

Chapter 4 – Serenity Forest

It looked as if Louie's grandfather had been pacing back and forth for quite a while. He had worn a fairly nice pattern into the dirt along side the den's opening. I stood back a bit as Wendy led Louie to see him. I didn't want to get in the way as Louie got yet another scolding. While Louie's lecture and probable punishment were being handed down I took the opportunity to check out the new surroundings. Unfortunately it was too dark for me to really make anything out. I did notice however something different about the trees but I wasn't sure what it was. As I looked around I could feel as if I was being watched. It was Richard, who never let me out of his sight. Wherever I would go he would be a few feet away making me a little nervous. Finally, when Louie's chastisement was complete I heard a rather loud and powerful voice.

"Who is this then?" The grandfather demanded.

"This is Robert." said Wendy. "Louie found him wandering in Anhysbys Forest. He's not from here and hoped that you would help him find some of his own kind."

The grandfather walked right up to me and I began to feel even more nervous than Richard had made me. His eyes were bright yellow. I could tell that even in the darkness. They seemed to reflect light like a cat's and pierced my very soul. He was the largest of the wolves, a good bit larger than any I'd seen in zoos, and was obviously the alpha male and as such demanded respect. My feet were glued to the ground. Even if I had wanted to I don't think I could've run anywhere. He sniffed all around me and then stared directly into my eyes.

"Yes, you're definitely new to the area. You don't smell quite like the other humans. Where is it you say you are from?" he asked.

"America." I quietly stated.

"Can't say as I've heard of such a place." he replied.

"I'm afraid it's in another world altogether." I suggested. "I was hoping as Wendy had told you that you could help me find other people like me so that maybe they could help me find my way back home."

He spun around as if to consider the situation and then replied. "That is probably for the best." He continued, "It's unorthodox to keep humans as guests in Serenity Forest but not unheard of. You may stay the night and in the morning we will consider what next to do with you."

"Thank you sir." I said with a faint smile.

I tried to find as soft of a place to lie down as I could. I waited for everyone else to find their spots first though. I found an inviting enough looking spot in the dirt

between Louie and Wendy and curled myself into position and waited impatiently to fall asleep. It took awhile what with my nerves already jangled from the encounter with the Nghuryll and then Louie's grandfather. Eventually though I was able to sleep and actually had an even more restful sleep than the previous night.

As the sun rose I started to stir. I looked around and noticed I was pretty much alone in the den. The wolves had already gotten up to start their day. I guess they weren't much used to sleeping in like me. I walked outside to find some of the older wolves walking around near the den's opening keeping an eye on some of the younger ones playing nearby. As I walked near them they tended to get out of my way allowing me much more room than I actually needed. I thought this may be as good a time as any to check out Serenity Forest in the daylight. Louie had been playing with some of the pups and came running up to me as he saw me walk away.

"Where are you going Robert?" he asked. "Breakfast will be here shortly."

"I thought I'd just take a look around." I answered. "I haven't seen your home in the daylight."

"I'll come with you." he said eagerly. "I can show you around."

"Thanks Louie." I responded. "I'd like that."

Some of the older wolves glared at Louie and I as we walked around. I wasn't sure how much of that was meant for me and how much for him since he surely wasn't allowed too far away after his recent troubles. Knowing this I made sure we never got out of earshot of the den. I certainly wouldn't want Louie getting any extra punishment on my account.

"I sensed something different about the trees here last night Louie but I couldn't make it out in the dark." I commented.

"I'm not sure what you mean, Robert." Louie said with that puzzled tone I had heard often when he originally questioned me.

"Well I can't be sure." I said. "Let me see..." I was trying to find a specific tree that had given me this feeling the previous night. "There! That tree, Louie. Oh, I think I see it now." I had gotten far enough around the tree to notice little awnings that appeared to grow naturally over small holes inside the tree. "What are those?"

"The little holes?" Louie asked. "Those are squirrel homes."

