

**Silas Oaktree
and the
Fox's Challenge**

by Nicholas Ballard

Book One of the Silas Oaktree Series

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To all my flock.

[Chapter One: The Forest Council Meeting](#)

[Chapter Two: The First Clue](#)

[Chapter Three: Harvey Oaktree](#)

[Chapter Four: The Brass Cage](#)

[Chapter Five: The Fox Den](#)

[Chapter Six: Zig's Story](#)

[Chapter Seven: The Barn](#)

[Chapter Eight: City Birds](#)

[Chapter Nine: Back to the Fox Den](#)

[Chapter Ten: The Prisoner and the Puzzle](#)

[Chapter Eleven: Spring Cleaning](#)

[Chapter Twelve: Epilogue](#)

Chapter One: The Forest Council Meeting

March in Tennessee laid in the pissed-on side of springtime. It was still dark at the edge of the forest, the pre-dawn chill permeating the nest. Silas Oaktree stood up, stretching his wings. He looked over at his wife, Crystal.

She was still sleeping, her recently augmented bulk resting on four turquoise gems. One of the eggs was sticking out too far from Crystal's warmth. Silas rotated it tenderly with his beak until it was tucked back under his wife's breast. She shifted in her sleep, but didn't wake. Like the rest of the forest, she was still.

Looking at Crystal sleep, breathing slowly in and out, her dull plumage blending in with the strings of browned plant matter weaved into the nest, Silas felt a warmth that made him temporarily forget about the nip in the air.

We're doing this, Silas thought. We're really doing this, hatching a family. And it's going to be better for my brood than it was for me when I was a nestling. Her and I, we're going to do it right.

Silas puffed out his chest, his deep red breast expanding. He hopped to the edge of the nest, surveying out from his vantage on the great oak.

The oak tree was on the edge of the state forest, adjacent to the backyard of a suburban development. The nest was on a prominent branch midway up the tree, and the tree itself was one of the best nesting properties in the forest. So Silas had thought, and so he still thought, two years after he and Crystal had moved to this part of the woodlands. An out of control fire had forced them from their old home in Virginia, but all in all, he thought they had come out of it having moved up a branch in the world.

Silas' brother Harvey had moved along with them. But that was another matter entirely. On the whole, they had moved up a branch.

What Silas didn't understand was why he had been sleeping so poorly lately. His eyes felt heavy on the sides of his head, like weights trying to anchor him to the nest.

But there was too much to do. Whether it was the Forest Council meeting later today, the mental pressures from impending fatherhood, or the thought of a much-needed full day of worming that he had been dutifully putting off, Silas would not feel justified in snoozing through the morning.

Silas tilted his head, scanning his surroundings. A gray squirrel with a bend in his tail ran along the ground, toward the human structures. Towards the feeder, Silas was sure. As long as water was still wet, and the sky was still up, the squirrel was heading to the feeder.

An early breakfast seemed like a good idea to Silas too. He launched off the side of the nest, plummeting some feet, navigating the oak branches and budding leaves. He spread his wings, translating his vertical drop into horizontal progress. Silas zipped over the expanse of lawn, overtaking the squirrel. He landed on the railing of the large wood deck attached to the back of one of the houses.

The squirrel was Colin Nutter, a neighbor who lived in a nearby beech. The kink in Colin's bushy tail was pronounced, but not so bad as it had been last week. As Colin climbed the deck, Silas greeted him.

"Your tail?"

"Your mother."

Silas flipped his tail feathers contentedly. Colin appeared better than he had last week, when he had hardly left his beech tree. Colin skittered to the bird feeder, angling his weight onto the frame of the feeder's seed silo, as the perch was spring loaded to close from a squirrel's weight, and reached in for some seed.

"Nah," Colin said. His cheeks worked in circles chewing the seed. "It's getting better. Throbbled like a son of a grub after Sadie tried setting it, but this morning not so bad." Sadie was a young female gray squirrel Colin was seeing.

Silas hopped over, flitting to the feeder's perch. "Maybe you should have the vet who lives in the blue house look at it."

Colin guffawed, some seed spitting out. "Let that quack grab at my bush? No thanks, Silas." He nodded, indicating the dog sleeping in the doghouse the next yard over, a brown sixty pound short-hair. "Ralphie was yippin' soprano when that lunatic chopped his nuts off last month. I'm no friend of the flea bag, but even I'm feeling a little sorry for him. You hear that?" Colin shouted so Ralph could hear. "I pity you, you mutt!" Colin tittered laughter.

Ralph's ears switched back and forward, one eye squinting open before he went back to sleep. It was too early, even for barking at squirrels.

