

Animal Tales: Raccoon, Bear and Coyote

By Melody Warnick

Lotor On His Own

As the sun sets on a cool October day, Mama Raccoon trundles quickly across the forest floor, her three small kits skittering along behind her. She's moving fast, scooting around tree stumps and clambering lickety-split over rocks. Lotor, the littlest kit, struggles to keep up.

It's not that he isn't as fast. When he wants to, he can walk as fast as a bat can fly. Lotor is just far too easily distracted. After all, the forest comes alive at night, with so much to see and hear. The frogs chirp in the creek bed. The grasshoppers sing in the tall grass. It's a symphony of sound, which Lotor, with his keen sense of hearing, can't help but pay attention to.

Then there's the snacks. Raccoons will eat almost anything, which means they can find food almost anywhere—and Lotor finds food hard to resist. When he comes across a large, smooth stone, instead of hopping briskly across it the way his mother did, he sniffs at it, turns it over with his five long fingers, and licks off the black beetle that clings to the sandy underside. Chewing briskly, he notices that his mother, brother and sister are thirty feet off in the underbrush, practically out of sight. In an instant Lotor drops the rock and runs after them, crying CREE CREE CHIIIRP, CREE CREE CHIIIRP. He doesn't want to be left behind. Not tonight.

There is, he senses, something different about this night. All summer long, their mother has guided Lotor and her other kits around the forest. They've explored Mama Raccoon's favorite feeding spots, like the clearing where mulberries splash in warm red puddles onto the ground. When the kits grab them, they end up with a handful of squiggling, squirming ants. No matter. Ants are good eating too.

The four of them hunted in the stream, as well, catching crayfish with their fingers. They each dunked their catch in the water a few times—SPLISH SPLASH SPLISH—before scarfing it down, just to keep things nice and neat.

Mother Raccoon also taught them about the scents that guide raccoons through the world. At six months old, Lotor can recognize the earthy smell of leaves, the damp-stone smell of water, the enticing sweetness of fruit and nuts. Most important, Lotor knows the smell of humans—musky and threatening. From time to time this summer a human has stomped through the woods in big boots, sometimes accompanied by a large panting dog. Even without his mother's chirped warnings, Lotor knew to scramble down a woodchuck hole or high up into an oak tree at first smell of them.

That was how the summer went. During the day, the raccoon family lounged in the den in the hollow tree to avoid the heat and humidity that made them shed their bristly brown coats. Then, when evening cooled things off, they hunted for food, played in the water, and explored the forest. At the end of each outing, they returned to their den, and Mama Raccoon nursed the kits. Lotor liked to snuggle

close to his mother and brother and sister, feeling their warmth and the shush-shush of their breathing.

But as autumn settled over the forest, Lotor and the other kits grew bigger. Now squeezing into the den requires acrobatic skills. That can only mean one thing: the kits are ready to be on their own. It's time for Lotor to be an adult. He would have to learn to hunt for his own food, sleep in his own den, and come springtime, find his own mate. All by himself, with no help.

With his mother leading Lotor and the other kits far away from their den, into parts of the forest where they had seldom come in the summer, Lotor senses that the time has come for them to strike out on their own. Still, when they reach the place in the forest where the stream curls west, away from the den, Lotor is surprised when his mother growls at them, making a go-away noise that comes from deep in her throat. RRRRRR. RRRRRRR. Mama Raccoon starts to hustle back the way she came, snarling a little whenever one of the raccoons makes to follow her. She's making it clear: It's time for her to leave her little ones.

For a minute, Lotor, his sister and brother sit back on their haunches, watching as their mother returns to their old den, where they are no longer welcome. But there's no time to feel lonely or sad. There's work to be done. On his spindly feet, with their perfectly shaped toes that look for all the world like a human hand, Lotor plunges headlong into the brush, looking for both food and a place to spend the night.

Where should he go? What should he do? This is the first time Lotor has hunted by himself. Most raccoons like to be alone, but kits tend to stick close to their mothers. Now, however, he can make his own decisions. Lotor tries not to look hesitant, though he's not really sure where he is going. Then he catches a scent—the stream again. He knows it's a good place to catch food at night. He quickens his pace, following the smell and now the sound of the frogs singing and the water splashing across the rocks.

