



It was an odd-looking vine. Dusky variegated leaves hunkered against a stem that wound in a stranglehold around the smooth trunk of a balsam fir. Sap drooled down the wounded bark, and dry limbs slumped, making it look as if the tree were trying to voice a moan into the cool, damp morning air. Pods stuck out from the vine here and there along its length, almost seeming to look warily about for witnesses.

It was the smell that had first caught his attention, a smell like the decomposition of something that had been wholly unsavory even in life. Richard combed his fingers through his thick hair as his mind lifted out of the fog of despair, coming into focus upon seeing the vine. He scanned for others, but saw none. Everything else looked normal. The maples of the upper Ven Forest were already tinged with crimson, proudly showing off their new mantle in the light breeze. With nights getting colder, it wouldn't be long before their cousins down in the Hartland Woods joined them. The oaks, being the last to surrender to the season, still stoically wore their dark green coats.

Having spent most his life in the woods, Richard knew all the plants—if not by name, by sight. From when Richard was very small, his friend Zedd had taken him along, hunting for special herbs. He had shown Richard which ones to look for, where they grew and why, and put names to everything they saw. Many times they just talked, the old man always treating him as an equal, asking as much as he answered. Zedd had sparked Richard's hunger to learn, to know.

This vine, though, he had seen only once before, and it wasn't in the woods. He had found a sprig of it at his father's house, in the blue clay jar Richard had made when he was a boy. His father had been a trader and had traveled often, looking for the chance exotic or rare item. People of means had often sought him out, interested in what he might have turned up. It seemed to be the looking, more than the finding, that he had liked, as he had always been happy to part with his latest discovery so he could be off after the next.

From a young age, Richard had liked to spend time with Zedd while his father was away. Richard's brother, Michael, was a few years older, and having no interest in the woods, or Zedd's rambling lectures, preferred to spend his time with people of means. About five years before, Richard had moved away to live on his own, but he often stopped by his father's home, unlike Michael, who was always busy and rarely had time to visit. If his father had gone away, he would leave Richard a message in the blue jar telling him the latest news, some gossip, or of some sight he had seen.

On the day three weeks before when Michael had come and told him their father had been murdered, Richard had gone to his father's house, despite his brother's insistence that there was no reason to go, nothing he could do. Richard had long since passed the age when he did as his brother said. Wanting to spare him, the people there didn't let him see the body. But still, he saw the big, sickening splashes and puddles of blood, brown and dry across the plank floor. When Richard came close, voices fell silent, except to offer sympathy, which only deepened the riving pain. Yet he had heard them talking, in hushed tones, of the stories and the wild rumors of things come out of the boundary.

Of magic.

Richard was shocked at the way his father's small home had been torn apart, as if a storm had been turned loose inside. Only a few things were left untouched. The blue message jar still sat on the shelf, and inside he found the sprig of vine. It was still in his pocket now. What his father meant him to know from it, he couldn't guess.

Grief and depression overwhelmed him, and even though he still had his brother, he felt abandoned. That he was grown into manhood offered him no sanctuary from the forlorn feeling of being orphaned and alone in the world, a feeling he had known before, when he was young and his mother died. Even though his father had often been away, sometimes for weeks, Richard had always known he was somewhere, and would be back. Now he would never be back.

Michael wouldn't let him have anything to do with the search for the killer. He said he had the best trackers in the army looking and he wanted Richard to stay out of it, for his own good. So Richard simply didn't show the vine to Michael, and went off alone every day, searching for the vine. For three weeks he walked the trails of the Hartland Woods, every trail, even the ones few others knew of, but he never saw it.

Finally, against his better judgment, he gave in to the whispers in his mind, and went to the upper Ven Forest, close to the boundary. The whispers haunted him with the feeling that he somehow knew something of why his father had been murdered. They teased at him, tantalized him with thoughts just out of reach, and laughed at him for not seeing it. Richard lectured himself that it was his grief playing tricks, not something real.

He had thought that when he found the vine it would give him some sort of answer. Now that he had, he didn't know what to think. The whispers had stopped teasing him, but now they brooded. He knew it was just his own mind thinking, and he told himself to stop trying to give the whispers a life of their own. Zedd had taught him better than that.

Richard looked up at the big fir tree in its agony of death. He thought again of his father's death. The vine had been there. Now the vine was killing this tree; it couldn't be anything good. Though he couldn't do anything for his father, he didn't have to let the vine preside over another death. Gripping it firmly, he pulled, and with powerful muscles ripped the sinewy tendrils away from the tree.

That's when the vine bit him.

One of the pods struck out and hit the back of his left hand, causing him to jump back in pain and surprise. Inspecting the small wound, he found something like a

thorn embedded in the meat of the gash. The matter was decided. The vine was trouble. He reached for his knife to dig out the thorn, but the knife wasn't there. At first surprised, he realized why and reprimanded himself for allowing his depression to cause him to forget something as basic as taking his knife with him into the woods. Using his fingernails, he tried to pull out the thorn. To his rising concern, the thorn, as if alive, wiggled itself in deeper. He dragged his thumbnail across the wound, trying to snag the thorn out. The more he dug, the deeper it went. A hot wave of nausea swept through him as he tore at the wound, making it bigger, so he stopped. The thorn had disappeared into the oozing blood.

