

WADBOROUGH FOREST



John-John Markstedt

This novel is entirely a work of fiction. The names, characters and incidents portrayed in it are the product of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, or events or localities is entirely coincidental.

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PREFACE

This is the first out of two external revisions. So—although, I'd appreciate comments regarding grammatical errors, sentence structures and formulations—the focus is intended to be on the consistency of the story, the flow of the writing, the entertainment to the reader, and, most notably, the quality and feasibility of the book.

There will be, if this first one goes well, a second revision, where the focus will solely be on the language.

I've made an effort use British spelling and British words where there are multiple possibilities. E.g. brook over creek, autumn over fall, rubbish over trash.

Notably I've chosen to use whilst and amongst as the conjunction, preposition, adverb, and while solely for the verb. Similarly, I've chosen to use the somewhat increasingly archaic verb form of but.

This story is a satire; therefore, it touches on many ideas and references that is not entirely self contained within this book. It is my wish that the story is in itself self contained(in the same way Animal farm is self contained, albeit very boring if no association to the real world is allowed). However, much of the fun(or value) in reading it comes with the understanding of symbolism and the mockery within it. As part of this first revision, I've noted every outside reference(those that are

intentional at least) made in this work. I do not want to rely on obscure knowledge of trivia however, and those references should not harm the experience of reading—if so, they should be removed. Please note every reference you are able to find—even the ones that are almost too obvious. I’ve divided every outside reference in to three categories.

Category tier one, must be noted. Contains very few but obvious references that I think should be known by 80% of the populace aged 18 or over. They are also imperative for the tale itself. Failing to understand these would make a really dull read.

Category tier two, may be noted. Missing to draw these connections should not interfere with the cohesiveness of the tale; they should be passed over without the reader feeling a sense of missing out. Understanding none of them would probably diminish the reading experience. Most references are in this category.

Category tier three, unlikely noted. This category contains all obscure references. They must be completely passed over with no hiccup, i.e. you’d never guess it’s an reference if not told so. Some of these require some deduction, and I hope that even if they’re found, It’s not obvious that I put it

there intentionally.

Perhaps unnecessary remark 1: the chapter quotes are carefully picked and are all relevant to the chapter's text.

Perhaps unnecessary remark 2: the character names are carefully picked and are all relevant to the story(albeit some more than others).

Chapters:

- 1: Intro
- 2: Build up
- 3: Build up
- 4: Pay off
- 5: Neither
- 6: Pay off
- 7: Build up
- 8: Build up
- 9: Pay off
- 10: Neither
- 11: Neither
- 12: Pay off

Chapter 1

c3: Darwin quote, hints to a tertiary theme of the book: [REDACTED].

c3: published in 1859, it fits perfect being ruffly 10 years before la belle epoque.

cX: I'm a fan of Darwin's work

c2: 'Natural checks and balances': a very darwinian sentence.

c3: Locks of gold — Goldilock: both: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Goldilocks_ec

and https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Circumstellar_habitable_zone

c3: The beautiful era: La Belle Époque: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Belle_Époque

chapter 2

c2: inertia: tertiary theme [REDACTED]

c1: Increase in specialization, very well known phenomena.
Although I'd like to attribute to Adam Smith.

<https://www.investopedia.com/ask/answers/040615/what-are-economic-impacts-specialization.asp>

c1: Aorta, (arteriole), allegory(or metaphor, but I don't think so(?)) Circulatory system -> Logistics.

c2: Aequitus: Equality(Roman, but masculine form.) Also [REDACTED]

c3: Chief Chipmunk -> Adams's Chief Rabbit

c2: Br'er Rabbit, read Brother Rabbit.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Br'er_Rabbit, also c3 reference to Adams's El-ahrairah(the multiple references to Adams should make this clear). Also Anansi and folklore. I've included it also due to the widespread censorship of him. It's absolutely ridiculous.