There it is, the stream. Lotor approaches slowly. He knows that he isn't the only one who likes to hunt here. There could be other, bigger animals—even raccoons who aren't as friendly as his mother and brother and sister. Once, as Lotor and the other kits practiced catching fish along the stream, a large raccoon lumbered over to steal the piece of trout that Mama Raccoon was gnawing on. The big raccoon tried to drag it away, but Mama wouldn't let him. She hopped right into the fray, snorting and snarling more like a bobcat than a raccoon. They had wrestled for a few minutes, the piece of fish between them.

In the end, both had gotten to keep a little of the trout, but both had also been hurt a bit; the big raccoon's ear was bleeding when it fled into the forest with its prize, and Mama limped on the way home to the den. The fight had made Lotor shudder in fear. Now that he's alone, that's exactly what he doesn't want. Although he's bigger than he used to be, he senses that he's probably not big enough to protect himself from an older raccoon that wants to start a tussle.

Pausing behind a buttonbush, Lotor peers to the right, then the left. When all he can see are a toad and a mama possum with a few babies clinging to her back, too far off to be any trouble, Lotor scrambles forward and dips his front paws in the cool stream.

Lotor's raccoon hands are incredibly sensitive. Even though it's too dark to see, he can sense vibrations in the water that let him know if a fish or a frog come near. Lotor waits. He feels the water with his hands, smells the scents of wet stone and grass all around him, and listens. Then it's there, something below him! He makes a quick grab with his hands. Success! Out of the water he pulls a small crustacean—a crayfish. Though Lotor is hungry, he doesn't gobble it up in an instant. Instead, Lotor sniffs it to make sure it's good enough to eat and not likely to make him sick. After that, he douses the fish in water, washing it with delicate motions as if he were doing the dishes. When the crayfish is free of dirt, he scoops it into his mouth, chews and swallows. Dinner at last.

He's leaning in for a second catch when, from the trees above his head, he hears branches rustling, then a "Hoo-HOO. Hoo. Hoo." A great horned owl! Instinctively Lotor ducks, pressing his triangle ears flat to his head and his face against the ground. He holds as still as he can. Again, he hears the owl's call; this time it's louder and closer. Owls don't often try to catch animals as large as raccoons, but Lotor is still young; he knows his small size could make him an easy target for a big owl. He closes his eyes, waiting, trying to be as quiet as a shadow. When he can't stand it anymore, he turns his head and glances up—and there it is,

the owl swooping toward the water, toward Lotor! Lotor makes a dash for the thicker tree cover of the forest, screeching and clicking as he goes to warn away the owl from following him.

Behind him the owl flaps and hoots. He's caught something else, probably a mouse or another small rodent, but Lotor's heart is beating too fast to allow him to slow down now that the danger has passed. He keeps running, pushing through the underbrush, in and out of the shiny patches of moonlight. When he hears another noise behind him, Lotor jumps with lightning-fast reflexes and sinks his curling claws into the thick bark of an ash tree. Not even pausing to look behind him, he clambers nearly to the top. Lotor is safe for now. But he doesn't quite feel that way. Instead, he's breathless and quivering with fear. What a night this is turning into.

That's when Lotor notices the light. It's not like the light that comes from the moon, which is white and shines from above. This is bright and yellow, and comes from the distance, like the sun when it rises. Except it isn't nearly morning time. Though he's nervous, his curiosity outweighs his fear. Lotor can't help but want to explore. After a minute of gazing at the light, he climbs down the tree tail first, then moves toward the glow, keeping his head down as he goes to sniff and listen for danger.

After a few hundred yards, he catches his first hint of what he's heading for—the barest whiff of human. Mama Raccoon would have clicked and shrieked at him, warning him to stop, to find some warm, safe den and hunker down for the night. But Lotor remembers that he's alone now, able to do what he wants. And what

he wants is to know what that light is. Moving a little more slowly, warily watching for trouble, Lotor creeps closer to the humans. The smell gets stronger. So does the light. Its reflected brightness dances across Lotor's feet.

