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*THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton*

CHAPTER FOUR

“THE WOOD HAS A VISITOR”

Something was happening. The Wood was astir.

A babble of voices at the bottom of his tree finally forced Peter to get out of bed and he stumbled sleepily to the door to see what was the matter. A wristwatch would have told him it was almost ten o'clock and he should have been out of bed long ago. But he had been trying to stay asleep, hoping that a dream would come back to him. It was a pleasant dream about playing with his uncle's puppy. Peter had only visited the puppy a few times, but they'd had great fun playfighting and, as good times sometimes will, it had come back to him in a dream. In fact, the dream was so realistic that the puppy gave a loud bark and woke Peter up!

Sitting up in bed he had listened for a time, almost expecting to hear a puppy bark for real but, except for a few rustling noises that were probably the wind blowing the grass in the clearing, everything was quiet. Since the sun was not fully in the sky yet, he had tried to go back to sleep and remember his dream.

He was still trying to remember it as he made his way to the front door.

All of his friends were up before him and, along with several other small animals, stood staring at something on the ground at the foot of the oak tree. The animals were all talking at once, of course, so Peter could not make out anything of what they were talking about.

"What's all the noise at the bottom of my tree?" he asked as he started to climb down. "Isn't a person allowed to sleep anymore?" The faces turned upwards to look at him, calling him names like 'Lazybones' and 'Sleepyhead'.

He was soon on the ground and wanted to hear an explanation. But asking the animals a question, without singling out only one to give the answer, is always a great mistake. After a minute or two of trying to listen to several voices at the same time, he gave up and spent even longer trying to quiet them down again.

Léolin had been squatting on her haunches looking at the ground and rubbing her chin, but now she stood up and walked over to Peter.

“It has definitely been here,” she said. Her face was so stern that Peter knew something serious must be going on, but he couldn’t really be properly afraid until he knew what it was.

Léolin motioned to two field mice at the edge of the crowd. Peter had

the feeling that he had been introduced to these two before, but he still didn’t catch their names.

At any rate, the little creatures trotted up to tell their story:

“It was early this morning,” said the one mouse.

“Just as the sun was rising,” said the other.

“Well the sun was really up,” corrected the first.

“Yes,” agreed the second, “But there were clouds in the way so it wasn’t very light yet.”

They chattered over this point for a moment before continuing:

“We were gathering up sunflower seeds,” said the first mouse.

“I was collecting pine-cones,” added the second.

“Yes, but you should have been gathering seeds,” said the first, “We agreed to get the pine-cones tomorrow.”

“But it might rain tonight,” argued the second, and they jabbered on again.

Léolin whispered to Peter that the mice always talked this way, and I am afraid that it is quite true, so I will try to leave out as many of the interruptions as possible, and only tell you the important parts.

They had been going about their business (whatever it was), bothering no-one, when suddenly a ginormous animal (“You mean gigantic,” said Léolin. “Or enormous,” suggested Peter. “No, GI-NOR-MUSS” said the mice, stretching their arms to show that neither of those other words were big enough.) ... when a ginormous animal had jumped out of the bushes and begun chasing them. It had made a terrible noise and ran horribly fast but they had somehow managed to reach a hollow log and lay inside it, panting, while the huge creature stuck its great black nose in at one end and then the other, trying to get at them.

“It wanted us for *breakfast*,” squeaked one mouse.

“And both of us wouldn’t have made more than a mouthful for IT,” chirped the other. The mice shivered with fright just remembering their narrow escape.

This had all taken place not far from the clearing, about halfway to Léolin's house, so that when the monster had finally become tired of waiting for them to come out and had gone away (and had been gone for quite some time), the mice dared to leave the shelter of the log, and ran to the Elf to tell the news. For the first time Peter noticed that Léolin had a stout stick with her, and the animals kept looking nervously around the clearing, as if expecting something to jump out and attack them at any moment.

"We went back to the hollow log," said Léolin, "And found the creature's paw prints. I had to follow them backward because in the other direction they disappeared among the fallen leaves. They end at the foot of your tree. Or *begin*, I should say. No other tracks coming or going."

"You mean it just appeared here?" asked Peter, his mouth starting to open wide. The Elf nodded. They both knew what that meant. Some fierce animal had come through the magic doorway from the other worlds (just as Peter and Léolin had done) and was now wandering loose in The Wood, looking for something, or *someone*, to eat.

There are animals in our world that would fairly make Peter faint from fright if he were to meet them outside a cage. And Léolin knew several in her own world just as dangerous. But an even worse possibility occurred to both of them. The magic doorway connected the Wood

with Peter's home and the land of Léolin's family. Yet there was every reason to expect that it led to others as well.

That morning's monster need not be familiar to anyone; it might have come from a completely alien world and it was possible, only too possible, as they began to think of it, that the creature was something more deadly than anything out of their worst nightmares!

The colour drained out of their faces as this thought came to the boy and the Elf at the same time. But it was no good standing around waiting for trouble. They could only hope to find some means of protecting themselves if they used every second and all of their brainpower making a plan.