c2: Chipmunks' enterprise -> cooperative, it's a thing by itself:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Cooperative>

But also relates to unionization.

c2: Winter Fund -> private health insurance

c2: Ongenþeow: King of Svea. Egil Vendelcrow, makes sense since he is a [REDACTED], also literally means 'Against Slavery' which is also very fitting with the introduction of Br'er Rabbit in the exact same sentence.

c1: Glade of Representatives -> House of Representatives or

any form of Parliamentary structure.

c2: Pietus: [REDACTED](Roman, but masculine form.) Also [REDACTED]

c2: Veritas: Truth(Roman, true feminine form.) Also [REDACTED]

cr: Moles speaking Old English, also spins on tertiary theme [REDACTED]

Chapter 3

cr: Aritole, continuation. cr: screw nuts -> gold.

c2: Death is the mother of beauty. Wallace Stevens Sunday Morning.

c2: Death is the mother, reciprocal altruism, screw nuts 'of other beauty', transcend death. All of same theme.

c2: Markets with everything available, woodpecker 'commercial interest', describing a Laissez-faire free market system. Or 'Capitalism'.

c2: Chapter quote, said 'emergencies' happens in the chapter.

c2: Having Hayek quoted tells quite a lot by itself.

c2: Heap and Stack, CS related.

cr: State of emergency.

Characters:

Introduced Chapter 2:

Kraerion(main, introduced), Aequitus(main, introduced), Br'er Rabbit(mentioned), Ongenpeow(mentioned), Pietus(support), Veritas(support), Cinnamon(mentioned)

Introduced chapter 3:

Kraerion(main), Redrill(main, introduced), Greyhead(support,

introduced), Spinestack(support)

Introduced chapter 4:

Kraerion(support), Eaglewing(main, introduced), Hroðulf(main, introduced), Αίσωπος(main, introduced), AeQUITUS(mentioned), Pietus(mentioned), Br'er Rabbit(support)

Main:

Kraerion(2, 3, 4)

AeQUITUS(2)

Pietus(2)

Veritas(2)

Cinnamon()

Br'er Rabbit(4)

Eaglewing(4)

Hroðulf(4)

Αίσωπος(4)

Enjoy!

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“Some people talk to animals. Not many listen though.
That’s the problem.”

- A.A Milne



DEORDINATION

"Man selects only for his own good; Nature only for that of the being which she tends."

- Charles Darwin

The Wadborough forest is a peculiar collection of trees; it's shaped by an improbable set of circumstances, setting the preconditions of this unlikely tale you're about to read.

The forest has stood where it now stands for millennia, but surrounded by other trees and part of a much larger forest: it did not crave attention, nor require distinction by name. With the ever increasing sophistication—and population growth—of the main British isle, most trees were cut down for timber, and the woodlands were slowly turned to grazed meadows and tiled farmlands. The trees near the little village of Wadborough would most certainly meet the same fate, if it wasn't for a growing posh ritual of high British society. The Duke of Worcestershire—lest he lose pace with his peers—began importing pheasants to be hunted by his guests and his more distinguished subjects. He thus proclaimed that the trees near the Wadborough village would never be cut down, and ever solely be allocated to the hunting of game. These trees became

the Wadborough forest—standing tall and alone in the wild ocean of fields.

Pheasants are clumsy birds—used to roam the Asian steps undisturbed by predators—and found it difficult to survive in the forest. To protect their precious game: the Duke’s men drove, over the years, all major predators out of the region. The red fox was first to go(to the chickens’ rejoice) as they seemed almost offended by the ease of hunting pheasants. The weasel family: the stoat, the wolverine, and the mink; followed shortly thereafter. The badgers were also hunted, but they soon understood that the pheasants were off limit and began to ignore the foreign bird; thus, a few badgers remained alive. As with all human interventions: they’re seldom without unforeseen consequences; the rodent population boomed; which, incidentally attracted more birds of prey to the region. These birds—mostly consisting of various hawks and species of owls—did not danger the life of pheasants; however, they possessed another threat entirely. The ornithologists of the time had a fierce reputation of enacting conservation legislation; the rumor of the birds broad prevalence reached the group and soon they took interest in the forest. The Duke thus had a choice: spare the birds and risk the ornithologists’ influence, or kill them and risk the outbreak of rodents; he chose the latter. The rodents did explode in numbers, but they did not carry disease with them, nor overrun the neighbouring fields and the Wadborough village. As a matter of fact—the rodents did not at all conform to the behaviours so often attributed to them. No one could explain why.

