

Slipping Away

By Abby Lunsford

Book Chapter

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Freedom Church, Tallahassee, FL

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Experience the fall of humanity through the eyes of Swift the leopard and Clover the rabbit, two sentient animals that live in Eden. They witness the first act of disobedience and see the threat that sin unleashes into the world. Sin transforms Swift into a wild animal. Clover, however, retains his ability to reason, but feels it slowly ebbing away. Without thought for their friendship, Swift chases Clover out of Eden. Despite Clover's efforts, every encounter with Swift brings Clover farther away from restoring the bond they used to share. Finally, after Clover's hope for the sin-stained world nearly melts away, along with his ability to think and reason, he has a confrontation with the serpent himself. Swift unexpectedly comes to his aid. A vestige of Swift's former mind returns, and he struggles to inform Clover of the words of the Creator promising a future hope for the world.

The newborn sun emerged proudly from the distant hills, settling gracefully on the blazing, painted horizon. It bathed the glowing garden with humble light, illuminating the land and clearing away the suffocating darkness. The black of night had once covered everything, enveloping the formless earth and covering the deep waters with its dark blankets of emptiness, but now the sun hung high in the sky, its parading light reflecting on the branching rivers that flowed out to fill Eden, the sparkling gem of the whole earth. The gem of the garden, the Tree of Life, stood tall next to its brother, the Tree of the Knowledge of Good and Evil. My friend and I always called it the Tree of Good and Evil for short. However, we didn't venture anywhere near it except to visit the Tree of Life.

My paws soaked up the moisture of the dew-kissed blades of grass. I breathed in the rich scents of the Garden of Eden, the honeyed smell of golden flowers and wet leaves. I closed my eyes and cleared my mind, letting only sounds and smells pass through the barrier.

"Swift! Let's go check out the Tigris River!"

I opened my eyes to the sound of Clover's voice, taking in the beauty around me. Herds of animals filled the landscape, the symphony of every bleat and grunt and growl rising to the

cloud-strewn sky. Luscious trees sprouted from the earth in clusters, and little spiders spent their days weaving bright webs that caught glistening, dewy sundrops in pavonine colors. Everywhere I looked, shades of rich umber and indigo and chartreuse flooded the land. Springs bubbled out of the ground, glistening like melted glass, tumbling across ponds and rocks. Our Creator was never really in one place; He was always wandering the garden, surveying His creations and seeing how very good it all was. The garden caretakers, Adam and Eve, had named all the animals the day before, and now they were taking a quiet walk along the Pishon River. Life was truly paradise; they were always kind to us, and we went about our lives eating fruits from the lush trees and spending time with our families. We could never get used to the view; from the hill above the branch of rivers, you could see every animal and red-dotted tree. The winding breath of wind kissed the grass, rippling the vegetation and foliage with its soft fingers. Birds of all sizes and great winged reptiles patrolled the sky, strengthening the wind currents and sending soft breezes to ruffle my spotted fur.

I took in a breath of the fresh air and bounded down the hill to Clover, who was waiting by the Tigris, dipping his little paws timidly in the shifting waters. Clover and I loved going to the Tigris river to swim every day, and I would always have to save him when he remembered he didn't know how to swim. I grinned widely as I landed in the water, spraying him with millions of droplets. He let out a yelp and shrank back, then gave me an annoyed look, his nose twitching. I laughed at his expression. His glare would have been more effective if he wasn't a bunny.

"SWIFT," He groaned, running his paw through the dirt. "I told you never to sneak up on meeee."

"You were the one who called for me," I retorted, sinking deeper into the cool water. "And it's the fifth time I've done it."

"That doesn't make it any less scary!" He cried, looking genuinely offended. I laughed again, backing away a bit.

"Fine, I won't do it anymore."

"That's what you always say." He smiled.

"Promise."

Clover turned his smile to the water, seeming satisfied. I hopped into the river, paddling cheerfully to the other side. The silvery coolness of the water rippled relief through my bones, and I let out a long breath. "Finally want to learn how to swim?"

"No," Clover said immediately, stepping out of the water. "I'll just sink again."

"Not if you ride on me!"

Clover gave my back a curious glance as I inched over, then fumbled to climb onto it. I grinned to myself, then after he settled securely between my shoulders, I bounced back into the water, splashing and bounding and giggling with Clover clutching me desperately. I paddled down the stream, making sure to keep him above the water.

And then someone else was near the river, someone tall and sleek. I recognized her immediately and sprinted through the water in excitement, landing in a wet mess beside her. She laughed in her silky voice and stroked my fur affectionately.

