

"I am just here to pick up a few things," the woodsman announced as he entered the store. They all stared at him. The weight of his old heavy coat lowered his shoulders which were thinning with his age. The power in his arms was still there but his movements were slower. He removed his hat, his cherished hat. He always carried it in one or the other of his hands careful never to lay it down carelessly. His wife bought him that hat when they moved to the small town he now spent his days alone. "John," said Henry, the store owner, "Are you going to try again today?" A low chuckle came from the rest of visitors in the store. "Oh yes, yes I am," answered John. I will find my feather and once and for all be able to join your band and play music with the rest of you."

The town was small and had one peculiar rule. If you wanted to play in the town band you had to wear a feather in your cap. It had to be gotten by the person wearing it after spending two nights in the local woods, alone. The reason for the chuckle was that John, the woodsman, after spending unending days in the woods chopping down trees always came home. Not one night was ever spent in the woods. He tried but he loved his wife more so he would come home night after night without accomplishing the reward of capturing a feather.

"Is he coming today?" asked Bertie. "I don't know, he's moving awfully slow these days," chirped Gertie. "He'll be back to see me," sang Flirtie. With a flutter of pinfeathers covering the branch he was perched on Dirtie said, "Oh give it a rest Flirtie, it's not always about you." "How do you know?" Flirtie squawked back. "Okay, okay, calm down, we all know he'll be back today but what is he looking for anyway?" requested Pertie the leader of the flock. "I think it's something he needs, really bad," Sertie quietly putting in her opinion. "Ya, well I think it's something he's missing," said Mertie point to his head where his brain is located. The laughter was so loud they all jumped from their perches to flutter their wings and do flips in the air.

The birds were a strange flock. They had come together over the past few years due to a set of circumstances that is very familiar to birds. Protection. They were part of a dying breed and wanted to make sure somehow they were remembered. A great eagle kept them safe in one of its nests. He protected them from other animals, the weather, and especially man. When he had to leave to protect his mate and his offspring earlier this year he left them one of his feathers. It was so beautiful and so perfect they made a pact to keep it always and give it the same protection the eagle had given them.

Pertie was a natural leader; he was a dazzling brown with white specks on his wings. He was not the oldest of the flock but everyone listened when he spoke. His mate Sertie, was just as dazzling but she only had a few white specks on her wings. Bertie and Gertie were the oldest. Their color had less dazzle these days but their white specks were in the exact same places on both their wings. Flirtie and Dirtie, well they were just a pair. Flirtie had four shades of glittery browns set in rows down both of her wings. Her white specks went down her back feathers on to her tail. Dirtie lost pinfeathers continuously. His specks were the pinfeathers that flew up and around him and landed on his back. Mertie joined the flock when his mate was lost to a careless hunter last spring. It was questionable if he was all there but he was a nice old bird.

As a flock they did almost everything together. They watched out for each other with great caring and love. Oh yes, there are three more of the same kind but they stick to themselves. Vertie, Hertie, and Nertie cause trouble, all the time. They think it's funny they are the last of the species and dare fate to step in whenever it can to see if they will win or lose. They take pleasure in putting the rest of the flock in danger too. Vertie comes up with the ideas and sends Hertie, who lives up to his name, and Nertie, a rough edged female who wants to belong, out to complete the plan. Once, Vertie sent Hertie and Nertie to get Dirtie and bring him into a deeper part of the woods. They showed him where he could get some delicious berries from a special bush but neglected to tell him it was where Snake lived. The Great Eagle swept in just in time to grasp Snake in its talons and carry it away before Snake ate Dirtie.

"Who is in charge of the feather today?" asked Flirtie. "We are," came a chorus answer from Bertie and Gertie. "When will it be my turn, I will make a great watcher," Flirtie squeaked back loud enough for Pertie to hear. "When you stop looking after yourself and think about the other birds," Mertie responded with a smirk. "We have to find food soon and fly back to the tree before he gets there," Pertie instructed the flock. "You two take the feather back, we'll bring you something. And watch out for those three troublemakers. I haven't seen them yet today but I know they are up to something." Bertie and Gertie headed back to the tree where the old man came everyday to gather wood for the small townspeople. He was always careful to look for the birds so he wouldn't chop the tree with their homes in it.

Vertie was already back at the tree thinking up his next misbehavior. Nertie and Hertie were close by on the ground. They were running at each other full speed to see which one would back out first. Both were tough so neither would back down. The results were painful for them because instead of using their talons to knock each other down they would use their heads. There was "ooooohing," and "owwwwing" all over the ground they were having their contest on. Vertie flew down between them and put his wings out to stop them. Both kept pushing on his wings trying to get at the other until Vertie folded his wings and the two of them fell to the ground. "Get up, get up, I have a plan," hissed Vertie. "You see those two trees right there, well this is what we're going to do."

Bertie and Gertie carefully placed the feather in the nest. They kept it out of the direction of the wind so it wouldn't be carried away. "Doesn't our nest seem a little high to you?" asked Gertie. "No," answered Bertie a little irritated because his stomach was grumbling and no one had yet returned with food. "But..." Gertie went on. "I remember this branch from yesterday and the day before and the day before that," snapped Bertie. "Now stop carrying on." The next sound was the smack, snap, smack of the woodsman's ax cutting into the very tree the two birds were sitting in. Bertie was half asleep trying to forget his hunger and Gertie was attending to the prized feather tucked carefully into their nest. Neither seemed aware of what was happening below. A few more smacks, snaps of the chopped wood, and a great wedge had been cut into the tree trunk. "Tiiiiiiiiimberrrrr," yelled the woodsman as the tree soared to the ground landing with a great thump and a bounce. Gertie and Bertie were sent sailing off their nest into the air. They watched as the tree hit the ground and their nest was lost in the leaves and brush of the fallen branches. Both flew to the nearest branch stunned at what they saw. ©mMnḡhn