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Half-Fledged

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Cade awoke to the trilling chirps and the rhythmic hums of birds; they were unlike the ones at home. Their chirping had meaning.

He exited the tent with his toothbrush bag. Shades of brown and green comforted him, and his brain still wondered if they were real. The trees back home never evoked such feelings, so why now? A cold wind brushed against his body, begging him to go back into his bedroll. He still needed to adjust to the unfamiliar yet calming summer mornings.

The birds continued to chirp as he brushed; the differing chirrup crossed the trees around him. He took in the scenery and noise. It would be a while before he would hear these types of sounds again. The birds in the city were always drowned out by horns and engines, by cumbersome things. Here, the birds could be as loud as they wanted to express how they felt. Nobody could contest their singing in these tranquil woods.

Once done brushing, he tossed his bag into the tent.

He surveyed the campgrounds to find a woman sitting at a picnic table. He recognized her from the night before when everyone congregated behind a fire to share stories. Her group was around his group's age; she was in her late twenties. He had spoken to her briefly before going to bed.

"Good morning," Cade said as he approached her. "Mind if I join you?"

She flinched, saw Cade, then calmed. She gestured at the table.

"Sorry. Did I scare you?"

"Startled, more like," she said. "My mind is elsewhere."

"On what?"

She pointed up to the trees. "I wanted to hear them sing. What brings you up this early?"

"They woke me up. I usually ignore them, but the ones here are different."

"What do you mean?"

"I don't think I've ever encountered birds that sang such songs, yet it's familiar."

She nodded. "Isn't it peaceful? My dad and I used to listen to them. He would mimic their chirps and could name the species from sound alone."

A few minutes passed.

"Are you down for a walk?" She asked.

"Right now?"

"Yes. Now."

"Sure." There was hesitation in his voice. "I might need a sweater. When does it get warm?"

"It's not that cold out. Where are you from?"

"Down south where it's hot year-round."

"That figures. It'll get warm soon. You can go through the cold for a while longer. I believe in you."

The pair walked on a gravel path. The stones' impressions changed beneath their feet.

She said, "Did you know this park was formed across millions of years? A volcanic eruption created that caldera, the lake this park is known for."

"Really? That's interesting."

“It’s true. This land was prone to earthquakes and other disasters, but now it’s this beautiful park. I like thinking about how it ended up the way it is now.”

“Like a tinier big bang? I don’t often think about these kinds of things.”

“I like learning neat facts about the world. It makes life interesting.”

She strayed from the path towards an array of boulders. She stepped onto one, then propelled herself onto another. Once she maintained her grounding, she waved him over and lent out her hand. “Do you want to see something cool?”

Cade repeated as she did, then grabbed her hand. She hoisted him up towards her. He looked down. Despite being a six-foot drop, the height surprised him. He forgot the last time he was at an elevated height that did not involve stairs or elevators.

The formation of boulders continued to rise with the hill. They were tucked into one another, but he could slip into a crevice. Don’t fall, he thought to himself.

Her legs ignited like pistons and she sprang onto the next boulder, this one about her height.

“Impressive jump, but is this safe?”

“People do it all the time. Come on, or I’ll leave you behind.”

“Just because everyone does it doesn’t mean it should be done.”

“You’re not going to move a thousand-pound rock.”

“The same can be said about snow, but one wrong move and it can trample you.”

“Mr. I’m-From-the-South knows about snow, huh?”

“I’ve seen videos.”

“I’ve been here since I was a kid. I’ve climbed these boulders with my dad before he passed away— he didn’t die bouldering, so don’t worry about that. He actually— You’ll be fine. Trust me.”

Cade skeptically jumped onto a boulder. “I can’t jump the one you did but I can manage this one.”

He became more comfortable as he traversed the boulders. His footing adjusted to the gritty stone. He even tried to push against the large rocks, to see if they would give, but they remained in place. A few slip-ups made his heart pump, but he made it to the top unscathed.