Eventually the time of serfdom met its end; and the society slowly morphed into something approaching the appearance of a representative democracy. Ownership of land trans-

ferred from lords and ladies to the establish municipalities, and so too did the ownership of the Wadborough forest. Although hunting remains a tradition of the well-off, its clientele slowly shifted to in time mostly consist of ordinary rural villagers. Innovations in agriculture and growing manufacturing greatly shifted the populace from rural to urban. The growing cities lost touch with the rural arts. Hunting—especially when performed as sport as it is with game—became viewed as cruel and barbaric. The urban population greatly outnumbered its rural counterpart in voting power; activists rallied and tallied support—the Bill of The Wildlife Preservation Act soon passed through the county of Worcestershire; which, incidentally holds the legislative power in Wadborough. The Act contained many a paragraph, but only one concerned the Hunters of Wadborough.

‘A person shall not hunt game birds including but not limited to the Common Pheasant, Grouse, Goose, Turkey, Duck or Pigeon by means of firearm, or any form of projectile, unless bread in captivity under permission from a state licensed breeder (§95b). A person guilty of offense under this Act shall be liable on summary conviction to a fine not exceeding 5,000 pound sterling.’

- §68, The Wildlife Preservation Act

The Act angered the villagers; “what does city folk know of hunting!?” could be heard at the local drinking holes. Wild conspiracies was liberally spread along with wild guesses on the probabilities of actually getting caught. To the villagers dismay, the city clerks had foreseen their unwillingness to abide by the new law and were ruthlessly prepared to hand out many a salted fine during the first year of the bill’s passing.

And so it came to be that the forest of Wadborough was free of both predator and man alike—undisturbed by the natural checks and balances that keeps the order of things. Even the locks of gold couldn't compare to the beautiful era that would follow.



DOUBT

“I have never made but one prayer to God, a very short one: Oh Lord, make my enemies ridiculous. And God granted it.”

- Voltaire

“One day is today—”, Kraerion whispered to himself as his tired eyes slowly widened to an open state. The chimpunk had woke—like all mornings—to a loud unpleasant banging sound, echoing around the run outside the comforts of his small burrow. The sound carried with it the news of a new day, and with it: the message that all who wanted a day’s pay ought to drag themselves to the great hall, the Aorta, presently. The frowsty air this deep underground usually made him rise as soon as he woke—to seek a more pleasant ambiance—but today he lingered in thoughts.

“One day is today.”, he repeated, to reassure himself and still his doubts, as if repeating the words would make them more true. The power of inertia is strong; Kraerion full well knew of its insidious nature: that tomorrow and never were but equal measurements of eternity. He had longed—even dreamed—for this day to come for as long as he could remem-

ber; so he wondered why—now when the day was finally here—he had so suddenly lost his strong convictions.

Chipmunks may be genetically poised for a life underground, but not the chipmunk Kraerion. Even as a little kitten, he had loathed their exists: the damp runs and burrows, the second-hand air, the ever present darkness, and about everything else underground just by association. He hated—as only an adolescent can hate—that which most of his peers called home. Instead, he wished for a strong wind in his fur, sunlight that uncovered all the beauty that is Nature, but most of all the chaotic buzzing of life above, that so contrasts the routines down below. He yearned to run the branches of trees, not the ever branching network of runs dug in the forest soil. His father had many a time japed that his son was born more a squirrel than chipmunk—and he had not been wrong. When he was younger, he had stated that one day he was going to live amongst the trees, but received feedback which would otherwise only be appropriate after a well executed joke.

