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Dendarian: A Young Man's Quest & The Functions of Fairy Tales

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DENDARIAN: A YOUNG MAN'S QUEST
& THE FUNCTIONS OF FAIRY TALES

A Thesis
Presented to
the Graduate School of
Clemson University

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts
English

by
Daniel Atkinson
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ABSTRACT

The primary content of this creative thesis is a portion of a manuscript: the prologue and first two chapters of a novel to be called *Dendarian: A Young Man's Quest*, which could be considered a work of literary fantasy. Secondly, this thesis contains a critical essay entitled "The Functions of Fairy Tales," which explores the ways in which the fairy tale form has been used in recent years by various authors to address social and philosophical issues. This essay sheds light on my own creative work in that *Dendarian* attempts on several levels to explore cultural values within Western society.

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THE FUNCTIONS OF FAIRY TALES

Modern audiences seem to have an ever-growing appetite for the non-real, a fact evidenced by the increasing number of fantasy stories finding their way into print and being produced as movies and TV shows. This cultural trend toward fantasy is not limited to the realm of popular fiction, however, as academics have correspondingly produced their own speculative material that tends to blend the distinctions between fantasy and realism, the popular and the literary. Such cross-genre works are often classed either by their authors or by their critics as fairy tales, reflecting, probably, both a desire to reconnect with some of the fanciful foundations of our cultural past and a recognition of the unique utilities of departure in stories from the confining strictures of reality. While fairy tales continue to defy exact definition, there is bound up within the genre an essential removal from the normal and the real, which allows us to read speculative fiction generally, be it fantasy or science fiction, as innovations in the tradition of this form. Fairy tales' removal from reality can serve many purposes for the author, but as the culture telling these tales changes, so do the functions of the stories.

The first attempts to repurpose fairy tales, as opposed to merely resurrecting them in their original forms, were thoroughly modern in their framework and function. They contained the modern hallmark, as put forward by Lance Olsen, of appealing to a meta-narrative, "some Big Story that tells the Truth about knowledge and culture." Accepting such a structural absolute governing the nature of reality lent these early works a

particular facility for didactic content, an ability for the story to serve as allegory within the consensus worldview of its readers. As Roger Schlobin has observed regarding the link between fantasy and allegory: “Both are conservative, absolutist literatures (especially fantasy in its popular form) that celebrate the triumphs of established social orders—their characters’ goals are almost uniformly to restore the good and the right, which have been disrupted by evil and falsehood.” The first modern fairy tales enjoyed a sturdy good vs evil meta-narrative, which authors could employ to push the superiority of their own value system within a society that was beginning to draw up cultural battle lines.

A good early example of the new generation of Western fairy tales is C. S. Lewis’ *That Hideous Strength*, which he originally subtitled *A Modern Fairy-Tale for Grown-ups*. This dystopian fantasy novel, published in 1945, is illustrative of the original capability of modern fairy tales to make arguments for and against societal trends. As a conservative by and large, Lewis generally opposed progressive trends within society, and his fairy tale turns the cultural struggle that he and his supporters are engaged in against scientific materialism into a cosmic battle between good and evil. His story follows two academics, a professor and his wife, a PhD student, who find themselves embroiled in the secret and nefarious activities of a university faculty’s “Inner Circle” of scientific materialists. In the novel, Lewis imbues the struggle against scientific materialism with the highest possible stakes by including a spiritual element. Not only are the scientific materialists bad people whose ideas are bad for society, but they also prove

by the end of the book to be in league with the powers of spiritual darkness, serving daemonic, god-like spirits who are clearly intended to be understood as the Devil and his demons. So Lewis' cultural opponents are painted in his story as being as evil as evil can be, in the terms of his conservative Christian framework; the scientific materialists are opposed to God Himself.

Lewis also makes moves to take away any notion of respectability in his progressive foes. Not only are the scientific materialists opposed to Lewis and his cultural allies' faith and values, but they are also in betrayal of their own lofty ideals. The academics of the Inner Circle, representative of an influential portion of England's intellectual elite in Lewis' day, hypocritically violate academia's commitment to truth-seeking and truth-sharing by engaging in lies and deception, using the press to mislead the public about the N.I.C.E. organization's intentions and motives. There is nothing to honor in these adversaries to conservative society. By taking his readers on a flight of fancy, Lewis seeks to motivate them to focus more sharply on the real world and become more actively engaged in his struggle against scientific materialism. His largely conservative, Christian readership is encouraged through his allegorical fantasy narrative to see themselves as participants involved in a great battle between good and evil with the spiritual and physical freedom of humanity as the prize.

This social-conscious, culture-war rallying function of Lewis' fairy tale is strikingly similar to that of Margaret Atwood's *The Handmaid's Tale* published forty years later, in 1985. In reverse of Lewis, Atwood is on the progressive side of the Western

cultural divide, and she writes in opposition to conservative forces in American society, particularly the Christian church insofar as it resists certain ideals of the feminist movement. Atwood's tale is also a dystopian fantasy, and like Lewis, she portrays the struggle in which she is engaged against Christian conservatism as a struggle between good and evil with the highest possible stakes. Operating from a naturalist meta-narrative, Atwood cannot follow Lewis in raising the stakes of the struggle to the spiritual plane, but she nonetheless uses the fairy tale mode to push the consequences of defeat to the utmost gravity. In her story, the Christian architects of Gilead, the oppressive regime that has taken control of the United States, are murderers, torturers, and sexual slavers, managing to maintain a self-righteous moral superiority in the midst of their crimes. In Atwood's value system, these people are as bad as bad can be; they may not be opposed to God, but, worse, they are opposed to humanity.

In similar mirror movement to Lewis' narrative, Atwood is careful to remove any sheen of respectability from these conservative opponents to progress. Not only are these Christian agents of political change opposed to Atwood and her societal allies' values, but they also betray the doctrines of their own faith. These Gileadean leaders who had initially voiced outrage over the availability of violent pornography and illicit sexual services contradict the basis of their prudery by engaging—immediately upon coming into power—in the sexual enslavement of women as child-producers in the case of the titular handmaid Offred and as unpaid prostitutes in the case of Offred's friend Moira. By violating the Christian love-based ethic through violent oppression and contradicting their

claims to holiness by illicit sexuality, these Gileadean stand-ins for the American Moral Majority show that they were only ever hypocrites, hiding their evil behind the smokescreen of their faith. There is therefore nothing to honor in these adversaries of progressive society.

Atwood's readers, like those of Lewis forty years prior, are continually having their attention directed by means of the fairy tale back toward the society in which they live. According to Sharon Wilson, *The Handmaid's Tale* is a deliberate reversal of the "Red Riding Hood" tale that is "designed to move readers out of Rapunzel towers," making the novel a call to feminist action (272). The real-world corollaries of the Christian architects of Gilead and of oppressed women in the story like Offred, the daughter of a feminist activist, are held before the reader as an attempt to show what the two groups stand for and what their differing ideals lead to. The contest between good and evil in which feminist women are engaged has the highest possible stakes within Atwood's worldview framework: her readers can either overcome the conservative opposition to the liberation of women, or they can lose their freedom entirely and be reduced to sexual slaves. As with Lewis, freedom and well-being are the prize of societal victory and the cost of cultural defeat.

The ability of fairy tales to argue in favor of particular value systems or even to operate on the allegorical level of good versus evil at all has sharply declined with the rising tide of postmodernism. To return to Olsen's characterization of modern fantasy as relying on meta-narrative, he contrasts postmodern fantasy narrative as marked by the

negation of such, a “transformation of the universe into a plethora of micro-narratives that refuse ultimate authority... a universe of plurality.” By rejecting any set framework of values, whether religious, secular-humanist, or otherwise, the postmodern trend has removed any grand schema of ideals for fairy tales to reflect and reinforce.

This increasing mixture of narratives undergirding stories has actually corresponded with an increasing mixture of narrative styles, leading to a rise in the popularity of cross-genre literature and to heightened levels of seemingly incongruous elements within such works. According to Pilnovsky, “modern readers, and perhaps, even more so, modern writers, are no longer wholly content with the given possibilities which are available when a given set of tropes coalesce into a defined genre, a set worldview” (189). The short stories of Kelly Link, which might be considered postmodern fairy tales, are an example of this “uncategorizable” style, and they perform a different function than those of her socially-oriented predecessors like Lewis and Atwood (190). A good example for the contrast is Kelly Link’s short story “The Great Divorce” and Lewis’ famous novel by the same name. Lewis’ work argues that there can be no “marriage” between Heaven and Hell, good and evil, life and death, and that every soul will eventually belong only to one or the other. It is an explicit fantasy with a moral purpose—that his readers choose good and reject evil, on his Christian terms—and as he makes very clear in his preface: “The last thing I wish is to arouse factual curiosity in the details of the afterworld” (Lewis, x). Link, on the other hand, writing without an evident allegiance to any one Narrative, references Lewis’ work in her story’s title and theme

only to engage in a completely different project. Her story is about a living man, married to a dead woman with whom he has had children, seeking a divorce with the help of a medium. Where Lewis preaches, Link explores. Where Lewis argues that no union can bridge life and death, Link plays with the possibilities. While Lewis explicitly rejects factual speculation about the afterlife, the enjoyment of such speculation is a key element of Link's work, and she even concludes her story by remarking, through the voice of the medium who narrates the tale, on the mysterious nature of the activities of the dead and charging the reader: "You think about that" (Link, 185).

The "stranger happenings" that Link's stories narrate offer an escape from meaning, they are the inverse of Lewis and Atwood's more grounded form of fairy tale in that they actually disengage from the cultural conflicts that wrack the Western world. In Link's works, values systems are not described; social causes are not advocated. For Schlobin, contemporary fantasy authors like Link are faced with a crisis which leads him to ask, "What are contemporary authors to do when no new ideals rise or when those that do are so numerous and cacophonous that there is no consensus?" With no consensus in society of what constitutes meaning and values, postmodern narratives are forced to shift their focus away from society, which no longer possesses a roadmap for itself, toward the individual, for which there is a more simple and still-clearly-defined goal—happiness. This shift is evident in Link's works. Events in her fairy tales are more or less randomly happy or unhappy accidents which the character navigates without a moral compass, and

the prize, insofar as there is one, becomes happiness or satisfaction on an individual level, with implications for larger society no longer centrally at issue.

As fairy tales become increasingly mixed in their content and fragmented in their framework, meaning-oriented writing on a societal scale becomes less and less possible, leading to a new project for the author—structure-empty writing that the audience nonetheless finds meaningful: compelling stories that are adrift. Whereas the old-guard modern fairy tales often sought to reinforce values within a particular cultural subset, their newer, increasingly cross-genre counterparts avoid any logical framework of belief within which meaning can exist on a societal level. Any meaning to be found in such works is for the individual alone.

