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THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton

CHAPTER TWO

“THE SEARCH FOR A HOME”

Oh, it's you again is it? You've come to hear some more about Peter, you say? Very well, sit down and make yourself comfortable. But just where did we leave Peter last time? I've been so busy, you know that it's just slipped my mind. What's that? Oh yes, of course, they were just about to look for the World of Men weren't they? Yes, that's right. Well, let me see now ... oh yes, I remember....

After what seemed like no time at all Peter woke up with the sun streaming into his eyes, brighter and more golden than he had ever seen it before. If he looked at where it played upon the covers he could see that it sparkled with all the colours of the rainbow. He almost called for his mother to come see, when he remembered, all in a flash, that he wasn't at home at all. And his mother would not have come.

For an instant he felt something almost like fear. The first few moments of waking up in a strange place are not always pleasant. And whether it becomes pleasant later, well, that all depends on where you have landed yourself.

Fortunately for Peter he had landed someplace very pleasant indeed. In fact, before he'd even had a chance to throw the covers back, the room was full of friendly faces and cheerful voices, all talking at once. It seems that while Peter had slept his new friends had been up and about with the sunrise, and Léolin had had quite some trouble trying to keep them quiet (or as close to being quiet as they were able to come). Once they had seen Peter raise an eyelid the game was up. Nothing could keep them from rushing into the room, tripping and tumbling over each other in their efforts to be first at Peter's bedside. By the time Peter had realized what was happening, he had a hard time deciding which of his new friends belonged to which of the legs, arms, wings, and tails that were sticking out in all directions from a pile on the floor. While the animals untangled themselves with a great deal of noise, Peter heard the delightful music of Léolin's laughter and the Elf stepped lightly up to the bedside with a sparkle in her eyes as bright as the morning sunshine.

“Get up, Peter, get UP!” cried several voices together, and “Hurry!” and “Rise and Shine!” and a great many other things as well.

“We’ve got to get going, there’s no time to lose!” shouted Harriet the rabbit, and “No time to lose!” echoed Webster the frog. The others were all about to add something of their own when Peter said:

“Why? Where are we going?” and all of the noise suddenly stopped. For in all the excitement the animals had quite forgotten that if someone has got to be going he should first have somewhere to go.

Well ...“ began Jackson Crow, “Perhaps we could ... uh ... perhaps ... uh, um ... well where do *you* think we should go Léolin?” And the others all agreed that if anyone would know where to go it would be Léolin, for she had been just *everywhere*.

The Elf laughed and turned to Peter.

“Well I seem to remember that we promised Peter we would help him look for his way home,” she said, “And we wouldn’t want to break a promise would we?” At that the animals began talking so quickly and shaking their heads so strongly that it took quite a while to get them all settled down again.

“All right then,” Léolin began again, “That’s what we’ll do. But it might take a long time, you know.” Peter nodded thoughtfully. His Grandma and Grandpa flew across the country to visit him sometimes, and he knew that it took many hours. Yet it took *days* to go the same

distance by car. Who could know how long it might take to get to a whole different world on *foot*?! Even so, there was a bright side to it all. He felt that as long as there was a good chance that he would get home sometime, there should be no harm in having a little fun along the way.

“Perhaps the first thing we should do,” said Léolin, “Is to find our new friend a house. Then we would have a place to visit him.”

Everyone was so pleased with this idea that a few animals were already out of the door before it was remembered that none of them had yet eaten anything that morning and, as anyone can tell you, it is a great mistake to go house-hunting before breakfast. So it was not until after a very busy, fidgety, furry, feathery, noisy meal, that the six friends set out on their search.

Now, no-one really knew where Peter’s new house was to be found (because, you see, no-one had ever been there yet), so there was a great deal of talk about which direction they should take, and even how they should travel. Fowler, being a duck, was sure that they would have the best chance of finding a house for Peter by flying. Indeed he knew of some very nice swamps not far away that might be just the thing. Jackson Crow agreed about the flying part, but thought that it must be obvious that all of the best homes were to be found in the tops of trees.

“Isn’t that right, Léolin?” he asked (for Elves are known to be very fond of trees and Léolin’s own house was in one). Léolin just smiled, not wishing to take sides.