"Squirrel homes?" I said surprisingly. "Those weren't man-made?"

“Man-made?” Louie said in an almost detestable tone. “Why would a man make a home for a squirrel? Those grow especially in squirrel trees. I’m told they only exist in Serenity Forest.”

“Squirrel trees, eh?” I said scoffing. “I don’t see any squirrels.”

“Well they may still be sleeping.” Louie said. “Let’s see...”

Louie took a couple of running leaps over to the squirrel tree and threw his front paws up on the trunk. He was just barely tall enough to get his snout a few inches from the lowest of the holes on the tree. “Archie! Sally! Anybody home?” yelled Louie towards the hole. A couple of seconds later I heard some chattering and squeaking. Then I heard a small voice from inside the tree. “Go away Louie. I’m not interested in hearing any more of your tall tales.”

“But Archie,” Louie moaned, “I have a real live boy here with me to see you.”

“I’m not buying that again Louie. I’ve heard this story too many times before.” the voice said.

“No, really.” Louie pleaded. “It’s true this time I promise!”

“Get lost Louie!” came the reply. “I’m going back to sleep!”

Louie turned away from the tree and looked up at me with disappointment. “Well the squirrels are at home but I don’t think they want any visitors now.”

“That’s okay Louie, I understand.”

I didn’t want Louie to feel any more embarrassed than he already was so I dropped the issue of his stretching the truth. I was fairly curious though and wondered if that had something to do with his getting into so much trouble.

Louie took me next to a large garden that was nearby. The flowers were fairly indistinguishable from those at home. I didn’t really notice any new varieties or different colors but then again I never was much one for studying flowers so they could have looked alien and I may not have even noticed. The thing that seemed odd though was why wolves would have a flower garden at all. Before I could ask Louie about this he was distracted by a rather large insect that looked something like a grasshopper. He chased it around for a couple of minutes and then it just burrowed itself into the ground like a corkscrew leaving Louie with a disappointing moan.

I looked around at the sky and took another long deep breath. The sky was bright blue and the air was fresh. I had another of those comfortable feelings wash over me as if I was at home. Despite some of the strange looking plants and animals Serenity Forest

looked and felt pretty much like any forest you'd see at home. Of course talking animals were always there to remind you that this was anything *but* home.

Some of the other wolves had started to get a little antsy, darting back and forth in front of the den. I wasn't sure what was going on but I figured it'd be a good idea if Louie and I didn't wander any further away. Just then some of the hunting party had come back with breakfast. They had apparently killed some mice and rabbits. A couple of the rabbits had been brought back whole. Unfortunately the mice and at least one other rabbit were regurgitated for the younger wolves. I had suddenly lost my appetite and I usually can't stand to miss breakfast. The older wolves gathered around the front of the den and began to split up the meal. Louie's grandfather motioned me over to join them. "Here now Robert," he said, "come and have some nice rabbit."

My face pretty much told the story. He could tell from my expression that I was less than interested in consuming raw rabbit meat, especially with most of the fur still attached.

"Oh, I guess like most humans, you aren't much for eating the raw meat then are you?" he asked.

"No, sir. I'm not." I replied.

"Well we can't have you starve on us." He motioned for Wendy. "Wendy, show our guest to Branwen's garden and maybe he'll be able to find something more palatable there."

Wendy signaled me to follow her and took me back towards the flower garden I'd seen with Louie just moments before. I wondered how full I could get from eating flowers but then I was surprised to see behind the flower garden there was much more. Louie and I hadn't gone around the garden and I hadn't seen past the tall flowers and wasn't really curious enough to investigate further. On the other side though were several rows of vegetables. There were plants with all kinds of familiar and a few unfamiliar vegetables. Wendy invited me to help myself to whatever I may like. I sampled a bit of almost everything. There were some plants that looked a bit like corn but the kernels were thicker and had a rather grayish hue to them. I took a small taste at first thinking they may not yet be ripe but they tasted wonderful. Then I saw some carrots and cucumbers and had one of each of those. There was some lettuce as well which gave me the idea to put together a salad. I've never been much on vegetables or salads but when faced with a choice of salad or raw fur covered meat the choice was pretty simple. After I had eaten my fill of the wonderful bounty I started to wonder in addition to the flower garden, why wolves would need a vegetable garden as well.

