

Firewing: Chapter 1

Griffin

It had rained during the day and now, under a three-quarter moon, the forest was silver with mist. Things always smelled better after the rain, Griffin thought as he sailed through the humid summer air. From the forest floor rose the loamy fragrance of the soil, and the rich stink of rotting leaves and animal droppings. The resinous tang of pitch wafted up from the firs and pines as he grazed their topmost boughs.

A new smell suddenly twined its way through all the others - one that didn't belong to the forest. Griffin felt his fur spike up. Nostrils flared, he sniffed again, but the smell was gone now, evaporated. Maybe just the dying traces of a faraway skunk. It was pungent but... somehow hotter and more dangerous. He stored the smell away in his memory so he could describe it to his mother back at Tree Haven at sunrise. Then he angled his wings and set course for his favourite hunting ground.

The giant sugar maple occupied a small rise on the valley floor, and its canopy spread wider and higher than any tree nearby. After Tree Haven, this was Griffin's favourite place in the forest. He loved the way the moonlight washed the leaves a translucent silver, and when a strong wind blew, the leaves looked and sounded like a thousand bats, all taking flight at once.

Circling low overhead, Griffin cast out sound and the returning echoes painted the tree's canopy in his head with more detail than his eyes could ever achieve. He saw each branch and twig, each bud, even the veins of the leaves. And, of course, the caterpillars.

They were everywhere. The maple, like plenty of other trees in the forest, was infested. Gypsy moth caterpillars, that's what they were, and they'd already stripped the tree of half its leaves. Every night for the past week Griffin had come here and fed, but the next night, it seemed there were just as many caterpillars as before. Just look at them! There must be hundreds of them! His stomach made a hungry popping sound.

He trimmed his wings, and tipped himself into a steep dive, spraying sound ahead of him. The first caterpillar he scooped right off a twig with his tail, flicked it into his wing and then straight into his open mouth. Ducking under a branch, he wheeled and snapped up two more dangling from threads. Curled on a nearby leaf was yet another caterpillar. Griffin streaked in close and with a swat of his wingtip bounced it right off the leaf, gobbling it in mid-air. They were a bit fuzzy going down, and had a slightly sour aftertaste, but you got used to them.

"Doesn't it get boring?"

Griffin looked up to see Luna, one of the other Silverwing newborns, swooping down alongside him.

"They're not so bad," he said.

The truth was, it made him feel useful. The caterpillars were voracious eaters, and his mother said they could gobble up half the forest if they weren't controlled. The thought had filled Griffin

with panic. He didn't want to see his forest stripped bare, especially not his favourite sugar maple. A horrible vision had played itself before his eyes. Without any trees the soil would wash away and without soil nothing could grow and there'd be nowhere to roost and nothing to eat and all the Silverwings would probably starve to death or have to leave and find a new home!

So Griffin ate caterpillars.

And every time he swallowed, he was helping stave off total catastrophe. That's how he saw it anyway. But he didn't tell Luna this. She already thought he was crazy.

A nice fat tiger moth fluttered past, no more than a few wingbeats from his nose. Griffin let it go.

"You don't want that?" Luna asked in amazement.

"It's all yours," he told her, and she was already gone, plunging down into the trees after her prey.

Griffin watched, admiring the expert way she swerved and tilted through the tight tangle of branches. He'd tried to catch tiger moths once or twice, but he was no good at it. They sprayed out their own sounds and scrambled up your echo vision, so it seemed like there were a whole bunch of moths, all darting in different directions and you could end up chasing a mirage and getting splatted against a tree. Wasn't worth it. Also, he wasn't the greatest flier. His wings were too long, and he felt clumsy in the forest, couldn't manoeuvre fast enough. And there were beasts down on the forest floor: bear and lynx and fox. He preferred to stay up high, where he could see what was what. He didn't mind eating mosquitoes and midges and caterpillars.

The boring bugs, Luna would say. Griffin looked and caught one last glimpse of her before she disappeared into the foliage. He hoped she'd come back afterwards.

Below him, a maple leaf glittered with dew and he carefully checked out the nearby branches before roosting. Further down was a nest of warblers, but they were all asleep, and anyway, birds didn't attack bats anymore, so it seemed safe enough. He braked, spun upside down, and gripped the branch with his rear claws. Thirstily he lapped up the bright beads of water on the leaf.

