

## CHAPTER FOUR/Seasons

The grazers were hungry.

The cold season was lingering, and the young were being born. The does needed better forage and couldn't find it. The bucks ranged far, into new and unknown territories looking for any sign of green shoots under the decaying brown of the forest floor.

They hovered at the margins of the woods and made forays into the fields, the meadows, the pastures. Here and there a small, sheltered nook by a boulder, near a cliff, in the crook of the stream, or partway up a hillside yielded some delicacy.

More often than not, bark filled their bellies, the bark of smaller trees, deciduous trees that would not grow again after the hungry herd passed through.

The does trailed along, doing their best to protect the young already born and falling back to deliver the young that were ready to appear.

The wild cats, the wild dogs, the wild bears and wolverines, they circled, and waited. Their young, too, needed to be fed.

The trees felt the cold, too.

The light was stronger, and the patterns in their fibrous trunks required growth, but growth was slower in the cold. The water of life struggled to reach the tips of the branches, often still frozen even when the sun was bright at fullest height. So the energy that had been stored in the roots, the sugars that fed the cells and pushed out the buds that had formed even before winter began, failed to arrive and the trees remained dormant.

This year, the cold was lasting longer than any trees had experienced. The long-lived trees felt it, with unexamined knowing, and paused. The rhythm was interrupted.

The smaller plants, too, were in distress. Shrubs and sub-shrubs, the plants of the understories, the margins, pre-forest colonizers of open spaces were not growing at the light levels that triggered growth. They attempted to send out shoots, runners, buds, leaves. Most were small, delicate, and easily damaged or lost.

Bulbs sent up shoots from their reserves, shoots that were quickly sampled by the grazing animals. Even if unpalatable damage was done, and for the rest of the season the plants would struggle to produce enough starch to feed the bulb for next winter.

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The patterns of growth were interrupted. When the warmth finally arrived, late and listless, the plants could not grow according to their habits. Many gave up. The stronger ones survived another year, but with fewer seeds and seedlings produced to fill the gaps that a year brings to a landscape.

The birds, migrating again or beginning to nest, were thrown off by the cold and the storms. They needed food, but more importantly they needed flying weather. To move from point to point against the wind was far more energy-intensive than they had nutrition to provide. And the usual food sources were few, and paltry.

The insects were not out, or out but in smaller numbers, or out in full numbers but not in the right locations. The blooms that some of the birds sipped out of were absent. The plants that sheltered them as they roamed from place to place lacked foliage.

The air that season was wrong.

The weather that season was wrong.

Just wrong. The rhythm of wind and rain were off. First, the rains fell. And fell.

And fell. The soils absorbed all they could, and the water ran off filling gullies and valleys.

Still the rain fell. The soils ran into the rushing waters, staining the churning foam brown and black and green.

And still the rain fell. It fell gently and persistently, then sporadically and hard. The air pressure dropped and colder air from another place flowed in, and turned the silvery drop white with ice and snow.

The ice coated the branches and ledges. The snow fell on top, and absorbed more liquid when the rain returned, weighing everything down until a cacophonous clatter rang out. Again, and again.

The landscape shook with the impacts of branches, hillsides, trees and boulders, falling under the weight of the too-heavy snow and the too-much rain.

The animals, crazed, ran toward the only shelters they knew.

Some of the shelters held.

Some of the shelters fell.

The scavengers were well fed, but the new generations were diminished. The resilience of the lands was gone.

The waters raged. They swirled and swelled.

In the deep places, where the ice never reached, a steady cascade of cold water sifted down.

The fish huddled, gulping the cold, oxygenated waters and waited.

In the worst of times, the fish of the depths survived by waiting, by staying at the edge of the cold, and at the edge of the heat. The others survived by placing eggs in sheltered spots and leaving the young behind to grow as best they could.

But the cold was long-lasting, and the sheltered places, and the unfrozen depths grew smaller.

And then the rains came.

The water rushed above, breaking through the ice, churning the clean water with mud brought from upstream, brandishing sticks and logs with fury.

The fish were tossed around, carried downstream, pushed onto newly-formed sandbars and beaches. They gasped in the cold, inhospitable air, seeking oxygen without lungs and dying.

When the vernal weather arrived, the young animals that had survived were stunted. They were hungry, and the adults that survived wore threadbare coats and showed more bone than muscle. The plants were greening out, budding and blossoming, but the pollinating insects had emerged, been disappointed and moved on – or died. Only self-fertile or wind pollinated fruit would form.

It was late, the warm, dry weather.

The occasional rain shower or gust of air racing through the tops of the tallest trees and along the rims of canyons were gentle now, and barely noticeable to ground-dwellers, but the birds felt each raindrop and each breeze the way an old scar feels when caressed. It was not comfortable. They flew on, muscles aching with strain, finding nesting materials, or food for hatchlings, but finding them in poor condition, lacking the qualities that were best for strong fledglings.

The foragers, the grazers, the hunters were watchful now. Most of the young that had survived were beginning to wean, but food sources were still scarce. The early berries were small, and sour. The roots and corms, those that had not rotted in damp and moldy soils, were of similarly poor quality.

The plants felt the soils warming, responded to the warmth by bringing up extra nutrients and pushing out buds and leaves. The petals of the blossoms unfurled and expanded as if embracing all of Nature.

Bees, moths and flies tickled the stamens and pistils in the flowers, and then, laden with pollen, moved to the next bloom.

The ground, carpeted with yellow and orange pollen, sent up puffs of color with each step.

Each breeze sent a haze into the sky and obscured the outlines of objects just beyond.

As the warm season came into its own, the animals and plants that remained found the rhythms restoring and became the pattern again.

Until the heat began to stretch out, reaching over the landscape like a pale premonition. As the dry extended its reach past the weeks and months, fruit ripening on the trees hardened. Berries shriveled, and flowers dried then dropped.

The low spots, where amphibians of all kinds congregated in ponds and pools and puddles, developed a lustrous, then merely shiny, then a matte surface. The amphibians hid under logs, dug down when they could where the warmth did not reach, and waited.

Grasses, that had leapt into action at the first sign of warmth now huddled, clumped together in rigid poses, in shades of ochre and shivered with every hot breath from the sun.

Trees began to drop needles and leaves as the water beneath them dried up. Fruit and nuts formed a carpet over the withered wildflowers of the forest floor. The cool, misty glens were no longer a refuge for larger animals, who lay panting in what shade they could find.

And the sun glowed, now red, now orange, as smoke from fires filled the air. At night, the moon waned and waxed fitfully, in paler shades of blood and brown.

Nature was dying.

And the dry season lingered.

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