Kraerion eventually mustered the will to rise from his moss coated bed. He went over to a corner of his burrow and began scratching away at the dirt.

”Good, still here.”, he confirmed anxiously, as he felt the steel of seven steel screw-nuts—which would surely appear beautiful in the sunlight—laying before him. He covered them up again and left his burrow into the run, and followed its twists and turns until it widened into a great hall: the Aorta. It was dug under a great willow; its massive network of roots—intertwined with the walls and ceiling—supported the weight of the dirt and kept it from caving in.

Since the time of Man, the forest had steadily increased its

economic output. One of the contributing factors was the increased specialization of its inhabitants. Whilst many a specie have some certain advantage in the gathering of some specific type of feed, none is as great a carrier than that of the chipmunk. In their elastic cheeks, they are able to carry loads of feed—and other goods for that matter—efficiently around the forest; their small size and great numbers gave the operation a granularity to it, which made it difficult for larger and stronger animals like the roebuck to compete. When other animals began to hire them for their service, they began to expand their network of tunnels and runs to cover whole forest—connecting all its major hubs. Therefor—every morning—the chipmunks gathered in the Aorta to share news and plan the day ahead.

Most chipmunks were already present when Kraerion entered.

“One day is today.”, he thought again, as he headed towards his usual spot in the front. But he hesitated suddenly and reconsidered; instead, he decided to begin his new life with breaking this habit and found a place in the back.

The murmur of conversation disappeared in an instance when an old chipmunk appeared in the Aorta. His name was Aequitus and was the chief chipmunk, gray spots of fur spoke of his age, yet his features were easy on the eye and he bore his age proudly. Everyone knew the chief and saw him as something akin to a revered hero. When he was but a kitten, he’d taken interest in the chipmunks’ livelihood and noticed irregularities in their billings; after some further deliberation with his friend Br’er Rabbit, he realized that they could likely double their prices with little to no churn. He put forth the motion to the then chief chipmunk, who surprisingly listened

to the youngster and approved it. When their income subsequently increased, he was very vocal about its occurrence, and made it impossible for the chief chipmunk not to pass it forward to the chipmunks' daily wage.

When Aequitus a few years later became unanimously chosen as the next chief, he took it a step further. He transformed the chipmunks' enterprise to a sort of cooperative, with by-laws dictating that a fixed percentage of the total revenue would be earmarked for workers' wages. As well as other rules limiting the influence of his own office—not only for himself but setting the precedence for his eventual replacements.

Together with Br'er Rabbit—who had by then become the implicit leader of the rabbits—and with the help of the by then Glade of Representatives Twig Ongenpeow, he started the Winter Fund. A collective fund that functions similar to that of human insurance: its members contributes feed during the spring, summer, and autumn as a premium; members that find themselves short during the winter may then make a claim and receive feed to sustain them until winter's end.

A cynic human might proclaim the flaw in this scheme, that an animal might take advantage of it by wasting his wage and making a claim every winter—but he forgets two things: most animals can't count; and although possible, making a claim is very stigmatized, and that most animals would rather starve than to broadcast their destitution. Aequitus also—being a co-founder of the fund—made sure that all the work related to the logistics—moving and storing of the feed deep underground, where the soil is grainy, cold, and preserves the feed from pest and rot, and hidden from prying thieves—went to the chipmunks—further boosting the demand for their services.

The fund was a great success; winter deaths decreased drastically the first year, and then slowly year after year. The chipmunks got a more steady stream of sophisticated work from the fund and thus means for a better life. For all the contributions Aequitus made, none could match the feeling he instilled in every chipmunk: the intangible sense of worth; the standing he brought them to in the forest; and the care he fostered between chipmunks by treating them all as equals.