"Hey, lay off Ralph," Silas said. "I like him. He just chases us for sport. He never hurt even one of us. Besides," Silas pointed his wing at the sliding door on the opposite side of the deck, "he keeps that ill-tempered furball on her toes."

On the other side of the glass, a cat with long white fur swished her tail menacingly.

Wings beat closer.

"Ill-tempered? Who's talking about my wife behind my back?" Mack Starling landed beside Silas and Colin. Silas found he enjoyed Mack's company, whose shiny, clean black feathers, marbled with white, contrasted starkly with his dirty mouth. Mack wasted no time bobbing his head into the feeder. "So what have you girls been jawing on about?"

"Oh, you know," Colin said, "The same, really. We were just debating which was worse: your nesting habits or your mating call. I said your mating call, but then again, it's not me sleeping in your dropping-filled nest."

Silas chirped laughter. Mack joined in good-naturedly. "Hey, at least my tail isn't looking as crooked and ugly looking as something else your girl Sadie's been mentioning...."

Colin's jowls sagged. He swore at Mack.

Mack spread his wings. "Colin, kiddo, easy! Don't get in the ring if you can't go ten rounds with the maestro!" He dipped his beak back into the feeder. "You might be onto something about the dumping though. If Corey keeps putting out this so-called seed, I could fly over and paint lines for the high school field myself."

"It's better than that muck we see them putting out for Sour Puss over there."

Mack looked over at the cat inside the door. Yes, Maybee. She was as wicked as her name was atrocious, and there wasn't a bird around who didn't love to hate her. Mack jibbered his beak mockingly at Maybee, spreading his wings. "What? What?"

The cat stirred irritably behind the glass; they could see her mewling to go outside. Too bad for the cat, Corey, who owned the house, and his girlfriend, who recently moved in and brought Maybee with her, never got up before a beeping signal from inside the house repeatedly went off, stimulating them awake.

Mack was right about the seed, though. Silas could taste the cheapness. Feel it, too, when it came out much the same as it went down. "I'll have to talk to Corey, tell him to put out something better."

Mack let out a low whistle. "That's our Silas Oaktree, the one we know and love. Always going to bat for us, when the rest of us are sitting on a branch with our wings folded up like a-holes. I love ya, buddy."

"What?" Silas didn't know if Mack was patronizing him. Sometimes it was hard for him to tell. "It's just bird seed, guys. Corey's decent. He'll probably listen."

"Mack's got a point, Silas." Colin was packing his cheeks with more seed, so his words were becoming more garbled. "It's not just bird seed. You're always thinking about more than just yourself. You care about more than just what's inside your own nest. That's not common. Not for a bird, not for anyone. Speaking of which, you going to nominate yourself at the Forest Council meeting today?"

"No, I —"

"Yeah, Silas," Mack said, "Why aren't you running for Council this time? Cougar made a nice big vacancy when she ate Ten Point Tom. You'd have our support, buddy. You're liked well enough in the forest, and we could tweet good words about you — help you with your campaign."

Colin put on a show of thinking hard. "Say good things about Silas Oaktree.... Whatdya say, boys? It will take some getting used to, but anything's worth trying once...."

Silas cawed at Colin, but he knew he was kidding. Did they really want Silas to run for Council? He had never even entertained the thought. Now, imagining himself on the Council, debating endlessly with the other animals, forest politics seemed even uglier up close than it did from a distance.

"I don't know, guys. I've got a clutch of eggs incubating. Four more mouths to feed, plus, you know ... Crystal is still not ..."

Even Mack seemed sobered up. "Yeah, I've been meaning to ask. How is she? Still not flying yet?"

"Not since hitting that bay window."

"Oh, man. Sorry to hear that. You know, sometimes it takes a while to get over the shock of something like that. I know a grosbeak that — Well, like you said, with the eggs incubating...."

Mack rustled his feathers uncomfortably. Colin's tail twitched.

A yellow ball of feathers flapped their way. Silas felt a flood of relief. His best friend in the world, Mitch Birdsly, falling from the sky ... a subject change from heaven. The goldfinch landed on the feeder, budging up between Silas and Mack.

Mitch sensed the atmosphere. "Who died?"

Mack said, "My appetite, the moment I saw your ugly beak."

"Down a fox's throat with you." Mitch looked over at the squirrel. "Sorry, Colin."

Colin shrugged. His tail bristled. "Whatever."

"But really, what were you guys talking about?"

"Just how Silas should run for Forest Council, but he's being a selfish prick saying he doesn't want to, but we all know he isn't a selfish prick, and that's why we want him to —"

Mitch turned to Silas. "Not a bad idea. Why don't you? Yeah, Silas. I can't think of an animal better up for the job."