This is not to say that no possibility remains for Western fairy tales to conform to larger narratives or pass judgment on society. While the shift away from such functions is marked in the fiction of the fantastic, individual authors are not absolutely bound by this cultural trend. For example, Kazuo Ishiguro, in his 2005 novel *Never Let Me Go*, uses many of the hallmarks of science fiction to tell a story that questions the ethical bounds of Western civilization's increasing biomedical prowess. His novel centers on the lives of three young persons who have been cloned into existence and engineered specifically for the purpose of providing organ donations for "normal" people, a process which will not surprisingly lead to their premature deaths. While critics struggle to categorize this cross-genre work, dystopian sci-fi or sci-fi horror are often suggested, since the story is set in a dystopian future and makes a fairly obvious moral point about the prospect of medical

solutions that come at the expense of the welfare of a certain class of humanity. In this way, Ishiguro's work shares strong similarities with that of Atwood, appealing to a humanist meta-narrative to argue against the societal oppression and exploitation of a subset of human beings. At the same time, there are other ways in which his ostensibly straightforward moral tale seems more like an opportunity or an excuse to explore universal human conditions: when at the end of the story the main character, last surviving of the three friends, stands alone in a wasted field and contemplates all that she has lost—despite her best attempts to “never let go”—it becomes clear that Ishiguro's true focus in the novel is less about society and more about humanity and the individual's doomed quest to preserve what is dear to them. This is a question to which he offers no answers; having brought the reader to the brink of a kind of despair about life, he leaves them there to think about it and to invent what solutions seem helpful to them. There is no call to action; in fact, the novel seems to doubt the efficacy of any such course. In this way, Ishiguro is in keeping with the aforementioned postmodern practice of authors like Kelly Link, at a loss for a Narrative to give meaning to human suffering but nonetheless searching for possibilities through the construction of stories.

It should be noted, however, that there are fantasy authors writing from strong political motivations today, which could signal a return to the society-focused fairy tales of Lewis and Atwood. N.K. Jemisin is one such author, whose emphasis on cities in her short stories plays to this kind of focus. In three of her most popular stories, “Non-Zero Probabilities” (2009), “Sinners, Saints, Dragons, and Haints, in the City Beneath the Still

Waters” (2010), and “The City Born Great” (2016), she treats cities as having a life of their own, enabling her to make cultural arguments through her stories. The first of these stories centers on New York City, in which the metropolis has suddenly become heavily infected with luck, both good and bad, such that unlikely events are constantly occurring. The city-dwellers react to this deluge of upsets to their lives in various ways: by fleeing, by trying to insulate themselves with good-luck charms, by praying for divine protection, or, like the main character, by victoriously surrendering to the current and becoming willing to experience whatever comes. In this way, Jemisin condemns societal attempts to seek cultural security or forestall change, arguing that in the cultural melting pot of NYC, where change constantly challenges peoples’ efforts to adapt to it, one can only really prosper by moving forward with the current.

The latter two of Jemisin’s city stories focus on New Orleans and NYC, respectively, and both personify the cities in which they are set. This personification is most overt in “The City Born Great,” in which the main character literally becomes the city of New York, being told by the character Paulo (who represents the city of Sao Paulo, Brazil), “you will embody a city of millions.” In both of these tales, the cities in question are under threat by mysterious forces of the supernatural variety, threats which are overcome in New Orleans by main character choosing loyalty to his city over fear and hatred, and in New York by the main character embracing the city’s diversity and singing its “birthing song,” which proves to be “*lo que pasa, pasa*” (“what happens, happens”). Aside from such larger themes of cultural change being a positive societal force, Jemisin

also uses these stories to make smaller arguments regarding specific issues, notably against the current state of these cities' police, who are portrayed throughout as aggressive, racist, and sadistic, and whom Paulo refers to in "The City Born Great" as "the city's parasites." Since the health of cities or of city-dwellers is the prize to be won at the end of each of these stories' conflicts, it seems that Jemisin's brand of cultural argument is guided by an optimistic meta-narrative in Olsen's aforementioned use of the term: a simultaneous focus on the general welfare of society and of the individuals who comprise it.

These five authors' differing uses of the fairy tale during these last seventy-five years in which the old form has been experiencing such a resurgence serve to demonstrate the remarkably self-revelatory nature of fantasy and the wide range of goals which it can be used to pursue. These tales can be tools to push people forward into new ways of thinking, to pull people back in the face of such philosophical inroads, or to go about other projects altogether. While for some time the trend in fantasy literature has been toward the individual and away from society, it may be that we are entering a cyclical return in the story form to the functions it served when twentieth-century authors first pulled it from its dusty shelf. As a reflection of their creators, Western fairy tales evidence the subcultures from which they arise, and their production and reception are a roadmap of the development of Western thought. As we stand at the crossroads or the battle-lines of a society divided among increasingly variant worldviews, the functions of fairy tales continue to multiply, and while these stories will likely become increasingly

difficult for us to define and to classify according to any one set of standards or from any particular perspective, it seems assured that they have no intention of releasing their collective hold on our cultural imagination.

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DENDARIAN: A YOUNG MAN'S QUEST

PROLOGUE

Doubtless, the world is filled with many wonders, but a wonder of which I have seldom seen the equal is the forest land of Dendaree. Imagine if you can a great wood, stretching for hundreds of miles in all directions, and bounded by mountains, plains, and seas. Easy enough. But the trees! So tall that the eyes of the sharpest owl perched in the lowest branches cannot descry the dark and foggy depths where hides the ground. Yet do not mistake this forest for a land of gloom and terror, for there is sunlight and fresh air aplenty among the branches of the trees. And there, naturally enough, the people of Dendaree dwell, and they do so prosperously.

Near the Centers, where the gigantic boughs trap the sediment of the centuries against the ancient tree trunks, soil is rich, and farmers find their toil rewarding. The small hamlets that spring up here are the hub of trade and civilization, for to travel the stretching Windroads, carved into the very trunks of the trees, one must enter at the center, just as the branches do. Beyond the central farmlands lie swaths of rather poorer soil, covered with the lesser cousins of the great monarchs on which Dendaree is built, woods within the Woods and trees among the Trees. Through these woodlands, men cut timber and fell logs for the dwellings of the people. Through trade with the towns, hunting, and some meager farming, they eke out a living for themselves and their families. The timbermen are rather a rougher sort than the farmers and shepherds of the

interior, but they would not readily admit it. In fact they and the townspeople are much alike when compared with the hunters and trappers of the Outbranches. Where the wide, level ground of the boughs gives way to the winding, treacherous twigs of the Great Trees, carpeted in deep mosses and tangled in countless vines of immense breadth and length, creatures abound. Feeding on the fruits and leaves of the vines and Great Trees are numerous animals of the mammal and bird kinds.

And where there are small furry and feathered things, there are larger and fiercer furry and feathered creatures to eat them, ranging from the wily and sharp-fanged mosscats to the dreaded and powerful greathawks and horseowls, the royal predators of the leafy realm. Into this food chain the hunters and trappers thrust themselves, eating fresh game and keeping a wary eye for the cats, who on the one hand yield excellent and valuable skins, and on the other offer a rather unpleasant exit from the land of the living. Some of these men band together at times to hunt even the great birds, which alone suffices to show the depth of difference that stands between the Centermen and the Outbranchers. Joined together in society, the people of Dendaree mirror the trees in which they live. Around the middle are the Centermen: steady, strong, and numerous; while extending outward like the thinning branches of a tree, the Outbranchers strive, grow, and sometimes break among the ever-changing leaves, even to the Far Reaches where a man can feel the branches bend beneath his weight.

CHAPTER 1:
TIMES OF TROUBLE

It was a drowsy Dendarian afternoon of late spring, warm and still. Sunlight falling through the Upper Branches rested in great green-tinted pools that slowly made their way across the mossy pasture. It lent the world a secretive air, pierced here and there with bright shafts that had penetrated the leafy vault entirely unscathed. And at the base of one of those slanting pillars of gold, reclining against an affording hillock of small bushes, a young man kept watch over a quiet flock of grazing sheep. His name was Peregrine, son of Wendell, and the little group of animals under his care represented the livelihood of his family.

An only child was Peregrine, or Perry, as he was more familiarly known, and together he and his father and mother worked to build a comfortable life in the profession of shepherding. It did take work. Even now his mother was at home in the village, grinding bark from the Timberlands and mixing it with alfalfa from a neighbor's farm to produce feed, which would supplement the flock's diet of stringy moss. This would have of course been unnecessary were they able to graze their sheep on grass, but only the best soil could yield grass, and the best soil was reserved for farming. But with a little added feed, the moss was sufficient to raise sheep, and Perry did not mind the added burden to the shepherd; after all, in Dendaree, good soil was not a thing to waste.

It seemed strange to him that as he relaxed in the sun, his mother was pushing tired arms to work the millstone. Usually, he or his father did that job, while the other tended the flock. But Father was away on business, so Perry must mind the flock while Mother took care of the feed. His task was easy for the moment; a child could herd these gentle animals. But at any moment, Perry knew, a pack of timberwolves may come streaking over the rise with strong jaws and hungry stomachs. At such times, shepherding proved itself a man's work. Only a few weeks ago, three wolves from the Timberlands had invaded the pastures and attacked a neighbor's flock, killing a sheep before the shepherd drove them off. It was an unusual occurrence for this time of year, as generally only the cold of winter made the wolves hungry enough to risk such raids. It just went to show: you always had to be on your guard. Perry glanced back toward the rise and gripped his staff at the thought.

The tool in his hand was his favorite and most valuable possession. Long as he was tall, smooth, hard, and straight as a plumb line, it was made of an exceedingly rare wood that grew in thickets on the far side of the Timberlands, on the verge of the Outbranches. It had been a gift to him, as was the custom, on his twelfth birthday, and although it had towered over his head like a lamppost at the time, it had never ceased to afford him with a feeling of security. During those early days of his first guarding the flock alone, he had come to regard it as a trusted ally. With these thoughts he absently stroked the polished surface, rubbed from time to time with a special oil purchased in the distant markets of Stumton. That's where his father was now, selling the year's wool to

the weavers so that the people of the city could have their fine clothes. Profit was much higher in the city, if one was able to make the trip.

Perry sighed with boredom. He was ready for his father's return, which was already a few days overdue. Until then, he would be spending a lot of time alone with these sheep. Funny creatures, he thought, watching as they munched with a kind of stupid contentment on the gray-green moss that covered the ground. Sheep were easily the most hopeless little animals one could ever wish to meet. Dumb, defenseless, unlikely to survive on their own for more than a few days, even in the relative safety of the pastures. Yet for all the faults of their nature, these were his sheep, each with a name and personality well known to this shepherd. Should any wolf be so foolish... well, he would take on all comers who threatened their safety.

This musing was interrupted when a ewe called Clover suddenly broke the silence with a heavy bleat, slumping to the ground next to him with the decided air of a farmer falling into his chair by the fire after a long day's work. Perry did not suppress his smile. "Hard day?" he asked. She answered with merely the flick of an ear. Perry stood, stretched his back, and surveyed the rest of the flock. He would go ahead and lead the sheep back home a little early today. Tomorrow was the Festival, and his stomach tightened with pleasant anticipation at the thought. If he was going to get the most out of the day-long celebration, he would need a good night's sleep.

*

Perry was snatched from his dreams with a violent start. The sheep were distressed—he clumsily carried himself on groggy limbs to the open window and peered through the darkness at the fold. The door was shut, as it should be. The bleating of the frightened sheep mingled with the distant sound of wind in the treetops far above him. There would likely be a storm tonight, but that did not explain the flock's distress. Something was wrong. Without pausing to put on his shoes, he threw a cloak over his shoulders, grabbed his staff from the bedside, and hurried from his bedroom.

