it ends happily—maybe not “happily ever after”—but happily enough. Let us say it ends *satisfactorily*.

But in order to truly appreciate the story, it might help if you try to put yourself into the situation of the characters of the story. Let us say you've lived with your family for your entire life... And then! With no warning at all, you're forced to endure the most intense storm you could ever have imagined. You watch as the wind and rain sweep away everything on this earth that you've come to know and hold dear. And then! Then, you watch helplessly, as it takes away the life of someone you love so deeply, you scarcely have words to express it.

What could be worse?

. . .

A reminder. ... A constant reminder. And that is what the Storm was to Flint: a constant reminder of what it took, and what it *can* take at any time it desires.

“Daddy!” Flurry tried again. “Daddy, are you okay?”

Flurry was the eldest of the three kits. She lived up to her name. The phrase, “everything with her was fast paced” (as long as she wasn’t ill at least) is probably an understatement. She embodied the words “energetic” and “creative.” Being able to come up with fifteen ideas in the span of three seconds to a question she just asked you (and herself, apparently) was just the beginning of her spontaneity and approach to life.

And somehow, with all of that, even with The Great Storm first hitting and its subsequent refrains, though she retained her personality, during times where it was keenly important, she was able to concentrate on the most specific of situations or ideas quite well.

“Daddy?” she called again.

“Ye...ye...yes!” Flint finally muttered out, extremely quietly, but audible enough for Flurry to hear. He was at this point standing just near where they were resting last night, where he told them a fun bedtime story before they fell asleep for the evening. He was trying to take it all in—of how the storm kept coming back to destroy each home they tried to build.

Finally he answered, “Yes, sweetheart. ... I’m fine. ... What are you and your sisters doing?”

“Daddy!” Flurry answered, “That’s what we’re asking *you*. ... What do *you*, *want* us to do?”

Flint sat back on his hind feet, continuing to think of what had happened in the past month and again in this last hour. It

was too much for him to process, but he knew he had to keep his family going—safety for his daughters must be his primary concern. ... But what did that entail? Safety from this storm seemed to be a vanishing option. Whatever they build, it destroys—seemingly targeting them specifically. They'll need a meal again soon. Perhaps start there?

"Scavenge!" he replied.

"You mean, look for food?" asked Picnic. She was the second eldest. Living up to her name was as enigmatic as her name itself was. As you know, typically when people remark, "It's no picnic," they mean to say the task or situation is not easy. And picnics themselves are thought of as a fun outing—to some. Yet to others they're thought of as quite an odd and tiring place to have lunch—outside with ants and bees. And yet for some reason, people still enjoy doing it—sometimes as if it's the most delightful setting in the world for a meal.

Well, Picnic the raccoon was quite interesting in that way as well. She could certainly make herself a joy to be around. Friends would seem to just appear out of nowhere and cling to her. All the while, those who knew her best and loved her most could sometimes find themselves being bit by ants or stung by bees (metaphorically) while trying to enjoy her company—despite the nature of her company sometimes being so unquestionably difficult.

Now don't misunderstand Picnic, dear reader. Like many picnics, she can be full of delightful surprises. While I'm sure you'll find her the most mysterious of the three kits, I'm equally sure she'll astonish you with unexpected twists—especially when it counts.

"Not just food," Flint answered Picnic. And he spoke to all three of them. "Scavenge for everything! For food, for materials to rebuild our home, for materials that will aid in travel—anything! Everything! Just scavenge!"

"I'm confused," replied Tickle. "Are we going to rebuild our home, or are we going to travel somewhere else?"

Tickle, as I'm sure you guessed, was the youngest of the three. She had as much energy as Flurry (possibly more), but not enough experience to know what to do with all that energy. So she used it to emulate both her sisters in various ways. And the result very well tickles you when you see it in action. She's a very smart raccoon. Flint once told me that when all was said and done, "Tickle may be the smartest of us all. She just doesn't yet have the same amount of information as the rest of us. But the day she does, I don't know what will be able to stop her—other than the Creator Himself."

That's what he told me, anyway. As for what he said to her in that moment though: "Yes!"

"Yes. ... Wait! What?" she asked. "Which one are we doing? Rebuilding our home, or going somewhere else?"

"Both!" replied Flint, starting to sound more confident, though he had hardly any plan at this point. "We're going to rebuild our home. But it might not be right here at this spot."

"What?" all three of them rang out simultaneously in their varied demeanors:

Flurry: "We're not staying here?"

Picnic: "That doesn't make any sense."

Tickle: "I don't understand."

"Clearly there's something wrong with this spot," Flint responded. "The Storm can't possibly be targeting us specifically, right?" he spoke as if he were trying to convince himself. "I mean, there has to be some natural explanation for why it keeps coming back right to this spot and destroying our home. Am I wrong?"

