

The Cinnamon Forest



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Pip the squirrel lived in a busy oak tree at the edge of the meadow. He had warm russet-brown fur, a cream belly, and big round amber eyes that never stopped looking for something new. A tiny green leaf was tucked behind one ear for luck. Pip was bold and always first to investigate. "Come on!" he would call to his friend Nutmeg. "Let's see what's over there!"



Nutmeg was smaller and rounder, with soft grey-brown fur and a white belly. She kept a little acorn-cap pouch on a vine string around her neck. Her wide dark brown eyes noticed things Pip often missed. She followed him happily but always nudged him to be careful. "Wait for me," she said, hopping along. "The world is big, and we are small."



One morning after a soft rain, a wonderful smell drifted across the meadow. It was sweet and warm, like cinnamon. Pip lifted his tiny pink nose and sniffed the air. "Do you smell that?" he asked. Nutmeg sniffed too, and her whiskers twitched. "It smells like the cinnamon cakes we once smelled from a far kitchen," she whispered. "Where does it come from?"



The two young squirrels scampered toward the fragrance. They crossed the meadow and hopped over a mossy log. Beyond it stood a forest they had never visited before. The trees were tall and twinkled with raindrops. "I've never been here," Nutmeg said softly. Pip's amber eyes sparkled. "Then it's time we were!" he said, and in they went.



The unfamiliar forest was quiet and green. Every leaf sparkled after the rain. Pip hopped ahead, his bushy tail with its pale tip swishing. Nutmeg followed close, her fluffy tail curled tight. "Pip, slow down," she said. "This place is strange." But the sweet cinnamon fragrance grew stronger with every hop, and Pip could not wait to find it.



Soon they found the source. The bark of the tall trees was smooth and reddish-brown, and after the rain it gave off a warm cinnamon fragrance. Pip sniffed a trunk and sneezed happily. "It's the trees!" he squeaked. Nutmeg pressed her nose to another trunk. "Oh, it's lovely," she sighed. "Like a whole forest made of cinnamon."



Pip was so excited that he dug his tiny claws into the bark to climb higher. A little strip of bark peeled away and fell to the ground. "Oops," he said. Nutmeg gasped. "Pip, look! You hurt the tree!" A thin line of pale wood showed where the bark had come off. The lovely fragrance seemed to fade for a moment, and Pip's ears drooped sadly.



Just then, the leaves rustled above them. Down stepped a tall, thin figure, gnarled as an old tree. His skin was bark-brown, his hair hung like moss, and his honey-gold eyes glowed warmly. Tiny mushrooms grew on his shoulders. He carried a twisted cinnamon staff, and its tip glowed softly. "Hello, little ones," he said kindly.



Nutmeg hid behind Pip, but Pip stood tall. "Who are you?" he asked. The old guardian smiled a wrinkled smile. "I am Old Barkwick. I look after this forest." He knelt down and looked at the peeled bark. "The trees share their cinnamon fragrance after rain," he said. "But their bark is like a coat. When it peels, they feel cold and hurt."



Pip's cheeks turned pink under his russet fur. "I didn't mean to hurt it," he whispered. Barkwick nodded gently. "Curiosity is a fine thing," he said. "But in a new place, we must be gentle and careful." He showed them how to sniff close to the bark and how to touch it lightly with just the tips of their toes. "Never pull," he said. "Only listen and smell."



The squirrels practiced right away. Nutmeg touched a trunk oh-so-lightly with her toes and sniffed the warm cinnamon smell. Pip copied her carefully, without using his claws. "It works!" he cheered. "The fragrance is even nicer when you're gentle." Barkwick chuckled, and the tiny mushrooms on his shoulders bounced. "You learn quickly," he said. "The forest thanks you."



Then Barkwick tapped his glowing staff on the ground. A puff of golden dust swirled up and settled on the hurt tree. Slowly the pale line faded, and new bark began to grow. "It will heal," he said. Pip and Nutmeg clapped their tiny paws. "Thank you!" they said together. Barkwick smiled. "Remember, little ones: enjoy the cinnamon forest, but always with gentle paws."



The three sat together while the sun came out and warmed the wet bark. The whole forest breathed out its sweet cinnamon fragrance. Barkwick told them stories of rain and roots, and the squirrels listened with wide eyes. "You may come back anytime," he said. "Sniff, touch lightly, and leave the trees as you found them."



When the afternoon grew long, Pip and Nutmeg said good-bye to Old Barkwick. "Thank you for teaching us," Nutmeg said politely. Pip tucked his green leaf more firmly behind his ear. "We'll be careful," he promised. Barkwick raised his staff in farewell, and the glowing tip twinkled like a small star among the leaves.



On the way home, the two friends chattered about everything they had seen. "Curiosity is fun," said Nutmeg, "but caution is wise." Pip nodded, his amber eyes thoughtful. "Being gentle is the best way to explore," he said. They stopped once to sniff the air, and the cinnamon fragrance followed them all the way to the meadow.



Back in their oak tree, Pip and Nutmeg curled up together as the stars came out. The sweet smell of cinnamon still tickled their noses. "Same time next week?" Pip whispered. Nutmeg smiled in the dark. "Yes," she said. "But this time, gentle paws." And they fell asleep dreaming of the warm, kind forest and its glowing guardian.