"Why? So I can squabble with Barnes and the rodents over every stupid thing that's going on in the woods?" It came out more snappish than Silas would have liked, but he meant it. He didn't want a Council job; he had enough responsibilities under his wings already. He didn't need his friends putting him out in the clearing like this.

"But that's why you'd be perfect for the job, Silas," Colin said. "You aren't a grub-juggler. You wouldn't be taking the job to feel important, which is why the other Council Members are doing it. You'd actually be doing it for the good of everyone in the forest."

"Lay off him, guys," Mitch said. "You might be right that he would be good for the job, but that's not going to make Silas do something he doesn't want to do. He's got a lot he's got to do already. Don't you, Silas?"

Mitch darted into a feeder hold, his black capped head and wings handsome on his yellow body. If Silas didn't know Mitch better — they were, after all, born just a tree away from each other — Silas would have mistaken Mitch's seeming casualness for something other than the show it was. Mitch might want Silas nominated to the Council perch, but he knew pushing the issue wouldn't budge Silas an inch.

The blaring wake-up signal went off inside the house, muffled from the closed window, then stopped abruptly. The one time Silas had asked, Corey, the human, said there was a way to hold off the signal, though it could only be appeased for so long.

Colin, his focus taken by the sound (then the cat, the sleeping dog, the wind blowing through the trees — he was rather titchy), turned back to the group. "Silas is the only Oaktree I'd be voting into the Council. Who'd we elect, Harvey? There'd be mandatory Crazy Berry harvesting. We'd all be thinking we could smell the color blue, and —" He noticed what he was saying. Mack and Mitch were suddenly interested in choking down the dry seed. Silas' wings slumped.

"Hey, Silas, I'm sorry, I —" Colin started. Silas held up a wing to stop him.

"No, it's okay. I know he's got a problem. Harvey knows too. He just ... likes his problem too much. That's all."

That wasn't all, and Silas knew it. The rest of them probably knew it too, and that's why they almost never brought up the oh-so-taboo subject of Harvey Oaktree. Silas' older brother Harvey had been flying high on mushrooms, Crazy Berries, poison leaves, and anything else that scrambled brains into bird droppings for years now.

"Sorry Silas."

"Forget about it."

After that breakfast buzzkill, it wasn't long until Colin left, saying he had to look for some acorns he'd misplaced. Mack made an excuse too, except he didn't put as much effort into it as Colin. He mumbled vague hissing and gargling sounds in his throat, finally giving it up as a bad job. "See you ladies at the meeting," he said, before taking off.

More birds were flying in and out now. Chit Red Squirrel came up on the deck, but he wasn't much for banter. Silas and Mitch pecked at seed in silence, husking shells off sunflower seeds tasting uncannily like Christmas lights.

Silas could sense what was coming.

Finally, Mitch said, "You know, they do have a point. Maybe you should go for the Council Perch."

Yep. There it was.

"Mitch. What am I going to do, huh? Deal with the flaming a-holes that already are on the Council, plus deal with the human Wildlife Resources Agency ... on top of taking care of Crystal? Plus to mention the eggs ready to hatch? Not to mention Harvey ... The ground has barely softened enough for serious worming...."

"Okay! Okay! You made your point, Silas. You can stress out better than anyone I know, I get it. But maybe that's why you should consider —"

"— I said I'm not —"

"— Let me finish. I'm not saying to run for Council. I know you've got a lot of bills to take care of. But that's the point the others were trying to make. They're just not as suave and good looking as I am, so I have to make it for them.

“Seriously though, the point is that you actually are taking care of the other bills. You don't let things slide, Silas, in a good way. You handle things. You care. You know the saying, 'If a bear doesn't craps in woods, does he even matter?' Well, you do give a crap. You do matter, Silas, because unlike the rest of us tick-bitten creatures —"

"— I don't think that's how the saying about the bear goes."

"My point, Worm-face, is before I feather a nest with some dull-feathered hottie and start hatching Mitch Juniors — like someone I know is doing with his girl — I would want to know someone is out there trying to make the forest they hatch in a better place."

Silas's feathers were almost sticking straight off his body. "I am trying to! ... " He deflated, took a breath. He did not want to keep talking about this ridiculous idea. "Just leave it."

"Silas, I'm —"

"Just ... leave it."

Mitch shook his body placatingly. "Okay, Sigh. Okay." Silas knew the son of a grub was trying to hide his amusement, feeling like he had won something.

Soon Mitch flew off to practice singing — a warbler was teaching a seminar on how to get more reverberation into your call. Silas felt out of practice himself; after he a Crystal started going steady, he just didn't see the point.

