

A Path He Never Chose

Charlie stood in front of the forest, staring at the endless array of trees stretching into the shadows. He had never been this close before. The air smelled like damp leaves and wet bark. Honestly, he never ventured outdoors at all. Why would he? Inside there were games, videos, and a world he could control with just a swipe of a finger. It was so much easier than getting up and going outdoors just to stare at leaves and branches.

But today he didn't have a choice.

He had just finished the next level of his game when he finally looked up - and Buddy was gone. One second, the dog was watching him play, and the next, when Charlie was too focused, he was springing across the yard and straight into the woods.

Charlie took a deep breath, and before he knew it, ran after him.

The forest engulfed him instantly. Mud splashed up his legs. Twigs cracked under his shoes. Branches lashed his arms as he pushed through them. He hated all of it. The ground was slippery, the air was biting, and everything smelled like wet dirt. A bug whirred past his ear and he swatted it, shuddering. Why did nature have to be so messy and chaotic?

"Buddy!" Charlie shouted, breathless. "Where are you!"

No answer.

Charlie kept running, almost slipping on the damp leaves beneath him. He stumbled over roots that twisted like ropes across the ground. His heart hammered in his chest, partly from fear, partly from frustration. He thought about all the things he liked better than this: video games, television, predictable worlds where nothing jumped out at you. Outside, everything felt untamed, like the whole forest was watching him.

A branch snapped somewhere behind him and he spun around, pulse racing. Just a squirrel. Everything out here was alive, loud, and impossible to ignore. He missed the quiet hum of his room, the glow of his screen, the feeling of being in control.

Then - faintly - he heard a whine.

Charlie froze.

He held his breath, listening.

There it was again.

He sprinted toward the sound, skidding down a small hill and nearly falling. He shoved past a cluster of bushes, thorns snagging on his jacket, and finally saw him.

Buddy.

His paw was wedged between two thick roots, and he looked up at Charlie with wide, optimistic eyes, tail thumping weakly against the ground.

“I’ve come a long way to get you, Buddy,” Charlie said, crouching carefully, trying not to let his knees touch the muddy ground. His voice trembled with relief as he reached forward and freed the trapped paw.

Charlie stood quickly, brushing dirt off his hands. “Let’s go home.”

But Buddy didn’t just limp beside him. The moment he was free, he perked up, sniffed the air, and bounded ahead, grabbing a fallen twig in his mouth. He shook it triumphantly, darting between ferns and kicking up leaves. He paused to sniff a patch of wildflowers, then chased a squirrel halfway up a log before circling back to Charlie, tail wagging rapidly.

Charlie slowed down. For the first time, he actually looked around. Sunlight gleamed through the immense number of towering trees around him. A flock of birds swept above him, soaring through the crisp air. A gentle breeze drifted through, like a whisper of wind. Charlie

closed his eyes, just for a moment. He had never experienced anything like this before. Nature felt alive. A connection seemed to form between Charlie and the natural beauty around him. The idea of escaping from the depths of his room no longer felt forced, but it felt refreshing, like he needed it.

Charlie walked back home, no longer frightened or disappointed, but with a new perspective of the world around him. He observed his surroundings; the massive trees, none with an identical shape or pattern, the leaves, with different colors and sizes, and the fascinating birds and insects that passed through.

Charlie stepped into the back door of his house, Buddy trailing behind him. As he entered, he noticed his mom sitting near the entrance.

“What took you so long?” Charlie’s mom remarked, raising an eyebrow. “I could’ve found Buddy twice over by now!”

Charlie hid his smile. “It just took a while to navigate through the forest,” he replied.

His mom took his word for it. “Well, you can go play your game now.”

Charlie started to head upstairs, ready to finish the level he had been working on, but then he stopped in front of his room.

“Actually, I’d rather spend more time outside,” Charlie said, grinning.