The door to his parent's room was shut, and he did not bother to open it. He would let his mother sleep for now; while his father was away, the wellbeing of the flock was Perry's responsibility. Passing quickly through the kitchen, he came to the door, lifted the latch, and was greeted by a strong cool breeze as he stepped out onto the mossy turf. Far above, gusts of wind tossed the mighty crown of Brynntree, and the light of the moon passing through the undulating canopy fell in ghostly patches that danced on the ground like pale waves on a dark sea. He saw nothing amiss as he covered the twenty yards or so to the old wooden gate. The last vestiges of sleep's hold on him gave way as the sheep's sounds of alarm raised the rhythm of his chest. There must be something in the fold. Gripping his staff and reassured by its familiar weight and unyielding surface, he slowly opened the door.

Before he saw anything, he heard it. From just inside the fold and to the left, there came a low growl. Perry stiffened into an instinctive crouch, whipping his staff with both hands to the left between him and the source of the growl. Big, grey. Mosscat. It was the

first that he had ever seen alive, and the sight was terrifying. Its face was painted with the deep crimson blood of the dead sheep that lay before it, partially devoured. Strangely bright, amber eyes that captured the weak light gleamed at him fiercely, and the beast lifted its forearm and placed a huge paw with outspread claws onto the sheep, exposing large, sharp teeth stained red as it delivered a warning hiss. The message was clear, and Perry took a half a step backward despite himself, clutching his staff with the grip of a vice. A brief silence ensued as man and beast regarded one another. What passed through the cat's mind in that heavy moment it is impossible to tell, but for Perry one clear thought surfaced as he watched the moonlight flicker across the taut muscles that led his attention from the lean flanks up the knotted shoulders and down to the bloody paw: *It's as big as I am.*

Fear swept over him like an overwhelming current, and it might have taken him, had not the sheep at that moment, emboldened by Perry's presence, resumed their terrified bleats. It was a call for help, and as his mind turned to the sheep he regained his tenuous hold on his senses. He could not abandon his flock to the appetite of this monster. Their welfare was his responsibility. He seemed to see for the first time the dead sheep beneath the creature's claws. An animal he had cared for and protected all its life lay slain and torn. Pity rapidly gave way to anger which rose to fury all in the span of an instant, and with nothing in his mind but the desire to destroy this destroyer, Perry let out a shout and lunged forward. The cat had not been poised for nothing, and answered his advance with an angry shriek blended with a roar that drowned Perry's shout as it erupted onto his

ears with astounding intensity. Before his foot hit the ground, the mosscat sprung toward him with outstretched claws and gaping mouth. There was no thinking now, only the struggle: the movements of the cat and the movements of himself in all-absorbing clarity.

Perry struck the cat mid-air on the right side of the head and shoulders, pushing himself to the right and deflecting the cat's assault harmlessly to the left. Landing deftly, it reached for his leg with one raking paw as it tucked its hind legs for a leap at his throat. Perry meanwhile had replanted from his dodge and swung the base of his staff upward with desperate strength and practiced accuracy. Just as the cat began to release the coiled spring of its deadly pounce, Perry's blow met the creature at the base of the jaw, snapping its mouth shut and knocking the surprised animal's head backward a full three inches. Stunned and momentarily disoriented by the blow, the cat merely raised itself slightly as it broke off the attack, and Perry pressed his slender advantage, striking the cat with a crashing downward blow on the head. Next moment, its bravado broken by the fortunate success of Perry's assault, the overwhelmed predator spun on its heels and bolted away in retreat. Passing the sheep unheeded in its flight, it bounded over the wall of the fold and was gone.

Perry stood for a moment, hesitating in his disbelief that it could have ended so quickly, and that a danger so great could be so suddenly removed. Was it really over? The sheep sat in their corner with their eyes fixed on their champion as he stood trembling over the body of their fallen member. The wind moaned for a long, still moment; then the sheep noisily crowded toward the safety of the shepherd. Finally Perry began to accept

the possibility that the cat had truly left. He relaxed slowly, blinking in the darkness as he made the slow transition back to a thinking man. Breathing heavily, with his pulse still pounding in his ears, he heaved a tremulous sigh of relief and leaned upon his staff. Something warm trickled over his bare foot to the cool ground, and he absently looked down, startled to see that the side of his foot was covered in blood. Oh, it was coming from his leg, he remembered now that the cat had swatted him there. He angled the outside part of his lower leg toward the moonlight, gently clearing a space among the sheep with the help of his staff. Four deep furrows dug through his flesh—no, five—from which the blood flowed freely. Strange that he felt no pain. Leaving dark footprints on the moss, he walked over to where the cat's victim lay, kneeling down to place a hand on the savaged body as though to comfort it. Old Belle, he noted sadly, tenderly withdrawing his hand from the begrimed wool. Then, in growing conviction of his good fortune at having escaped the ordeal with so minor a wound, he left the flock of sheep, shutting the door to the fold behind him. Limping across the yard as the pain finally began to assert its existence, he walked back to the house and met his anxious mother on her way out the door.

Morning came, and Perry awoke before dawn, as he always did. He began to raise himself but stopped suddenly when his leg shouted a painful protest. The events of the previous evening came rushing back to him, and he was surprised to acknowledge their reality. To think that he had actually fought off a mosscat! And his leg would hold a scar to bear written witness to the tale for years to come. He lingered a moment under the blankets as his pride and delight swept him away. He imagined himself standing at the town gathering, firelight playing across dramatic scars on his leg, as a whole cluster of townspeople hung on the words of his story. Someone might say, “A mosscat, right there, staring you down! It must have taken some guts not to budge then!” “I didn’t really have time to think about it,” would be his humble reply; and all the while Seren would be there watching. His manly qualities of strength and bravery would be on full display, and he would meet her gaze to see her bright eyes shining with admiration...

“Perry?” He looked up to see the slender figure of his mother in the doorway, her voice full of concern. “How is your leg? Does it hurt very much?”

“I don’t know; I just woke up,” he said, raising himself up carefully into a seated position and pulling off the covers. The leg was wrapped in the white cloth bandages his mother had dressed it with last night, marked now with dark blotches where the blood had soaked through in a few places and dried. Apprehensively, he gradually began to push the ball of his foot downward, wondering what waves of pain might result. Not too bad. He completed the motion, then tested the opposite direction. “It does hurt a bit, and it’s stiff, but all around it doesn’t seem too bad.”

“The pain will probably be worse if you try to put your weight on it. Why don’t you just stay home today and rest?”

In a flash, Perry remembered what day it was. “Can’t do that; there’s no way I’m going to miss the Festival. If I can’t walk that far I’ll get Elgan to give me a ride in his cart. This is the biggest day of the year, you know, Mother.” He finished with a teasing grin. “Besides, if I don’t show, people might say a cat got the better of me.”

“Well, of course, we wouldn’t want that,” she said, giving up the cause. “But please do take it easy today; you know it won’t take much to reopen the scratches.”

“Don’t worry, I’m not about to race or wrestle with a leg like this.”

She went outside to remove the dead sheep from the fold while Perry washed his wound and changed the bandages. By the time the sun had risen over the pastures, they were on their way to the nearby town square. From there his mother would turn aside to meet up with her sister’s family, and Perry would continue on to Elgan’s house to catch a ride. Ultimately, everyone was headed for the same place.

The festival was held once per year, as a way to celebrate the ending of another winter and to maintain friendships among the different communities on Brackenbranch. Almost all of the town would be there, along with Timbermen in large number. Usually a few Outbranchers could be found in the assembly as well, which was of special interest to Perry, who despite a long-held interest in places far from his own, had never had the chance to venture beyond a short distance into the Timberlands. There would be a feast, of course, and entertainment, and games of all sorts. The celebration began in the

morning and lasted far into the night, with many of the celebrants simply sleeping until morning in makeshift tents and canopies or on the open ground.

Eager as he was to get to the Festival Field, travel was slow for Perry that morning as he hobbled along his way. Nonetheless, he found an odd satisfaction in the strangeness of having to rely on the support of his staff to walk. Parting with his mother in the town square, he made his laborious way down the Main Row. This was the best street in town. The road here, as in the town square and a few other important areas, was built up into a boardwalk of wooden planks, which was a real benefit when heavy rains came, turning all the other roads into an estuary of swamps and muddy rivers. On his left now was Hayden's carpenter shop, with ornate woodwork adorning the structure as testament to the proprietor's skill. Oftentimes Perry would pause here to enjoy the intricacy of the interlocking beams and the exquisite designs carved into them, but today time did not permit such reverie. If it had, he might have stayed a moment. Perhaps he also would have raised his eyes over the roof of the shop, and taken in the view of a larger, infinitely more impressive piece of woodwork, which is to say, he might have taken a look at Brynntree itself. The houses of Main Row skirted the boundary of branch and trunk along much of its habitable length, their structures butting right up against the trunk, many with additional rooms carved out of the living tree. The trunk of Brynntree was always visible to its inhabitants, of course, but here, standing at the very vertex of the two vast planes, the outlook was, in Perry's opinion, at its most awe-inspiring. Few sights could make a man feel so small as looking up at such a pillar, with its mountainous girth,

running straight up, high above him, spreading eventually into a huge and sunlit crown in the indeterminable distance above. But today, the bustling town paid little attention to the tree in which it nested. It was this bustle that now caught Perry's eye.

Everyone was in a hurry to make the festival. Doors were open as families jostled in and out loading carts, horses, and donkeys with supplies for the day's revelry. Men were sporting their best apparel as they lashed bundled tents to the saddles, and women in lovely dresses clutched their culinary creations as though each one was a prize-winner to be. It was smiles on the faces and shouts on the air, and children darted everywhere with untrammelled enthusiasm in the excess of their excitement. Perry knew the inhabitants of each house, to varying degrees, and more than once at the sight of his limping gait a neighbor called out: "Perry! Are you all right? What happened to your leg?" To these he answered with a cheerful reassurance of his welfare, which normally would have brought on eager questions, but not on festival day. He was glad for the lack of interest; he needed to be sure to reach Elgan's house before the old man left for the Field. Sometimes it paid to have a friend with a cart, Perry observed. It would also be a chance to revel in the story of last night's battle with one of his favorite audiences. Elgan was an old widower who had moved into town years ago, at about the time that Perry was getting old enough to express his endless questions in the form of intelligible sentences. The patient old-timer had proved to have a corresponding abundance of answers, and the pair had been asking and answering ever since, which suited them both just fine.

Perry was almost beyond the hive of activity when a horse and rider came rapidly into view with steady drum of hoofs on boardwalk. He paused to rest his throbbing leg and was pleased to see the familiar face of the rider coming into view. It was Dylan Owenson, splendidly dressed, riding his father's horse, and wearing his characteristically vibrant smile. He looks no different than usual, thought Perry with a chuckle. For someone as cheerful as Dylan, every day seemed a celebration.

"Ho there, beggar!" called the young rider. "And how was it that you lost the soundness of your limbs?"

"Lame since birth, I'm afraid," he quipped back. "Can you spare a few coins?" Dylan pulled the reins and slowed the horse to a stop alongside him.

"I'm just on my way to find my lady and carry her to the Field in style," he said with his easy manner. The lady he referred to was Carwen, a cousin of Perry's on his father's side and soon to be Dylan's wife. "And here I see you hobbling on your shepherd's crutch when you ought to be warming up those legs with a brisk walk. How are we going to hold on to our pride if some axe-toting Timberman beats us in the footrace?" Perry was one of the fastest runners on the branch, and in the race last year he had only lost to Dylan by an arm's length.