For the moment Peter decided to have a look at the paw prints. They were somewhat smeared, so it was difficult to tell what their true size should be. But Peter thought, from clearer parts here and there, that they looked rather like a dog's, except when he tried to describe what a dog looked like to the others the mice interrupted loudly and said:

“No, IT was *much* bigger than *that!*”

So Peter had nothing more to say; he was too busy trying to think.

The Wood folk were all sure of one thing: a plan was needed. It is only too bad that they couldn't have been more sure about *what* plan to use. Most of them agreed that they should lure the monster to a chosen place and somehow trap it.

They could try digging a deep pit or making some kind of strong snare; no-one could know which was best until they had seen what kind of animal the monster really was. But the greatest problem with that plan was that if a trap is to work it has to have some kind of *bait* with which to lure the creature in.

And no-one felt like volunteering for the job.

Then Harriet spoke up.

"Perhaps I'm wrong," she said, "But isn't there the slightest chance that the animal has just gone away, I mean, gone somewhere else to look for food? If It kept right on from the hollow log in a straight line, It could be a long way from here by now. And if we build a trap, whatever we use for ... bait (she shuddered), that might just bring It back here when It would otherwise have stayed away. We can't be sure that whatever trap we make would hold the creature. We might only make It angrier than It is already, and then there might be no escaping It!" She sounded very frightened by the time she had finished and she was not alone. The rest of the animals became dreadfully gloomy, but Léolin said:

“You are right Harriet, first we should try to protect ourselves from It ... build a safe place somewhere if we have to. But then we must still try to trap It. If we don't, we will never again be able to walk our woods without fear.”

This was a terrible thought. Yet they knew the Elf was right. Even making a safe shelter that would protect all of them would be very difficult, and travelling might be out of the question. It was a thorny problem. What would *you* do?

Harriet quickly remembered that the monster had not been able to get at the mice in the hollow log so she suggested that, if everyone got into houses with small doorways like tunnels or hollow logs (in fact something like her own rabbit hole was what she had in mind) they would be safe unless the animal knew how to dig. Unfortunately many of the Wood dwellers, especially Peter and Léolin, were too large for a rabbit tunnel, and a hole big enough for them just might be big enough for the monster too (although the mice insisted that It was *much* bigger than that).

Webster naturally thought that everyone should find a pond or perhaps travel to the big lake that was usually seen far to the east. Maybe the creature could not swim, and so they would be safe on islands, or simply floating from place to place (in case the monster could fly or build boats). Or what would be best of all would be for them to bury themselves down in the muck at the bottom of a pond, for then the monster would never even know they were there.



Well, it was quite a good plan for a frog, but for absolutely no-one else. It goes without saying that if any of the rest tried to stay for long at the bottom of a pond they would never come up again! As for swimming forever or living on islands, that didn't appeal to anyone. This was just as well since, though they didn't know it, the monster *could* swim, and quite well too!

Fowler had a duck's natural fondness for water, but when it became clear that the others did not, he brought up a plan of his own, which was seconded by Jackson Crow.

Yes, I thought you might be able to guess what the two birds would suggest, and you are quite right. They were all for *flying*. They were pretty sure that nothing so *ginormous* as the monster would be able to fly, so in the air everyone would be safe.

Léolin gently pointed out that a creature didn't need to be *ginormous* to be unable to fly. She swept a hand across the gathering to include everyone there without wings. "Jackson and Fowler can, of course, always use that skill for their own protection ... that's what it's for," the Elf continued. "But the rest of us ...." The two feathered fellows nodded in understanding. But they still wanted to help.

"Perhaps we can't all fly," said Jackson finally, "But we can all get off the ground, in a manner of speaking, especially if we help one another. What I am suggesting is that

we get ourselves high up into the treetops, where such a large creature as *It* would surely be unable to go. The flying and climbing animals, such as squirrels and, uh, birds” (he gave a shy little bow) “could keep a watch on the creature and bring food and things to the others, and so on and so forth.” He gave another little bow and stood waiting modestly for the applause.

Well, no applause came, but it was nevertheless a pretty good idea for the most part. The others began to nod among themselves, and the crow hid his pleasure by pretending to preen his feathers.

“Some of us are too heavy to climb right to the tops of the trees,” said Léolin, “But I think Jackson is right. The higher we can get, the safer we should be. And I think we should get started right away. We’ve wasted enough time already. It wouldn’t do to have a visitor before we’re ready for him.”

This started everyone looking nervously around again, and they all agreed that not a moment should be lost.

There was just one more thing to decide. Would it be best to climb into a tree with many others close around it, or one standing on its own, such as Peter’s oak tree?

“With other trees around we could go back and forth through the treetops to get food,” said Harriet, “At least some of us could. And if the monster can climb, we could make our escape through other trees.” The mice were not convinced.

“If the monster can climb,” they squeaked, “IT could go up another tree and sneak over to ours. Or even *drop* on us from above!”

“If the monster can climb,” said Léolin quietly, “What would you do in a tree like Peter’s if It made up Its mind to climb up to you?” This thought frightened the mice so much that they were just about to start back to the hollow log when Fowler stopped them and assured them that he would always be able to carry such little animals to safety, no matter what happened. So they felt much better (except they began to wonder whether they had not seen patches on the monster’s sides that might be wings!)