"It's like there's something about this location that attracts the weather here. So why not make a change? Instead of building a different type of structure, why don't we move a little bit out of the way—maybe not too far, but some place

where we know the Storm hasn't been continually coming back to... Right?"

His girls just looked at him with confused, blank stares.

"Daddy?" Picnic spoke up. "Didn't you and mommy live here for years before a storm ever hit?"

"Yes...?"

"Well ... doesn't that mean that the storms don't always come to this spot?"

Flint was flustered. Not that she made a good point, but that she didn't understand what he was saying. Of course, he himself wasn't quite sure he understood what he was saying yet either. He was processing his thoughts as he was speaking them in the moment.

"Yes, Pic, that's true. ... storms don't always come to this spot. ... But for some reason..." he started to sound as if he were speaking from a fuzzy dream: "...for some reason...*this* Storm does..."

"Please girls," he said, now as if back in reality, and in a lowered tone, "scavenge."



Up above them on a high tree top, a very interested bird of prey watched closely. His eyes, which could see from miles away, zeroed in on this devastated widower raccoon, and he let out a deep sigh. You see this Golden Eagle, named Worrick, though a fierce warrior, had a golden heart. And he seemed drawn to creatures that were hurt or struggling. Though he hadn't spoken to him, he could tell Flint had been in a state of utter confusion since he first set eyes on him a couple days after The Great Storm. He had hoped the gift he left Flint and his kits last week would help, and it did. But...Flint was still clearly lost.

"Well..." he said, in a low, warm voice. "I knew it wouldn't

turn their lives around. But...this poor raccoon..." The wind gently blew across his feathers, and he could feel the Creator's presence, knowing this raccoon's story wasn't over yet. Barely a second had passed when a familiar, small but confident voice said to him, "What's got you down, dear friend?" As his small falcon friend had landed near him, Worrick looked up and greeted him. "Ripple! It's so good to see you this morning! I trust the weather didn't prove too bad?"

Ripple, a Kestrel Falcon, replied, "Not too bad I guess. ... It'll be difficult to make it to Mount Tazzo if it keeps up though. Birds my size aren't meant to fly that high ordinarily."

"I know, I know, good friend. I don't think you'll be needing to make this trip often. Teylon knows your abilities. I think he's just trying to pick a spot central to us all. ... It must be important, whatever it is."

"I know what it is, Worrick," Ripple replied. "He told me last week. ... But it was over at the coast off the Rigid Mountains and much closer to the ground."

"Ahh..." Worrick replied, feeling a little disheartened that Teylon hadn't revealed his plan to him first. "I knew I shouldn't have missed his birthday."

"Oh Worrick! You must know he's not trying to hurt your feelings. The only reason he told me is that I was there. I'm sure he would've told you too—and only you—if you had been there. ... Where were you anyway?" Ripple gently inquired.

Worrick let out another sigh... "I was here...watching him." Worrick looked down toward Flint and continued. "This poor creature is so lost right now. ... The Great Storm destroyed his house, took his wife, and left him to raise three kits by himself. ... But everything he builds crumbles in his hands."

"Worrick?" Ripple hesitantly began to ask. "I know you love helping hurt creatures and all. And it's lovely and amaz-

ing. It really is! Our Creator has blessed you with such an enormous heart. ... But ... But how can you help this fellow?"

Worrick shrugged. "Do whatever I can, I suppose."

Ripple was unsure of how to respond. He too felt compassion for hurt creatures. But he was more of a pragmatic mind-set. If he didn't know of an immediate need to help, then he just moved on. He wasn't about to tell Worrick that—not yet.

Worrick continued, "But...at this point I've done all I can. I'll return a little later to check on him and his girls. For now... well I suppose we best get going."

"To Mount Tazzo, you mean?" Ripple replied with some slight dismay, not looking forward to the rest of the trip.

"Well...yes," Worrick responded with sympathy in his voice. "Ripple, I know he doesn't mean for you to make this trip very often."

"I know. I know... But thank you for the encouragement!" Ripple smiled at his friend, and as they were about to take off in flight, he asked, "on the way there, would you like me to tell you what this council meeting is all about?"

"I'd be delighted, dear friend."

And off they went.



Meanwhile, Flint had started to move the debris around more and more. With each moving piece he was both satisfied that he was getting something done and also disappointed that he hadn't found what he was looking for. ... Until... "Ah! Yes!" he shouted with enthusiasm!

"Girls! Girls! I've found it! ... Come here, quickly!"

The three kits had not yet scattered very far and arrived right at Flint's feet to see what he was rejoicing over so much. It was hard to understand him at first, as he was trying to talk while pulling something up with his teeth.

“Grb nn tt tt nd hp pllll” he said.

