

## **The Spirit of Harmony**

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Have you ever heard the legend of the Forest Runners? While their story is one of pride and arrogance, it's one shared by the animals of the Everflow Woods as both a lesson and a tribute to those lost long ago.

While we may be an assortment of animals living in a forest, we aren't without our traditions. We celebrate each new moon with a thanksgiving feast to the lands around us. Every time the rainy season begins, we gather around and build dams to help the poor overworked beaver families in their construction. Aside from all that, what us forest dwellers really love most of all are our festivals. Fairs and carnivals occur once every moon or so, but on the fourth moon we always host a large race called "The Everflowing Harmony". Every creature big and small comes out to watch the best of the best race against each other from one end of our humble woods to the other.

This harmonious occasion didn't start out quite so innocently though. You see, the race began in a very competitive and volatile state. A red fox, a northern flying squirrel, a large moose, and a stubborn badger had all met up in a clearing to have an argument about who was the fastest in the woods.

"I could make it from one side of the forest to the other quicker than all of you!" Boasted the fox, puffing out his white chest. "I can slink in and out of the shadows, zipping ahead of any of you!"

The squirrel chattered and spun in a little circle as she shouted as loud as her little voice could go. "With my claws I can climb high up in the trees, and I can glide to the end with ease!"

With a laughing chuff, the moose shook his head. "You're all foolish. I stand taller than any of you and can trudge through the underbrush without getting stuck. My height will just let me plan where to run all that much easier!"

"You're all wrong!" The badger snarled, stomping his paw into the dirt. "You don't need to plan, be sneaky, or fly. A hard head and a little bit of perseverance will get you anywhere!"

They continued on in this manner for many sunrises, garnering attention from many of their peers. Animals who weren't even involved began taking sides, agreeing with one species over the others.

It seemed like the squabbling would go on forever until one day, a pine marten named Persnickety approached the disgruntled foes.

“Why not just have your race? We hear all this talking and see no feats! The one who is the best will prove themselves in a dash across the forest, will they not?” She looked each in the eye best she could, sensing the doubt that hid in the back of their minds. With all the excited onlookers, it was impossible for any of the contestants to back down, and the race was set!

It would start in the plains to the east, go across the thickest grove of trees in the middle, follow an old path as far as it went, and the finish line was set to be the top of a large waterfall overlooking a river valley to the west. All contestants agreed on this and lined up at the starting point, tails twitching in anticipation. With a loud *SQUEAK!* from Persnickety, the runners took off!

Each played to their strengths exactly as they said. The fox slid and slunk his way through as many nooks and crannies as he could find. The squirrel took to the trees instantly and bypassed much of the difficult terrain. The moose trampled through as quickly as he could, looking ahead to find every obstacle in his path. Even the grumpy old badger made great progress headbutting and clawing at everything he came across.

The four raced well into the evening. By the time they were approaching the finish line, it was apparent each still had a chance to win. Using every ounce of strength they could muster, the animals pushed themselves to the limit. Bravado raged in their hearts and their minds burned with thoughts of proving their superiority once and for all. Unfortunately, none of them realized how quickly the finish line approached. With a yelp, a squeak, a bellow, a screech, all four went tumbling over the waterfall. The onlookers were dumbfounded as their champions plummeted off the side of the ravine, never to be seen again.

Every four moons, we hold The Everflowing Harmony in their honor. The race is a bit different now. We have two finish lines to this race, each with a very special meaning. The first stopping point is the beginning of the path that leads to the waterfall. We crown a victor there in memory of their competitive spirit. We then walk in silence, paw in paw, up the old path to the waterfall. We look out over the valley, and we sing a song of humility.

I can't speak for anyone else, but as we race and as we sing, I feel the spirits of the Forest Runners around us. Their souls are at peace, but they stay to share the moments. They love the triumphs, the trials, the pain, and the humility. They watch over us when they can, but I know that if you listen very closely on a warm summer evening you can just make out the sounds of teasing, whooping, and hollering disappearing into the night.