Webster was certain that he had seen a lily pad big enough for Peter somewhere along the creek, and if half of them swam upstream and the rest swam downstream they would be sure to find it. Harriet said nothing because she was imagining how much work it would be to dig a rabbit hole for someone the size of a *boy!*

More than once the animals got so caught up in the argument that they forgot to keep walking and were left behind. After this had happened again and again and yet again, each one of them began to believe that they would be better off on their own. After all, *they* were right – the others were clearly wrong. So one by one they disappeared, each to try his own way of finding a house for Peter. Finally the boy and the Elf were left quite alone in the quiet wood.

“They’ re always like that,” laughed Léolin. “But you’ ll soon get used to it .“ Peter laughed too.

“They are a bit odd,” he admitted. “But they’ re *very* nice.” They walked for a little while in silence.

After a short time they came to a beautiful little waterfall, a bit taller than Peter’s family’s house in Poppy Lane, the sparkling water droplets playing leapfrog over each other from rock to rock, and finally tumbling the last few meters into the glassy pond below, as if trying to see which of them could make the biggest splash. At the very foot of the falls Peter could see small silver and gold fish, leaping out into the sunshine and chasing each other’s tails through the

snowy-white foam. While up around the crest, as the water tossed itself over the edge, the cool spray had made a miniature rainbow for the pleasure of the ants that scurried among the rocks.

It was a lovely place. Perhaps the nicest that Peter had seen. He turned to Léolin with a smile and said, “This would be a wonderful place for a house.”

The Elf nodded her head, still gazing at the bubbling waters with a smile as big as Peter’s own.

“Yes, it would,” she agreed. “If only the waterfall would always stay here. But it doesn’t, you know, and then it’s not nearly so pretty.”

Peter gave a puzzled look. Then he thought that the Elf must mean the creek froze up in the wintertime and the waterfall stopped, or perhaps, in very dry weather, the water only trickled slowly down the rocks instead of dancing so playfully as it did now. Even so, it would still be a pretty spot with the tall trees waving to each other across the creek bed, and the many colours running through the shiny rocks. They sat for a little while longer, wiggling their toes in the crystal blue pool and silently watching the fish, the rainbow, and the happy water. It was Léolin who finally broke the silence.

“Well don’t make your mind up right away,” she said. “And we’ll see if anywhere else might suit you better.” Peter was in no hurry so he readily agreed, and off they went.

The Wood had a wonderful way of being as warm as toast in the sunshine and deliciously cool among the trees, so that if you got too hot or too cold it only took a step or two for you to be comfortable again. The Elf and the boy followed along one of these cool leafy paths, chatting about this and that, and quite often not saying anything at all.

Peter learned that Léolin had a mother and father and some brothers and sisters, but that Elf children didn't have to live at home, and the home of her parents was in another place a good distance from The Wood. This seemed strange to Peter. But perhaps it was because Elf children didn't go to school and so their parents wouldn't need to know where they were all of the time (which didn't really explain why Peter's parents watched over him even on summer vacation, but he didn't think of that). Léolin hinted that it would take more than walking to get to her parents' house. Had she come into The Wood from somewhere else, much the same way Peter had? It seemed so. Except that Léolin could get back home whenever she wished, and Peter could not.

After walking for a good while Peter noticed that the path was getting steeper, as if they were climbing a long hill. He wondered where they were going and asked Léolin, but the Elf only replied that they would have to wait and see. It might have been a tease, but from the way she said it, Peter would almost have believed that his new friend really didn't know what they would find. No, he thought, that didn't make sense. All of the animals had said Léolin had been everywhere and seen everything.

It was quite a long time before the ground stopped rising and went straight again, and even a rough-and-tumble, bike racing, hockey-playing boy like Peter was beginning to get tired by the climb (though he didn't say so). He could see that it was getting lighter through the trees ahead and in a minute, following right beside Léolin, he had pushed through a last wall of bushes and stood on the edge of an enormous cliff!

Peter gasped and grabbed the bushes behind him. He was still a meter or so from the actual edge but it was a moment or two before he could really believe that he would not fall if he let go of the branches. He looked at Léolin. The Elf was not holding on to anything, but she was standing rather stiffly and her face looked even a shade more pale than usual. She was staring out at the view, so Peter did the same, still keeping his back close to the bushes. The cliff top was higher than the boy had ever been, even in the tallest buildings back home, and although it had taken some time to get there, they simply *couldn't* have climbed that far. He couldn't understand it at all.