When Aequitus reached the front of the Aorta, he turned and faced the scurry.

"Before we go through today's agenda, I have news—both good and bad.", he began, "And, as you may not be able to appreciate the good in anticipation of bad, I'll begin with the bad.", he took a tactful pause, as anyone with his level of experience would in this situation.

"The eastbound run collapsed late last evening; we're completely cut off from the eastern part of the forest. Therefor, the deliveries to the rabbits' hill must be postponed."

"Why did it collapse?", Aequitus younger brother Pietus asked, who stood at his regular place just right of his brother.

"Well—", Aequitus dragged, "a pheasant went chasing a maggot again and crossed above the shallow no-zone."

"Again!?", Pietus cried, not hiding his contempt, "Did the pheasants not promise to be more careful—that last time would be the last? Will they honour our agreement and pay for the damages?"

"They did indeed. As you all know, the pheasants are not the most organized of animals and will only blame each other if we make a claim for damages. We may bring it to the Glade, but what—other than appearing petty—would we gain? Lit-

tle and less, I'm afraid. Nevertheless, I want you, Pietus, to go to the moles and have them dig a deeper eastbound run this time—that is, at least, a factor we can affect.” ”I'll do it.”, Pietus responded, ”But send someone else to the moles next time—they don't even speak our language...”

”Nā, hēo seċgaþ þone ealda spræce. It is we that don't speak theirs.”, Aequitus paused, waiting to see if Pietus had a response. When his brother only mumbled something inaudible, he continued.

”I'll make sure Br'er and the rabbits get the news of this postponement personally. As for the good news, the rumors going around are true: the Glade have decided to institute a 2% tax on all Forest shipments. It's only a temporary experiment with us as the pilot service.”

”How is this good news?”, Veritas squeaked, a tiny runt of a chipmunk who were also standing in the front close to Aequitus.

”Two reasons: firstly, the funds are marked as aid for destitute animals who can't afford the Winter Fund, and we'll surely get the contract for its operation; secondly, we don't pay for our own services—we're essentially exempt!”

”No! That's not how it works.”, Veritas snapped angrily, ”this will force an increase in our prices—hurt our margins; to only burden one industry, and ours at that—it's... it's incredibly unfair.”

”Enough.”, Aequitus grumbled, ”That's enough, this is neither the place nor time, we may discuss this later in private.”

Veritas did not answer, but she turned her head sideways—showing everyone her disdain.

The old chipmunk moved on to the day's normal agenda,

dishing out more routinely orders before dismissing his workforce. However, his eyes were fixed on Kraerion—the dismissal did not apply to him. When the last chipmunk had left the Aorta, he began to speak.

“Kraerion—”, he said.

“Father.”, Kraerion responded, equally enthusiastic.

“It’s true then, hiding in the back like that; you’re actually leaving what we worked so hard to create?”

“What you created you mean? You cannot pretend this is news—I’ve been more than forthcoming with my intention to lead a different life. You of all chipmunks should know of my extra shifts to afford this move, and my refusal of the managerial responsibilities you so blatantly pushed on me.”

“We all have dreams, Kraerion. I know you might *feel* like a squirrel, but you’re not one—I promise you that you’ll end up miserable, dearth of resources, and completely alone in a world of wings if you try to live as one. Dreams are a lesson in growing up: learning how to smother them in favour of what’s truly important in this life. And, you’ll get other dreams—realistic dreams—like forming a family, building a future for our specie, and contributing to the betterment of the Forest at large.”

“I’m sorry—”, Kraerion said at length, “but that’s not me, and quite frankly, that’ll never be me.”

“Don’t you feel any sense of responsibility? What about your sister Veritas? You expect Pietus and I to go on forever?”

“What about her? She’s smarter than us three combined; she could take over tomorrow if you’d only let her.”