The little raccoon peers through the trees and sees what he's been looking for. It's a campfire, burned down to glowing red embers. Next to it is a dome-shaped shelter—a tent. Besides the crackling of the fire, the place is quiet, but Lotor can still smell the humans. Where are they? he wonders.

Lotor isn't sure what to do. Move forward to explore? Go back? His heart is beating BUMP-BUMP-BUMP inside his chest. Just as he's about to return to the darkness, he catches another scent. He can't identify it—it's like nothing he's ever smelled before. Strange and new. But sweet. Very sweet. With his nose low, he sniffs along the ground until he comes to what he's looking for, next to the stone ring that surrounds the fire. Lotor grabs at it with his delicate hands. What is this?

It's a package of marshmallows. Lotor's never had a marshmallow before, but it smells so wonderful he knows in an instant that he wants one. The package is sealed, but no matter—with a few quick tugs with his small, sharp teeth, Lotor works a hole into it and grabs a marshmallow out. Turning it over and over in his hands, the way he does when he catches a fish at the stream, Lotor finally lifts the white lump to his mouth and bites.

It's delicious! Sweet and soft. Like mulberries, but not quite. Lotor quickly gobbles up the first marshmallow and eats another, then another. A fine white powder coats the outside of his mouth and the pointy black tip of his nose.

As he eats, his eyes inside their black bandit mask dart side to side, watching to see if other animals have discovered his treat. So far, so good. But after a few minutes of munching, Lotor realizes he shouldn't stand there in the dying light of the fire any longer. He must find someplace to spend the night. But he's not yet willing to give up his marshmallows. Clutching the plastic bag in one hand, he backs slowly toward the safety of the bushes.

Just as he's about to ease himself into the branches, where he'll be able to eat his treat in safety, he hears a noise. A GRRRRROWL, followed by a HSSSSS. Lotor whirls around and comes face to face with a large, bristly raccoon. Immediately he recognizes it as the one from the stream, the one that attacked his mother. He can tell it's the same by his size, his smell, and by the scar on his ear where Mama Raccoon bit him.

The big raccoon is glaring at him as if to say, "Those are mine." On any other day Lotor would have dropped the bag and run for cover. This big male raccoon is obviously used to getting what he wants, and he's willing to fight for it. But somehow being on his own, surviving an owl attack, and finding this treat himself have boosted Lotor's confidence. He growls back to let the other raccoon know he won't give up easily.

The big raccoon moves forward. He's angling for a marshmallow. Lotor snarls again, and the big raccoon stops to look at him, as if he's wondering what to make of Lotor, this small but fierce raccoon. As if to show him who's boss, Lotor reaches into the bag, pulls out a marshmallow, and chomps on it.

That's too much for the big raccoon to take. He rushes in and nips Lotor on the ear. For a second Lotor is stunned, then he reacts, hissing forward with his teeth bared. The two wrestle for a few seconds, grabbing at each other with their claws and their teeth, making loud, howling noises. Lotor has play-wrestled with his brother and sister before, but not like this. He's scared that he'll be seriously hurt, and he's about to give up and back away, when suddenly something happens: the big raccoon gives up.

Well, not exactly gives up. As Lotor leans back to catch his breath, the big raccoon dashes over to the bag, grabs a marshmallow, and runs away with it. Lotor watches his ringed tail disappear into the bushes. For good measure, Lotor chirps CREEEE CREEEE CREEEE one last time, then munches a few more marshmallows before deciding he's had enough. He lumbers away with his belly full, leaving the bag behind for other animals—maybe even that big raccoon—to enjoy it.

It's the middle of the night, and the forest is vibrant with the noises of animals and insects scuffing and screeching and sliding across the forest floor. But with a night's worth of adventures behind him, Lotor is ready to rest. He pokes around for a place to sleep for the night and finally squeezes into a crevice of rock.

Tomorrow he'll look for an abandoned groundhog burrow or something warmer and comfier, but for Lotor, on his own for the first time, this is a good new home.

Osa's Moving Day

From the moment she set eyes on it last summer, Osa the black bear knew that this would be the perfect den for winter. She hadn't been looking for a den that day, not really. But two weeks ago, last year's den, a hollow under the roots of an overturned oak tree, had been taken over by a bossy male black bear. Osa had tried defending her turf, growling and huffing at the big boy, but when he charged at her, she realized the den wasn't worth the fight. There were many more dens in the woods, and she would just have to find one.