"You'll have to defend our honor on your own today, unfortunately. I'll consider myself winner enough if I make it over to Elgan's fast enough to catch a ride on his cart."

“I just came from there. After what happened with Luc’s boy last year, my father wanted me to make sure he didn’t forget to bring an extra cask of water. He’s still loading up, so you should make it if you hurry. Anyway, what happened to your leg?”

“Oh, I’m just faking my way out of the race so you can look good for Carwen. I’d hate for my cousin to have to marry a beaten man.” These words brought a laugh.

“Actually, it was” —he hesitated, itching to tell Dylan every detail of the encounter, but knowing that if he missed his ride it would take him half the morning or more to hobble to the Festival. “Well, I might better just tell you the story later, but mark my words, friend, you’re in for quite a tale.”

Dylan was in no mood for prying, so he accepted the postponement readily. “If Peregrine Wendelson says a great story is in the waiting, then I believe it,” he said, flashing that smile of his. “Well, I best be off, or Carwen will be cross. Take it easy on the leg, and I’ll see you at the Field.”

“Till then,” he replied as Dylan resumed his carefree canter down the road.

Elgan’s house stood on the edge of town, past the length of the actual boardwalk, in fact. It terminated about thirty feet shy of the old man’s house, which he had built himself, Perry knew. Why he had ever built his house here when there were remained open spaces on the developed portion of Main Row, Perry did not know. At the terminus of the long, wide planks of the walk began a continuation of the platform on a much smaller scale, neatly fashioned but homey compared to the official version it projected

from. Another work of Elgan's, this narrow causeway, barely wide enough for two persons to walk abreast, led directly to his own front door.

Perry arrived at this private bridge in the nick of time, calling out to the old man just as he began to give his pair of horses the nudge to go.

“Hello, Elgan! I'm glad I caught you before you left!”

“Perry! As am I, my young friend!” He turned on the cart's bench, presenting his striking semblance to Perry's view. Gleaming white hair thinly covered his aged head, wisping down across his forehead toward great, bristling eyebrows that seemed to reach up to meet it. Peering out from beneath them were dark eyes constantly glittering with observation. Age had exaggerated the angles of his face, and his large frame was somewhat stooped and withered. Clearly he was old, but still hale, as evidenced by the heap of supplies he had just loaded onto the cart alone. He spoke with measured voice: “You're moving rather slowly today.”

“I have a right to be. My leg was mauled by a mosscat last night.” The words felt unbelievable as he said them. Perhaps mauled was too strong.

The keen eyes widened perceptibly. “Mauled? Mosscat?! Climb aboard, if you can, and tell me what happened. I assume you're here for a ride to the festival?”

“Indeed I am, and much appreciate the lift,” answered Perry as he cautiously clambered up to join him on the bench.

“I appreciate the company. Now, are my ears playing tricks on me, or did you say you were mauled by a mosscat?”

It was half an hour's ride to the Festival Field, which gave ample time to thoroughly explore the subject of Perry's battle for the flock. Elgan was an eager audience, being as fond of receiving such accounts as he had always been of giving them, and when Perry brought him up to the throbbing of his swollen wound at the present moment, the old man became thoughtful and pensive.

"Wolves in the fields in springtime," he muttered. "Now a mosscat shows up on the edge of town. In the springtime, good weather..." He was squinting a little, as if the effort would help bring the issue into better focus.

"Strange, isn't it?" said Perry, with some pride in how casual his voice sounded, like they were discussing an unseasonal thunderstorm.

"I've heard several strange things of late. Do you know I was in Evanson's shop the other day, and he was telling us all how the man he gets most of his dry goods from—comes by the Branch every few months—was going on about seeing a great bird flying low over the Timberlands. The night before he made it into town he'd been camped on the Windroad a little ways up the Trunk, you know, where he could look out over the whole Branch. Said he'd been up early waking his fire for breakfast, still grey out, and he saw this dot moving back and forth over the tree-line. Which would have to have been a greathawk or horseowl for him to have seen it from that far away. Owl, I guess, since it was hunting in the dark."

A pleasant thrill of something like fear shot through Perry at this. He had heard the stories. An owl the size of a cart house, able to carry off animals the size of a horse for a meal. Even bigger than the greathawks, people said, one of which Perry thought he had seen once from a vast distance.

“Said he watched it for five minutes until it disappeared toward the Outbranches,” Elgan continued. “A horseowl on this side of the Timberlands! Strange.”

“What’s that got to do with the wolves or the mosscat?”

“It’s all adding up to something,” said Elgan. “I just don’t know yet what it is.”

Perry had to agree that it seemed like an awful lot of bad luck to have at one time, but whether the old man was onto something, he wasn’t sure.

As they drew near the field, they saw the sprawling panoply of tents and tables, surrounded by a milling crowd of people that swarmed like ants across the field. Soon the sounds of lively music and loud voices met them on the path, and Perry felt the excitement the Festival always brought welling up inside him. Elgan drove straight to a rather large and official-looking pavilion, saying that this was the destination of the goods he carried.

“Well,” said Perry as the cart slowed to a stop and two men emerged from the shade of the pavilion to greet it, “I’d offer to help you unload, but I really don’t know how much help I’d be with my leg...”

“Don’t give it another thought, my lad. Between myself and those two fellows there, this task is well in hand. Don’t forget, I loaded the whole thing by myself this

morning. Besides, I've already seen more than one pretty girl pass by wishing some young buck would show her around." He winked and raised a gnarled hand to wave Perry off the cart with a smile.

"I won't keep them waiting. Enjoy the Festival," said Perry as he climbed down.

"I'll do my best. And one more thing, Perry." He paused, his face growing more earnest as Perry looked up at him expectantly. "You're a brave man, and I'm proud to know you." He spoke deliberately, not losing the seriousness of his expression. Perry was a bit startled by the frankness of the remark, although his previous experience of the old man tempered his surprise at such open sincerity. At a loss for words for the moment, he simply nodded his head and smiled.

Elgan smiled in return and said, "Now you best be off or you'll miss the Festival. I'll see you later, friend."

"I'll see you later," said Perry. And supporting his weight on his staff, he made his way toward the buzzing crowd.

The Festival did not disappoint. Perry was standing in more or less the center of the temporary tent village, and he turned his head this way and that to survey the lively scene that surrounded him. The clearing in which he stood was continuously being crisscrossed here and there and in every direction by hundreds of people. Some flocked slowly by in large, jovial groups erupting with boisterous laughter as they pulsed along according to the rhythms of their conversations, while others shot through like solitary

arrows, slicing their way through the field on pressing errands known only to themselves. Amidst the bewildering chaos, the shifting windows of the crowd revealed more stable groups of onlookers standing like dense thickets growing around the various canopies. At one nearby tent beneath a long yellow streamer, he could see a prodigious concentration of graceful forms with long hair, and small children clutching at hands and skirts. Perhaps one of the cooking contests, he guessed. He was instantly reminded that had skipped breakfast that morning. Far across the way, through a short-lived gap among the traffic, he saw people tightly knotted around some spectacle he could not see, while just beyond them and a little to the right, several short figures were hopping by as they vigorously sought victory in a sack race.

His wandering exploration led him eventually alongside the wood-cutting competition, and as it was one of his favorites, he congratulated himself on the discovery and moved closer to watch. This event was for the benefit of the Timbermen, obviously, and the few townspeople who entered the contest did so mostly in fun. As he approached, there was just such a person currently striving to sever the log before him. Perry recognized him as Phylip, a young fellow of sixteen years who was an acquaintance of Perry's and a fellow shepherd. His family's home was on the far side of the pastures however, so the two saw little of each other. Phylip was hacking at the log in a frenzy, pausing for just a moment to lift his axe to the audience as they shouted their delighted support. The jokester's hopeless bravado was hilarious, and Perry laughed heartily with the others. The abused log before him looked more chewed than chopped, a stark contrast

from the deep, wide grooves that the Timbermen he was competing against were etching into their wood. Perry looked now at the foremost contestant: a big, hairy young Timberman who had nearly finished his cut.

He made the action look effortless as he lifted the axe high above his broad shoulders and then dropped it quickly and surely into the log, spitting out pale chips of wood with every stroke. The skill these Timbermen commanded over the axe was incredible. After a final swing, the man lifted the axe to his shoulder, resting it there, and broke the remaining bridge between the two halves of the log with a confident thrust of his heel. The audience cheered, and it was announced that this winner would advance to the final rounds, scheduled to take place later that afternoon. Perry decided it was time to make his rounds of the cooking contests in case they needed a volunteer judge.

Perry felt he had already seen almost the entire town at some point or other on the Field already that day, with one notable exception. Where was Seren? Had she stayed home? Surely not, that would be unlike her. Seren was not the sort of person to miss a party, in fact, parties seemed to spring up around her wherever she went. With one look of her lustrous eyes and flash of her brilliant smile she could light up a gathering like a sudden blaze of light. Perry wasn't sure how long he had admired her over and above the other girls, probably for as long as his mind had possessed a category for such thought. And she was beautiful. Perfect and pristinely beautiful, with shining golden hair and crystal blue eyes. He had never seen anything to compare with those eyes. As if on cue, just as he reached the edge of the large tent housing the pie contest, his musings were

interrupted by the real thing: a flash of pale yellow hair, a warm and friendly smile beneath shining eyes. Seren herself.

She was standing behind a table, cutting slices of pie and handing them out to a line of hungry people in front of her. Every move she made had a flawless yet careless grace, and everyone seemed to notice. Several men (the pie tent was getting more traffic than usual today), a couple of women with their kids, everyone in the line was smiling, perhaps unconsciously, as they waited their turn to stand in front of a truly beautiful woman and accept a plate from her hand. Seren accidentally got a bit of pie on her finger and popped it into her mouth with an apologetic and mischievous smile for the little girl she was handing the plate too, as if she were letting the child in on a funny secret. The little girl put one hand over her mouth and bashfully leaned forward to accept the pie with a giggle. Perry's heart ached as he pulled up short outside the tent and watched. He was too far away to hear what was being said, but Seren had something to say to everyone in their turn, stopping once to rush to the aid of a fat, flustered-looking woman beside her who was nervously trying to set more pies on the table than she could safely manage at once. Seren did this with a laugh, giving the lady a reassuring rub on the arm, which seemed to visibly relax her, before she bounced merrily back to her post. Everyone around her was happy. The line was now dwindling, and soon there would be only Seren waiting expectantly behind the table. Vacillating between a pleased smile and a nervous grimace, Perry then did an odd thing. Odd, but not unusual in his experience. Just as the

last person in line had been served his slice of pie—an older man who left Seren with some witty compliment—Perry wheeled his back to the tent and walked hurriedly away.