Looking about, Richard spotted the purplish red autumn leaves of a small nannyberry tree, laden with its crop of dark blue berries. Beneath the tree, nestled in the crook of a root, he found what he sought: an aum plant. Relieved, he carefully snapped off the tender stem near its base, and gently squeezed the sticky, clear liquid onto the bite. He gave a smile to old Zedd for teaching him how the aum plant made wounds heal faster. The soft fuzzy leaves always made Richard think of Zedd. The juice of the aum numbed the sting, but not his worry over being unable to remove the thorn. He could feel it wriggling still deeper into his flesh.

Richard squatted down and poked a hole in the ground with his finger, placed the aum in it, and fixed moss about the stem so it might regrow itself.

The sounds of the forest fell dead still. Richard looked up, flinching as a dark shadow swept over the ground, leaping across limbs and leaves. There was a rushing, whistling sound in the air overhead. The size of the shadow was frightening. Birds burst from cover in the trees, giving alarm calls as they scattered in all directions. Richard peered up, searching through the gaps in the canopy of green and gold, trying to see the shadow's source. For an instant, he saw something big. Big, and red. He couldn't imagine what it could be, but the memory of the rumors and stories of things coming out of the boundary flooded back into his mind, making him go cold to the bone.

The vine was trouble, he thought again; this thing in the sky could be no less. He remembered what people always said, "Trouble sires three children," and knew immediately that he didn't want to meet the third child.

Discounting his fears, he started running. Just idle talk of superstitious people, he told himself. He tried to think of what could be that big, that big and red. It was impossible; there was nothing that flew that was that large. Maybe it was a cloud, or a trick of the light. But he couldn't fool himself: it was no cloud.

Looking up as he ran, trying for another glimpse, he headed for the path that skirted the hillside. Richard knew that the ground dropped off sharply on the other side of the trail, and he would be able to get an unobstructed view of the sky. Tree branches wet with rain from the night before slapped at his face as he ran through the forest, jumping fallen trees and small rocky streams. Brush snatched at his pant legs. Dappled swatches of sunlight teased him to look up but denied him the view he needed. His breath was fast, ragged, sweat ran cold against his face, and he could feel his heart pounding as he ran carelessly down the hillside. At last he stumbled out of the trees onto the path, almost falling.

Searching the sky, he spotted the thing, far away and too small for him to tell what it was, but he thought it had wings. He squinted against the blue brightness

of the sky, shielded his eyes with his hand, trying to see for sure if there were wings moving. It slipped behind a hill and was gone. He hadn't even been able to tell if it really was red.

Winded, Richard slumped down on a granite boulder at the side of the trail, absently snapping off dead twigs from a sapling beside him while he stared down at Trunt Lake below. Maybe he should go tell Michael what had happened, tell him about the vine and the red thing in the sky. He knew Michael would laugh at the last part. He had laughed at the same stories himself.

No, Michael would only be angry with him for being up near the boundary, and for going against his orders to stay out of the search for the murderer. He knew his brother cared about him or he wouldn't always be nagging him. Now that he was grown, he could laugh off his brother's constant instructions, though he still had to endure the looks of displeasure.

Richard snapped off another twig and in frustration threw it at a flat rock. He decided he shouldn't feel singled out. After all, Michael was always telling everyone what to do, even their father.

He pushed his harsh judgments of his brother aside; today was a big day for Michael. Today he was accepting the position of First Councilor. He would be in charge of everything now, not just the town of Hartland anymore, but all the towns and villages of Westland, even the country people. Responsible for everything and everyone. Michael deserved Richard's support, he needed it; Michael had lost a father, too.

That afternoon there was to be a ceremony and big celebration at Michael's house. Important people were going to be there, come from the farthest reaches of Westland. Richard was supposed to be there, too. At least there would be plenty of good food. He realized he was famished.

While he sat and thought, he scanned the opposite side of Trunt Lake, far below. From this height the clear water revealed alternating patches of rocky bottom and green weed around the deep holes. At the edge of the water, Hawkers Trail knitted in and out of the trees, in some places open to view, in some places hidden. Richard had been on that part of the trail many times. In the spring it was wet and soggy down by the lake, but this late in the year it would be dry. In areas farther north and south, as the trail wound its way through the high Ven Forests, it passed uncomfortably close to the boundary. Because of that, most travelers avoided it, choosing instead the trails of the Hartland Woods. Richard was a woods guide, and led travelers safely through the Hartland forests. Most were traveling dignitaries wanting the prestige of a local guide more than they wanted direction.

His eyes locked on something. There was movement. Unsure what it had been, he stared hard at the spot on the far side of the lake. When he saw it again, on the path, where it passed behind a thin veil of trees, there was no doubt: it was a person. Maybe it was his friend Chase. Who else but a boundary warden would be wandering around up here?

He hopped down off the rock, tossing the twigs aside, and took a few steps forward. The figure followed the path into the open, at the edge of the lake. It wasn't Chase; it was a woman. A woman in a dress. What woman would be walking around this far out in the Ven Forest, in a dress? Richard watched her making her

way along the lakeshore, disappearing and reappearing with the path. She didn't seem to be in a hurry, but she wasn't strolling slowly either. Rather, she moved at the measured pace of an experienced traveler. That made sense; no one lived anywhere near Trunt Lake.

Other movement snatched his attention. Richard's eyes searched the shade and shadows. Behind her, there were others. Three, no, four men, in hooded forest cloaks, following her, but hanging back some distance. They moved with stealth, from tree to rock to tree. Looking. Waiting. Moving. Richard straightened, his eyes wide, his attention riveted.

They were stalking her.

He knew immediately: this was the third child of trouble.