The kits just looked at each other to see if either of the other two understood. They looked back at their father and just gave him a look that he immediately recognized. He dropped his find and said to them, “So...you didn’t understand that did you? I couldn’t have been more clear.”

“Daddddyyyyy,” they responded in unison, knowing his jokes were always a little too obvious.

“Okay, okay,” he continued. “I said, grab onto it and help pull.”

“Grab on to what?” Picnic asked for clarification. For what he previously had in his mouth looked only like an aged piece of rotted wood. And it didn’t quite make sense.

“This brown rope...” suggested Tickle, as she began to pick up in her teeth the same wood-looking thing Flint had in his mouth a second ago—only a different part of it.

And then Flurry gasped. “The net! ... Picnic, Tickle, it’s the net! Daddy found it!”

Indeed, while looking on the brink of being petrified, the net was intact and still usable. Immediately, all three kits and Flint found a spot to grab it with their teeth and all began to pull it out of the earth, from which it had been buried by the Storm’s latest attack.

“This is amazing!” Flint exclaimed, after they had fully retrieved it. “I truly thought we had lost it. The one good thing we had found since...” his face changed, not wanting to bring up what he already did. “Well, never mind. We found it! Thank you, girls!”

“Now what do we do?” they asked.

“Well...” he hesitated—not because he didn’t know what to say, but because he was afraid they wouldn’t want to hear it. “Now...now we scavenge!”

“Yes, Daddy!” they responded in unison. ... Mostly

unison. Picnic was a little behind and not as enthusiastic. But she was still respectful.

As the girls went off to scavenge with each other—and with the help of the regained net, Flint continued to overturn any and all of the debris he could. It was quite remarkable really. He wasn't sure why. He found what he had been looking for—what he thought was lost—and yet even after finding it he still continued searching. The oddity of it wasn't lost on him, but he tried not to think about it. He just kept turning debris over and searching for things to use...scavenging, basically.

The three kits went off on a little adventure for their scavenging. They knew they had to stay somewhat together, and they knew their father had given them very odd instructions on what to scavenge for. But they each made the most of it as best they could.

Picnic found a worn, but sturdy bird's nest, a giant cluster of berries, and many small twigs, which she sorted by size before placing them in an orderly array on the canopy they had created out of leaves on top of the net they dragged with them.

Meanwhile, Flurry discovered a smooth, beautiful rock that for some reason just screamed it needed to be taken. She found some long vines she thought might come in handy and one giant piece of bark. She wasn't sure what that would be used for, but surely it could be meant for either traveling or rebuilding—or both.

Tickle, on the other hand, was still unsure of the mission. She couldn't quite figure out if she was supposed to scavenge for items that could be used for all three, eating, moving, rebuilding, or items that could fit into either of those categories. So she pretty much just grabbed whatever she could find that spoke to her. She grabbed some dandelions, various clumps of moss, several nuts of various sizes, and a small log.

Now the log she needed help with, but when she called for her sisters, they came to her aid and helped her move it onto their canopy net.

Now during all this time they took breaks to play fun games with each other, which they knew their father would permit. They also took a break for lunch and ate some various berries—from the same place Picnic had found a plentiful amount from which she scavenged before and after their meal. By evening they were getting tired and had found a great number of other items that could be used for either rebuilding their home, traveling, or just eating.

As they worked together to drag the net back to Flint, they discussed what on earth their father had in mind. It would be weird to move since they had lived in the same tree huddle their entire lives. But at the same time, it might be fun to visit some place new. Most pressingly at this time though...they were getting hungry for supper.

“I wonder if Daddy has prepared anything for us to eat?” Tickle wondered aloud.



When they reached their home...or...what they always called home. It was more of a wreckage site again. When they reached there they found their father lying down, crying. It was very odd for them to see. They knew him as strong and resilient. Yet he seemed so broken.

While they were out scavenging, Flint was doing the same, just around the broken structure of their once-house. After he overturned every piece of debris he could, he walked around the perimeter of the entire area, looking for things to use to rebuild, or maybe to help in their travels. Truth be told, he had forgotten all about eating—for himself, and for his kits. And it was at that moment when

they came back to him and found him in his debilitating state.

"I'm so sorry, girls," he sobbed to them. "I failed you... again."

They each answered in their own way:

Flurry: "You didn't fail us!"

Picnic: "No you didn't!"

Tickle: "Daddy, no!!!"

"I did, girls!" Flint responded, as he continued to sob. "I didn't even prepare dinner for you or anything. I'm so sorry."

"I'll figure something out though. I think there are still some berries in a small reserve I dug a little west of here. And I'm sure if nothing else, we can go to the river and grab a couple fish."

"But girls... we're... we're just not done..." he spoke in a soft, somber voice.

"Done what, Daddy?" Flurry asked.