Silas had eaten the seed for himself, if you could call it much of a breakfast. What he needed was to wrangle up some worms for the gullet. Real, live, nutritious worms. Grubs, too. Nothing beat the crawlers when it came to food, and with Crystal incubating the eggs, he wanted her to have only the best.

Still, Silas hoped when the eggs hatched in a couple weeks, if everything went okay with the baby birds, Crystal would start feeling well enough to fly again. It had been over a month now, and the excuse of incubating aside, Silas was worried.

The sounds of movement inside the house went from the top floor to the bottom. Silas could see Corey shuffling around inside, oblivious to Maybee winding around his pajama bottoms, supplicating access to the outdoors. Silas admired Corey for his dismissal of the cat. Most humans were subservient. Maybe it was

because Maybee was only truly bonded to Corey's girlfriend, Jenny. Maybe it was because Maybee was a real pluckhead.

Corey was average height for a male human. (Which is to say, large. For that matter, most things that didn't crawl through the ground eating dirt through one end and pooping it out the other were considered large by robin standards.) Corey had black hair, long enough to cover his ears but not much more; a roundish face for a human; full lips (human lips crept Silas out, how they were flushed flat to the face); and a stomach that pushed out his wife beater top.

Corey reached in a cupboard, pulling out a box and a bowl. He poured seed for humans into the bowl, dumping his weight into a dining room chair just on the other side of the glass. Corey stared out the window vacantly as he ate with no apparent enjoyment. Perhaps, Silas thought, because with spring coming, Corey had no need for his extra winter weight.

He finally saw Silas, who stretched a wing in greeting. Corey gave a lethargic wave.

Silas did not have all morning to watch Corey graze like a deer. He landed on the deck, hopped to the glass, and tapped with his beak. Maybee ran up on the other side, pawing the slider.

"Stay right there, bird! I'll be out to play with you soon!" A motor sound started in Maybee's throat as the twisted feline was undoubtedly fantasizing tearing Silas to bits. The least he could do was help her visualize.

Silas spread his wings out wide, puffing up his red breast looking all the more appetizing to the cat. When he started a sidestepping mambo in front of the glass, she licked her mouth.

"You want this? You want this?" Silas sang, jiggling back and forth, undulating his wings in The Wave.

"You little pluck!" Maybee screamed, slamming her paws into the glass. "I'll rip your plucking throat out, then crush your ribs with my teeth!" She was losing it, cursing out Silas, then Corey when he told her to shut up.

Corey got up, motioning Silas to retreat to the railing. He tried holding Maybee back with his foot as he opened the slider, but she lept over and onto the deck. Her movements turned to stalking as she moved under the railing.

Silas tutted. As if he suddenly couldn't notice a twitchy white ball of fur slink across the brown deck. He perched atop the feeder. Corey huffed.

"Damn it, Maybee! Get back inside! I've got to get ready for work."

"Pluck off, Corey. I've got a bird to maul." Maybee stared fixedly at Silas, all eyes for him as she prepared to jump onto the railing. She didn't notice as Corey came up from behind her. He punted her sidelong with his foot. Maybee yowled indignantly.

"Get the pluck out of here, Maybee! Get back inside! If you weren't Jenny's cat, you'd go for a ride to the pound."

Silas had known he liked Corey for a reason. But rather than go back inside, Maybee slinked down the steps and out of sight around the corner of the house.

"Corey," Silas said.

"Silas."

"How are you?"

Corey sighed, "Fine." He rubs his arms. "Cold. Damn! It's freezing."

"You're telling me. I live out here."

"I can always tell it's you. The mark on your beak. And you have a deeper red than the other robins."

Silas puffed out his breast. "Thanks, Corey. You don't look too bad yourself." It was a lie, but flattery works both ways.

"Say, Corey, what kind of seed do you have in there? What's that you're eating?"

"Seed? I guess I've got some of those chia ... Oh, you mean ... cereal?"

"Yeah. What kind of cereal is that you got?"

"Cheerios."

"Cheerios." Silas bobbed his head, acknowledging he understood. The one with the picture of the bee on the box, with the mutated face. Silas knew an unorthodox queen who lived deep in the woods, but he had only ever encountered bees that made honey; he had never come across bees making Cheerios. Nor, frankly, did he care to. If he did, he thought the hive best be destroyed and the unnaturalness stopped before it spread throughout the forest. "Yeah. Cheerios. I've tried those. The little loops, right? Yeah, they're okay...."

"Say ... Corey. I see you're cold, so I'm going to get right to the point. Lately you've been putting out seed for us birds and squirrels that's ... let's just say ... not too good. We appreciate it and everything, it's just —"

"— I put it out for the birds, like you. I don't want the squirrels eating it all up."