However, the view was such that he soon forgot to be puzzled. He could see for kilometers and kilometers for the air was fresh and clear. Straight ahead the trees of the forest below became a fluffy green carpet with small holes here and there, and a few gentle ruffles that Peter knew must be small valleys or clearings. As he grew braver and looked closer and closer toward his feet (and the edge of the cliff), he was startled to see a small white cloud with a few birds wheeling around it, actually *lower* than where he stood!

This was ... well this was just beyond any words that Peter could think of; too beautiful to be true. It seemed as if the whole world lay at his feet, and he felt very wise just to be able to see so far. He looked down, down at the tiny forest below. Yes, that must be the waterfall they had visited, now so small that he could barely see it. Far off on the right was a large patch of blue that he knew must be a good-sized lake, and from it the long ribbon of a lazy river twisted and turned its way right across the forest. This river had several lighter blue threads leading into it and, following Léolin's pointing finger, Peter could see that one of these ran through a clearing with a large tree in the center. In fact, the very clearing where Peter had first appeared in The Wood.

He turned to Léolin with glistening eyes. "This is amazing!" he said. "I can see everywhere from here. But you looked surprised too ... when we stepped through the bushes. Didn't you *know* this cliff was here?"

Léolin shook her head. "It isn't always," she said. "But I thought it might be today."

'There she goes again,' thought Peter, 'As if a cliff could move. Or perhaps she means that the clouds often get in the way and then you can't see it.'

And with that thought Peter looked down at the forest again.

“This would be a great place for my house,” he said after a time. “I don’t think I’d ever get tired of this view. Although I might get tired of climbing the path!” Léolin just smiled and said nothing. Before long she motioned to Peter and they started back down the hill.

As they were walking Léolin suddenly stopped and stood thinking to herself, then stepped into the bushes on the left. Peter had not noticed any paths branching off the main one on the way up, but there certainly was one now.

So along it they went.

Now Léolin moved slightly bent over, walking from one side of the path to the other and looking closely at the bushes. She reminded Peter of a dog sniffing out a trail, but it soon became clear what the Elf was looking for.

All of a sudden she gave a laugh and shouted: “Yes, it’s here!” and then disappeared into the leaves on the right. Peter followed quickly so as not to be left behind, but carefully enough to make sure that he didn’t step over the edge of any cliffs.

When the branches had stopped brushing past his face he tried hard to open his eyes. But they were already open. Why couldn’t he see anything?

“Léolin?” he called, starting to get worried. A friendly voice came from beside his ear.

“It’s all right. It’s just a cave.” And then Peter understood. Within a few minutes he could see his friend crouching beside him.

“Can you see now?” asked the Elf. Peter nodded. “Then let’s go.” The two began to walk through the darkness with their heads bent low.

After a few steps they could stand up straight without hitting the ceiling and the walking was much easier that way. They were still going downhill but they never stumbled, for the floor was smooth and free of rocks. Peter was excited as all boys are when they find a cave, and he wanted to ask lots of questions but, as always, Léolin told him to wait and see. They continued on down the black tunnel until Peter began to wonder if it went all the way to the bottom of the cliff, or even farther.

Finally Léolin stopped. She pointed through the blackness to where a small streak of light lay ahead of them on the floor. When they came to the spot they saw that the light fell from a long shaft in the ceiling that opened up into the daylight far above. In the light of the shaft the tunnel dropped away much more steeply, but the floor of the slope was covered with a thick layer of fine sand. To Peter it looked for all the world like a long waterfall or rapids disappearing into the distance.

“Come on,” yelled Léolin, and before Peter knew it the Elf had jumped over the edge and slid out of sight. He gasped in surprise. How could he possibly follow? Jump into a black hole, without any idea of what might be at the bottom? But it soon came to a choice: follow the Elf, or find his own way down in the dark. He looked longingly at that far-away spot of sunlight. It didn’t seem like much to keep him company or point the way out. What else could he do? After another moment to work up his courage he closed his eyes, held his breath ... and jumped.

The sand was soft and cool, and in no time at all the walls were speeding past. His hair flew behind. A cloud of grit prickled his back and neck. The passage went up and down and twisted like a spiral slide as Peter fell farther and farther, so fast that he could barely get his breath. The wind whistled in his ears, the sand flew into his face, and he called once for Léolin but could not even hear himself yell over the roar of the air and sand. Down, down, faster and faster he dropped like a stone. Black was the air and black were the walls of the tunnel, and black became Peter’s thoughts as he knew he must be kilometers from the cliff top, perhaps kilometers from the surface, the sunshine, and the dust-free air. Where was Léolin? Was she still ahead or had the tunnel branched off and taken Léolin down another way? The thought of losing the Elf like that made Peter bite his lip. Oh, would this fall, never end?!

