



Chapter 1

Year 3072 AA
Day 70

A white-hot light filled the eastern sky above the trees. Kooper couldn't resist looking through the bare branches straight into the blinding glare. As a jolt of pain took his sight, he dropped to his knees. His eyes slammed shut, but even so, through his eyelids a bright pulsing orange glowed. *This isn't possible*, he thought. *The clouds are too thick to see the sun*. Confused, his eyes on fire, the grey squirrel was paralyzed with fear. To be blind was the worst possible thing he could imagine, and here he was, helpless to see.

"What is it, Kooper?" Sharani called out. They had been chasing one another through the forest when he stopped. She could see his eyes were now clamped shut, seeping ~~water~~ **tears**

Sharani crept close and reached out to take his paw in her own. As soon as they touched, she too saw the blistering light. With a gasp she jerked away to cover her face, hiding behind a tree. But the moment she let go of Kooper, the harsh light disappeared. "What is happening?" she implored.

Unable to speak, Kooper shook his head. The pain behind his eyes had disappeared the instant Sharani let go of him. He was just as bewildered as her. Kooper finally managed to pry open his eyes, looking down and away from the sky, to find the blinding light gone. The sky, the forest, had returned to normal. *Did that really happen?* he asked himself. Kooper's fear lingered, but now he wanted to rid himself of it and get back to the righted world. Sharani had never before shown him this much attention ~~or even smiled at him this much~~ and he was hungry for

more. He knew evening was approaching and his ~~remaining~~ time with Sharani would soon end.

As Sharani watched expectantly, half-hidden from behind a tree, Kooper winked and grinned at her, a wordless invitation, and bolted back into their chase. Sharani laughed over her shoulder and took off just before Kooper could reach her, up an oak tree and across its branches. She slowed to allow Kooper to come close enough to ~~now~~ touch her before she quickly twisted away out of his grasp. They threw themselves from branch to bough, scurrying ~~around~~, up and down the tree trunks. Wishing to prolong the tantalizing game, Kooper left the image of uncommon light behind as the two reveled in their romp.

Sharani slowed just enough for Kooper to come near her again and with a quick turn and a sudden burst of speed she darted just beyond his grasp, coyly letting him brush against her. Chests heaving ~~as they panted~~, Kooper and Sharani sped after each other in a ~~kind of~~ heated dance, ~~their eyes fixed intently on one another~~. Twice they stopped mid-stride, ~~only their tails twitching and their chests heaving~~, before rushing off after one another again. Kooper didn't want this to end.

Neither of them noticed the Eastern sky becoming lighter again until the sun suddenly blazed low above the horizon through the trees, sharp and bright. Kooper's eyes shot skyward and stopped again. Right on his heels, Sharani tumbled into him, flushing with embarrassment at the sudden awkward contact. Kooper stood transfixed as a brilliant gold illuminated the shimmering trees. *This is crazy*, he thought. The day was nearly spent. The sun setting in the Eastern sky was impossible! Before he could sort it all out in his head, he was startled by a distant voice.

"Kooper, wake up!" barked Boggs, his brother.

Confused, still inside his dream, Kooper didn't respond.

"Wake up! It's the First Light! Koop, wake up!" Boggs shouted, finally resorting to shaking his brother.

Opening his eyes, Kooper saw only pitch black and he bolted upright. His head hit hard on the unyielding oak ceiling of the nest, and he grimaced at the sharp pain.

"The morning of FIRST LIGHT is coming!" Boggs repeated.

Realizing he had been dreaming, Kooper groaned, sorely disappointed that the imaginary romp with Sharani was over. All memory of the intense light was lost for the moment.

“Oh, let me sleep!” moaned Kooper. “If you only knew. . .” his voice trailed off as he closed his eyes and wrapped his tail around his nose, wanting to sink back into his delicious dream.

“It’s the First Light!” Boggs persisted, impatience making his voice anxious and shrill.

The import of these words finally penetrated his fog and Kooper jerked himself awake. Scrambling to rise, he narrowly avoided smacking into the hard wood again. Rubbing his still stinging head, he tried to orient himself. He was unable to see anything in the darkness, but he knew from the scents surrounding him that he was in the nest he shared with Boggs.