The wolves had pretty much finished their breakfast and began to lie around to start the digesting process. I walked over to Wendy and asked her about the garden. "Why would wolves have a flower garden?"

“That’s Branwen’s garden” she replied. “She thought it would be nice for us to have some decoration around our home.”

“And the vegetables...?” I asked.

“Those are mainly for her and her friends when they visit.” she told me. “Occasionally a rabbit or two will get brave enough to try to steal some of them, usually while we’re away of course.”

“So I take it Branwen’s not a wolf?”

“Of course not” Wendy replied. “She’s human like you. We couldn’t have planted a garden ourselves.”

“I didn’t think so.” I nervously commented. “But I thought humans weren’t common here in Serenity Forest.”

“Well Branwen’s a different case all together” Wendy said. “She is not like most humans we encounter. She loves the forest and all the animals within it. She’s very welcome here anytime and in fact she sometimes spends several days with us here.”

“She sounds pretty cool.” I said. “I think I’d like to meet her.”

At that point I felt a little more comfortable in asking Louie’s grandfather about the other humans again. I walked over to where he was resting and sat next to him. He looked me up and down and sort of frowned at me. “You’re beginning to get a bit too used to us I’m afraid.” he said.

“Pardon?”

“You see Robert, humans and wolves are not usually found lying about together after sharing a meal. We have a natural and respectful fear of one another. Your approaching me makes me feel you’re a bit too comfortable here. I think it’s time I directed you to the nearest human village.”

At that I felt pretty awkward. It was my goal of course to find some humans to help me get home but I was feeling comfortable with the wolves and I didn’t want to overstay my welcome. “I only wanted to ask you a few questions sir.” I said.

“That’s as it may be.” he replied “But I think the time for questions has passed. You can get the answers you need from your own kind. Now where is Richard? He’d be ideal to take you out of Serenity forest and point you to the next village of humans.”

Just then it had occurred to him that Richard and one other wolf hadn’t returned from the morning’s hunt. They didn’t seem altogether worried as such. I suppose there were any number of reasons for them to be held up. He then gave Wendy the task of

escorting me from Serenity Forest. I would have preferred to get some more answers first but then at that point it didn't seem to matter as much. I went over to say my goodbyes to Louie who seemed to look as if he'd actually miss me and then Wendy and I began to walk away from the den. Before we had gotten very far we heard a commotion just off the trail ahead of us. Wendy told me to stay back and she crouched down as if preparing to leap on some prey when all of a sudden Richard and the other wolf burst onto the trail.

They seemed very upset and were in a big hurry to get back to the den.

"What's wrong Richard?" asked Wendy.

"It's Branwen! She's in trouble! We have to tell grandfather." he replied.

They all rushed back to the den with me right behind them. Fortunately we hadn't walked too far away and within a couple of minutes I had caught up to them. Richard and the other wolf were just beginning to tell their story to Louie's grandfather who seemed none too pleased a listener.

It seemed Branwen, the girl who I'd just learned about from Wendy, had been kidnapped by some other humans. She apparently had some sort of knowledge of a device they were interested in having. It was clear that Branwen was very important to these wolves. Some of them appeared to even be crying at the news while others were seething and ready to attack.

My trip had obviously been postponed. No one was in any type of mood to take me out of the forest and it was as if they'd even forgotten I was there at all. I had begun getting second thoughts about meeting up with my fellow humans at this point. Branwen sounded great but if there were a group capable of kidnapping her then there were obviously some bad apples in the bunch. Now at least I had hope of another opportunity to get some more information out of Louie's grandfather.