Flint paused. He knew his response would cause grief. But it was also the only thing he could think of. His mind was turned off. He didn't even realize or think to look at the great haul the kits had brought in with them. The truth of the matter was that *he* was not done. And his sadness had so deeply penetrated him, he couldn't see beyond himself at this point. Finally, he answered in his still somber tone: "Scavenging."

The kits looked at each other in confusion. They had been scavenging all day. Daddy had been scavenging all day. Though he didn't mention it, they saw a huge pile of things he found: large pieces of wood bits, presumably for rebuilding, string, and other string-like items, probably for tying things together—maybe for moving to a different "home." There were also piles of nuts, which they would be happy to eat for dinner; though he didn't mention those. They could only wonder what was going on in his head.

Then Flurry, speaking for the three of them, approached him. "Daddy?" she said in her sweet, but anxious voice.

Flint, no longer sobbing at this point, yet still struck with grief over his perceived failures, answered her gently, "Yes, sweetheart."

Flurry looked back at her two sisters and then again at Flint. "Daddy, we *did* scavenge today—and we brought back a whole bunch of things. They're right here in the net, if you just look—"

"—It doesn't matter," Flint snapped. He did that at times. Though he wasn't angry with Flurry, she couldn't help but feel she had caused that emotion. But no, he was angry with himself. He realized he upset her and addressed all three of them in a sort of stern tone: "Girls, I'm not mad at you. I'm sure you collected a great many things. And I'm proud of you. But.. but..." he started to trail off and then recovered his speech, "But it just doesn't matter. ... We have to keep scavenging! It's what we do, it's what we *have* to do. And—"

A light rain had started (though there were no signs of a big storm at the present). Flint continued, "And we have to leave!"

"Leave?" Tickle chimed in.

"Yes!"

"When?" asked Picnic.

"I don't know. Now? No, not now" he rethought. They haven't even had dinner yet. "Soon. ... I don't know. We have to leave, we have to build a new house, we have to eat. We just have to...have to..." His voice now trailing into a low whisper, "scavenge," was the only word he could get out; yet it somehow lost its meaning. He wasn't even sure why he said it at this point. The reality was he was broken and didn't know how to fix himself. And he knew three girls were depending on him for their survival and growth. It was so much pressure, overwhelming to the point of... He couldn't think anymore.

Flurry once more approached him, softly, gently, in a way only she could.

“So...what are we doing, Daddy?” she asked again.

“Scavenging...?” Flint replied, in a forlorn, soft tone, almost as if in the form of a question.

Flurry looked at her two sisters, gaining more confidence to ask what they were all wondering. She pressed further the conversation: “But we don’t understand, Daddy. We’ve been scavenging all day. Look at all these things we’ve found. Do you still want us to scavenge more?”

Flint didn’t answer. It’s not that he didn’t want to. He just couldn’t find the words.

Flurry, looking desperate at trying to calm her sisters’ anxiety (as well as her own) and to get to the heart of how they could help their father, gently walked up to him even closer and spoke in her softest voice: “Daddy... Why are we scavenging? ... What are we scavenging for?”

There was a silence. It was not long, but somehow felt as if it would last forever to Flurry and her sisters. Flint, who had started crying again, looked up, with tears in his eyes, as he faced his daughters together. The idea of scavenging for items to build a new house, the idea of scavenging for items to travel... Neither of them made much sense and somehow both of them did. Was he losing his mind altogether? It was too much to think through at this late hour, and his emotions were getting the best of him.

As he continued to cry at his failure to know how to protect his kits and lead them in this chapter of life, he exhaled his answer softly through a sprinkling of tears: “Hope,” he whispered as he faintly wept... “We’re scavenging...for hope.”

What Have I Been Hearing?



THE NEXT DAY THE GIRLS HAD LET their father sleep in for as long as he needed. After the intense emotions of the night before, they all quickly fell asleep in a makeshift tent from the canopy net they had made earlier that day. Thankfully, throughout the night, the rain had gone from a light sprinkle to nothing at all, and still no storm was in sight. The only sound they heard as they drifted to sleep was the familiar call of a nearby Barred Owl, which was always a comforting sound to them.

When Flint woke up, he was disoriented at first as to what day or time it was. Making him more anxious was realizing that all three girls were not there. “Girls!” he said in a panic. “Girls, where are you?” He began to search rapidly when he heard the familiar giggle of all three of them returning to him from the west.

Flint barely caught his breath from his panic before he began to question them, “Girls, where were you?”

“We were just over at Naida’s house, Daddy,” Flurry responded. Without giving him the time for a follow-up ques-

tion, she continued, “we had so many nuts from our scavenge yesterday, we thought we’d drop some off to her.”

“Oh...” Flint remarked in relief. “How is Naida?”

