

The Tails of Tess and Chestnut

By Elisha Hatfield

Chestnut, a Douglas squirrel, scurried up the tree, his cheeks bulging with cracked corn from the bird feeders. Near the middle of the oak was a small crack about a foot long that was parallel to the trunk. Chestnut squeezed through it into a small hollow. He spat out the corn and piled it on the far side. Other than that bit of food, there was nothing in the hollow but a few stale leaves.

“Not bad for a start,” Chestnut said to himself, studying the pile. He was beginning his winter storage. Spring had just begun, and he wanted to get an early start.

Just then Tess, also a Douglas squirrel, popped her head in, blocking the light.

“Already gathering food I see,” she said, eyeing the pile of corn.

“You had better do the same,” Chestnut said, “I won't be sharing any of mine this time.”

“I don't want any of your cheap excuses for food,” Tess said, sticking her nose in the air, “I've got my eyes on a bigger prize.”

“And what might that be?” Chestnut asked.

Tess looked down at him with disapproval.

“Eggs of course!” she said, climbing down next to him, “Isn't it obvious?”

“Oh, Tess,” Chestnut sighed, shaking his head, “You're always running into mischief. I fear one day you're not going to come back in one piece.”

“Oh, gibberish,” Tess said, waving a paw in the air.

Chestnut shook his head and hopped up through the gap. He scurried down the trunk to a branch and made his way to the very end. He sprang into the air and sailed to the next tree. There was a tree hole under two branches that forked out in different directions. He squeezed through into a hollow, smaller than the one he had been using to store food. It had a

carpet of leaves and a few acorns stashed away for a special occasion. It was his home and he loved it more than anything.

He curled up into a tight ball, surrounded by leaves, and fell asleep, feeling warm inside.

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It was mid-morning when Chestnut was awakened by the sound of chickens clucking. He sat up, rubbing his eyes and yawning. A chicken squawked loudly, bringing him to his senses. He poked his head out of the hollow and looked around. The chicken house was well out of sight, but not earshot. He hurried out along a limb and jumped from branch to branch, making his way quickly through the forest. Part of the woodland was swampy and flooded with water. So Chestnut was especially careful not to fall. He'd never been too fond of water.

The clucking grew louder as he neared treeline. He got there just in time to see Tess dive headlong out of the chicken house. She raced across the yard and up a tree, leaping from branch to branch right above the water.

"Tess!" Chestnut called, waving his paws in the air to get her attention, "Over here!"

Tess stopped, looked around, and spotted him. She then began racing in his direction. At the last second she came to a stop in front of him.

"What were you doing?!" Chestnut asked, throwing his paws in the air.

"I... wanted... eggs..." Tess replied between gasps for air.

"Did you get any?" Chestnut asked doubtfully when he realized she had nothing with her.

"I was in there," Tess explained, "There were tons of eggs. But it would be impossible to carry any out. So I decided to eat one right there and then."

"Oh, brother," Chestnut shook his head.

"I had just got my teeth through the shell when a hen hopped in and started clucking like crazy," Tess finished, "And so I left the egg and ran."

"So now you can collect regular food with me," Chestnut said.

"No way," Tess backed up, "I'm going to have my egg if it's the last thing I do."

Then she turned and disappeared into the trees. Chestnut watched her leave, and shook his head.

“Gonna get herself killed someday,” he muttered to himself, then made his way through the trees to where the ground was drier.

He dug up a hazelnut that he had buried some time before and climbed to one of his favorite perches that looked out over the chicken yard.

He began to gnaw at the hazelnut with his teeth as he watched the chickens and ducks forage for food. He rather enjoyed observing the lifestyles of different animals. Sometimes he found himself wondering what it would be like to be a different kind of animal.

Chestnut continued to watch and nibble at the shell of the nut. The sound of rustling leaves caught his attention and he looked around. The sound grew louder. Suddenly, Tess appeared, racing through the tree branches towards him. Before he could react, she was on him.

“Guess what I just found!” she yelled, shaking him.

Chestnut tried to push her away but it was useless. He inched back along the branch, trying to keep his balance.