And suddenly, it did.

He hit water and his downward plunge drew a cloud of foam around him that bubbled noisily, then became a fountain pushing him up and up. It swirled around his face but he held his

breath. He didn't even try to swim for the current was carrying him so swiftly that he could do nothing but let it take him where it would.

Around he spun and up he rose until, just as he was sure he was going to have to take a breath, his head popped above the surface, and he let a flood of fresh air come pouring into his chest.

Opening his eyes (which he had wisely closed to keep out the sand), he saw that he had come up in a calm pool in the middle of a very large cave. The roof of the cave was a long way up, and sunlight came through three long holes in it so that Peter could see quite well. He was just beginning to think about swimming to the shore when he heard a tinkling laugh. He turned to see Léolin sitting on some rocks.

“Well?” she asked, as Peter swam up. “What do you think?” But Peter couldn't think; there were no words. So they both just laughed.

Another sand-filled tunnel opened out nearby but Léolin's wet clothes proved that the Elf had come up in the pool, the same way that Peter had.

“Yes, I could have come that other way,” she confirmed. “But I thought you would like the long route better.” Her merry eyes twinkled.

“So you knew the cave was here all the time?” asked Peter.

“Well, it’s often here when the cliff is,” replied the Elf. “But not always, so you can’t ever be sure.”

Peter frowned, as confused as ever. How was he supposed to make sense out of these strange answers? He could only hope that he would find out what they meant sooner or later. Meanwhile they took a little stroll around the large room of rock.

The walls were quite a ways from the edge of the pool all of the way around, so that the room was as large as a school gymnasium, or maybe even an arena. There were many boulders and smaller rocks scattered about the floor, and these sparkled and glittered like diamonds. The center of the ceiling was taller than a house, and where it drew down low at the edges water had dripped through to form those icicles of stone that are often found in caves. The sun’s rays shining through the holes in the roof painted flashing colours along the rocks, while the calm pool showed hints of clouds gliding overhead. At one end of the room the largest of several tunnels drew off and it was this way that Léolin led Peter.

Not far ahead they could see that the tunnel turned and the bend was lit quite brightly. When they finally rounded the corner Peter began to blink and sneeze. For the bright midday sun was shining in their eyes.

When he could see again at last, he discovered that he was standing on the edge of a cave mouth in the face of the great cliff they had stood upon a little earlier.

This opening was near the bottom of the cliff and the ground went down in long wide steps from the lip of the cave to the forest floor. A small stream, as clear and blue as the pool inside, bubbled out of the cliff face beside them to go playing down the steps. These same steps were also covered with hundreds of bright wildflowers, giving back the sunshine in as many different colours and shades. To complete the picture there were a few slender trees cooling their toes in the tumbling brook.

Peter just stood there gazing at the beautiful scene. “If I had a house here I could explore the caves or play among the flowers and *never* be bored,” he said to Léolin.

The Elf just smiled, and nodded, and said nothing. Before long they were on their way once more.

By now more than half the day had gone, so they decided that they should return to Léolin's house to see if any of the others had found anything. In a very short time (so short that Peter could not believe they had gone *half* the distance) they had arrived and found the animals waiting.

The wood creatures naturally began to talk all at once, but Léolin held up her hand for quiet and said that they would have to speak one at a time, with Jackson Crow going first (because he had been waiting the longest).

Jackson said that he had seen a good many tall treetops that day and was sure that several of them were almost always to be found in the same spots. This was definitely an advantage when building a house.

Fowler had discovered that one of the swamps he had been talking about before hadn't been seen that week, so he really couldn't say whether Peter would like it or not. But the marsh where Fowler himself lived had stayed in the same place almost every day for nearly a month now, and looked like a safe bet.

Webster had not found the large lily pad (though he had talked to some fish who remembered having seen it), but in its place had been a little grassy island in mid-stream. "If it would only stay there, it would be perfect," he said with a happy froggy grin.