“She’s fine,” Picnic answered in her matter-of-fact tone. “She still hasn’t fixed anything in her tree. She said she wants to wait awhile and make sure there aren’t any more storms first.”

“Hmm... Maybe we should have tried that strategy,” Flint said in jest. “But, in all seriousness, how *is* she? Is she doing alright? Squirrels her age...well, how is she?”

“She’s great!” Flurry responded. “She’s her normal funny self. She misses Scraps still—but she’s missed him ever since we’ve known her.”

“—Did you know Scraps?” Tickle piped up.

Flint looked at her, “No... I’m afraid not. When your mother and I moved here Naida was already by herself. But I’m glad to know she’s doing okay. ... And she still has Wally to help her?”

“Yes, he’s still there,” grumbled Picnic.

“Still not a fan of Wally?” Flint wondered.

“Well, he just kind of sits around and doesn’t do anything. He mostly eats her food.”

Flint chuckled a little. “Yes, I suppose he does. ... He’s been in that same tree a long time too. They’re good neighbors, but with Wally’s bad eyesight, there’s not a whole lot he *can* do—except keep Naida company that is. But I’m glad he is there for that because...” Flint hesitated but only for a second. He knew his girls were listening to him the previous night. He knew they understood that even though he was crying at times and obviously distraught, his plans for a possible move were genuine. And he knew they were ready for what he was going to say.

“Because I didn’t want to leave Naida all alone. And we need to start moving today.”

Of course, the three kits responded in their own ways:

Flurry: "So we're moving!?"

Picnic: "Today?"

Tickle: "Why can't Naida be alone?"

Ensuring he had their attention, Flint responded, "Yes. We need to move today. Why today? Because what better time? Our house was destroyed—again—just yesterday, and it'll be nice to have a change of scenery. ... We don't even have to move too far, at least, I don't think. But we can just try it out and see what it's like. It *could be* fun...?" The last part of his statement seemed more like a question, but the kits didn't seem to mind.

"Oh!" he continued, "Tickle the reason I'd prefer Naida not to be alone is because she's pretty old for a squirrel, and her kids moved south to Woodland Haven a long time ago. They're not able to visit that often, and it's always good to have company—especially when you're older."

"Daddy?" Tickle had to ask a follow-up question.

"Yes, dear?"

"If Naida didn't have Wally to stay with her, would we still move?"

Flint paused before answering. He knew the answer, he was just never sure of himself and how to communicate his thoughts to each of his girls. "That's a great question, Tickle," he started. "I want to say no *and* yes. It probably depends."

"On what?"

"Well... I would've talked to her about my decision and tried to find out if she would be okay by herself, or if she would prefer us to stay here with her—or maybe if she'd like to come with us, although I don't see that happening in a thousand years. Ah! But maybe we could take her to Woodland Haven to be closer to her children."

"Oh..." Tickle was thinking this through. "But...we're not taking her with us?"

"No. Not if Wally is still there. And I know he won't want to go with us. ... Besides, I really don't know that we'll move *that* far away. Then again, I really don't know much these days. The Creator knows, and that's what's important!

"Why don't we pack up and start going. We don't want to lose any more sunlight than we already have," he continued as they pulled the net-canopy down and rolled it up. He asked them, "Girls?"

"Yes, Daddy?" they replied in unison.

"Are you alright with this?" he asked in earnest.

The girls had been through so much in the past month; yet their love for their father and their loyalty to him hadn't budged an inch. They each responded:

Flurry: "Of course!"

Picnic: "Yeah."

Tickle: "I'm alright with it."

Flint just smiled, loving each of their individual personalities. "Well then...I guess let's get moving," he said as he strapped the rolled-up net-canopy on his back.

"One more thing, girls..." he said as they began trekking east.

"Yes, Daddy?" they replied.

"Thanks for letting me sleep in," he said warmly.

The girls just looked at each other and back at him. "You're welcome," they responded in unison. And off they went, while the Barred Owl from last night watched silently as they left.



It was chilly inside the cave in one of the peaks of Mount Tazzo. Gathered there were about twenty raptors—including Worrick and Ripple—from all over the entirety of Silva Island.

They formed quite a nice circle in the cave as they caught up with each other: discussing where each had been living lately, how the food situation was, how everyone's families (if they had them) were doing.

And then a strong-looking Bald Eagle named Teylon waved for their attention and began speaking in an authoritative voice, which had a low timbre. "Friends!" he announced. And while he looked and sounded youthful (though he was actually well along in age), so authoritative was his voice that the cave became so quiet that the only sound you could hear was the wind outside.

"Friends, I know you're wondering why I've summoned you here. And let me start by thanking you for making this journey. I know it was a long one for quite a few of you, and for some of you, I'm sure, very difficult." At this, some of the raptors gave a slight glance to Ripple—not to be rude, but simply because they were amazed a bird his size had made it up this high.