Since then, even when she was grazing berries or sniffing out other bears, she always kept an eye out. And that afternoon, there it was, a wall of granite stone that rose up from the forest floor. Where a few big lumps of rock had tumbled down, it formed a hole. A little cave, really. The opening to it was small, but Osa thought she might be able to squeeze herself in.

Not carelessly, though. Osa was three years old now, and had been separated from her mother since she was a year and a half. This would be her second winter denning by herself. Even though she was a strong black bear, armed with jagged teeth and sharp claws that made her fierce enough to fend for herself, she'd learned that the first trick to surviving in the forest was, Be careful. Don't poke your nose where it doesn't belong. And definitely don't poke it where you're not quite sure where it's poking.

Moving cautiously, Osa sniffed and snuffled around the entrance to the cave, trying to catch the scent of another animal, particularly another bear, who for Osa

could be the biggest threat. Nothing. Among the damp smells of moss and lichen was a faint scent of animal, but it didn't belong to a bear or wolf or anything else that would put her on her guard. Osa lowered herself down, her massive rump still in the air, to try to peek inside the cave. Too dark. UUURMPH, Osa grunted impatiently. She backed away, circled around, checked things out. All clear. Back she went, this time lowering her fur-covered body—more dark brown than black—to the forest floor and wiggling her golden muzzle into the cave's opening.

From the smell of it, a badger had been sleeping here. But no matter. At this point in midsummer, Osa weighed about 200 pounds, making her about 10 times the size of any badger. And though a badger had razor-sharp front teeth, they were no match for Osa's 42 large teeth. So if Osa wanted this den—and she did—Osa could have it, end of story. The black bear scratched her paw across the den floor to leave a strong, clear mark of scent as an eviction notice to the badger. *Time to find a new place*, the scent would announce. *A black bear will be moving in shortly.*

First, though, she'd need to do a bit of remodeling. Small and dark was fine for a wintering den, but this cave would be a little too small for Osa's comfort. Wedging herself inside would take considerable effort, and getting out even more. As a black bear, Osa was equipped with a tool that could fix the problem: her short, curved claws, which made a perfect scoop for moving dirt.

Immediately Osa began construction. She pawed at the dirt, pushing it this way and that, and slowly rolled it out the door and into the den's front yard. When she really got a rhythm going, dark, damp earth flew over her shoulder or between

her short hind legs and out the den door. Occasionally Osa dug up a stone; that went flying too. Though she wouldn't sleep here until she was ready to hibernate, when the forest's food sources had all withered away to nothing, Osa worked at the task single-mindedly.

For a few minutes, at least. As cicadas and crickets chirped in the background, Osa felt a familiar rumbling in her stomach. Time to eat. In this forest, food was everywhere. Dark-purple chokecherries, plump blueberries, prickly gooseberries, all growing wild and dripping heavily from bushes, ready for Osa to nibble. There were tasty flowers, nuts and insects, too. And, if Osa was in a hunting mood, trout from the stream, or small animals like rabbits.

Because winter meant going five or six months without any food at all, summer was the time black bears gorged themselves like guests at a banquet to bulk up and pack on extra layers of fat for the lean winter months ahead. While food was plentiful, Osa ate virtually all day. If she stopped even for a short while, her ravenous stomach would remind her to get eating again.

The den could wait. With her paws, Osa tossed a last bit of dirt from the den's front entrance, to leave it neat and tidy. At least until next time. She'd need to dig some more to make the den just the right size, but for now, dinner beckoned. Osa lumbered into the forest, her back end swaying mightily from side to side, in search of sustenance. Soon, Osa found the promising-looking stump of an old oak tree. One swipe with her powerful paw and the wood cracked open, revealing a city of termites inside. Osa crunched a few termites, but kept digging until she reached the

true delicacy: the white termite larvae that could be sucked out by the mouthful. Slurping happily, Osa feasted until the meal was gone.

Over the summer, Osa ate and ate. She gained sometimes 10 or 15 pounds in a single week. Each day she grew bigger and fatter, and her stomach began to hang down like an overstuffed pouch, brushing the grass when she walked.