She high-fived Cade. “Now, time to admire the view.”

The campgrounds centered the park, mostly trees and hiking paths for casual visitors. Cade’s campsite was concealed by trees. To the right, miles away were the mountains he and his friends visited on their first day, and ahead were the pools of water that brought sustenance to the fauna.

The wildlife was hidden, but he knew they were roaming, swimming, flying all around. Thousands of hearts flowing blood and oxygen, their bodies breathing in and out. A conglomeration of species living together, yet amongst themselves, eating those below for food, and running away from those above. They were living.

He could still hear the lovely birds, their singing more skittish now.

“I like it here.” Cade’s voice was shaky, and he was unsure why. “Thank you for showing me this.”

She nodded in understanding.

He said, “It’s my last full day here. We leave tomorrow before noon, then it’s back to my scheduled life. I don’t want to go back.”

“What do you do for a living?”

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“I work in an office in the city. I follow a to-do list and whatever my manager tells me. Not much else to it. You?”

“You’ll laugh at it.”

“It can’t be worse than working a 9-to-5 unless you do that too.”

“I want to act in movies.” Her words were prideful but tinged with gloominess. “TV shows maybe? I moved away from home years ago, went to an acting school. It’s been some time now and I get acting gigs, but they aren’t worth mentioning. I do side jobs, which are my main jobs. I walk dogs, bus tables, whatever pays the bills. I’m somewhat successful with freelance photography.”

“I’m sure you’ll find something soon,” he said. “Photography? Is this a job-related trip?”

“I’ve never photographed this place, and I never will. I’m here to refresh my mind. All I’ve thought about lately is how I’m nowhere near to my goals, and about— I needed this trip.”

“You reminded me of life back there. I saw it in your eyes last night and I saw it today. I guess I wanted someone to talk to.”

The birds still sang.

“I envy the animals here,” Cade said. “Their life holds no purpose, yet they’re fine living that way.”

“They’re living but hold no purpose? What you said is paradoxical.”

“I mean all they have to do is wake up, fulfill survival needs, sleep, then repeat. They have no goals other than to survive. Bears don’t want to be actors, bison aren’t dissatisfied with their careers, and birds aren’t thinking about how mundane life is. They’re satisfied with what they have. But me? I always want more, but I never know what I want.

“My mind floods with minuscule things I don’t care about. What’s on the news? What’s today’s tragedy? I don’t want to know, but I also need to. The world around me goes on, and it feels selfish to sit back and retreat here. My mind screams at me to partake, but it’s all a distraction.

“I’ve been better since I came here. My friends locked my phone away in the car, so I have nothing to worry about, but I think I’m distracting myself again. There’s no such thing as silence for me. It’s all noise.”

Cade turned to the woman. He forgot he was talking to someone. He placed his index and middle finger on his wrist, the side closest to his thumb. His heart rate steadied.

“Sorry,” he said.

“It’s alright. It’s refreshing.”

“What is?”

“Talking to someone that struggles as I do. We won’t see each other again, and you’re revealing your troubles to me.”

“I might see you one day on the big screen. You never know.” He pondered. “We could talk for a while longer, then we’ll go our separate ways. Does that sound good?”

She placed her hand on his and said, “It does.”



A few miles away, a wolf pack begins its attack on two bear cubs, a brother and sister less than a year old. The separated mother searches for her lost kin.

The cubs are inexperienced at fighting, so they attempt to run, but the wolves encircle them, still cautious to the cubs' innate strength. The wolves snarl and present razor-sharp fangs. One pounces forward, its first bite connects. The only chance for the ensnared cubs to live on is to fight back. The momentum shifts further, and the wolves realize now is the best time to advance. Lacerations ensue, and the wolves break down any point of resistance. The cubs do not survive the onslaught.

That night a mother mourns for her loss, the wolves relish in their triumphant hunt, and the birds go silent.

Snowy Owl, Michael Koppenhoefer