Teylon continued, "As you know, my plans several years ago were to retire in my home northwest of Silva, at the peak you all so graciously named after me..."

"A well-deserved retirement indeed, sir!" spoke a voice from among the raptors, to which a hearty agreement was cheered on with enthusiasm.

"Thank you, friends! Thank you! And perhaps soon I'll retry the retirement life." Teylon began again. "But as for now, I believe it best, if you'll allow me, to resume my position among you as your commander—since my understanding is that you haven't yet chosen anyone to fill that position."

"Sir," spoke up Ferrin, a Red-tailed Hawk with a firm, rustic voice. "While I would love nothing more than to have you as our commander again, I don't quite understand the necessity.

“We are indeed set to choose a new commander this fall, and I would be happy to give that role back to you. But why the hurry for a commander right now? As far as I know things on Silva Island are quite peaceful.”

“Indeed,” uttered Varka, a Rough-legged Hawk, in his ice-cold but respectful voice. “All is quiet in the Shiverlands and has been for a while. There’s obviously some bouts every now and again between the wolf packs, but that’s to be expected. Nothing major though.”

“Same for the prairies as of present,” spoke up Harra in his customary quiet but stern-sounding tone. He was a Northern Harrier who frequents Buffalo Valley. He continued, “The recent storm hit the western woods pretty hard, but it hasn’t caused any uproars.”

The questions, while all respectful toward Teylon, started to gain more traction, causing the discussion to get off its main course. This caused Worrick to give a quick glance to Teylon and then, with his booming authoritative presence, simply look over the raptors and make a quick but intentional ruffle of his feathers. Accordingly, when a Golden Eagle the size of Worrick does that, they all fell silent again.

Teylon, nodding in gratitude to Worrick, continued his conversation. “Friends. Yes. I realize our schedule is to choose a new commander this fall. And if you’d like to wait until then, please do so. However,” he paused. He looked over at Worrick who had been living on the east of Woodland Haven, and then at Sigaho, a Barn Owl whose home is in the north-central area of the Human Territory. He looked at a few others from whom he had heard recently and continued his discussion.

“However...there have been several disturbing reports lately, which will hopefully amount to nothing, but may in fact lead to dangerous times.

“—Now, before you start asking questions,” he interrupted himself in order to keep the conversation on his end,

“let me explain. ... There have been reports of two issues that are connected. One: there seems to be a human hunter that has started to hunt north of Little Ones River.”

This caused an immediate murmur throughout the council, as no hunter has ever before in the history of Silva traveled that far north. But Teylon spoke over the murmur to get to his second point, “and Two:” he paused to make sure he still had their attention. “Because the hunter has been killing or maiming a few deer with traps, some of the deer have started to migrate north of Raptors’ Mountains.”

While Teylon expected some slight frustration at this news and even perhaps some discord conversation, he was baffled at instead being met with mostly blank stares.

Then Solas, an Osprey who knew the rivers and lakes of Silva better than anyone spoke up in his humble, but projected voice: “If I may sir...what...what exactly does this news possibly mean in terms of leading to dangerous times? ... Please...forgive me, but while one hunter in Woodland Haven is unprecedented, I’m not sure many of us see how that by itself or even in conjunction with some deer migrating north to Buffalo Valley will have such dire ramifications.”

“I agree, commander,” replied Harra. “There have been many deer in Buffalo Valley for as long as I’ve been alive. And—please understand I’m sure you have a reason for your concern; but I’m just not quite seeing why a few more, or even many, would be such a terrible outcome.”

Before anyone else could chime in Ripple flew to the center of the circle and spoke with his small but confident voice, “Friends!” And as a hush fell upon them, he gave them these few words: “This is one of many reasons we so strongly wanted Sigaho in attendance. Sigaho,” Ripple looked at the wise Barn Owl, “will you please elaborate on the potential danger that is looming in our future?”

At this, all attention was now on Sigaho, who hardly ever

spoke at these meetings—who actually hardly ever spoke at all. But when he did speak, it was with such importance that you simply *had* to pay attention.

Sigaho, not one for seeking attention, but wanting to make clear the predicament they were in, then addressed his fellow raptors.



The girls had never really ventured very far east of their home before. They had certainly never been as far as they were now, right at a slight bend where the foothills of the Silver Mountains pushed a little farther south into the woods. And by the time they reached this place, it was getting to be evening.

Although Flint had slept in earlier this morning, he was starting to get tired himself—though one can hardly blame him. Most nights he slept maybe four hours at most. So he slowed them all down and told them to be on the lookout for an easy place to spend the night.

It was at this point where Picnic had spotted an extremely odd structure. It looked as if a tree had fallen on top of another, and then started to decay—forming a somewhat livable fort.

“How about there,” she said and pointed at the odd structure.