Kicking himself for his cowardice, Perry's mood waned as he wandered aimlessly through the tents, until at last he ran into Dylan and Carwen, Perry's cousin, who was horrified to see him injured. Cheered by her friendly solicitude, he again brushed off any explanation, preferring to wait until after the Festival when he could say what had happened without distraction or interruption. Instead, the trio set out to try to hit each of the day's major attractions. Watching the games while being unable to compete was not as bad as Perry had expected. Now that he didn't have to worry about how he would perform when his own chance came, he found himself able to more completely absorb himself in the spectacle. He wondered if perhaps this was a bit what it would be like to grow old. The wrestling was great fun to watch, as always, and the contestants did a fair job of keeping their struggles clean and aboveboard. A Timberman ended up carrying away the prize which Perry had coveted, although he honestly doubted very much if he could have bested the big man anyway. Perry knew he was fairly strong and rather agile, but against that hulking fellow, whose prodigious belly was more than atoned for by his huge, thick limbs, Perry's best tricks would have likely served little purpose. He could have climbed the man like a tree more easily than thrown him to the ground.

When the time came for the footrace, Dylan beat the rest of the field by a good margin. He was called to stand on a small stool and receive his prize, which he raised into the air for the onlookers to see. It was an uncommonly good prize; typically the winner of

the footrace was awarded a simple cloth badge, but not today. Dylan had won a small rock, about the size of an egg, but flat, with the dark figure of a runner painted onto it. The onlookers were duly impressed; Perry was outright jealous. As the soil among the Branches of Dendaree was really just sediment from higher branches, the only rocks to be had were ones that had been brought into the Trees long ago. Most of the ones Perry had seen on Brackenbranch were tools of some kind or other; the large millstone that his family used to grind feed was the only one on Brackenbranch. Immensely valuable, it had been collectively bought by the farmers and shepherds years ago and shared among them ever since. Smaller rocks like this one, less useful as tools, were valued more for their beauty and curiosity, prone to be displayed on mantelpieces or carved into jewelry. Elgan had told him that in some places of the world there were so many rocks on the ground that the grass could hardly grow and people walked on top of them just to get around, a bizarre and fascinating thought.

Dylan stepped down from the stool amid the applause to show Carwen and Perry his prize. Carwen seemed even more delighted than Dylan, and after she had excitedly examined the rock she handed it to Perry. It was cool, smooth, hard, and heavy. They were always heavier than he expected, and stronger than the strongest wood by far. Stone. A ridiculously good prize for a Festival contest; with some difficulty he managed to swallow his bitter regret and put on a smile. The sun was hot, and the three of them retreated to a nearby canopy along with many of the other runners and watchers to cool

off and quench their thirst. As they seated themselves in the shade on makeshift benches, Perry heartily congratulated his friend.

“Well done, Dylan. You’re the fastest man on the branch.”

“Save one, perhaps,” Dylan replied graciously. “When your leg heals up we’ll see. Either way I’m keeping this” he said, carelessly flipping the rock like a coin and catching it as it fell.

Carwen gave her long, curly tresses a pretty toss and stuck her nose in the air as she declared with mock pride, “My fiancé and my cousin, the fastest men on the branch.” She then beamed sweetly at Dylan, leaving no question that, jesting aside, she really was proud. “The very fastest.”

Dylan grinned and put his hand over his heart. “All for your honor, my dear. And this small token, fair maiden,—”

He stopped short at that moment as an ill-favored Outbrancher, who had fared poorly in the footrace, made his sudden appearance in front of Dylan.

“It’s alright for you Centermen to win contests rigged in your favor,” he said loudly to no one in particular. “I never could run in a straight line anyway. But if we’d been racing in the Outbranches, you wouldn’t have had a chance.”

Dylan was courteous in his reply. “I really don’t see how that would change anything, but I suppose you’re welcome to your own opinion.” He watched the rude fellow steadily, sizing him up to determine what he was up against. They were about the

same size. Perry was sitting between Dylan and Carwen, and she nervously touched his arm.

“I’d say I’m welcome to the prize you’re holding. Unless you’re too cowardly to fight for it, which is about what I’d expect from a dandied up Centerman like you.” The sneer on the Outbrancher’s face increased his ugliness five-fold. He was looking for trouble, and Dylan seemed willing to oblige him. With slow deliberation, Dylan began to rise from his seat as the Outbrancher’s sneer shifted to a smirk. Perry sat and watched, fully prepared to support his friend in any event, using his staff if need be, but unsure if he should intervene or let Dylan face the challenge man to man.

Dylan glanced over to Perry, who understood the summons and immediately stood beside him, staff in hand. The Outbrancher looked from one to the other. A nasty gleam came into his eye, and he reached a hand behind him as though to draw forth some object hidden there, but then seemed to change his mind with a glance around the tent. The gleam faded but the nastiness remained as he spat out, “You Centermen are all the same. All cowards.” With that final insult, he slunk away from the pavilion.

Perry was relieved to see the fight end before it started. Besides his pragmatic concerns—the Outbrancher had seemed strangely undaunted by he and Dylan’s combined challenge—there was the simple fact that he was not a violent man. His limbs shook a little from the aborted call to action.

Carwen could contain herself no longer and rushed over to her fiancée’s side.

“Oh, what a snake that was!” she exclaimed.

“Yes,” said Dylan as he wrapped a reassuring arm around her waist, “a worthless troublemaker. But it’s all right now; thanks, Perry.”

“I think you had him,” Perry lied. “All the same I’m glad it didn’t come to anything,” he continued, following with his eyes the path the Outbrancher had taken from the tent.

“Well, I’ll tell you what I wish to know,” replied Dylan, thoughtfully looking down to his bright red tunic, smoothing it a little with his hand before darting twinkling eyes back up to Perry with a grin. “Would you say these clothes look dandy?”

They were all about to sit back down when another person approached the party.

“I’d like to apologize for what happened a moment ago,” the newcomer said. “We Outbranchers aren’t all like him; in fact, most are not.” One look at him made his claim abundantly apparent, as a more total opposite of the fellow they had just dealt with would be difficult to conceive. Where the former was rather squat, ugly, and mean of expression, this man was tall, handsome both in his features and dress, and most importantly carried with the expression of his face the impression of a kind nobility. “May I buy you some drinks to make amends?”

The little group welcomed the newcomer gladly, and they reclaimed their seats while the owner of the pavilion quickly moved to replenish their cups at the Outbrancher’s bidding.

“That guy was a real piece of work,” said Perry. “I don’t know when I’ve come across a more disagreeable sort. Do you know him?”

“The answer to that question is yes, although I do not associate with him. There are not many of us Outbranchers on Brackenbranch, but I manage to avoid his particular company with a fair degree of success. He is a low kind of man beside whom wild animals appear benevolent. Iwan is his name.”

“And what’s your name?” broke in Carwen, with friendly insistence.

“I am called Rodric,” he replied, smiling, “and may I request the honor of your names?”

As the names were given, Perry examined the man with keen interest. He already liked him immensely, yet he was puzzled by his appearance and manners. Outbranchers were known to be a very rough, uncouth lot by and large, and here was this fellow carrying himself with more polish than anyone Perry had ever met. He surmised that this Rodric had seen more of the world than the tangled Outbranches that he now called home.

“Have you always lived in the Outbranches?” asked Dylan, perhaps pondering along the same lines as Perry.

“No, not always, as I suppose may be seen clearly enough. Though where I lived before going there I do not normally tell.” He paused, and a brief silence ensued until he spoke again, “And now I will dwell in the Outbranches no longer.”

“Where are you going?” asked Perry.

“I am not yet sure. I will probably begin by traveling to Stumton; there is work for me there. The next step I will decide later.”

“Work in Stumton?” asked Carwen.

“Yes, work in Stumton,” came the inscrutable reply. “I will tell you the reason for my departure, for it affects you also, though in a much lesser way.” The group waited, spellbound by the mysterious man. Little could have prepared them for the shock of the next three words. “Brynntree is dying.”

Perry was stunned. The idea that their own great tree, so unknowably ancient, could die, was something he surprisingly had never considered. He was to be the third generation of his family to live out his days on Brackenbranch, and his forefathers before his grandfather’s time had come from Bardsbranch, which was higher up and on the opposite side of the same tree.

“I doubt it will survive the winter,” he continued quietly.

Dylan voiced what everyone was thinking. “That’s crazy; how could that be? Besides, the leaves are green.”

“The leaves are still green... relative to brown, at least. But the fruits are drying up, and the leaves will follow,” Rodric replied.

Perry knew that every year in the autumn, small fleshy fruits that held the seeds of the great trees fell intermittently for several days until they thoroughly littered the ground. He recalled now that last year the fruits did not fall until after the falling of the leaves, and when they did they were dried and shrunken. The bitter clusters were never of much value to the townspeople anyway, except sometimes as fertilizer, so no one had paid much notice.

“Of course the tree will stand for hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years after it ceases to live. However that does not solve the problem we are beginning to face in the Outbranches. Gorging on the fruit of Brynntree normally allows the small animals of the Reaches to survive the winter. Last autumn, the fruits failed, and those creatures mostly died. The effects of this are beginning to be felt. The predators are hungry, and game is growing scarce.” Here Perry’s mind flashed to Elgan’s murmurings that morning, but Rodric did not slow for him to pursue the thought. “It is time for everyone in the Outbranches to leave. They will, too, before the coming of this winter at the latest, I expect. Many of the Outbranchers you see here at the Festival have merely timed their exit so they could enjoy this celebration, like myself.”

A more quiet group was not to be found at that moment amid all the Festival noise of Brackenbranch. Perry thought perhaps he should say something, but he was speechless. Rodric looked about the table with a decided air.

“Well, I see that I have shocked you with this information, which is understandable. I would not be too alarmed, as I do not foresee this affecting your lives in a manner too drastic. But now I must go if I am to meet my companion at the appointed hour. It was a pleasure to meet each one of you, though I am sorry to have been the bearer of bad news. I now bid you farewell.”

“Yes . . . pleased to know you, farewell . . . goodbye,” came the mumbled responses.

“And Iwan was right about one thing, by the way,” said Rodric as he rose to leave.

“What?” asked Perry, more as a general mark of confusion than a specific question.

“About the race. An Outbrancher would never defeat a Centerman in a race here on wide, level ground, but neither would a Centerman, even one so swift as Dylan here, defeat an Outbrancher in a race out in the Reaches. It’s a totally different terrain and requires a different method of movement.”

“Well, I guess that makes sense,” said Dylan, slowly coming back round to the topic of their earlier conversation.

“He’s still a jerk, though,” declared Carwen stubbornly, and the group seized the opportunity to relieve their tension with laughter.

Night came, cooling the air and refreshing the weary revelers. The dances were done, and the doubtful portent of Rodric had long been dismissed from Perry’s mind. Although disappointed to have missed out on the dancing due to his wound, which was now complaining much more loudly than it had even when he first received it, Perry tempered his regret with a consoling thought. Seren had not been at the dance tonight anyway, which was surprising, because she loved to dance. Perry loved to watch her dance; it was even worth the sickening stabs of envy he inevitably felt for her partners.

How could a woman be so beautiful, all the time? There were other pretty girls on the Branch, to be sure, but Perry hardly noticed them. For him, Seren was the standard against which every other girl was naturally measured, and to whatever extent they shared her features, that was the extent to which they really hit the mark. That was how far and above Seren stood; she was in a world apart. But the same glory that drew Perry's affections so powerfully toward her also terrified him. And so it was that she remained to him inaccessible, distant as a star, which no matter how devotedly he gazed upon it, left him cold and alone.