Corey was missing the point, but at least he was participating.

"I'm sorry. What ... what does it matter if squirrels eat the seed?"

"Because I want you birds to have it."

"Why just birds?"

"I don't know, because ... I like seeing you. Your colors and stuff."

Colors and stuff. Silas wasn't one to judge, getting a bird pregnant in winter even before he was calorically secure and with a fully built nest, but Silas thought humans were supposed to be smarter than this. It just went to show....

"I'm flattered Corey. Really, we all are, that you put this seed out for us. I can't say how much it helps. Especially in winter."

"I like to put suet cakes out, too. Help you put on fat."

Silas pointed his wings enthusiastically at Corey, needing to hold tight to this one and only lucid point Corey had made all morning.

"Suet cakes! Yes! That's what I'm talking about! See —"

"But the squirrels get to them ..."

Silas stared blankly at Corey. What was this bizarre preoccupation with squirrels? Did Corey have nothing better to think about? Silas needed him to focus.

"Well, the suet cakes, see — those are good. Really good. You should keep those up. Personally, I love suet. Especially when they mix the seeds in the fat ... yum. And the last brand of bird seed you put out, before this one ... that was right on. That was good. You should really get that again. This seed, though —"

"— This seed was on sale," Corey said proudly. "There was a coupon in the Sunday flyer for five dollars —"

"Corey." Silas tried not banging his head repeatedly against the rail. "Corey. We appreciate you putting out food for us. We do. And I'm talking to you now as a friend, and because you put out the best spread in the whole development. Everyone else, it's like they forget about us. But you — you care, Corey. And that's why I'm going to talk straight with you: You're putting out bird seed now, and it's not cutting it."

"I'm putting out bird seed now —" Corey tried following along.

"— And it's not cutting it," Silas finished. "It's Grade F crap, and it's got to go. Whatever this is now, I don't know. The sunflower, flax, everything else ... I don't know, it's just off. Smell it. It's not right. We need you to put out better seed."

"Uh, um ... alright." Corey was shivering, his arm hair spiked. "When you guys finish this bag, I'll —"

"No. Corey. Today — a new bag of seed. The good kind. Right before work —"

"No, I can't. Grace ... I've got to get in, I hit the snooze too much already ..."

"Fine. After work. Go to the store, get the good stuff. Whatever this is," Silas indicated the feeder with his wing, "It's got to go. Dump it out. We'll start over fresh."

Corey said he would, and Silas thanked him. Corey was a decent human, through and through. When Corey understood what he needed to do, he went and did the right thing. It was another thing Silas liked about him.

"How's Grace?" Silas asked. Grace Winsworth was an old female human who lived a five mile straight flight into the city in a old Victorian house. Corey went to care for her as an in-home hospice aide. Silas had started visiting her at Corey's request, as she loved birds. As any sensible creature would, really.

Corey shook his head. More than the cold seemed to be bothering him. "Her lymphoma's at Stage Five. Has been, even when you first met her. Can't believe she's held on this long, but she's tough."

"Yeah. Yeah, she is," Silas bobbed his head. As Silas understood it, Grace was old, even by human standards. Maybe even tree standards. "I'll have to pay her a visit soon."

"She'd like that."

They cut the conversation short as Corey got back inside. Silas flew off in haste to get his work done before the Forest Council, which was scheduled for around four o'clock.

Silas spent the better part of the morning hunting worms. He started on a boggy hillock abutting the forest. The pickings were good; it seemed every hole in the ground, had a worm, Silas turning and tilting his head against the ground to peer into the holes. He filled his crop, making multiple trips back to Crystal in the nest, regurgitating the haul into her mouth. With four eggs on the way, she needed to eat well.

In the afternoon, a shallow depth into the woods, Silas ran into Rob Robin, an acquaintance since hatchlinghood. Rob was a pompous dandy who preened too much, and they hunted the same ground occasionally. They made small talk about the Council meeting — Rob told Silas he was considering running for Ten Point Tom's old spot.

Silas couldn't put a talon on it, but Rob Robin had always annoyed him. Silas tried to not hate him, but it was instinctual; between his too-interested questions in how Crystal was doing, and his redundant name, it was hard not to.

Rob wasn't the only one talking about the Council Meeting, however. Hawk Cooper, who helped patrol the forest, spotted Silas from miles off with his obnoxiously good vision, landing to remind Silas about the meeting later, as if Silas could possibly forget with everyone bringing it up.

Later on Silas heard a big lumbering animal down by the stream. It was Momma Bear, out with her two new cubs, Spike "The Griz" and Joe Bear. They were new this winter, the forest's first offspring of the year, and the whole forest had gone goo-goo eyed for them. The two cubs frolicked in the stream.