“You know full well that intelligence isn’t everything. You saw how she acted today: she lacks the social conduct to lead other chipmunks.”

"Maybe you should have spoken with her before announcing your decision to the whole Aorta?"

"It's not only today and you know it. Never mind. If not for us, then what of you and Cinnamon?"

"Don't", Kraerion said flustered.

"What, you haven't told her!?", Aequitus said truly surprised; he was just about scold his son, but hesitated when he saw Kraerion's face and realized it would be superfluous. Before he had time to say anything more, Kraerion turned around and ran.

Kraerion ran, and he ran, and he kept on running until the pain in his lungs, and muscles, numbed the thoughts that so rudely had occupied his mind.



DREAD

”’Emergencies’ have always been the pretext on which the safeguards of individual liberty have eroded.”

- Friedrich Hayek

Kraerion eventually stopped running; once his emotions cooled off, he felt embarrassed for how he had acted.

”Well, good riddance—”, he thought, ”at least I can’t go back now. One day is truly today.”

The chipmunk returned to his burrow one last time, to fetch his screw nuts and say his goodbyes. He had stood there for a very long time; not knowing how to say farewell, and he somehow felt that the moment required a solemn pause. When he made an attempt to leave, his legs refused; he felt an annoyance for his own nostalgia. Life underground was all he had known; nothing would ever be the same.

When he exited the networks of runs through the exit known as the Northwestern Arteriole, a large woodpecker were already waiting for him. His name was Redrill, and he had an especially pronounced red crest. Woodpeckers made excellent woodworkers, but most of them worked in small teams and only took on larger construction projects. But not Redrill,

he was a loner and preferred to work alone and had hence accepted Kraerion's rather unorthodox request. The seven screw-nuts he had fetched were awkwardly wrapped around his front legs, and caught the sunlight and glimmered harmoniously.

"You're really sure about this?", Redrill asked.

"Yes!", Kraerion answered, maybe a bit too quickly, as if he was caught with his paw down a honey pot, "I—I mean, I've never been more sure."

"Don't worry," Redrill chuckled amused, "I won't argue with the hand that feeds me. I see you've brought payment."

"Well, only one is for you though. Better get going."

The woodpecker smiled, nodded, and unfolded his wings and set off north with Kraerion—with all his might—trying to keep up the pace through the thick undergrowth.

The Wadborough villagers—in a time before environmental concerns—dumped much of their *undesirables* in the forest. Everyone denied it—of course—yet batteries, plastics, electronics, and everything else one can imagine found itself in every nook and cranny of the forest floor. Even a run down car or two occasionally joined the detritus. Most animals—after a good whiff—would not bother with these alien contraptions. But, in a magpie a curiosity grew; soon, he conjectured: these objects of Men may teach a thing or two! The magpie began to take them apart; study their intricate design and their innate structures. He felt an unnatural compulsion towards to the weird family of human fasteners: the screw nuts. Death may be the mother of all beauty, yet these imperishable hexagons of cast steel were of different kind. Sun rays bouncing off their plain silver surfaces caught the magpie

in awe; the beauty consumed him, and he eventually took to hoarding. The desire for these little things spread like wild-fire; first amongst the magpies and the other birds in the crow family, but soon all animals had taken a fancy to them—a treasured commodity was born. But it wasn't like any other commodity: it endured where blueberries rot, it was portable where trees stood firm, but most significant was its limited supply—a thing of Man. It couldn't be produced like the spines of a hedgehog's back, nor grown like the acorns of an oak tree. Naturally, the young economy was tired of barter and sought a system to keep better score: an informational instrument to keep track of favours; a fair system of time allocation. And thus, for the first time in the kingdom of animal, go beyond reciprocal altruism—transcend death—and let a money be born.

But to Kraerion, the screw nuts were but a means to an end: to purse life anew.