Harriet announced that, after deciding it might be too much work for one rabbit to dig a boy-sized rabbit hole, she had asked some field mice and some moles and a few other ground animals, and all of them could remember a large burrow that had once been in The Wood. Unfortunately none of them knew where it had gone to lately. Still, she thought that if only they

could keep a close watch and wait 'till this burrow came back, Peter could live there as cozily as anything.

The boy listened through all of this, growing more and more confused until, by the time they had all finished, he felt that they must be playing a mean joke on him.

“Wait a minute,” he said, getting a little angry. “Tell the truth. Did any of you really find a place where I could live?” The animals looked at each other in astonishment. Why ... hadn't they just been telling him?

“Well then why are you talking nonsense?” Peter continued. “ ... One of the swamps is gone, and ... and waiting for a hole to come back, and things like that. And Léolin talked that way too. You don't expect me to believe that kind of thing, do you? Trees and swamps can't be there one day and somewhere else the next.”

The animals just stared at him.

“Why ... of course they can!” Jackson said finally.

It was Peter's turn to stare.

"But that can't be right!" he blurted. "And ... and anyway, if that were true you could never find each other's houses." He put his hands on his hips and held his head up smugly. Surely this proof would stop all of the silliness once and for all.

"Maybe you're right," grumbled Fowler. "I suppose we couldn't". And Peter felt he had won the argument. Until Webster said: "But we do!"

And the animals all agreed that they certainly did, whether they could or not. The poor boy could think of nothing more to say. His anger faded away into astonishment, and he slumped like a leaking balloon to sit on the ground.

Léolin finally came to his rescue.

"So your home is like my home," she said. "I wasn't sure at first but I can see it now. Yes, Peter, what the others are saying is quite true ... in The Wood. Just because a thing is here one day doesn't mean it will be the next. Think back to yesterday, when you were standing by the tree in the clearing. What *did* you see and what *didn't* you see?"

At first Peter could not understand what Léolin meant. Then he shut his eyes and pictured how it had been: the grass, the leaves, the blue sky all around, the few wispy clouds ... and, in a flash, it came to him.

“The cliff!” he said in an astonished voice, barely above a whisper. For, of course, yesterday he had not seen that great cliff he and the Elf had just been exploring. Yet, from the cliff top he had seen right into the clearing, right to the foot of the oak tree with no trouble at all!

“You see?” continued Léolin, nodding her head. “The cliff wasn’t there yesterday.”

Peter just stared, with his mouth wide open. It couldn’t be true. But it was!

“I know how you feel,” said Léolin. “It took me a while to get used to the idea too. The place where my parents live is like your home in that way: things always staying the same, day after day, or changing only after a great deal of time. But it’s different here. And you *will* get used to it, don’t worry. I’ll bet you even get to like it.”

“But how do you find your way around?” asked Peter quietly, still not quite able to believe his ears.

“I don’t really know,” replied the Elf. “But we do. And we never seem to get lost. We just somehow know where to go. You’ll soon catch on.”

Peter couldn’t help doubting it. He sat still for a few minutes, trying to let it all sink in. At last he looked up and said, “I’m still not sure that I’d like living in a place that was changing ‘round all the time. Isn’t there *somewhere* in The Wood that always stays the same?”

Léolin smiled. “I thought you might ask that,” she said with a chuckle. “And I think I have the answer. Follow me.” They all paraded after her in single file to see what the Elf had in mind.

Before long Peter began to think that he knew where they were going and, sure enough, within a few minutes they all stood beneath the spreading branches of the great oak tree in the middle of the clearing where Peter had first appeared.

“There,” said Léolin. “I think I’ve found you a home. Of course, we don’t always come here so one can’t be completely certain. But I first came into The Wood in this same spot and it looked the same then. And I’ve never come here when it looked any different.” Now that she had mentioned it, none of the animals could recall ever having seen any change in the clearing either.

A feeling of relief swept through Peter. “That’s all right, then,” he said, beginning to smile. And so it was.

With a little work, a little time, and a lot of happy laughter his new friends helped Peter build a very cozy house among the branches of the sturdy oak. And then they all had to welcome him into the new house with a very nice party until the sun had gone down and it was time to leave.

Léolin was the last to go, and when she and Peter were alone once more under the shadowy leaves and the bright stars, Peter said quietly, “Thanks, Léolin, for ... well for everything you’ve done for me since I came here.”

“Thank you for coming,” said Léolin, and walked off into the night.