"Why don't you just drink from the creek," Luna asked as she flipped down beside him.

"You never know what's under the surface," Griffin replied darkly.

"Sure you do. Fish!"

"Right. But from what I've heard, some of them can get pretty big, and what's to stop them from just leaping - "

"Leaping?"

"Leaping, yes, right up out of the water and taking us down with them."

"A fish?"

"Well, a big one, why not?"

"Fish don't eat bats, Griffin."

"So they say."

"It must be tiring, being you," Luna said, but she was chuckling. Griffin had noticed this about her. She liked hearing him worry. She seemed to think it was funny. That must be why she hung around with him sometimes. It certainly wasn't because he was brave or adventurous like her. But she still seemed to consider him a friend, and he was intensely grateful. She had a hundred friends, though, and it was rare he had her all to himself. Normally there were half a dozen other newborns flapping all around her.

Luna's tall ears pricked up and with a nimble forward lunge, she snatched an earwig off the twig above her. Griffin cocked his head, studying the insect as she cracked its shell.

"You know," he said thoughtfully, "when you look at most of what we eat, it's not altogether appetizing. If you really stopped and looked at it, I mean. All those legs going, and the antenna tickling your throat on the way down..."

"Stop it," Luna said, giggling, "You're gonna make me choke."

With a flurry of wings, three other newborns came in to land, calling out hellos. There was Skye and Rowan and Falstaff, who was so stuffed that the branch bowed over and bounced up and down a few times after he roosted. Griffin knew they'd come because of Luna. If it had been just him hanging here alone, forget it. It wasn't that they disliked him - he doubted they even thought about him enough for that. They just didn't see the point of him.

Boring, Griffin thought. That's what he was to them. And they were right. There was nothing special about him. He wasn't a particularly good flyer or hunter. He hardly ever joined in with their games. And why should he? They only ever seemed to want to do ridiculously dangerous things. Now the little hairballs were shoving their way in and all chittering to Luna at once -- Skye about the moose she'd seen earlier in the night, Rowan about how fast he'd flown with the wind at his tail, and Falstaff about all the bugs he'd eaten, what kind, where he'd found them, and what they each tasted like. Luna seemed to be able to listen to everyone, and talk back, all at the same time.

When he was off by himself, Griffin hardly ever felt lonely. But now, amongst the other newborns, he did. He wasn't much like them. He didn't even look like them. Sometimes he thought he was barely a Silverwing at all. Their fur was sleek and black, shot through with silver. He had stupid fur. Most of it was black, but all across his back and chest were jagged bands of dazzling bright hair. The bright stuff came from his mother, a Brightwing. His father was a Silverwing, but it seemed he took after his mother more. Like her, his fur grew in longer and thicker than the Silverwings, and his ears were a different shape, round, small and close to the head. His wings were longer and narrower than the other newborns, but that wasn't really a consolation, because they still felt too big on him, made his flight all loose and jerky in the forest.

"Hey, Luna," Rowan whispered. "Look."

Griffin looked too and saw, roosting several trees away, an owl perched on a thick branch. Even though they were at peace with the owls now, the sight of them still sent a tremor of fear through Griffin. They were just so big, easily four times his size, with sharp talons and a hooked beak that was designed for slashing and crushing its prey. Griffin's mother still said they should avoid the owls. They were at peace, but that didn't automatically make them friends. All the mothers said so. Now the owl's huge head swivelled, and fixed them with its moonlike eyes.

"You want to play?" Skye asked Luna.

The owl game was Luna's invention, and it terrified Griffin. The idea was to see who could roost closest to an owl on the same branch, and stay there for ten whole seconds before taking flight. Several weeks ago, Luna came within two wingspans. No one had done better than that.

"Sure," said Luna. "I'm always ready."

"Me too," said Rowan.

"I'm in," Skye said.

"All right," Falstaff agreed, "but only if it doesn't take too long. I'm starving."

Griffin was hoping they'd just forget he was there, but Luna turned to him. "Griffin?"