"Why, hello, Silas," Momma Bear said in her low, drawling voice.

"Hi Momma Bear. Look at those two! Looks like they're getting ready to hunt."

Joe Bear was pawing at something in the stream; The Griz ignored the water, taking his brother's distraction as an opportunity to launch an assault on Joe Bear's back.

"They're still young yet, Silas. Still learning their berries, and pawing at crawdads. Spike, stop that!"

Spike "The Griz" went on attacking his brother like he hadn't heard his mother. She turned back to Silas.

"Silas, I hear you're running for Council. That's wonderful ... I'll be sure to cast my vote."

Silas' feathers bristled. "Who told you that? I never said I was running for Council!"

"It's the talk of the forest, Silas. Everyone is saying what a good Council member you will be, and I agree with all my heart. You've been nothing but good to me, getting a thorn out The Griz's paw ... eating ticks off my back.... Speaking of which, Silas, you wouldn't mind, would you?, if ..."

Silas took the hint, hopping on her back and scouring for ticks. Silas didn't mind; ticks went down easy enough. He searched through her black coat, his voice muffled by the thick fur.

"People have been saying I would be a good Council member?" Silas paused as he wrangled a ticks jaws out from Momma Bear's skin, biting down on its crunchy body. He was rewarded as the engorged tick burst, squirting warm blood in his mouth. "I'm not interested in forest politics. I've got a family to take care of, hatchlings on the way...."

"You have family values, Silas. That's a plus. I don't want to name names, but some of us consider family values important. These boys, for instance: Spike and Joe hardly know their father ... out wandering miles and miles, who knows where, marking territory ..."

Not naming names, right. Like Poppa Bear. Silas didn't see any reason to voice this out loud. He continued rummaging for ticks.

"The point is, Silas," Momma Bear went on. Silas had been hearing a lot of points today. "The Forest Council could use someone like you. Everyone thinks you would be good for the Perch."

"Not everybody thinks that." It was a nasally voice coming from nearby. Silas looked up from Momma Bear's fur. Fox came out from behind a tree. His pointed ears stuck out from a narrow face that held a perpetual sarcastic smile. His bushy tail bobbed as he trotted nearer.

"Actually, from what I've been hearing around the forest, a lot of animals don't even want to see Silas run for Council," Fox said, stopping at the stream's edge closest to the playing cubs. "In fact, I've heard creatures say Ten Point Tom getting ripped up was the best chance this forest has had in years for some real change. And they don't want that chance screwed up by another narrow-minded bird brain on the Council."

"That's a terrible thing to say!" Momma Bear said. "Fox, you should be ashamed!"

"It's okay, Momma Bear," Silas said. "Fox is a little sore from Colin escaping him last week. See, unless he's out destroying someone's life, the miserable pluck feels his day's wasted."

"Pluck!" The Griz repeated from the stream. So he wasn't as deaf as he had pretended with his mother.

"Spike! Silas, please! Your language!" Momma Bear prickled with indignation.

"Yeah, Silas, you should watch that dirty beak of yours." Fox giggled a clownish laugh. He surveyed the cubs as they romped in the shallows. "Whatever injustice you think I did to Colin, you're mistaken. The squirrel had lost a wager we had set, and just because he didn't honor our agreement, and I got a little nibble at his tail. It doesn't make me a villain...."

"When you set the price of your challenges as the other animal's life, do you really expect them to pay up?"

"Absolutely," Fox said. "It's called honoring an agreement, Silas. Something, despite what some of the other animals have been saying about you ... I thought you knew something about ..."

"Bug off, Fox. If you're still smarting because I beat you in that challenge with the pebble in the soda bottle —"

Fox's perpetual smile fell. "I paid up for that. You found your brother right where I said. Though why you even bothered with that maggot was is beyond me...."

"Fox, please!" Momma Bear said pleadingly. "I don't see what any of this has to do with the Council meeting this evening ..."

Silas could tell she just wanted the arguing to stop. He didn't mind: just seeing Fox was enough to get his blood boiling.

"It's okay, Momma B," Fox said. "Silas and I are just old friends, trying to see eye to eye. Now, if I was him, I would focus on my family. Eggs hatching, nice wife ... a brother, when he's not out scratching anyone's fur for a quick Crazy Berry...."

Silas wanted to stab Fox's eyes out. Fox went on.

"If I were Silas, I would keep to pulling worms out of the dirt, and keep my beak out of Council business. That's just what I would do, if I knew what was good for me. Momma Bear, you've got two nice little cubs to think of. Joe, and ... Spike — 'The Griz,' right?" Fox chuckled. "I like that. 'The Griz.' You bears should be real careful. Human hunters, prone to accidents, wandering off too far.... You need a Forest Council who's looking out for you. You need more than a bird picking ticks off your back...." Fox's voice lifted in crazed humor. "But that's just me." He tittered.

