



## The Storm of All Storms

The wind howled throughout the day, and the late autumn leaves twisted wildly. As lightning flashed in the distance, booming thunder echoed throughout the land. Dead branches fell to the ground. Sharp *snaps* and dull *thuds* kept everyone's heads spinning.

Carl poked his head out of his tree hollow to assess the damage caused by a nearby crash when he heard the sound everyone dreaded. The Forest Alert System had been activated. A bird from the Westlands, the area west of Home, was the last bird in what had been a series of messengers. Her warning: The current storm was worsening, and more powerful winds were on their way.

As Carl watched the trees forcefully sway, often bending to the point of breaking, he wondered what else lay ahead of them on this ominous day. Through the relentless rain, he noticed something dark and large moving at a high speed ... and it was coming his way. He stared at the brown blur until it came into focus. It was an eagle. No, wait. It was Dee, and she was battling strong winds as she struggled to navigate through the trees. Carl was accustomed to watching her surf the thermals high above the treetops, but these winds were impossible to ride.

When the eagle landed on a branch near Carl, the bough dipped under her weight. Skipping the usual pleasantries, Dee immediately dove into the crisis at hand. “From what I hear, the incoming storm is a monster. The Westlands are being pounded with rain. Floods are washing away the topsoil, and mudslides are ripping trees from their roots. Everyone is scrambling for cover. We need to prepare.”

“Sounds like it’s going to be a bad one,” the owl replied.

“I just came from the Council Tree, and I have been appointed to coordinate the preparations. I selected you to be my assistant. Congratulations.”

“Uh, thank you,” the owl stuttered. “I am glad to help.”

“Good. Let’s begin. First, I need you to contact the parrots. They are responsible for communicating the strategy, once we determine what that will be. Second, talk to the other owls and have them draw up a plan. On second thought, scratch that. The owls will take too long. I’ll create the plan.”

Carl was a bit offended that Dee insulted his fellow owls, but he put that aside for now because there was much work to be done.

“Should I contact the doves?” Carl asked. “I can ask them to prepare to support anyone who gets displaced during the storm.”

“No time for that. We’ll worry about damage control later,” the eagle said as she flapped her mighty wings and disappeared.

“Okay, then,” Carl replied to the empty space where Dee had just stood. “I guess I will go talk to the parrots. Though I am not quite sure what I am supposed to tell them.”

The wind was pushing and pulling Carl in every direction as he made his way to his colorful friends. On arriving, he could

only tell them that it was their job to convey the storm strategy to everyone else, and that they should stand by. The parrots were eager to play their part.

As trees twirled beneath the dark gray sky, and violent winds tore leaves off branches and sent them swirling through the air. A wall of rain pelted Carl as he fought his way back to his tree. He felt responsible for keeping everyone safe, and uncomfortable at not understanding the plan.

Shortly after Carl returned to his tree, Dee arrived. Before she even touched down, the eagle began dictating orders. “Here’s what we are going to do. First, we will move everyone further south, where the storm is not as severe. The base of the large falls, just north of the pine forest, will be our meeting place. When we get there, we’ll take attendance and determine if we need to move further south. If we do, we will identify someone who has the energy and speed to fly ahead and identify trees with large leaves that can act as a canopy for the smaller birds. I don’t know if we have enough food to weather this event, but we’ll figure that out when ...”

“Hold on. I have a question,” Carl interrupted. He was feeling uneasy about Dee’s strategy. “How do you know that the storm will not be as bad in the south? When we were hit with a big storm two years ago, the south received more rain than the north did, and they had terrible flash flooding and landslides. Have you received additional information about what is coming?”

“No,” said Dee, “but in a crisis you sometimes have to make assumptions. My experience tells me that I am right. Besides, this is not a good time to doubt leadership. This is a time for action.”

“Whoa. Wait a second,” the owl requested. “I am not challenging your leadership. I just want to make sure we have thought this through. Is that your entire plan, or is it an overview?”

“That’s all of it,” Dee declared. “What more do you need? Head south and I’ll see you there.”

Carl was dumbfounded. Surely there had to be more. He stared at Dee in stunned silence.

