

Restored Roots

The organization in the following story is based upon the Red Cross, who has provided disaster relief, from fires and many other natural disasters, since 1881.

Danger, heat, pain, destruction.

This is what surrounds me. How did I get here? It is the question I ask myself over, and over. I look ahead at the pile of flaming wood and sheetrock that stands in my way. On my right, the willow trees weep as the strong oaks and fragile aspens fall as equals. For nothing can stand against the fire. One of the orange-leafed aspens has crashed down on my tail, my balance, my fifth limb. Pain sears through my body, making my vision blurry. Rusty, Poppy, and Marigold, my small fox pups, are trembling underneath me for protection. Blade, my mate, is gone. Where was the peace that was here not so long ago?

I have always had a good life. I live in a strong den, I have three adorable little babies, and I have a faithful mate. I also have Hazel; she is a human, but I like her. She has very pretty eyes, and she is kind. She will leave all the berries on the bottom of her bush for me, and sometimes she will leave pears from her tree on the edge of her yard. All other humans I fear and stay away from, but not Hazel. I never get too close, but I hang around because I know she likes me too. It was my turn to hunt. It was the perfect time. Humans were out just about every other time of the day. I had been walking through the forest of aspens and birches. I admired their beauty and strength. I watched as the wind blew through the flowers. The roses with their sassy thorns, and pretty petals, the daffodils filled with joy, and splendor. The tulips, knowing their time is almost over and yet still rejoicing. And the

daisies outshining the rest, like the sun to fireflies. I lay down and rolled in them, smelling them, breathing in starlight.

All of a sudden, smoke rolled in like fog. Hot fumes blew in the wind, ushering me away. Danger was on the horizon. My instincts were about to explode. The foul smell filled the air, worse than any skunk I had ever met. I saw the monster of flames engulfing trees in the distance. With my young foxes in mind, I charged for the den that had been dug by my mother between the roots of an old oak tree. When I got there, I saw that Blade was gone. The pups were rolled together like one lump of red, bristly, dough. Whimpers filled the air. I called out to them. *Safety*: it was the only thought on my mind. I had to protect them, it was my purpose. My heart sank at the thought of Blade looking for us, but he did not return in time to join our wild escape. I ran with ash raining down on my head, I ran for the lives of my little ones. I ran for myself, so that they might have a chance. Then a flaming aspen came crashing down on my tail. And here I am.

Suddenly, I hear the bellow of a hound. My body tenses. The huge dog leaps over the pile of flaming wood. He has a white vest with a red cross on it. I have seen dogs like this before, digging humans out of a variety of troubles. He looks into my eyes and lets out a short bark. He comes over to me. I growl. He darts in and grabs my tail with his teeth. White hot pain rushes through my body once again, deep into my bones. But I will not give up; I have to protect my pups. I snap my jaws on his front leg. He pulls my tail out from underneath the aspen. I am about to attack, but he turns and runs away in the direction of where he came. I wait. Then I dash after him, knowing he will go somewhere safe from the fire, dancing through the wood. There were no thunderstorms that week. Humans had done this. As I run away with my pups trailing right behind me, I see things flash by: a deer

corpse, half eaten by flame, a meadow of black spikes, destroyed homes. I watch the surroundings change from forest to town. The dog runs to a man. I turn and dash down the street. We continue on at a frantic pace, away from the smoky perfume of the forest.

It is pitch black out except for the orange glow in the not so far distance. We keep moving. We come to a big patch of ferns and Poppy, Rusty, and Marigold nestle down into them. They curl up together and fall asleep, exhaustion taking over. Then, gloriously, rain in big heavy drops comes to the rescue. Fierce water drops fight the fire. I let it soak my fur and watch as the light of the fire dwindles. Finally, mother nature comes to soothe the wounds of clumsy humans.

Before the sun rises, we are up. By midday we arrive at a meadow. Not my meadow, a foreign one. There are white tents upon white tents. I stay in the trees, not wanting to be seen. One section has tents with red crosses printed onto the side of them. *Just like the dog*, I thought. Even more abundant than the tents were the people, flooding from every direction. Some were crying, running, or limping; none were smiling. I heard snatches of conversation. "Help me set up another tent here!" said one person.

"Are they relatives of the Burtons? They're in this tent over here," said another one.

Then I saw her: Hazel, my only human friend, kneeling down on the ground, weeping. My heart ached within me. I wanted her to feel better; she was always so good to me. Her mate was standing next to her with their young child in his arms. They had all made it out of the fire. Some people were talking to her in comforting voices. "Don't worry, the Red Cross is sending in more food and water; we can help you and your family. I am so sorry about your mother...I'm sure she was an honorable person."

"Why are they helping us?" asked the child.

“They say that each person has the power to save a life,” the man replied, almost to himself, meditating on the words he had heard earlier that day. Hazel was just like me, a mother who was trying to escape the fire with her family. We had both lost someone we loved, and we were both going to have to rebuild our homes. As I watched the humans’ generosity and efforts to help each other, compassion welled up inside me; their wrongs had done this, but their good could restore what had been lost. With a backwards glance at the city of tents, I ran around the meadow through the trees that bordered it. Now to rebuild *our* home, just like the humans. We are not so different.

When I knew we had gotten far enough away, we made our den in the roots of a birch tree. We wove through them and dug a little into the dirt ledge until it was perfect. Food was scarce. Days turned into weeks, weeks turned into months. I provided for my pups. They became strong, independent, and one by one eager to venture out on their own. Poppy left. She no longer called me when she was in danger. Next Rusty. He no longer relied on me for food. Finally Marigold. She no longer felt fearful to explore the unknown. Their skills and instincts had been honed: hunting, survival, and the ability to care for their own pups one day.

Although I liked my den, cozied in with the earth and the trees, I missed the one where I was born. A year passed. I was four and growing older. I had led a good life and served my purpose; I had cared for my young ones so they could care for their young ones. But I had a hole in my heart. No daisies grew here. I missed my childhood aspens. I missed my roses, daffodils, lilies, and tulips. I missed Hazel too. I wanted to go back and decided I would. I started my journey. The sky turned into a star-filled night. I heard the howl of

coyotes, their calls revibrating through my body, energizing me. When my paws were scraped bare, and I could go no further, I collapsed.

A cool breeze woke me. It was after sunrise. I kept on. I could see traces of the scorched black land. But past it I could see the beauty and the rebirth of the forest. I could see the green creeping up. I could see the meadow with green grass mixed in with yellow reeds, not black spikes as before. I could see the grove of trees where the aspen fell. As a lightning bolt, I raced down the hill like pure energy. I ran into my meadow and rolled in my daisies. Once again I was breathing in the starlight.

I lay there all day until dusk. Then I saw them: foxes, on the far side of the meadow! Six of them. One male, two vixens, and three silky babies. I recognized the male as Rusty. Pride filled me until the hole in my heart was overflowing. I ran over and rubbed noses with him; this was my introduction to his family. We all went to live in my mother's den. She would be happy to know that she was *still* providing for her great grandchildren. And there I lived with a joyful heart. The people had started rebuilding their homes, as I had rebuilt mine. I would see them now and then, laughing, and running and having fun with each other, just like before. Their lives had come back to them and I hoped they would never take for granted this opportunity to start again. Then one day I saw her; she was playing with her daughter. It was Hazel! I was so happy that she was back in her home, just as I was back in mine. She glanced over her shoulder and met my gaze. She smiled as tears came to her eyes, but they did not fall. She silently raised her hand to me in a hello.