"Hi, Eve!" I said, licking her hand cheerfully. As she petted me, Clover stumbled off of me and flopped onto the ground, gasping for breath. I rolled my eyes and turned back to Eve.

"Where's Adam?" I asked.

"He's off picking fruit," said Eve. "He said he would meet me on this side of the river." She sighed. "It's always so peaceful on this riverside. It's my favorite one."

"Mine, too," I replied, resting my head. "I just took Clover for a swim."

"I'm never doing that again," Clover murmured from behind me.

I giggled a little, then saw someone walking up the stream toward us. I sat up, greeting Eve's husband with a kind gaze as he came forward and sat beside Eve. His hazel eyes swept over her, and he scooted a little closer.

"None of the fruit on this side of the river is ripe yet," he said ruefully as Eve rested her head on his shoulder.

She leaned over to look at the tree that stood in the center. It was lush with fruit; glistening orbs of sweetness hung on the leaves and beckoned silently. The tree had often drawn her eye. "What about that tree?"

Adam gave her an alarmed look. "But, Eve... that's the Tree of Good and Evil. We can't go anywhere near it."

"Well," she reasoned, a lilt in her voice that I didn't like. "God never said we couldn't go near it. He said we couldn't eat it. Looking at it won't kill us."

"I... I suppose."

"Come on, we'll just take a quick peek at it," Eve said, standing up and aiming for the opposing tree. As I watched her lead Adam toward it, something disturbing stirred in my soul. Just looking at it felt wrong...

But wait. The tree, it was... moving. The leaves were rustling, as if some creature were skulking inside. A chill washed over me, an unfamiliar sense of dread. I squinted at it, then caught a glimpse of something black and slithery shifting through the leaves.

I shoved every other thought from my brain, then hurried to stand and summoned my leopard speed as I ran to stay at Eve's side. "You can't eat from that tree," I said desperately, concern pumping blood to my paws. "God said you'll die—"

"You won't die."

I flinched, paralyzed for a moment, before peering curiously at the tree. Did the Tree of Good and Evil just... speak?

"Eve," It said again, its voice compelling and mellifluous. I watched as Eve stepped forward, her face a mask of intrigue. I took a few nervous steps back, then bolted behind the nearest pear tree, staring at the creature emerging. A dark, sleek head slithered out of the leaves, peeking out of the tree and flicking its tongue out. His scales were dark and shiny, and his lidless eyes gazed thoughtfully at the humans in front of him.

"Did God really say you mustn't eat from the trees in this garden?" he asked.

"Well," Eve started, her voice struggling, "of course we can eat fruit from this garden. It's only the fruit from this tree that we can't eat. God said we can't even touch it or we'll die." She said the last word with slight scorn, like the idea of death was enough to fear.

"You won't die!" He said in his drippy voice. "God said that because he knows that your eyes will open when you eat it, and you'll be like God, knowing both good and evil."

Eve stared at the serpent's compelling eyes, looking thoroughly convinced.

"Eve," Adam started, as if he were about to protest.

"Don't you understand, Adam?" she flared, her eyes locked on the fruit. "God doesn't want us to be happy! He lied about the tree and everything else! Don't you want wisdom? Don't you want to be happy?"

"Just a little taste," the serpent whispered.

Eve's eyes flickered with a new, distasteful greed as she reached for the fruit and plucked one from its branches.

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My small, soft paw skimmed the river, leaving ripples flying away from the break in the water. I sighed, glancing over at the tree behind which Swift had disappeared. Hanging out beside the river wasn't fun without someone to hang out with. Were they done yet?

A rustling noise sounded from behind me, and I jolted back, but it wasn't Swift. It was a wolf, a very large wolf (or perhaps it was large because I was a bunny) that didn't look quite alive. Its

eyes weren't alert and thoughtful anymore, like most animals' eyes were.

It squared its shoulders and leapt aggressively at me, its teeth bared with a murderous gleam in its eyes. I let out a squeak and jumped into the river, the cold wetness filling and flowing past my ears as I sank quickly to the bottom. The wolf let out a muffled snarl and retreated back out of the water. As soon as I knew it was gone, I flailed my legs frantically in a desperate attempt to swim. When I reached the surface, I gasped for air and draped myself on the shore.

But... why had that wolf attacked me? That had never happened before. What reason would he have to hurt me? Was it something I had done?

I had noticed a change in the atmosphere a few minutes before, though. I wasn't sure what it meant, but it seemed as if something had shifted the world slightly out of balance, like the order that formerly governed the land had just tilted. Like something precious was slowly slipping away like sand through my paws...

It probably doesn't mean anything, I tried to reassure myself. Swift's stories must be getting to me. This is real life.

But right now... life seemed awfully bleak.