The day was a beautiful one; the sun shone bright on a blue canvas sky with only a few dots of white. His seven screw-nuts around his legs made it difficult to run, and he soon lost sight of Redrill. He did not worry though, the woodpecker would not drop his client for a lousy tempo. His anxious feelings from earlier that morning eased somewhat by the fine weather, like the miraculous cure weather so often can be.

"What a great day!", he said out loud to no one in particular, "What a shame it would be to have it spent underground."

The sun's rays told of high noon, yet the forest was uncharacteristically quiet. Noon was a time of activity, when the animals left their nests, burrows, lairs, and vocational duties to seek out trade. To buy or sell feed; to offer or acquire ser-

vice. Anything imaginable were up for sale: a blackbird could be hired to sing, a joyride could be enjoyed from the back of a magpie, fresh blueberries—or stolen cabbage from the neighbouring fields—could be bought. Therefore, on any other day, a distant voice in his ears would not have sparked his curiosity. When he reached a clearing in the trees, he leaned back on his hind legs and saw—past the overgrowth—a hedgehog and a robin arguing intensely. He recognized the hedgehog as an acquaintance of his fathers, he knew him as Spinestack, and closed the distance to them.

"Are you mad?", the robin asked flustered, "Have you completely lost your mind? You know I need more than two measly spines."

"Spines are not weeds you simply pluck from a field of your choosing; they take effort and care to grow.", Spinestack answered calmly, "And these recent—although tragic—events have created a wonderful demand, as you surely understand."

"But... But that's more than trice as expensive than just a couple weeks ago. This is war profiteering! I'm down to my last screw nut; you must understand."

"I mustn't anything.", Spinestack reassured calmly as he saw Kraerion approaching and waved, "I could ask any of your neighbours, who, I'm sure, would find the price both fair and appropriate."

"Wait, hold on.", Kraerion interrupted as he took notice of the small heap of spines, sharp and keen, laying between the two animals, "What do you mean war? And what on earth would you need spines for?"

"Oh haven't you heard!?", the robin squeaked, "It's terrible—*Terr-i-ble* I say: just this morning a nightingale in the same tree as me got her screw nuts stolen. And it's not an isolated inci-

dent either, it has happened all over the forest in the last few days. I refuse to sit idle by; we must take up arms and defend ourselves—just like in the tales of the time of Man!”

”Hrmf”, Redrill uttered from a twig above the group, seemingly appearing from nowhere, ”I heard a few rats have similar complaints earlier this morning, apparently a few of their burrows had been raided. And they are *rats* after all, who dares mess with them?”

”Yes, very sad indeed. Now could you take your discourse elsewhere?”, Spinestack said glaring at the two newcomers, ”We are conducting serious business here, go waste someone else’s time—preferably someone whose time is of less value than mine.”

Redrill gave Spinestack a sharp look of disgust, ”You’ve always been more heap than stack, don’t you think?”, he jested, untucked his wings, and took off. Kraerion had not much choice but to follow.

When they reached the silver birch—which was to become Kraerion’s home—a fluffy wood pigeon greeted them with a coo.

”Welcome Kraerion, to our humble and peaceful corner of the Forest.”, the pigeon said. His name was Greyhead; this pigeon landlord owned a score of birches and had agreed to sell part of one to Kraerion. It was very unusual for one animal to only own part of a tree; most animals paid rent. Kraerion had first been offered to rent, but refused—he was ready for a life free from the burden of economic dependence and thus the need of a steady wage.

”The meter directly above the first twig is yours. I’ve etched in some markings, you may, of course, measure it yourself.”

Kraerion nodded and handed over three of the screw nuts to Greyhead. The pigeon thanked, and having errands elsewhere—excused himself and flew away.

Redrill had received instructions many days ago, and wasted no time consulting Kraerion on what to do. He flew up and landed on the south facing side of the birch and began drilling. The woodpecker's head jerked back and forth, transforming his appearance into a red smear. Kraerion felt very silly when the origins of Redrill's name suddenly dawned on him, he could not believe how he hadn't realized it sooner.