Momma Bear wasn't the sharpest thorn on the bush, but even she had her limits. She reared up on her back legs, Silas holding on with feet and beak. Momma Bear let out an almighty roar, slamming her paws back to earth and charging Fox.

Fox yelped, retreating along the bank and up a rise. When he was far enough away, he turned.

"I'm warning you, Bear. You don't want to get lumped into the same fate as the company you keep. If I were you, I'd keep the ticks, and lose the bird."

With that bit of repartee, Fox was gone.

"Don't listen to him, Silas. Joe Bear! Spike! Get out of that stream and get over here, right this instant!"

Momma Bear huffed as her cubs frolicked closer, taking their time in getting back to their mother.

"Fox is just worried you are going to get that Council Perch, like I'm sure you will. He's always into those tricks of his, planning and scheming...."

Silas shut his eyes, rubbed the bridge of his beak.

"Like I said a million times, I'm not going for Council. But you're right about Fox plotting. He's always scheming up something, but I don't think he wants to get on the Council himself. He's too much into his wagering and dealing. He's too offbeat to get full support from the forest. Plus he's too busy making a fortune in the Berry trade."

Silas also knew his own brother, and the loser juiceheads he hung around with, were some of Fox's biggest customers. The poison plant trade was illegal in the forest, but good luck trying to tell Harvey Oaktree that when he's toasted off his branch on a Berry bender.

"Siley!" The Griz and Joe were back by their mom. Silas said hi to the cubs, flew over and ruffled The Griz's fur on top of his head. Momma Bear said they were going back up to their den to get in an afternoon nap before the Council meeting.

"The boys will be bored at the meeting — their first one. But you know how children are, Silas. You will, that is —" Momma Bear tried stifling a huge yawn, failing. "Eeeyahhh! ... Excuse me, Silas. I was saying about the eggs on the way. I'm happy for you."

Silas spent the rest of the afternoon worming, filling his crop for one more trip back to the nest to feed Crystal and check on the eggs before heading to the meeting. It embarrassed him going to the meeting without her. They were husband and wife, and Silas was sure the other animals would be asking. Saying Crystal was incubating the eggs would float today — after all, it was true — but Silas knew that excuse had an expiration date.

Why couldn't Crystal get over it? She hit a window. So what? It happened to a lot of birds. What really stuck in Silas' crop was knowing she was still able to fly. She had gotten back to the nest alright. It was the shock that had set in later. That, or she just decided she didn't want to fly, and that the nest was safer.

Silas hated himself just then, realizing his wife embarrassed him.

Worming the Crawford family's lawn — they were having septic issues, and the wet lawn was a buffet of worm spaghetti — Silas heard a chirp of greeting behind him.

There she was. Rose Topbranch. Pale pink breast; dulled plumage; elegant, petite frame. An ornithologist's wet dream.

Silas' breast expanded, trilling a greeting back. It sounded off-key to his own ears; he kicked himself for not going to the warbler's seminar with Mitch. He felt shaky-winged. "Hi ... Hi Rose."

"Hi, Silas." Her voice was melody itself.

Silas scratched the ground, turning his head in a display of what he hoped looked like expert worm-spotting. He failed to notice the one crawling over his right foot. "So ... are you going to the Council meeting later?"

Was he really bringing up the Forest Council meeting? Of course she was going. Her and the rest of the forest.

"Yes." She giggled. "Are you going?"

"Yeah." Silas didn't know what else to say. He kicked the worm off his foot, busied himself looking for another one.

"Well, if you want, we can fly down together. I was just getting some lunch. I heard the Crawfords' was crawling. And look ..." Rose plucked a worm, thin and delicate, and jackhammered it down her gullet.

God. She could even make eating worms look sexy.

"Yeah. Um, sure. Okay. So, do you want me to meet you back here? I've got to do something real quick, and I can meet you back here, and we can go down to the meeting together? You know, just as flying buddies?" Silas swallowed.

Rose giggled, assenting. Silas flew off, feeling lighter despite the worm bits packed in his crop. He flew through the oak branches, alighting on the nest.

Crystal looked up from rotating the eggs.

"Hi Silas, how was your —"

"Hurry up and eat this." Silas jammed his beak to hers. He began retching worms into her throat. Crystal's eyes were wide. "I'm going to be late to the Council meeting. Come on, finish up. Gotta go."

"Silas —"

He regurgitated more worms into her mouth, cutting Crystal off. When he finished, Silas nuzzled her head distractedly, hopped to the side of the nest without glancing at the eggs, and flew back out.