“There’s another nest!” Tess said, shaking him harder.

He lost his balance and dropped the hazelnut so that he could grab onto the branch for support with his two front paws. The nut dropped away and landed with a splash in the dark water below.

“Look what you made me do!” Chestnut yelled, feeling his temper rise.

“It was just a nut!” Tess said, hopping up and down, shaking the branch, “We can have eggs!”

“I’m not getting involved in your thievery!” Chestnut yelled running the opposite way along the branch.

“You steal corn almost every day, ” Tess said, hopping over him so that he had to stop.

“Why would the humans put out food if they didn’t want us to eat it?” Chestnut shot back, turning around.

“But eggs are high quality!” Tess protested, “It’ll be worth it! Trust me!”

Chestnut had had enough. He darted forward and nipped her tail. Tess let out a squeak and scurried away to another tree.

Chestnut, relieved to be rid of her, hopped down to where the hazelnut had dropped. A few branches poked out of the water and he balanced on them while peering into the water. After a few failed attempts to retrieve the nut, he gave up.

“You know there are easier ways to get food,” Tess said as she walked along the top of the branch above him. She hopped down onto a floating log.

“Help me!” she said, running towards him, “I know you want to!” Chestnut yelped, and leapt to another branch and ran to a nearby birch tree. He hurried up, Tess in hot pursuit.

“Don’t you want to store food for winter?” Tess asked, stopping. Chestnut didn’t respond.

“We’ll split them!” she said.

“But how will we get them out?” Chestnut asked.

“That’s easy,” Tess said, waving a paw in the air, “It’s a duck nest. So we can just roll them away.”

“Give me three good reasons why I should help you,” Chestnut said, inching out into a branch.

“Ok,” Tess said, following him, “One: you need food to store for winter. Two: eggs are delicious. And three: I won’t let you come down unless you promise to help.”

Chestnut sighed. There was no other choice but to agree, or she would continue to pester him. And he couldn’t handle pestering.

“Fine!” he threw his paws up in defeat, “But only this once.”

“Great!” Tess cried, “We’ll start tonight. Meet me here when the sun is setting. Ok?”

Chestnut nodded and turned to leave.

“Do you promise to help?” Tess asked, stepping in front of him.

“I promise,” Chestnut sighed, then hopped past her and made his way down the tree.

He spent the rest of the day collecting food to store up for winter. He nearly forgot about the promise he had made to Tess, and met her at the birch long after the sun had set.

“What took you so long?” she asked.

“You should be thankful I came at all,” Chestnut said, not bothering to answer her question, “Now let’s get this over with.”

“Ok,” Tess agreed, “Follow me.”

Tess led the way through the chicken coop to a large leafless bush. Next to it was a second smaller bush with big pointed leaves and a few pink blossoms. At first, Chestnut didn’t see anything, but then he noticed the gray form underneath the pink flowered bush, and stepped forward, trying to get a closer look. It was a duck.

She lifted her head and quacked at him. Chestnut hesitated.

“What do we do?” he whispered to Tess who was behind him.

“Easy,” Tess said, walking past him, “Shoo! Skedaddle!”

The duck stood as she drew near, continuing to quack loudly. Chestnut watched as Tess herded the duck away from the nest.

“There,” Tess said, brushing her paws together as she made her way back, “Ducks are so gullible.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Chestnut said, ducking beneath some leaves and into the nest, “Let’s hurry up and finish the job.”

Tess nodded.

“Let’s get two each,” she suggested.

So Chestnut rolled two of the creamy green eggs out into the open. They were heavier than he had expected. Tess didn’t seem surprised at the weight as she began to roll her two down the hill. Chestnut followed her.

The eggs were still warm after the duck had sat on them, and Chestnut couldn’t help but wonder if there were ducklings inside.

“Tess,” he asked.

“Yeah?” she replied.

“Do you think that...” she interrupted him.

“No,” Tess said, reading his thoughts, “She’s only been sitting for maybe three days.”

“Oh.”

They rolled the eggs in silence. Then Chestnut had a thought.