Dee took Carl’s lack of response as acceptance of the plan, so she continued. “I will be part of the advance team. I’ll head south and establish a base. You make sure the parrots tell everyone where to go.”

And she was off.

Carl shook his head in disbelief. With great effort he made his way back to the parrots. He tasked them with announcing the plan, such as it was.

As Carl made his way to the pine forest, he thought about the storm and their options. He visualized their destination, and he had an epiphany. “We are heading south to seek cover in the pine forest, but pine trees do not have leaves! Where does Dee think we are going to get protection from the wind and rain? This will not do. This will not do at all.”

As he continued to fly, the owl watched the approaching black sky spread like a blanket across the forest. The rain had softened slightly. When he arrived at the meeting place, Dee seemed a bit smug that her plan was working. Carl approached the eagle and asked, “Now what?”

“The storm is still coming this way. We need to head further south.”

Dee turned away from the owl and hopped up to a higher branch. She called for everyone's attention, and the group quickly grew silent. "We can't stay here. We need to keep moving. Ivory, you fly ahead and scout out a safe place for us to shelter from the storm."

"Got it," Ivory confirmed as she leapt into the shadowy sky.

"Now, follow me!" Dee shouted over the growing wind.

*No, not again,* Carl thought. *We need to think this through.*

Without another moment's hesitation, the owl summoned his courage and let loose a mighty shout. "Deeeeeeeeeeee!"

To the owl's surprise, the eagle heard him and wheeled quickly around to return. When Dee arrived, she snapped a quick, "What?"

Everyone froze.

"Dee, can I speak with you for a moment?"

The eagle stared intensely into Carl's eyes without saying a word. The owl quickly began, "Your plan is not complete. Think like an owl for a moment. We need more details that include step-by-step instructions for each of us to follow. We need to carefully consider our strategy and determine precisely where we are going. I'd also recommend that we assign group leaders who will be responsible for ..."

"Carl, you think like an owl, but I'm an eagle, and that's not what I do. I was chosen to lead everyone through the storm, and so we're going to do it my way."

"But I just want to discuss ..."

Lightning cracked nearby, followed by an immediate *boom*. The raindrops grew bigger and began to hit harder. The storm was worsening.

“I already gave you clear instructions. Head south and find cover. As for assigning roles, here’s one for you. Get behind the group and bring up the rear.”

Before Carl could utter another word, Dee commanded, “We can talk about this when we get further south. I know what I’m doing.” Once again Dee announced, “Let’s go!” With a powerful pump of her wings, she launched herself into the threatening darkness.

The owl sheltered his eyes with his wing so he could better see through the pummeling rain, but all he could make out was the eagle’s fuzzy outline traveling away from him. As he watched all of the other birds get airborne, he remained on a branch thinking about what to do next. Watching his bird friends dodge leaves and falling branches prompted his decision to talk with Dee.

Carl was accustomed to making sharp, quick turns in the forest. Dee was not. Though it would take all his skill to navigate the deep woods and catch up with the eagle, he had to try. As Carl pressed against the wind, he thought about what he would say to Dee when he reached her. He acknowledged how much he appreciated her ability to handle a crisis without panicking, and he reflected on how he valued her willingness to take charge and make tough choices. Logic told him that she was the right one for this job, but her strengths seemed to be working against her. The eagle’s desire to be in control had closed her off to the ideas of others. Her decisiveness could potentially make her reckless.

The wind whistled through the trees as bursts of lightning illuminated the forest. Dee’s large wings slowed her down, which gave Carl the opportunity to catch up. As he watched the eagle

repeatedly adjust her path based on ever-changing airstreams, he realized that he needed to shift his approach to her.

In a flash of insight, Carl recognized that he was treating Dee like an owl, not an eagle. He was trying to change how she acted when, in reality, the only thing he could truly change was how he dealt with her. Talking about plans and clarifying roles wasn't going to get him anywhere with Dee. Those were his strengths. He needed to adapt his message so it made sense to Dee, and encourage her to maximize her own abilities. This wasn't going to be easy, but...

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