When she was nearby, with a full belly and a spare moment, Osa prepared her den. There was more digging, first. Osa moved the dirt with her short, curved claws until she had created a nice, deep trough for herself, with enough room to snuggle up without revealing herself to passing animals.

Now it was time to feather her nest. She worked on it almost the way a bird does. From the woods, Osa chose piles of the bright amber and rust-colored leaves that were starting to fall from the oaks and maples; scooping them up into her mouth, she'd hurry back to the den, duck her head into the cave, and spit them out on the dirt floor. Yellow grass and weeds, pine needles, some twigs and branches—each was deposited inside the den mouthful by mouthful. Then came the decorating. Osa pushed and prodded the bedding materials with her nose and paws till it formed a soft lining along the bottom of the cave. It would form a comfy padding for her long winter's nap.

Still, Osa had never slept there. She bedded down wherever she happened to be at night—inside a hollow log, under the low-hanging branches of a fir tree. The den was for hibernation, not for a single night's nap.

But by the end of October, the air snapped and cracked with frost, and the food was almost gone. Squirrels, badgers, possums, beavers, bears, wolves, deer—all had been in a race to devour, or store, the most food, so as the weather turned colder the berries and nuts disappeared at a quicker pace. Soon the bushes that Osa could usually count on for a mouthful of sweet juiciness were stripped bare. The trees were empty. The last acorns and hickory nuts had been whisked away and buried by the squirrels. Osa felt herself getting lazier. She felt tired all the time.

The morning at the end of October that Osa woke up with a prickly coating of ice in her dark fur, she knew it was time to begin her hibernation. She made her way to the den she had spent the summer preparing and crawled inside. Like a dog chasing its tail, she circled around, trying to find the most comfortable spot. She pushed the leaf-and-grass bedding this way and that. When she was finally ready, Osa fell deeply asleep.

It was like no sleep any human has ever known. With her eyes half open but unseeing, Osa's body took over. She didn't drink. Didn't eat. Didn't pee or poop. She didn't have to. Though she lost weight steadily, her body knew just what to do to keep her alive. During hibernation, some animals wake up periodically to eat some stored food, but not a black bear like Osa. With the layers of fat she'd packed on during the long summer and autumn feast, she could withstand the winter without eating at all.

For Osa, everything moved in slow motion. Her heart rate was so sluggish it was hardly there. She only breathed twice a minute, huffing and puffing in the dank

den. Every so often she'd get up and move around, but it was like she was sleepwalking—she never fully woke up.

Until that is, one afternoon in late February. Although it should have been cold for at least another month, the weather had turned warm, melting the snow—and fast. Osa could somehow sense that the den was warming up; her thick coat of fur began to feel stuffy all of a sudden. But it didn't bother her. She didn't even wake up.

Then, PLINK. PLINK. PLINK. Something was dripping on Osa's nose. In her sleep, Osa wriggled her snout and puffed air out her nostrils. PLONK PLONK PLONK. The dripping was coming harder now, more insistent. *Get up get up get up*, it seemed to say. Still, Osa clung desperately to her hibernation. Only when the water turned into a small rivulet, splashing her face and making her dream of catching trout in the summer stream, did she finally wriggle back into consciousness—and realized she had woken to a flood.

Outside sunshine streamed down, and the frozen ground couldn't absorb the moisture from the snow run-off fast enough. Now streams of water skittered down the hillside. Inside Osa's den, water seeped from the rock walls and through the crevices. It steadily drip drip dripped into her leaf and grass bedding, now crumbled to a fine softness from Osa's months of lying in it. Because she had dug the floor of her den so deep, there was more space for water to gather, so a small pond was forming right here inside the stone walls that were meant to protect her. Already,

Osa's belly was soaking. When she lifted herself up, icy water streamed off her tummy's chestnut-colored fur. Osa growled worriedly.

After four months without food, the bear was weak. Simply walking was difficult, and her thinking felt confused, like after a too-long nap. But she was awake enough to know that she needed to escape the den as fast as she could. The water was rising in the trough she had so painstakingly dug for herself last fall, and if she stayed, she would get soaked and chilled. If the water got deep enough, she could even drown. Slowly, Osa scooted rump-first out of her den, into the unusually warm day.