Woodpeckers were not made to carve homes in the trunks of trees. Their strong chisel-like bill and shock-resistant head had slowly been selected by Nature for its ever increasing ability to prey on termites, beetles, and various other larvae dwelling behind bark and wood. But—like most animals—with the rise of a market, their abilities found a vastly greater commercial value elsewhere. And, the woodpeckers found it in carpentry.

Kraerion didn't know how to act whilst Redrill worked. He felt that he would only be in the way if he tried to help, and there was nothing else there he could occupy himself with. He had not stood there long before he was saved by a loud screech from a neighbouring birch.

"Wait here.", Redrill yelled urgently from up above; he dashed—without hesitation—towards the sound. Kraerion paid no heed; instead, he lunged to the tree and rushed up its trunk. The trunk divided evenly into three large limbs; between them lay a pigeon's nest. He continued up one of the limbs as to look down and see it. Redrill was perched on a branch opposite of Kraerion—they were the first on site. And as pigeons came flying from all directions, they looked down

and saw a terrified mother and her three newborn squabs, naked save for their scrawny, near undeveloped down.

"They're gone," she said despondently, "They're all gone. Oh dear, how will we survive?"

"Won't nest insurance cover it?", a pigeon asked after a long moment of silence.

"No," another pigeon answered, "theft has not been an issue since the time of Man. Why would anyone even think of including it in coverage?"

"It may yet be rectified, as far as I'm aware, nest insurance has always been implied to cover these kinds of things. I'm sure there's some broad clauses in there that might be stretched to cover this situation.", Greyhead broke in, sighed, "Otherwise, we'll come together and cover it ourselves; solidarity is not yet lost on us. Regardless, the best we can do for now is to give her some room and time to breath, especially by those not yet part of our community."

The insinuation was not lost on either Redrill or Kraerion. Nevertheless, it was a reasonably request, and the two animals vacated the tree.

"We're not particularly popular today.", Redrill muttered jokingly.

The moon had long since appeared when Redrill finished his work. The woodpecker sailed down to Kraerion at the foot of the birch.

"I guess I'm done!", he proclaimed, "Are you sure it's deep enough? It's barely more than an entrance."

"Well, you know I can't afford more of your time.", Kraerion answered. "Besides, me teeth should be strong enough to carve out the rest. Take the screw nut before I regret it."

As he handed over one of his screw nuts to the bird, Greyhead appeared again.

"Good evening, excuse my rude remark earlier," the pigeon began, "these are strange times; I hope you don't take it as a reflection of your person."

"No offense taken.", Redrill said whilst Kraerion simply nodded.

"I have some news that might not have reached the two of you yet.", Greyhead continued, "The crows have called for a state of emergency, there's going to be a meeting in the Glade, tomorrow at noon. Thought you'd like to know."

"Okay, thanks.", Redrill said tiredly, yawned, and turned to Kraerion, "It's getting late, are you sleeping here?"

"Not like I have a choice, the new tenants have most likely already moved in to my old burrow."

"Well then,", the woodpecker said and untucked his wings, prompting Greyhead to do the same. The two birds took off and disappeared into the blissful summer night. Kraerion was left alone with his hollow, his new life, and his ever intruding thoughts. Still unsure if he had made the right decision, he climbed up the tree to his entrance.

"One day was today.", he concluded solemnly. The hollow's floor was still rough and unyielding, but it wasn't the brown soil of a burrow—that was all that mattered. With time, he would widen the hollow, grind the walls and floor sleek, carry up moss and lichen to make a bed, and slowly be able to call it home. That night, he slept uneasy; his body and limbs were heavy and exhausted, yet his mind was unbridled and completely awake. When sleep finally came, it was with an unusual satisfaction that only major life decisions produces—it scared him to know that he'd almost gone a whole life with-

