

The Luna and her Quadruplet Pups by Jane Above Story

Chapter 117

3rd Person

When dawn broke on the pups' first full day in the Southern Isles, the sun found them still curled in the protective shelter of a huge strangler fig, safely ensconced in the hollows of the tree it once engulfed.

Of course, the night hadn't left them entirely unscathed. Sleep was nearly impossible in the pitch black rainforest, with deadly predators roaming the forest floor and terrifying noises echoing in the distance. They eventually drifted off out of pure exhaustion, but when they woke they were covered in itchy bug bites and sweating through their clothes.

They didn't have any food or water, and as frightening as the jungle was, they were smart enough to know they had to try and find a way out. So the four children set out into the unknown, moving through the dense undergrowth one after the other, their small hands fisted in the shirt of the person in front of them.

Riley led the way, hesitantly scanning the ground for spiders, snakes and poisonous frogs, while the others kept their ears open for the monsters they'd heard calling in the night.

"What was that!" Ryder yelled, jumping a foot in the air when a twig snapped behind them.

All four pups whipped around, scanning the area and scenting the air. Unfortunately, their foreign surroundings were so unfamiliar they didn't recognize any of the strange smells which met their noses. After a moment passed without any signs of movement or further sounds, they continued onward.

"I'm starving." Parker complained, his stomach rumbling to punctuate his words. "Are you sure we can't eat those mushrooms we saw?"

"No, Mommy says never to eat mushrooms from the ground" Ryder reminded him, "they might be poison."

"I think it's more 'portant that we find water."

Paisley announced, already feeling lightheaded after so many hours without hydration.

As if the sky heard her worried words, a huge clap of thunder sounded overhead and once again the pups found themselves being drenched in a relentless downpour. "Arrgh, does it always have to rain here?!"

Riley exclaimed in frustration.

"Well it is a rainforest." Parker answered slyly, earning himself an unamused glare from his sister.

"No no, is a good thing!" Paisley exclaimed. "Look!"

She reached up to a huge leaf shaped like an elephant's ear, pulling the tip down towards her face and letting all the water that had collected on its concave surface pour into her open mouth.

"Paisley you're a genius!" Ryder exclaimed, running over to another leaf and mimicking her actions.

Parker and Riley followed suit, and before long all four pups were running from leaf to leaf, drinking up as much rainwater as they could. The torrential storm continued to douse the earth in fresh water, and before long the ground was drenched and inches deep in rich black mud.

Once their thirst was quenched, the pups quickly realized that the rain was more of a gift than a curse.

Not only did it send all the Jungle's scary animals running for shelter, but it created some of the biggest, muddiest puddles they'd ever seen in their lives. Riley realized it first, jumping with both feet into a huge puddle and squealing with delight when water went splashing in every direction. "Look at me, look at me!"

She cried, hopping into another.

Laughing uproariously, the other three pups joined the game, jumping from puddle to puddle and competing to see who could make the biggest splash.

Eventually they all came to a stop before the same sprawling pool, so deep that the tops of the tangled tree roots were visible above the surface. "Woah!" They exclaimed in unison.

Without needing to discuss a single word, the quadruplets linked hands and prepared to leap. "One, two, three!" As soon as the final number was spoken, they pounced, landing knee-deep in the dense muck.

Ryder, Parker and Paisley were so busy laughing, they didn't notice the devious smile on Riley's face, not until she reached down and grabbed a handful of mud, and lobbed it straight at her siblings.

It landed with a splat on Parker's middle, and he looked up with surprise. Riley was already reaching down for another handful, but the boys were used to her shenanigans, and quickly adapted. "Oh no you don't, Riley!" Ryder giggled, nudging Paisley to encourage her to arm herself as well.

"Too late." Riley chortled. "Is a mud fight!"

It took Paisley a moment to catch up to the sudden chaos, but before long she was having more fun than she could ever recall having in her young life. She'd always been too sick to do this sort of thing, and the pups she usually played with had never understood her adventurous spirit. They were all the children of stuffy aristocrats who would never dream of getting dirty just for the fun of it, but playing with her siblings completely free of inhibitions or worries despite their grave situation – well, it felt like coming home at long last.

She dove into the game with unbridled joy, even tackling Ryder and rolling around with him and wrestling amid peels of laughter.

Though the pups might not have realized it, thousands of eyes watched as they played. It was easy to feel alone in the wilderness, but creatures great and small moved stealthily around them, keenly aware of the intruders in their domain. In fact, the jungle's many inhabitants found themselves baffled by the behavior of these strange creatures. Within minutes they were all covered head to foot in mud, racing around and splashing each other – making far more noise than any natural ground dweller would ever dare. In the sprawling canopies it was common for birds and monkeys to claim their territory with loud announcements, but things were far more treacherous on the forest floor. Didn't these odd little canines know better than to announce their location so openly?

If the pups had known what to look for, they might have noticed when the forest around them went abruptly quiet. Initially their own noisemaking had joined a symphony of wildlife calls, which had dulled beneath the rain's deafening cascade, but crescendoed back to life as the storm eased. But now everything went eerily silent, the only sounds remaining in the dark forest were the pup's laughter and the final trickling of the afternoon shower. It wasn't until the deep puddle in which the children waded began to slither and ripple, that they realized anything was amiss.

"Hold on!" Parker called to the others, pointing at the surface of the dark water. "Is the puddle moving?"

The other three pups froze, intently watching the ground for signs of life. "Something just touched my leg!" Riley whispered anxiously.

"Back out, very slowly." Ryder advised, glancing behind himself to make sure the path was clear.

However as the children carefully retreated, the waters rippling grew more pronounced. Before long all four quadruplets were able to make out a long, serpentine body gliding through the water around their legs.

"Is a snake!" Paisley gasped, turning pale as a sheet, "a really big one!"

Right on cue, the coiling creature lifted its massive, triangular head out of the water, rising up from the black depths and carefully studying its lunch menu. The glinting slits of its reptilian eyes traveled between the petrified pups as it continued to rear up, until it stood as tall as they did, despite the fact that most of its body remained submerged. It's forked tongue stuck out at each of them in turn, as if it was tasting their individual scents before deciding whom to devour.

"I think is an anconda." Parker hissed, observing the huge jaws which could easily detach to swallow him whole. "Paisley, you run first, you're the littlest."

"But what if running makes it come after me?"

Paisley squeaked.

"We'll try to hold it off, but we have ta run or it will eat us." Ryder advised.

Nodding nervously, Paisley continued to retreat until her tiny feet were clear of the puddle, and then turned tail and ran. The monstrous snake whipped its head in her direction, distracted enough for Parker to leap onto its neck and wrap his little arms around it in a strangle hold. "Run!" He shouted to the others, even as the anaconda thrashed against his hold, trying to snap at its unwelcome passenger, but unable to reach him.

"We can't leave you!" Riley explained, searching for something, anything to use as a weapon. If only they were old enough to shift!

At the last second, she saw a huge stick on the ground. Hefting it in her small hands, she lifted the branch like a bludgeon. As Parker clung to the snake's neck for dear life while it j'rked him from left to right, his body flying through the air, Riley brought the stick down on its head, hitting it over and over again until it stopped moving. From the looks of it, it was only dazed, but the pups weren't going to waste any time.

They took off after Paisley, racing through the jungle as fast as their young feet could carry them and glancing over their shoulders to see if the snake was coming after them.

At first it seemed like they were home free, but then Parker saw the undergrowth violently rustling as it was crushed beneath a huge scaly body. And there, its eyes glowing in the darkness as it charged after its escaping meal, was one very angry snake.

"It's right behind us!"

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