~~First Light.~~ “**First Light.**” Kooper repeated those words **aloud**. Remembering the strange light of his dream, he wondered, *Could that be what I saw?*

Every winter thick gray clouds completely filled the sky above the forest, blocking all sunlight until the precious sun returned in the spring. It had been so for as long as their Tribe could remember. Ancient tradition held that if one of them greeted the dawning rays of spring’s first sunrise from atop the highest tree in the forest with song, it would be the greatest of good omens for both the Tribe and the Singer. However, climbing in utter darkness before dawn was the most fearful thing any of them could imagine. Grey squirrels had poor vision at night making them especially vulnerable to owls. For generations, no squirrel had been courageous enough to dare make the terrifying climb.

The last remnants of Kooper’s dream—of Sharani’s fur brushing against his, of her smiling ~~at him~~ **face**—vanished as the import of Boggs’ announcement fully sank in. “Are you sure it is time, Boggs? How do you know? What do you Sense?” he asked in a rush. Boggs didn’t answer.

Kooper reached out and gently touched his brother’s back. Boggs was sitting straight up and utterly still in the darkness, facing East. Kooper closed his eyes and concentrated on opening his mind to Boggs and Sensing ~~Boggs~~ **his** thoughts. *Maybe*

he knows what this all means. Kooper felt the telepathic oneness with his brother, and for the briefest moment, the bright light of his dream returned before it dimmed and disappeared. Kooper immediately realized that Boggs had also Sensed the strange light in the sky ~~Kooper~~ *he* had witnessed, but only Boggs had realized what it foretold.

A light rain began to patter against the tree outside the nest, quickly increasing. In no time, the wind intensified, the rain became a heavy downpour and the air was charged with electricity. The rain blew through the opening of their nest, drenching their fur, causing them both to shiver. A jagged flash of lightning lit up Boggs' wet face just inside the nest's entrance, water drops sparkling, before everything turned pitch black again. Watching from the back of the nest in the dark, Kooper realized that Boggs' eyes were open wide and bore not a hint of fear.

An immense clap of thunder shook the great tree and for a second, fire reflected inside their nest from outside the entrance. Terrified, Kooper squeezed his eyes closed after which all was eerily quiet once again. Trembling with *fear*, Kooper slowly opened his eyes to see only the darkness of their nest. There was no fire, no bright light. The storm was miraculously gone and his fur was dry. Kooper reached for Boggs. He *was* also ~~was~~ dry. *Was this, too, a dream?* Kooper wondered.

"Boggs, I heard the storm! I saw the lightning and fire! I felt the rain blow into the nest. We were both wet. But now we're dry?" Boggs remained silent. Kooper tried once again to focus and Sense out his brother's thoughts. Kooper caught a glimpse of a soft, golden sunrise glowing behind a curtain of trees before quickly fading to darkness. In its wake, Kooper became aware of the sadness Boggs was feeling. Instinctively, he reached for Boggs' shoulder. Kooper shared the profound sense of loss his brother felt, as though it was his own burden. Without a word, he gently stroked Boggs' back. Finally, Boggs turned around and spoke softly but urgently.

"You know I cannot be the Singer. It must be you. You have the voice. You have the heart. The courage. The vision. You must be the Singer."

Kooper began to protest, "I can't..."

Boggs cut him off, grabbing his paw. “No, don’t argue,” he urged. “Go now before it’s too late. It will be light soon and you must climb the Singer’s Tree to greet the dawn. You must sing!”

Boggs reached out with both paws and gripped Kooper’s shoulders. “Sing for both of us, and for Mother.” Boggs released his grip and instantly Kooper sensed that Boggs had blocked him from any further connection. Saddened and subdued, he gently placed his paw one last time on Boggs’ shoulder and sighed in resignation. “You’re right,” Kooper said out loud. “It must be me.”

Boggs moved away from the nest entrance to allow Kooper to peer out. A cold north wind struck him in the face, instantly bringing tears to his eyes. Kooper knew the thick, twisting limbs of their grandmother’s ancient oak tree stretched out above, but they were invisible in the black night. He knew he would be unable to see anything as he crossed through the trees and climbed the Singer’s Tree. Shivering from cold and **fear**, Kooper listened intently but heard only the moaning of the wind. He wanted to stay with Boggs and share the warmth of the nest with him and dream again of Sharani, but ~~he used~~ **using** all his willpower **he** ~~and~~ forced himself to crawl out of the nest into the cold night. Though blind and completely vulnerable in the total darkness, Kooper realized his brother experienced the same dangers, the same **fears** every day and night. Boggs had been blind since birth.

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