If Seren hadn't been at the dance, then he hadn't missed much by his wound, though with this thought a voice rose inside to remind him that he would not have asked her for a dance either way. *A very brave man, indeed, Elgan. I surely am very brave*, he thought to himself with some bitterness. But he was drawn from these unhappy thoughts by an elbow from Dylan in his side. Perry, Dylan, and Carwen were now seated with the rest of the crowd that remained of the Festival celebrants on a mossy knoll on the far side of the Field. They were close to the Overlook, a place where through some happenstance of life the edge of the great branch dropped off sharply down and back, leaving a sort of promontory cliff. From the sturdy platform built out over the edge of this cliff, an observer could look straight down the entire length of Bryntree until the mighty trunk disappeared into the trailing mists that forever shrouded the ground far below. Perhaps this unusual feature was what had first led to the Festival Field being proclaimed in this spot; regardless of how it came to be so, this knoll beside the overlook was the traditional

scene for the final event of the Festival, the Brackenbranch pageant. The dramatic production was more myth than history, and in recent years it had become increasingly fanciful. Perry's mind had long begun to wander during the various scenes that were probably intended to weave some common thread through life on Brackenbranch. If so, that meaning was lost on him. But now at the finale of the show, as a little group of children in colorful garments sang and the musical instruments swelled, Perry's eyelids were heavy. He was feeling very tired from the long day. Dylan's intruding elbow continued its onslaught until Perry shoved it away.

"What?" he hissed.

Dylan leaned toward him. "Don't you see?"

Perry's heart somersaulted. It was Seren. Seated on a stately white horse, and clothed in a long, blue dress that shimmered along with her golden hair in the light of the torches, she looked more magnificent than he could remember her ever being before. The play's wandering theme may have lost the attention of the audience some time ago, but here was a spectacle that needed no plot to give it significance, and the crowd stirred with interest. Around her walked figures in grey cloaks bearing torches, with the one in front leading the horse slowly across the open field that served as a stage. She looked placid and serene as she was led along her allotted course. *Like a star*, thought Perry. And she turned and looked at the crowd, at him.

Suddenly, out of the darkness above, a huge dark shape dropped silently onto the girl, obscuring her from view and knocking the torchbearers to the ground. Perry started

violently as the horse gave a terrified scream. The thing immediately raised itself, exposing Seren and her mount firmly clenched within massive yellow talons that seemed far too big.

“Horseowl!” shouted someone on the right.

Gasps and cries filled the air, and the girl in the grip of the great bird screamed. Immediately several men near the front sprang into action, grasping torches abandoned by the actors and whatever else they could find to attack the huge predator. Nothing that Perry had ever heard about the great birds braced him for what he now saw. That a creature could be so big was at once astounding and terrifying. Its wings stretched out immensely from side to side, and its colossal head towered above the ground with immense round eyes bigger than he would have ever thought possible. It was no wonder that this behemoth could fly off with a horse in its clutches. The men’s charge would have been utterly in vain had not the grey-cloaked torchbearer who had been leading the horse boldly kept his grip on the halter, dropping his torch and clinging to the rope with both hands. His weight, added to that of the horse and the girl, was simply too much for the owl to carry. It flapped its wings frantically, creating blasts of wind that could be felt throughout the forward portions of the audience as it pulled at the stumbling man, but the attempt at flight was to no avail as long as the halter held firm.

Perry tried to force his way down to the struggle, but the crowd was in a panic, and even with rather indiscriminate use of his staff his progress was unbearably slow. Screams mingled with shouts as the men struggled to force the bird to release its prey.

They plunged up at its feathered legs and body with the torches; one beat upon the joints of its talons with already bloodied fists. But the creature was relentless, fazed neither by the impotent blows nor the reeking smoke of smoldering feathers. As he forced his way through the crowd, Perry could now see Seren also struggling against the predator. She fortunately had not been stabbed by any of the long, cruel claws that now skewered the dying horse, but her left leg at least was hopelessly pinned between the body of her mount and the iron grip of the owl. Her dress was torn but she seemed otherwise uninjured, besides what damage the pressure might be doing to her leg.

Perry was almost through the crowd when he saw a tall figure streaking across the dark plain toward the deadly contest. In his hand was a long, terrible spear whose sharp point glittered threateningly in the night. In a moment he had ducked beneath the sweep of a powerful wing and darted past the men with torches. It was Rodric. He stopped hard on his heels beneath the bird's chest and spun around to meet its gaze. The owl looked down on him, beak gaping open in a threatening expression that looked oddly like some deranged smile. Rodric set himself, drew back the long spear, and then hurled it with deadly force at the creature's chest. The owl pierced the field with a deafening screech as the point drove home, burying itself in its victim far up the length of the haft. The bird flopped backward in a paroxysm of shock and agony, knocking many of the fighting men aside. It was in that moment that the halter broke, slipped off the horse, or finally fled the grip of the grey torchbearer's hand. The bird was now free, just as Perry at last burst through the last confines of the surging crowd and sprinted toward the girl. But it was too

late. Immediately sensing the new lightness of its burden, the expiring bird, still tightly clutching its floundering prey, half flew and half dragged itself away from the crowd toward the edge of the Overlook. It reached the edge, almost seemed to pause there for a second, then dropped into the open sky.

At that sight, with its finality too devastating to accept, Perry's blood ran cold in his veins even as he dashed out onto the platform, leaned out over the rail, and peered anxiously down. He could see nothing besides dim blackness, but over the din of the crowd behind him, he could hear the girl still screaming at the top of her lungs for help. Soon all the people were pressed up against the rail behind and beside him, listening in a horrified hush as slowly, pitifully, her cries faded away into silent distance of the dark night, with her doomed captor winging his careening way down through the mists to the far-away ground. Seren was gone.

CHAPTER 2:

A SEED SOWN

The following days were strange ones on Brackenbranch. The people were stricken, some with sadness, many with fear. Seren had been widely considered the most beautiful girl on the branch, making her loss, already devastating for those who were friends of the radiant young woman, also somehow staggering for those who did not. The very blossom of their society had been plucked, and no one knew who might be next.

By this time word had spread of Perry's unseasonal encounter with the mosscat, adding incontrovertible weight to the story that the Outbranchers had brought to the Festival: the Tree was indeed dying. The question on every mind now was how to avoid sharing its fate. Many had already made the costly decision to move away, and they began preparing to leave Brynntree to join relatives on the neighboring Trees of Fain or Calden. Those unable or unwilling to leave knew they must quickly adapt to the new order of things. If the predators were hungry now, one could only imagine how desperate they would become as they slowly starved to death in the coming winter.

The Timbermen, finding themselves on the frontline of this invading hunger, talked of building a huge wall across the entire width of the branch, to separate the town and inner Timberlands from the territory beyond. Once finished, every Centerman, townsman and Timberman alike, would join in forming a line stretched across the branch and together driving as many of their wild animal neighbors as possible out

through gates left in the wall for the purpose. A few homesteads would be left outside this new boundary, but there was little choice other than to abandon them. How well this measure would defend against the nimble mosscats was unclear, but at least it should largely solve the more pressing problem of hungry wolves.

The shepherds needed to take immediate actions of their own. Perry's father, who had arrived home on the chaotic morning following the loss of Seren, had helped organize construction of a sheepfold large enough to accommodate all the flocks in Brackenbranch. It was a good plan. Once it was completed, each shepherd would be able to call out his own flock to pasture in the morning, while every night, several shepherds, serving by rotation, would spend the entire night on a platform built onto the high fence of the enclosure, protecting all the sheep of the pastures against mosscats that might manage to climb or leap over the wall.

Perry felt lost amid the bustle. Ever before the eyes of his mind was the image of Seren, now smiling as she so often did when talking with her friends in town; now piercing him with those bright eyes, as she had on that day when he had helped her father carry some heavy crates into his shop in town. His heart burned within his chest; it could not be that she was gone. She was so much a part of him: the plans he had laid, the daydreams he had wandered in, the qualities of character he had sought to obtain, all found their purpose and their pleasure in her. That he could ever have her as his own had always seemed an impossible dream, and whether he ever truly believed that they would someday be married, share a home, and raise a family, even he could not have answered.

But now that she was gone, everything seemed empty, and he moved in a kind of daze, stunned at the wrongness of such a good and lovely woman being lost in the prime of her youth, and of such a good and lovely aspiration, really his only one, being so suddenly snatched away from him.

Again he shook his head. He was sitting with his back against a small tree in more or less the middle of the pastures, giving his still-sore leg a rest while his sheep, little affected by the events of the past few days, grazed contentedly around him. Across the rolling fields toward town, he could see men like ants in the distance as they laid out the framework of the new sheepfold, with its tall posts standing like a ring of stricken trees. His father was among them, Perry knew, ensuring that the work continued as it should. He could imagine him now, standing among the others, alternately scratching the top of his head and the side of his beard, his customary mark of concentration, as he put in some word on how the next beam should be attached. Perry was proud of his father; he was both wise and honorable, and was known as such. It was just as well that it was his father helping with the fold today instead of him. Normally such a project would have fascinated Perry, but for the past several days, he had opted to stay with the flock. His listless gaze remained on the scene as his mind returned to its trouble.

Tomorrow there would be a funeral for Seren, which made sense considering the circumstances. Her family needed the ritual of a burial, even if there was no body to bury, and perhaps a part of Perry welcomed such a relief as well. Yet one thought nagged him, as it had ever since that terrible night. *What if she's still alive?* It was quite possible, in his

estimation, although he had not spoken of it with anyone. The owl was dying when it fell, but not so quickly that it couldn't have made it to the very ground, he thought. If it had kept its grip on her, or, rather, had she kept her grip on it, then why shouldn't she be alive? Of course, there was an immediate answer to that question, and it plunged cold through his chest: the Ground. What hid in that darkness among the bases of the great trees was anyone's guess, and Perry had heard a few of those in his time. None boded particularly well for a living Seren. When Perry was just a boy, he and his friends had been among the many children who would sometimes go down to the Overlook on a summer's night, spinning terrifying tales for one another as they lay shoulder to shoulder on their stomachs and peered down into that mysterious abyss. Dylan's stories had always been a bit over the top: monsters the size of houses with insatiable appetites or swamps so deep that a person sinking through them would never reach the bottom. Perry had always been more bothered by the stories he himself invented, stories of malevolent minds that watched and waited, of horrible shadows lurking in the dark, of evil wizards wandering by the light of strange lanterns.

The thought of Seren trapped within his old nightmares made him shudder. If he could only be there with her, he would protect her. No danger would frighten him, no power break his courage. With her beside him, looking to him, he could hardly imagine himself being afraid of anything. If his nightmares could come alive on the ground then so, too, perhaps, could his daydreams. Finally he would have the opportunity to demonstrate to Seren how deeply he cared for her, and how strong a man he could be on

her behalf. He would sacrifice himself for her completely, so that he would be beaten to nothing and torn into pieces before he allowed one strand of hair on that wonderful head to be harmed. Already he was embarking on another of his heroic adventures of the mind when he was sharply brought to a screeching halt. *Fool*, he thought, *she might be down there right now*. This was no time for daydreams. It was just as well for him to sit here in the sunny pastures with his back against a tree and imagine himself doing heroic deeds, but what help was that? She was down there now, probably, stumbling through the dark: disheveled, dirty, tired, alone. How many days had it been now? Three. Was she finding food and water? Was she even right this moment being stalked by hungry beasts?