When Silas got back to the Crawfords' lawn, Rose was still there. They flew off together into the woods, and to the Forest Council meeting.

The Council meeting was about two miles into the forest from the human development. Silas and Rose flew together between the trees, piloting around branches, rounding trunks. Animals of all kinds moved below them, heading where they were headed. They broke into a clearing.

Ferns and fallen trunks, patches of bare ground and roils of dirt carpeted the clearing. Though it was hardly past three, the clearing and the trees surrounding were milling with woodland creatures.

Mitch Birdslly flocked with a group of other birds, listening to Flash Goldplume, a large white and gold parrot who had escaped human enslavement, tell a joke. Even Hawk Cooper took a break, trying not to look amused by the joke, as if enjoyment was something unprofessional. Silas and Rose landed.

Mitch nodded to Silas, doing a double-take seeing Rose fly in with him.

"Rose, sweetie," Zig Chickadee said, a snowbird down from New York, making lewd clicking sounds with his tongue. "Why are you flyin' around with that worm bag? Get over here and rub some of that color on me..."

The birds guffawed. Flash asked Zig if he wanted something else rubbed on him. Everyone laughed. Zig pointed a wingtip at Flash. "Watch it, you fast talking son of a grub. At least I don't look like my mother got in the nest with a clown before poopin' you out."

Flash laughed it off. "We'll really miss you when you fly back up north, Zig. Really."

Mitch leaned in close to Silas. "So, what's up with you and ..." he said softly, looking right at Rose, jerking his head in her direction. Real subtle.

"Nothing. Just flew here together."

Mitch didn't pursue it. They looked up when a big shadow soared over them, toward the center of the clearing. It was Wesley Barnes, the Forest Council's Top Perch. Mitch warbled, testing out what he learned at the singing seminar.

"Look who's early, as always.... The old bean counter himself. He'd rather leave his nest not wearing his feathers than be late — even if he is nocturnal."

Barnes was a great horned owl, his plumage a camouflage brown mottled with white. He was on a stump in the middle of the clearing, arranging some papers he had brought with him. Most animals learned to read at least a little, but Wesley Barnes' ability to read and write was something else entirely.

Silas circulated, making talk with the other animals he knew. Rose stayed on his wing for a while, quiet, nice to look at, until she got caught up chirping with some of her girlfriends. Silas could feel the eyes of Rose's friends on his back as he chatted with Bud Turkey. Silas didn't see Bud's wife Janine, but where one was, the other wasn't far off. Bud was alright one-on-one, but when Janine was around, she had him pecked. Silas didn't see why Bud put up with it.

"Barnes looks like an egg's going back up the wrong shoot, don't it?" Bud said. He gargled a soft chuckle.

It was true. Wesley Barnes always seemed annoyed, his imperious eyes daring you to waste his time. As Barnes surveyed the crowd from his stump, however, head twisting around in full circles, searching, he looked more ruffled than Silas had ever seen him. A raccoon approached Barnes — Rex Washer, a junior Council member. Silas could not hear what Barnes asked, nor Washer's response. Barnes' down moustache blew out as he hooted annoyance.

The crowd swelled, thousands of animal voices a cacophony ringing through the clearing. John Deer was there with his bevy, the human baseball cap he was fond of covering his head between his antlers. Alf A. Wolf and his pack stared in the direction of John Deer's group, licking their chops. Fox was in the shaded part of the clearing, talking animatedly with a group of animals, who seemed to be nodding at everything Fox said. Fox barked an unmeasured laugh, and as the group laughed with him, Fox looked past a crane's neck, his eyes meeting Silas'. He sneered.

Silas flew around with Mitch, looking for a perch; the trees were packed with birds, and finding a spot was difficult. Some of the stoner birds were there, but Silas didn't see his brother Harvey. It figured. Harvey probably was passed out in some bush, a poison thorn sticking out the fold of his wing.

Silas told Mitch about his run-in with Fox when visiting Momma Bear.

"I don't see that big broad here. Slept in late, probably. Still, would have been nice if Momma Bear had Fox for lunch ... do the rest of us a favor."

Silas agreed. "Look at him. If being a racketeer wasn't enough, looks like he wants to be a politician on top of it." Fox's tittering laugh carried up to the top branches.

"We could go over there and drop a load on his coat...."

Silas was mulling over Mitch's suggestion when Wesley Barnes fanned out his wings, letting out a feather-raising scream, cutting through the din of thousands of voices. Most the animals went quiet at once; nothing from Wesley Barnes came as a suggestion, and demanding quiet was no exception. Still, some animals chattered.

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