“Where are we storing them?” he asked her, “We could never get them in a tree. And to get to the dry part of the forest, we’ll have to go through the swamp.”

“I already have a spot planned,” Tess said, “Right over there.”

She gestured to the steep hillside covered in ivy. It was to the left of the pond, and at the far end of it was the large birch tree. It was where they usually crossed over into the chicken yard.

They rolled the eggs along it. Chestnut almost lost his balance a few times but managed to stay on his feet.

“Here,” Tess said, setting the eggs in a bowl shaped hole in the side of the hill, “This is where we’ll keep them.”

Chestnut rolled his eggs past her and put them with the others.

“We’re done, right?” he asked, sitting down.

“Of course not!” Tess said scornfully, “We’re going back for more.”

Chestnut groaned but followed her back to the nest. This time he got away with only taking one, while Tess took two again. She didn’t seem to mind.

By the time they added those to the collection, Chestnut was worn out, and it was dark.

“Meet me here tomorrow evening,” Tess told him, “We won’t take as many though. Maybe one each every night till we have them all.”

Chestnut sighed, but told her that he’d be there. Then the two departed.

Chestnut made his way to his hollow. It was dark, and he had to feel his way around the treetops. The trip was slow, but he made it eventually. Once he was in his home, he curled up and thought about what had happened that day.

He didn’t much like what Tess was doing. But she’d never leave him alone if he didn’t help her.

“What have I got myself into,” he muttered quietly to himself. Then after what seemed like ages, he fell into a restless sleep.

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The next evening, Chestnut met Tess at the Birch again, and the two stole from the duck, each rolling one egg to the stash, Tess decided that it

would be better if they only took two eggs a day instead of all of them at once so that it wouldn't be as noticeable.

Chestnut felt a terrible feeling in his gut as he made his way to the hollow. He tried his best to ignore it as he lay awake, staring at the wood ceiling. He eventually fell asleep, but it was full of strange dreams that left him shivering in fear.

The same thing happened the next night after they stole two more eggs. Tess seemed to be rather pleased with what they had accomplished so far. There were only two eggs left. So the next night would be the last. Chestnut wondered if she ever felt the same way about stealing as he did. Probably not. She always enjoyed thievery, while Chestnut dreaded it.

He thought about what he and Tess were doing, and then he thought of something. If he were that duck, he wouldn't want anyone to steal his eggs. No one wanted that. So why do it?

That was the question that sealed his decision. He wouldn't help Tess steal anymore. And he fell asleep, feeling relieved.

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"What?!" Tess shrieked, "Why would you do this to me? What have I done to deserve this?"

"You've stolen," Chestnut said, crossing his arms.

"True," Tess agreed, "But you've stolen too!"

"Thievery is below me," Chestnut said, sticking his nose in the air, "I won't steal any more eggs and that's final."

"Ok," Tess huffed, "Be that way. But you'll be sorry when you don't get any of them!"

She shook a fist in the air.

"No, I won't," Chestnut retorted, "I'm perfectly happy eating cracked corn."

"Well I'm not!" Tess yelled, and with that, she hurried away through the chicken yard to the duck nest.

Chestnut sighed, and began to make his way back to his hollow. He wished she could just see things the way he did. Maybe someday she'd have a change of heart. He hoped so.

Chestnut squeezed into his hollow and curled up. He smiled to himself, then closed his eyes. Only moments later, he was fast asleep.

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Chestnut woke, feeling refreshed. He squeezed out of the hollow and looked around. It was a beautiful morning. The sun was shining, and the birds were singing.

Chestnut made his way through the forest. He wasn't in a hurry, and went slow so he could enjoy the scenery. He stopped when he heard a rustling of twigs. He looked around.

Tess emerged through the leaves on a branch near him. She looked like she hadn't slept at all, and it was clear that something was bothering her.

"I couldn't get them open," she said glumly, "Duck eggs are harder than I thought."

They sat in silence a moment before Tess spoke again.

"You know," she said, scratching her chin, "I'm feeling like corn today."

Then she raced away. Chestnut grinned, then took off after her.