Elgan had called him a brave man, but was he? Surely it was cowardly to close his eyes and pretend he was helping Seren at a time when she was in actual need. For the first time in three days he began to consider if it were possible to save her, and his mind sharpened with the thought. There was no way to reach the ground; certainly he could not go down the way she did. Nothing would be gained by jumping off the Overlook and killing himself, he might even land on her and kill them both. Perched in Brynntree, he was helpless. But perhaps from some other tree . . . He remembered something else Elgan had once told him. They had been sitting at a town gathering one night, talking about the sea, which was far, far away to the south. When Perry had expressed sadness that he would never see such a sight, Elgan had replied, "That choice is yours. There are paths that lead from this very bench all the way down to that sunlit shore. Our first fathers were not born among these treetops; you may have noticed that Dendaree is not the most

fitting place for a civilization to thrive.” Perry had noticed no such thing, but now the import of Elgan’s words to Seren’s plight dawned on him: “*there are paths... down.*” So there was a way to the ground, somewhere, and he could travel it. He could get to Seren!

A ridiculous thought. Times were beginning to get hard on Brackenbranch, and his parents needed his help. Not to mention that such a journey would be so long in the making that Seren would surely be long dead before he could reach her. No, this was just another daydream, and he might as well forget it. Seren was truly gone, and there would be a funeral, and everyone would mourn, and he would, some day, he hoped, find some other woman that he would desire to have as his wife. He snorted bitterly at the wild idea of rescue he had entertained, and decided to stretch his leg and lead the flock to the next hilltop. But as he looked over his shoulder at the tree he’d been leaning against, he noticed a small blossom, the last remnant of early spring, all alone amid the leaves. It seemed to him that the little tree clung to that one beautiful, white flower as though it could not let it go.

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It was a brief but sorrowful ceremony. Perry did not think he had ever seen so many people weeping at one time in his life; even among the men there were several dewy eyes being quietly dabbed by gnarled hands clenching soft handkerchiefs. They were at the graveyard on the end of town, and the rows of grave markers extended away

in sad silence until the ground began to drop off sharply to the edge of the branch. He stood with Dylan and Carwen, who embraced one another as they added their tearful sniffs to those of the crowd. It was strange to see his friend in such sombre clothing; the entire assembly were respectfully appareled in subdued colors and pale faces. Several Timbermen were mixed among the townspeople, having made the trip this morning to be present for the farewell to the young woman whom they had watched be taken away. Their faces were serious but on the whole betrayed little emotion, and Perry was glad of that. Seren's loss was a bitter drink for him, yet here at the funeral today he felt no inclination to tears.

Perry shifted his feet and looked over the heads of the crowd to the motionless form of Faintree in the distance beyond the branch-edge. Men with ropes were lowering the casket into the grave, but Perry did not care to watch the descent of the empty box. He was remembering the sights and sounds of the last time he had been so near to the drop-off, the sounds of people screaming and of wind on the owl's wings; the bodies pressing against him as he had tried to shoulder through the crowd; the sight of Rodric sprinting toward the attack. Perry had half-expected to see the mysterious man who had almost saved Seren here at the funeral, but he had not spotted the tall stranger among the mourners.

In a few minutes the ceremony had ended, and people turned to talk to one another in quiet tones as they made their way toward Seren's family to offer condolences. Seren's parents, the Penllynsons, were a pitiable sight, clinging to one another like a pair

of drowning creatures as they struggled to bear up under the sea of their grief. Perry did not feel like talking; so he embraced the red-eyed Dylan and Carwen without a word, and walked a little apart from the crowd to be alone with his thoughts. As he made his way through the graveyard he passed another quiet mourner with a similar idea, who sat silently on a stump with her face downward. Her face was covered by thick waves of dark hair that cascaded down almost to the ground, but he thought he recognized the delicate form of Melody, Seren's cousin. Very often he had seen the two of them walking through town together or dancing side by side at the town gatherings. She had been Seren's closest companion. *Poor girl*, he thought. She did not look up, and he continued beyond the last of the grave markers until he stood where the ground began to drop sharply away. He stared absently out over the expanse and tried to make sense of things. The previous day's hopes for a rescue attempt were long silenced within him, yet he still wondered if Seren was alive, and his eyes followed the trunk of Faintree downward until it disappeared into the fog. Maybe she was alive, but he could not reach her. Maybe she was dead, and he needed to move on from her, but he could not know that, nor do that. He remained there for some time, conflicted and confused.

When he finally turned, the villagers had gone, the Penllynsons being long ago ushered home by a sympathetic cloud of friends and relatives. All gone, that is, except Melody, who was still sitting on that stump, her eyes vacant and face ashen as the grey morning that enveloped her. Perry paused, uncomfortable in the conviction that she should be comforted, but unsure of what he would say if he tried. Instead he opted to take

his leave, perhaps to go and wander among the tactfully taciturn company of his flock. As he walked toward, though, he veered close by the distraught girl, drawn by the presence of one who shared his loss. *Me and her and Seren's parents*, he thought, *us most of all*. She did not meet his glance as he passed by, yet he imperceptibly slowed, strangely comforted by her nearness and reluctant to be alone in this gathering of graves. He was almost past her, then:

“She’s not dead, you know.”

Startled, he rocked forward with a sudden stop and looked down at the girl. She seemed unmoved, still staring out over the embankment and into the distant boughs that hung shrouded in the morning mists.

“What’s that?” he asked.

“Seren’s still alive, and she’s down there, somewhere, now.” A brief silence followed the soft voice.

“Yeah,” managed Perry, as he followed her gaze into the void. “There’s no reason she couldn’t have hung on to the owl all the way down. It was falling slowly.”

Another pause. They were practically strangers. Although well acquainted with each other’s face and doings, they had never been much in the other’s company and had scarcely shared more than a handful of words in conversation before.

“But not just that.” She spoke now with more feeling, rising to her feet and turning to look Perry in the eye. “I know she’s alive. I can sense it; she’s my cousin and my dearest friend.” At that her voice trembled a bit, and she swallowed hard, darting her

eyes away. “I know she is.” And her gaze returned to him and rested there, her dark eyes shining with tears as she awaited his response.

It was his turn to swallow as he rapidly collected his thoughts. She was quite tall for a girl, he remembered that she stood nearly a head taller than Seren, and now standing face to face she was closer to him than he was accustomed to be in conversation with a girl outside his family. And he wasn't very accustomed to such conversations at any range. Her eyes confused him, so he searched for words in the distance over her shoulder, finally finding them after what seemed an embarrassingly long moment.

“I agree. But . . . I don't know what we can do. I mean, it's crossed my mind to, you know, try to go down there, and find her,—”

“Really?” Melody interrupted, all surprise.

Perry looked down at her and replied cautiously, “I was thinking about it, you know.”

“How? No one's ever been to the Ground.”

“Well, we didn't start out up here. Somehow, someone climbed up, so there must be a way to climb down.” So he reasoned, sounding perhaps a bit more sure than he felt.

She searched his face. “And if you found a way, you would maybe go? For her? Why would you do that?”

Now Perry winced like a bear that accidentally sets its foot in the trap. “I think it's the right thing to do,” he said hurriedly. “You know, one of our people gets trapped, stuck, down there, and maybe I could help.” He clamped his mouth shut, letting that

flimsy reason totter in the air. To give any indication of his long-standing admiration for Seren would be inconceivable to him, even now that she was gone, and the safety of his secret seemed for a moment very precarious.

But Melody seemed content to accept his civic attitude, filled as she was with a barely stifled excitement and a sudden hope. “Do you really think you might try it? Are you actually... Do you think it could be done?”

Reading the expectation in her face, Perry was relieved at the shift of topic. As he listened to her questions, he found himself somehow bolstered by her belief in his wild stratagem. It began to seem less like desperate notion and more like a potential plan of action. He found himself saying, “Tonight I’m going to talk to Elgan about it and see if he’s ever heard of a way down.” Was he actually thinking about doing this?

“Yes, he might know!” she practically squealed, any struggle for objectivity completely relinquished.

“If anyone on Brackenbranch does, it’s him,” he replied, still riding the wave of her buoyant belief.

“And if your old friend”—so she was aware of their friendship—“knows about a way to reach Seren, you’ll tell me about it, won’t you?”

Perry smiled with her. “I will,” he said.

**

That night, after dinner, Perry walked down the road to Elgan's house. He climbed the creaking steps and knocked on the door.

"Come in!" came the muffled voice from inside. "Do come right on in!"

Perry entered to a familiar sight. There was a small kitchen and sitting room before him, with closed doors leading off to other parts of the house that Perry had never seen. Warm light from the fire flickered over the walls of the room, which were mostly bare. The old man sat in a small chair right up against the hearth, which was sprinkled with wood shavings, and in his hands were a knife and a partially carved block of wood. He smiled with pleasant surprise at his visitor.

"Peregrine Wendelson! This is the very thing the evening lacked! What brings you to my home? Pull up a chair here by the fire if you like; the night is cool for this time of year."

"Good evening, Elgan, thank you; I'll do that gladly." Perry walked over to the kitchen table, on which there remained a single mug from dinner, and grabbed a chair.

"Were you at the funeral today?"

"No, no I wasn't. I had other things to do," Elgan said as Perry joined him beside the fire. "And just between you and me, Perry, a funeral is what you have when someone dies, not when you just wish that they had." The casual remark startled Perry, and he looked up from the fire to meet the keen gaze of the man.

"So you don't think she's dead?"

"Now, I wasn't there at the pageant, so you might know better than me, but I

heard what happened clear enough. The girl wasn't harmed, was she? And she was calling for help and holding onto that bird after it went over? And the bird was hurt but still alive?"

"Well, yes, all of that's right," said Perry.

"Then, I'd say, that big bird glided right on down to the ground, where Seren is at this moment. No more dead than my brother on Bardsbranch, and while I miss him, you don't see me holding a funeral." He shook his head with something like a smile and returned to his whittling.

"Bardsbranch is a bit different than the Ground," said Perry, wanting very much to see what the response to that would be.

Elgan stilled his hand but kept his face toward the fire. "True. She may be alive now, but whether she will stay that way... I prefer to know a person is dead before I try to bury them."

Perry was pleased to hear these words from a source as trusted as Elgan. So far the only people he had heard voice this opinion of Seren's survival of the attack were himself and Melody, both of whose judgment was of rather dubious dependability under the circumstances. There was a lull in the conversation; the old man and the young watched the dancing flames.

"Were you at the funeral today?" Elgan asked.

"Yes, I was there," said Perry, and another silence ensued.

“So what brought you here tonight, lad? Did Wendell send you to recruit me to help with that sheepfold? I hear they’re making good progress.”

Perry laughed. “No, he didn’t; they seem to be doing well enough already. I wanted to ask you…” He hesitated for a moment. “Do you know of a way down to the Ground?”

Elgan looked sharply at Perry, immediately guessing his intent. “Besides jumping, I suppose you mean,” he said as he placed the block of wood on the mantle and the knife in his belt.

“I already knew that route,” Perry grinned, but his stomach was tight with tension.

“Hmmm,” the old man grunted thoughtfully, considering more than just the answer to the question posed to him. “Yes and no. There is a way down, and I know of it, but I have never traveled it myself. Very few ever have, to my knowledge. Not for many, many years.”

Perry wanted to jump to his feet. “Where?” he exclaimed.

Elgan smiled at his enthusiasm. “Stumton. Beneath the city.”

