

Nothing but Peppercorn

We are a peppercorn family. Stretching back generations to the migration from the rushing river forest valley. Our nimble coyote paws are perfect for grabbing whole clusters and bringing them back to the stash. No one ever fought us for control either; we were known as the peppercorn family. If you wanted spice, you came to us.

I remember when the canaries flew by, warning us of a terror. *Scary for them*, we thought, *doesn't mean scary for us*. We weren't naive, we were blindsided. No other animal could bully us out, no other animal could take our peppercorn. These weren't like the other animals.

It started with the crack of thunder on a clear blue day. A sharp loud snap that exploded through Henry's tummy and uncorked his innards. I held him while he faded, hot blood dyeing my pelt. The monsters ran to us and I had to abandon him before his light had dimmed. That night, my salty tears soaked our peppercorn.

Their onslaught was ceaseless, their purpose unknown. They hunted us like peppercorn, leaving nothing on the bush. After Henry was Sophia, her final squeal wasn't joyous like normal. Then Joey and Flynn, I hid in the shrubs and watched the monsters peel off their skin. I didn't want to stay, but the thought of running was squelched when Luna tried. She was still in eyesight when her head burst in a puff of mist and gore. My scream of horror was overwhelmed by their hoops and hollers of delight.

All the animals formed a group together to stay safe. Coyote and rat, gopher and sparrow, with a predator like this, our solace was that we all felt like prey. We did

what we could to remember those who were slaughtered. The sparrows brought twigs, the gophers brought wildflowers, and the rats brought ivy. With each passing animal, with each new funeral, I only had one thing to offer the survivors. I wrapped them into bundles with dried grass and handed them with tear-filled condolences. They all said thank you, but it felt futile looking into the eyes of a widow and offering her nothing but peppercorn.