Outside water was everywhere, and Osa immediately lapped some from the mini river that had formed on the side of the rock. But there was no food anywhere. Even without snow, it was not yet spring. No flowers had bloomed, no plants had sent out green shoots. She saw a few other animals out and about—squirrels, mice, rabbits, all driven from their underground burrows by the water—but the second they caught sight of her they dashed away, and Osa was too weary to try to chase them.

If Osa ended her hibernation now, she could starve. She had to find another warm place to sleep for just a few more weeks, until the plants caught up with the sunshine. But where?

Moving day it was. With no bags to pack, no food to tote along, Osa lumbered slowly through the forest and looked for somewhere to sleep. But the rain had drowned everything in mud and wet. soon night began to fall, and with it the

temperature dropped again. The water stopped running and creakily turned to ice. Osa had to dig in her claws with each step to avoid slipping. She was tired, so tired.

At last, a spot caught her attention. It was a large hollow log that didn't seem to be too damp inside. Remembering her rule of forest survival, Osa cautiously sniffed around, then peeked inside to make sure the coast was clear. No animals here, at least not now.

Wearily Osa crawled inside. She could hardly do it, she was so exhausted from the day's exertion and her lack of food. But she pulled herself along the smooth wood with her claws until she was situated neatly inside. Osa sighed happily. Safe at last.

Looking around, Osa observed her new den. It wasn't *her* den. There was no soft bedding to cradle her, no deep bed to turn around in and get comfortable. But it didn't matter. Here was someplace to safely sleep off the last bit of winter. In a few weeks, Osa would emerge from hibernation for good. She'd find fresh new plants to munch on, active insects to slurp, the start of another season of eating.

Thinking of spring, and of good things to eat, Osa set her nose on her paws and fell quickly back to sleep.

Hazard Helps the Pack

Outside the door to the big red barn, the rancher asked his ranch hand, “Are all the sheep inside? No one’s been left behind?”

“Pretty sure,” said the ranch hand. “I can’t see any out there.”

“Good,” said the rancher, closing the door to the barn behind them. “I’ve been hearing coyotes howling for the past week, so we can’t be too careful.”

From his hiding spot on a hill above the ranch, Hazard the coyote watched as the two men walked to the little white farmhouse and went inside. Then he turned his attention to what the ranchers hadn’t seen. Not all the sheep were in the barn. Near the fence line in the northeast corner of the field, one young sheep was still sitting in the snow. Maybe he was sick, or hurt. Maybe he’d just gotten distracted. Whatever the reason, his thick winter coat of white wool camouflaged him in the snow, so the ranch hand hadn’t noticed he was there. Now the sheep was all alone in the field, without even a sheepdog to protect him. And that made him an easy target for a hungry coyote like Hazard.

Hazard and the other coyotes in his pack had never hunted one of the rancher’s animals before. For years, they’d lived side by side, with the rancher’s sheep baaa-ing and nibbling the grass on the other side of the fence, while the coyotes lived up in the foothills of the mountains. Sometimes the coyotes would watch the sheep and drool; to them, it was like looking at a plateful of chicken nuggets. But the rancher and the coyotes always left each other alone. The rancher

knew that these coyotes wouldn't harm his sheep, and they might keep out worse predators. For their part, the coyotes knew that if they ever attacked one of the sheep, the rancher might hurt them. Maybe even kill them. But never before had they needed the rancher's meat, either. Like other coyotes, Hazard could eat just about anything. Berries. Rabbits. Raccoons. Birds. Fish. Even bugs, like grasshoppers and crickets. Those weren't his favorite—too crunchy, and they hopped around inside your mouth. But Hazard was used to grabbing whatever kind of meal he could. If it looked tasty, and it was easy to catch, chances are that Hazard would eat it.