Stumton! It was the biggest city in Dendaree, as far as Perry knew. It was not built on a branch, but rather on the broken trunk of a great tree that had died aeons ago. The land there was fertile, and there were no branches above it to obstruct the sky. Thousands of people lived there, including the Lord of Stumton, who was the most powerful man in Dendaree. Perry’s father had brought back many stories of the place through the years,

and by his account it was unlike anything Perry had ever seen. He had planned to be the one to take the wool there to market next year so he could finally see it for himself.

Elgan continued, “There are old tunnels bored through the trunk. Some say they go all the way to the Ground, and I suspect they are right.”

Perry stood, unable to contain himself, and began to pace around the narrow floor.

“What are you considering?”

“I want to rescue Seren,” he blurted. “I think I might try it.” His mind was spinning and his heart was racing. He hurriedly began to consider what arrangements he would need to make and what his plan would be. The road to Stumton would be straightforward enough . . . then he would ask about the tunnels . . . he would need supplies and money . . .

“There is an old saying, Perry,” said Elgan, breaking in on his thoughts. “If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together.” Perry turned to face the old man, who continued, “You’ll need help on such a journey. If you’ll allow me, I’d like to join you.”

He didn’t know what to say. “Are you sure?”

“I traveled quite a bit in my younger days. I wouldn’t mind seeing one last new world before I die.” He smiled at his dry jest. “So yes, I am sure. Are you?”

Perry was beside himself. He thought of his parents, his friends, his sheep—all the things that he would be leaving behind on Brackenbranch. Then he thought of the

Windroad, Stumton, the Ground. Last of all he thought of Seren, and Melody, and a little white blossom alone on a green branch. To his surprise, he was sure.

“I’m certain, Elgan. I’m going to rescue her.”

“Well then, my brave young friend, I am going to help you on your quest,” said Elgan, the old man’s back straightening to his full height as he offered Perry his hand.

When he got home that night, Perry had a long conversation with his parents. They were shocked and distressed to learn of his plans, but they knew that they could not try keep him, or should not. At Perry’s expression of regret to leave them when such difficult days were coming for Brackenbranch, his father stopped him. Scratching the side of his beard, he said, “You’re doing a good thing, son. Not a safe thing, maybe not a smart thing, but it’s good, and I can see there’s no talking you out of it. Don’t worry about us, we’ll get by.”

At his father’s recommendation that he not worry about them, Perry was smitten with guilt and tempted to abandon the venture altogether. How much sense did it make for him to leave them now, when they needed him most and he was most able to help them? How could he ever leave them? Then he watched at that moment as his mother slid her arm around his father’s waist and he responded by draping his brawny arm across her narrow shoulders. They were complete, Perry realized; they two were complete in one

another. A heavy burden seemed to slide from off his chest, and for the first time, he felt really free to go.

There were many tears and tight embraces in Perry's home that evening, and many times he soothed his parents' concerns with repeated promises of caution on his journey. Before they went to bed, his father disappeared into the bedroom and came out with a small leather bag that he placed in Perry's hand.

"Some money for your journey. Travel is expensive."

When Perry poured the contents into his hand, there was a small pile of copper and silver coins. It was quite a bit of money by his standards.

"This is too much!" he cried, and tried to give most of it back, but his father refused.

"We want you to have it, Perry," his mother said, through glistening eyes. "It will help keep you safe and fed on the long road."

The fire burned low in the hearth before they went to bed that night, and Perry remarked to himself as he entered his room that he had been given the very best of parents.

The next morning was spent in preparation. The plan was for them to leave tomorrow, taking Elgan's cart along the Windroad. Perry packed his things and realized

there was little to bring. His mother parceled out some small sacks of food, mostly dried mutton and corn meal, just as she did for his father on the yearly trip to Stumton. In his satchel, he had a wool blanket, a flint, a small tool knife, his flute, a sturdy cloak, a water flask, and a cup, bowl, and spoon. Elgan would be bringing a tent for shelter from the rain and pots suitable for cooking in. The little bag of money was also in the satchel now, but before he left he would fasten it to his belt. He completed his meager preparations early and looked at the finished bundle sitting on the bed. It looked so small. His gut began to twist unpleasantly. He grabbed his staff from the corner and walked out the door.

Town was his destination; he wanted to see Dylan and talk over what he was planning. Perhaps, too, he would tell Melody of his decision to go; after all, he had told her that he would. He wanted to see her reaction to the news, and he needed to talk to someone besides Elgan who really believed in the success of the venture.

He found Dylan at Carwen's home; they were making plans for their wedding, which was going to take place next week.

"Hello, Perry!" Carwen greeted him warmly at the door. "Nine days, you know," she said with a grin.

"I hate to say that I'm going to miss it," Perry responded as he stepped inside. This brought a confused look from his cousin and from Dylan, who was seated at the table.

"What's this? You're not missing our wedding!" Dylan responded. "And what makes you think you're invited anyway?"

Perry hated to bring them this news, but he knew that there was little dampening spirits as happy as theirs for long. It took the better part of an hour before the questions slowed and the three sat quietly thinking. Dylan spoke:

“This is just the sort of thing we always used to talk about doing when we were kids. I wish I could go with you, buddy. Maybe I ought to,” he added, with a concerned look at Carwen.

“No, no. I’m not going to let you turn my cousin into an old maid. You have to stay.” Dylan and Carwen both looked a bit relieved at those words. “Anyway, I won’t be alone; remember I’ll have old Elgan to keep me company. Though I won’t deny I would much rather you were coming along.”

“Oh, Perry!” exclaimed Carwen, reaching out and taking his hand. “Are you sure this is worth it? I mean, even if she made it to the Ground, is it very likely that she’s still alive? You know the things they say.”

“Yes, I know, and I’m really not sure at all. But just in case, I’ve got to try.”

“You’re a brave fellow, Perry; I hope you find her,” said Dylan. “I hope you make it back in one piece.”

Perry ate lunch with Dylan and Carwen, then bid them a fond farewell. The afternoon sun found him walking down the road toward the house where he knew Melody lived with her parents. Her father was a farmer, and when he reached her home, it

was flanked on either side with rows of bright green plants that spread around the house and continued into the fields behind. He knocked on the heavy oak door, but no one answered. He was about to give up the errand and go see Elgan instead when he heard a sound.

It was faint, and for a moment he wasn't sure whether he was imagining it. But it was a voice, and it flowed up and down following the notes of a song. By now it had grown quite distinct; it seemed to be coming from the back yard behind the house. Really a beautiful voice— what was that song? He walked along the side of the farmhouse and was about to announce his presence with a friendly shout, but when he came around the corner he stopped still and silent. He was looking at Melody; she was standing barefoot on the grass, wearing a simple blue dress while hanging clothes out to dry on a clothesline. Her back was to him, and the dark hair that reached down to the small of her back waved gently in the breeze. She was tall and slender, and to Perry she looked like the most graceful of trees bending slightly in the wind. Her song continued, and as he listened to the pure voice singing words he could not quite catch, he was held captive to the tune. At that moment, however, she turned from the line and saw Perry standing there. He immediately flushed and wished he had said something sooner. She seemed startled, and he raised a hand in an awkward wave of greeting.

“Hello, Melody.”

“Uhh, hello, Perry. I didn’t know you were here. Welcome. Have you been standing there long?” She smiled prettily and gave an embarrassed laugh that Perry was relieved to join.

“Not very— I knocked at the front door, and then I heard singing, so I came around the house.” He wondered if she could see the redness in his face from where she stood. She took off the apron she was wearing, laid it on her basket of laundry, and walked toward him. Now she would certainly see it.

“Well I’m glad you stopped by. What brings you here?” she asked, coming to a stop just in front of him and folding her hands in front of her. A serious look crossed her face. “Is this about Seren?”

“I talked to Elgan last night, like I was going to. He told me that there is a way down, in Stumton. He and I are going to travel there and go down to the Ground to find Seren. We’re going to bring her back.” It was nice to tell his news to such a receptive audience for once. As he spoke her eyes brightened and her smile widened until it was beaming.

“That’s so wonderful! I feel like she’s as good as home!”

Perry was stunned by her confidence, stunned and immediately strengthened.

“Well, we don’t know how long it will take; two weeks to reach Stumton. But hopefully we’ll be back with her before too long,” said Perry, smiling unreservedly now for the first time all day.

“I’m so glad you told me, because you know what?” Perry had no idea what she was about to say. She leaned a little toward him and spoke with deliberation. “I’m going, too.”

He was completely taken aback by this resolution, and without even thinking about it his mind set to work on finding a way to dissuade her. “That’s very good of you, noble, I’d say. And I’m sure it would be much more pleasant for us with you along, but this trip will be a dangerous one. Even the road to Stumton would be risky for a young woman to travel, and the Ground! It’s very brave of you to offer, though. Not many girls would.” He finished with what he hoped was a disarming laugh and a smile.

She neither joined in the laugh nor appeared disarmed. “I’m sure the Ground is dangerous for anyone. My cousin is down there alone right now. And as for the Windroad, lots of women travel that, and I will be with you and Elgan, won’t I?” Her face was setting into a very determined frown.

“Well, yes,” stumbled Perry. “You would be with us, but you know we are preparing to leave tomorrow, and we only have the one tent. And besides, what would your parents say? I’m sure that they wouldn’t want their daughter heading off on something like this.”

Melody wasn’t budging an inch. “I’m old enough to make my own decisions; what my parents think is what they think. And how long could it take to pack? We can bring another tent. I guess we’re traveling in Elgan’s cart?”

We can bring another tent. *We're* traveling. She was not taking no for an answer. Was there any real reason why she couldn't come? She would need to be protected; it would be an added responsibility on him and Elgan. But at the same time, wouldn't it be nice to have someone besides old Elgan around? "Yeah, Elgan's bringing his cart." He decided to give one more try. "You know, it really will be a very dangerous and difficult trip. I'd be concerned for your safety."

"I should hope you will be," said Melody simply, and Perry gave up his struggle.

It seemed an odd morning that watched Peregrine Wendelson depart from his hometown for the first time. Walking along the footpath that led to the market, he found that the most peculiar thing about that morning was that it wasn't peculiar at all. Such a long, strange road lay ahead, yet here were all the sights to which he was so accustomed: the dirt and trampled grasses in the path; the huge, distant forms of Fain and Jenson trees; the spindly little sapling by the lane that would soon be covered in purple flowers; that old broken cart wheel that had been lying underneath it for as long as he could remember. It was all real and ordinary. The coming adventure had not imbued them with any special character. Perry wondered when the change would come from the things he knew to the things which he didn't, and whether a wooden wheel rotted any differently in the quiet dark at the roots of the Great Trees than it did here on the branch. A thought darted

toward him from the shadows of his mind, demanding to know whether he would ever be coming back to these things, and when, and how different he would himself be if he did. And of course there was also the ever-present question of whether this journey was nothing but a fool's quest, whether Seren was still alive to be found. These were questions he could not answer, but by then, his feet, which had not ceased their silent duty during these roving of the mind, brought him true to course over the rise that edged the cluster of stalls and small shelters that was the open market. He saw old Elgan busied about the harness that joined his horse and wagon. And at the rear of that wagon, the slender figure of a girl with long dark hair was taking some bundles from her parents and placing them into the cart. Her mother saw him, and he raised his hand in a greeting that was already almost a farewell. It had begun.