Flint looked at it with suspicion and answered, “Hmm... that’s a good find, Pic. ... You three stay here while I go check it out.” The girls naturally looked at each other with smiles about the adventure they might have if their father agreed they could spend the night there. And they began to play games as Flint went to inspect the fort.

Flint was always careful about not wanting to endanger his girls—now more than ever. They had already been through

too much. He approached the structure cautiously, being vigilant to look out for snakes or other predators that might be lurking from anywhere near their possible bed for the night.

As he approached, he thought he heard voices, though they sounded more like whispers:

“Why not?” one of them spoke.

“I say go back,” another spouted.

“I warned you,” still another one.

“You’ll regret this...you’ll regret everything” yet another voice spoke.

These voices shook Flint’s spirit as he approached this now-seemingly-dreadful place to stay. He looked back at his girls to ensure they were still safe, which, by the looks of it, they were—since they seemed to be enthralled in a new game they had just invented.

Interestingly, Flint had a curious ability to be able to move very stealthily—extremely stealthily for a raccoon—to the point that it would seem he had disappeared entirely. And he used this ability while climbing up to the top of the structure to inspect these voices. However, upon inspection, he noticed there was nothing and no one there.

He jumped down into the middle of the fort and looked all around him. No snakes, no mice, no squirrels. No chipmunks, no birds. Nothing.

“Girls!” he yelled back to his kits. “Girls, did you hear anything?”

Flurry responded, “You mean, like the wind blowing?” For sure enough, the wind was picking up a tad at that time.

“No,” Flint replied. “I mean like voices.”

The girls looked at each other for confirmation. And Flurry responded, “No, Daddy. We didn’t hear any voices. Well, each other I guess.” And they each had a little giggle.

Flint finalized his inspection, and returned to his kits.

“Well...can we stay here tonight?” Flurry asked.

Flint hesitated, “I don’t know, girls...” he responded, mostly to get a reaction out of them. He enjoyed picking on them when he had the chance, which they likewise enjoyed.

“Daddy...!” they exclaimed.

“Alright, of course we can. Now listen! It *does* look safe, but *do* still be careful.”

“Yes, Daddy!” they all assured him in unison and then ran toward the fort (safely I’m sure).

Flint began to grapple with the net-canopy pack in order to drag it over to the fort, when he heard a voice again: “They’ll die,” it whispered. He dropped the pack and looked around. ... There was nothing there.

“It has to just be my anxiety,” he said to himself. And he picked up the pack again and pulled it all the way to the fort.

After a delicious dinner of fruits and nuts, the four of them huddled together for bed under the roof of their lovely fort. They told stories, laughed together, and ended the evening with a prayer to their Creator.

Once the girls had fallen asleep, Flint gently maneuvered himself out of the pile of snuggles and climbed up on top of the fort. He began looking for signs of the Storm. He just knew it would strike again. While he waited and searched for these signs, he began to think of Naida.

She had been such a wonderful friend to the family for years. And he started to feel bad for just leaving without saying goodbye to her. He kept trying to justify it to himself, but couldn’t quite get over it. Why had he left without telling her? Of course, he knew why. He didn’t want her to convince him to stay. And he didn’t want to feel guilty for either not listening to her, or for staying and keeping his kits in harm’s

way (surely that Storm was targeting that area for some reason, right?).

After a few hours he eventually fell asleep himself, only to be quickly awakened by a downpour of rain. "The Storm wasn't targeting that area like I had hoped," he thought to himself. "It really is targeting us!"

He looked into the fort from where he had been lying down and noticed the girls were protected from the roof. This downpour wasn't accompanied by strong winds, and so he didn't really want to classify it as "the Storm." However, when he looked up, he saw Naida off in the distance, sitting on the branch of a tree about twenty yards away.

"Naida?" he called out. "Naida!" he yelled.

Flint looked back down to ensure the girls were safe. Seeing that they were and that the storm didn't seem to be affecting them at all, he began to sprint west toward Naida. "Naida! Please wait!" he called out as he chased after her. Why was she now running away? And how was she moving so fast?

"Naida, I'm sorry! I...I wanted to tell you but..."

As he was running incredibly fast, climbing up trees, and jumping across branches, he came to an abrupt stop where Naida had poked her head out of a hole from just above the branch where he was standing.

"But what, dear?" she asked him. Her voice sounded a little off.

Flint was so confused and didn't know how to respond. His main concern up until that point had been to catch up to her; and now all of a sudden here she was. "But...but..."

"Surely you know I want what's best for your lovely daughters too, don't you?" she replied to his stuttering. "Then again...I wouldn't have left them with the Storm," she said in a very peculiar tone, not like her at all. And she looked back east toward the fort. Sure enough, the downpour of rain was no longer unaccompanied by strong winds.