Sometimes he even got his paws on a big animal, like a deer or an elk, and had a real feast. Of course, since coyotes in his neck of the woods were small, closer to the size of a fox than a wolf, that mostly happened when he stumbled across an animal that had already died, and he'd stuff himself silly on the leftovers. Mostly the coyotes in Hazard's pack went after medium-sized meals—not too big, not too small. Hazard's favorites were prairie dogs and ground squirrels. They weren't exactly easy pickings, since they were speedy and could spend all day in their underground burrows if they wanted. But Hazard was patient. He was also fast. As soon as one of the animals made a break for it, he'd dash after it and catch it with his strong, sharp teeth. Yum.

With so many choices on the menu, Hazard almost always had plenty to eat. But not this winter. This winter had been hard—much colder and snowier than any he could remember. The little animals he and the other coyotes usually hunted were

burrowed so far under the piled-up snowdrifts that even his with good sense of smell, Hazard couldn't find them. The big animals were in short supply too. Only once this winter had Hazard come across a deer, but that happened when he was alone, and he knew he couldn't take such a big animal down on his own. The deer knew it too. He had to stand by and watch as the deer pricked up her tail and jogged in the other direction.

Now it was early February, and things were getting desperate. Hazard's ribs were starting to show their shape beneath his thick gray fur. The same was true for the other four coyotes in his pack—two females and two males. They all looked half-starved. Keena, the female who led the pack with her mate, Latris, was expecting a litter of pups later in the spring. Coyotes usually have fewer pups when times are tough and food is hard to find, but even so, helping Keena rest and stay healthy was the job of not only Latris but Hazard and the other coyotes in the pack too. If they all worked together they could protect their pack *and* Keena's pups. But they had to find more food, or else Keena, her pups, and all the coyotes could get sick. Even die. Spring was only a few weeks away, but could they last that long?

That was why, as Hazard watched the lone sheep sitting at the edge of the rancher's property, he was so excited that the second the rancher closed the farmhouse door, he sat back on his haunches, tilted his head back, and howled. A-ROOO, ROO ROO ROO. A-ROOO, ROO ROO ROO. The soft, white fur on the underside of his neck bristled. His long muzzle, tipped with a damp black nose like a dog's, pointed straight at the sky. A-ROOO, ROO ROO ROO.

Hazard stopped and listened. Off in the distance, another coyote howled back. ARR ARRR ARR ARR, like a dog's bark. *I'm here. I'm coming.* That was Latris, the pack's alpha male, talking back to him. Coyotes don't speak with words people would understand, but they howl and bark and yip to send messages to each other, even across long distances. Even though Latris was probably a mile or two away, close to the den he shared with Keena, he had heard the message that Hazard had found food. Now he was coming.

Every few minutes, Hazard howled again to help the other coyote find him, and Latris responded, sounding closer each time. At last, Latris loped into the clearing where Hazard waited. They yipped hello and sniffed each other a few times the way dogs in the park do. Then Hazard ran back toward the sheep enclosure, with Latris at his heels. He wanted to show the other coyote exactly why he'd called him to come so far.

Latris saw the sheep at once. Just seeing it made the coyote pant hungrily. While Hazard waited among the ponderosa pines, Latris ran a little closer; the wind was blowing away from the sheep, so Latris could get near without the sheep smelling him and running for safety. With his red-yellow fur shining brightly in the setting sun, Latris paced up and down the fence line a few times before running back to Hazard. They barked at each other, making their plans. It was decided: The two of them would kill the sheep.

But how? Even though the sheep looked like an easy kill all alone out there, he was still inside the ranch fence. That problem Latris could solve. He led Hazard to

a spot he had discovered where the fencing was coming loose from its post. He nosed his way inside, and Hazard followed. Even though the sheep had been his discovery, Hazard let Latris lead the way, since he was the bigger male and the leader of the pack.

Latris and Hazard sank down low to the ground, scraping their white bellies across the snow as they inched closer to the sheep. When Latris paused, Hazard did, too, looking around him to make sure they were still alone. Just by watching Latris, Hazard could figure out what he was supposed to do. And that was good, because now that they were close to the ranch house, it was important that they not make any noise that would give their plans away.