He knew she meant it kindly; she wasn't trying to make fun of him, was just wanting to include him. He shook his head and caught Skye flashing Rowan a smirk that said, So what else is new?

"Well, that old owl looks pretty fat and dopey," said Luna jauntily. "I figure I can do one wingspan. What d'you think, Griff. Can I do it?"

"I'm sure you can," he said, "but -"

"But what?" she asked. Griffin could hear the other newborns sigh impatiently, but there was definitely a gleeful spark in Luna's eyes. "What's the worst that can happen?" she wanted to know.

Griffin almost smiled. This, he was good at. "The worst? Well, the way I see it, you fly in, you roost, you're only one wingbeat away. And maybe this owl hates bats, or maybe he's in a really bad mood tonight, or maybe he's so hungry he figures no one'll notice one less Silverwing newborn in the forest. You're so close he can just snatch you up before you even blink. And in one swallow you're down his throat and then you get hacked back up as a little packet of bones and teeth."

"That's disgusting!" said Skye.

"Yeah, well, that's how they eat," Griffin said, with considerable satisfaction. "And until a couple years ago, that's what they did to bats."

Luna nodded, grinning. "Yep, that's pretty much the worst that could happen. Wish me luck!"

She flexed her knees and prepared to take flight, but to Griffin's huge relief, the owl beat her to it. Spreading its huge wings, it lifted from the branch, and swept silently off into the forest.

Rowan looked accusingly at Griffin. Sourly he said, "You talk too much."

"Griffin's good at talking," Luna told the other newborns. "He's hilarious." Skye, Rowan and Falstaff all looked at Griffin, puzzled, considering this for a second. Then they turned back to Luna and started talking about what they should do next. Griffin gave her a grateful smile.

Suddenly, his nostrils twitched. "Do you smell that?" he asked.

Only Luna heard him. "What?"

"I smelled it earlier..." Sniffing, Griffin lit from the branch, trying to follow the scent. It wasn't hard. The smell was stronger now, definitely not skunk. He climbed above the tree line, and was pleased to see Luna flying after him. Climbing higher still, he turned his face into the wind, breathed again and then saw it.

Far away to the west, a line of dark mist slithered above the forest canopy, dispersing as the wind blew it towards him. Griffin's eyes traced it back down to the treetops, then into the forest. Through the sifting mist, past a stand of pines, he saw a bright flickering.

"Fire," he whispered to Luna. He'd never seen it before, but he'd heard plenty about it. Fire didn't come out of nowhere. It was made. By Humans. By lightning. But there hadn't been any lightning for weeks.

By this time, the other three newborns were flapping towards them, Falstaff lumbering through the air, complaining about how hungry he was. Then they all saw the light dancing deep in the forest.

"Maybe it's one of those secret places where the owls keep their fire," Skye said to Luna.

Long ago, as they all knew, owls had stolen fire from the Humans, and kept it burning in hidden nests throughout the Northern forests.

"Not very secret if we can all see it," Luna said.

"Must be Humans," said Griffin, and felt a shudder even as he uttered the word.

"Let's go take a look," said Luna.

"Yeah," agreed Skye. "Come on."

"Shouldn't we tell our mothers first?" Griffin said worriedly. Humans were dangerous. Everyone knew about the things they'd done to bats.

"We'll tell them when we get back," said Luna. "It's just a few hundred wingbeats." Impatiently this time, she said,

"Come on, Griffin."

"Oh, let him stay if he wants," said Rowan, and the words sounded more dismissive than considerate. As usual he was ruining their fun. Griffin turned east to pick out the summit of Tree Haven. It already looked a long way away, and they would be going even further now.

He wished he were more like Luna. Fearless. He tried sometimes to be brave, but it never worked. He just started thinking and then worrying, and all he could ever see was how things might, could, would go terribly wrong. His mother shouldn't have named him Griffin. When he'd asked what it meant, she said it was a creature who was half eagle, half lion - both brave, powerful creatures. It seemed like a cruel joke now, he thought glumly. Should've been called Weed, or Twig, or something.

He glanced at Luna. She looked genuinely disappointed. He grit his teeth. He'd already said no once tonight. He couldn't face two humiliations in a row.

"All right," he said. "Just a peek, though, okay?"

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