Indeed the winds were so strong now they were throwing large branches into the fort where the girls were sleeping.

Flint was terrified and angered. “No!!!” he called out in a rage. And he darted ferociously back toward his girls. But the winds were too strong. As he ran as fast as he could to rescue his girls, he saw the waters rise and lift the fort off the ground. The girls were somehow still inside the fort! That doesn’t make sense. But then the winds simultaneously started carrying off the fort while they threw him head-first into a rock and knocked him out.

Flint woke up with a light rain sprinkling on his head, as he was muttering the words, “No! ... Girls, I’m coming...!”

He was back on the top of the roof of the fort, and taking a deep breath, he began thanking the Creator that it had all just been a terrible nightmare.

When suddenly he was startled—in real life this time—by a familiar voice saying to him, “Don’t worry about Naida.” It was a soft, female voice, and one that gave assurance in a gentle way. “She’s safe and well. And I already told her your plans.”

Flint looked up and realized why the voice sounded so familiar. “It’s you!” he said to her.

“Yes, dear. When I heard your plans to leave, I felt it best that I should follow you.”

“But...all this time, my family has always enjoyed your presence, and yet I’ve never known your name or even spoken to you.”

“That’s alright, dear. I usually prefer to keep to myself. But I think it’s clear you need some help.”

Flint was utterly forlorn at himself for having known this creature for such a long time, and yet not once ever actually trying to get to know her. “I...I’m sorry; but...what’s your name?” he requested.

"I'm Crystal" replied the Barred Owl. "And I'm a friend."

"A friend? To someone so horrible that up until now I've not even known your name?"

"Yes, Flint—a friend. And you'll need more friends as you go along this journey with your girls."

"How do you know what journey I'm on?" Flint asked, not in a rude, confrontational tone; but in a humble, inquisitive and polite manner.

"Dear, my hearing is quite well, and I believe you think to yourself out loud more often than you realize."

"Oh dear," Flint winced, not realizing his own quirks were so obvious to others.

"It's alright, my friend. ... It's actually good. It's how I knew that I needed to help you!"

"Well..." he tried to think for a moment before asking his next question. "So...what did you tell Naida?"

"I just let her know that you were taking your girls a little further east to try to get away from the constant storm that's been repeatedly destroying each house you build. And...well, that because of the constant beating the storm gives, you didn't have time to say goodbye—but that you were hoping your paths crossed again. ... I'm assuming that's right?" Crystal left it open as a question.

"I don't think I could have put it more precisely," Flint answered. He paused a moment and then looked up at her. He said thoughtfully, "Thank you, Crystal. For telling Naida, for following us—"

And their conversation was abruptly stopped by the sound of Picnic screaming.

Flint sprang from the rooftop to the side of the tree in a half a second. But by the time he could even assess the situation, Crystal had already killed the evil intruder that threatened the girls.

What had happened was that, by chance, as Picnic opened

her eyes, she saw a snake near the feet of Tickle. Though stiff from fear, she managed to scream and alert Flurry and Tickle. As Flurry was about to rush over to grab Tickle out of the way, she looked and saw her father on the side of the tree staring at them.

What all of them barely saw in the meantime was the wisp of the amazingly fast and silent Crystal, who flew from the top of the fort, grabbed the snake, and crushed it with her powerful talons. After flying upwards briefly, she threw its carcass a short distance away from their camp, and then settled down to the appreciative family of raccoons.

“That was amazing!” Flint exclaimed (the girls all feeling the same thing, but still unable to speak from all the nervous fear and relief still coursing through them).

Crystal didn’t respond, as she was used to being alone and not receiving praise—which was how she liked it. So instead, she simply looked at the kits and asked: “I trust you’re all okay?”

As the girls caught their breath, they managed to assure Crystal of their well-being. Meanwhile, Flint began to search the area for more snakes. Crystal then turned to address him. “Flint, he’s gone, and he’s not coming back. You can rest now.”

“That’s just the thing though,” Flint replied. “I can’t.” He shook his head. “I *knew* I heard voices earlier when I was inspecting the safety of this place. And even back over there too,” he said motioning over to the spot the girls were playing at earlier in the day. “There must be more,” he continued. “I heard several earlier; and I’m usually pretty good at spotting them. They must be incredible at hiding.”

Crystal flew toward him and looked thoughtfully and intently at him, ensuring she had his attention. “Flint,” she said with a stern but gentle tone.

Flint looked up at her, and she continued. “This was just a

Rat Snake. They don't speak. They don't whisper, they don't hide, and they don't travel in groups. They're silent, and they hunt. ... They don't speak—you understand me right?"

Flint sat back on his hind paws. He looked back up at her and then over to his girls, who were all watching the conversation, and then up to Crystal again. He sighed, exhausted, and asked, "Then what have I been hearing?"