The snow creaked and crunched under the coyotes' sturdy paws. Hazard kept his nose to the ground, sniffing as he walked. With all the snow, he could only really smell one thing: the wet-wool scent of the sheep, which was stronger and stronger the closer they got. All of a sudden, though, the scent faded away. Hazard picked up his head to figure out what had changed. Had the sheep run inside? No, it was still there. But Hazard noticed that the wind had started to pick up, only now it was blowing in the opposite direction. That meant that instead of being able to smell the sheep, the sheep would be able to smell them. Because he didn't want to risk barking at Latris as they prowled, Hazard let it go. Maybe the sheep, which had its eyes closed and hadn't seen them yet, wouldn't notice their scent either.

With their yellow eyes blazing, the two coyotes continued their slow creep. But within seconds Hazard realized the risk he had taken. The sheep caught whiff

the coyotes. And it panicked. Even though it had been resting on its side like it was ill, when it caught a whiff of the approaching coyotes, it struggled to stand up and brayed as loudly as it could. BAAAA BAAAA BAAA the sheep cried, calling for help.

Hazard and Latris glanced at each other. The alarm had been sounded. If they wanted to kill the sheep and have fresh meat for the pack, it was now or never. Hazard waited for Latris to start running at the sheep, but Latris hesitated for a second. Just then they both heard a loud shout from the ranch house. "Get out of here!" someone said. It was the rancher, waving his arms and shouting at them.

He was still too far away to hurt them, Hazard thought. Maybe they could still grab the sheep and make a run for it. But he was also deathly afraid of humans, as was Latris. When it came to battling people, coyotes almost always choose to run instead of fight.

So they ran. Out the flap in the fence and into the hills, as fast as their legs could carry them. Behind them, the rancher stumbled out to bring his sick sheep in from the cold. He was more worried about taking care of his sheep than taking revenge on the coyotes. But the coyotes could be sure that next time they wouldn't be able to break in so easily. The fence would be fixed and probably electrified, so if they even got close to it they would get a zap that would send them howling away. Sheep had been taken off the menu.

Back in the foothills, Hazard stopped to catch his breath and figure things out. He was glad he was safe, but without the sheep, his stomach was still empty.

Hunger pains still ricocheted around his ribcage. And he and Latris would have to go home empty-pawed to Keena and the other members of the pack.

While Hazard rested in the patchy snow by the pine tree, Latris ran on ahead. That was fine. Normally Hazard hunted alone anyway; he had called Latris in for help tackling the bigger animal. But since that hunt had failed, there was no reason for Latris to wait for him.

On his own now, Hazard started back to his den slowly. Out of habit, he searched the horizon with his eyes and sniffed the air. Although he was keeping a lookout for both predators—animals like bears or humans that can hurt coyotes—and prey—animals that coyotes can eat—he didn't really expect to see or smell anything but trees and snow. Yet he did smell something. Something different. What was it? *Sniff sniff sniff*—he kept his nose to the ground and paced off the area. Where was that smell coming from? *Sniff sniff sniff*. It smelled like—could it be?—dinner?!

Quickly but carefully Hazard followed the scent. It was like following a marked trail in the snow; a human wouldn't have been able to see it, but to Hazard, even in the darkness of the forest at night, it was as obvious as if spotlights were pointing the way. The smell was getting stronger, and he thought he saw what he was looking for. Yes, there it was, under a pine tree—a dead deer. It was pretty little; maybe it too hadn't had enough to eat. But Hazard couldn't waste much time thinking about what had happened to the other animal; he was just happy to have something to eat tonight.

He also knew he couldn't enjoy it unless the members of his pack had something to eat too. AAAR AAR AAAR ROOOO! he howled. *Come see what I found!* Pretty soon he wasn't alone with his deer anymore. There was Latris and Keena, and the other members of the pack, crowding around to get their share of the meat.

It was black night now, but Hazard's yellow eyes allowed him to see perfectly well in the dark; that was one of the reasons the coyotes often liked to hunt at night. Gathered around the deer, Hazard ate till his belly was round and full. Then he and the other coyotes barked and played and wrestled with each other. No one treated him any differently for finding the night's meal; after all, there were plenty of times when he ate the kill of another coyote. But Hazard enjoyed when they were all together. Watching Keena gain strength for her unborn pups. Watching Latris get bigger so he could help watch over them. Hazard sat back and howled at the dark night sky: AAAR AAAR AAR ROOO! It was good being part of the pack.