Everyone finally agreed that a tree with many others close by would be safest, and they soon found one a little way into the forest with no low branches on itself nor on any of its neighbours. With a great deal of lifting, hoisting, pushing, pulling, huffing and puffing, Peter and Léolin got everyone into some branches that were a fair distance from the ground. When all were safely settled the boy and the Elf ran back to the treehouse in the clearing to get food and a few cushions (for tree branches are not soft to sit on). Their return was made without any trouble. The monster had not re-appeared.

Well, there isn't much to say about the time they all spent among the branches, because nothing happened. (Do *you* have something else to do while we're waiting ...? No? All right, then, we can continue.) They ate and they sat; they searched the trees and the forest floor very carefully with their eyes; they tested some of the 'escape routes' to make sure that they would be able to get to other trees in a hurry if need be. And they sat some more. The hours passed.

By mid-afternoon everyone was tired and very sore (despite the cushions), and to tell you the truth, they had begun to take it out on each other. Arguments broke out over silly little things, until finally Léolin realized that something would have to be done.

"I can't wait here any longer," she said, "I'm going to go down and look for it."

The mice gasped and tried to hide under each other, terrified merely at the thought of doing such a thing.

"She'll be killed!" they squeaked, "Just killed. And then the monster will come for us!" They trembled until the leaves all along the branch rustled.

Léolin tried to calm them. "You won't be in any more danger than you are right now. But we can't do this day after day, forever. Sooner or later someone has to do something. If it's either the monster or us, I say let's get it over with. Of course most of you animals are too small to

even *try* fighting such a thing, so you should stay here,” (the mice breathed a sigh of relief), “But I won’t go on living in a cage until there’s no other way out.”

It was a very fine thing to say and a still finer thing to do, and everyone was moved. They all began to feel that they should go too, and help fight the monster, but at heart they knew they couldn't. They were not large animals, nor strong, and the only defenses Nature had given them were keen senses and good speed. For mice, frogs, and rabbits were never meant to fight, only to run away and hide. Everyone understood this and no-one blamed them, but Webster and Harriet felt ashamed, nonetheless.

Peter’s voice broke the gloomy silence that had come over them all.

“I’m going too. Léolin will need help, and it’s up to us larger people to defend the smaller ones.”

Léolin smiled, glad to have the company, and the two of them began the climb downward.

Suddenly Fowler was beside them, making funny coughing noises as if he had something to say.

“What is it Fowler?” asked Léolin in a soft voice.

“Er, um, well,” the duck fidgeted, stepping from foot to foot, “Well I’m no fighter. Only a duck. No good at tooth and nail. Don’t have any. But, uh ...” (he paused, looking downward and giving his wings a little shake), “Well I’m coming too. No help in a fight maybe. But I’ve got eyes. Can see as well as the next fellow. I could scout around for you. Look for danger from the air. If you want me.” This amounted to a long speech for Fowler, who was a duck of few words. The others stood silent while he balanced on the branch, looking frightened, but proud that he was doing the right thing.

“Oh you brave duck,” said Léolin and hugged the old bird. “We’d be very glad of your help.”

Jackson had overheard their words from where he perched on a nearby twig.

“If a duck can do it, so can a crow,” he said simply, in as calm a voice as he could muster. Then he hopped quickly down to the ground so that no-one could see his feathers trembling.

The hunting party set out.

They walked slowly and went as quietly as they could. None of them felt like talking anyway. They were very solemn and silent and it seemed as if the very air weighed them down. The only sensible place to start their search was at the hollow log, for that was the only place the creature had been seen.

As Léolin had said, the tracks in the direction away from Peter's clearing disappeared among the leaves, but since there was no other path to follow they went that way anyway, hoping that the marks would appear again where the leaf cover might be thinner. They traveled in more or less a straight line, curving only around the largest bushes, and after several long minutes they came upon a strip of soft brown soil nearly bare of leaves. Sure enough, the ground was dented with the prints of the creature. They were on its trail once more.

The boy and the Elf carried heavy sticks which they now gripped even tighter. All four heads spent most of the time turning from side to side and looking quickly behind. They jumped at every noise, and the birds walked with their wings slightly out from their sides, ready to take to the air in an instant. The tangled underbrush made Fowler especially nervous, for ducks like to have room to run before they can take off.

They had been walking for some time when Jackson spoke. His first try was only a dry croak, and he had to clear his throat nervously to get his voice.

“It seems that Fowler and I have forgotten what we came along for, he said quietly. “We were supposed to scout ahead.”

Well no-one had really forgotten, but the birds could not easily bring themselves to leave their larger friends, and Peter and Léolin knew it wouldn't be kind to rush them. The Elf pointed out that they should actually be much safer in the air. Fowler nodded and agreed that it was time for them to be going. And so, with a flurry of wings, they were off.

The two birds would have been no protection against a monster, but they were at least friends at hand and Peter was sad to see them go. Without them the whole business seemed more serious than ever. The two walkers went on in silence.

The day wore on.

The birds reported back from time to time but there was no sign of the monster itself, only marks on the ground, bent bushes and broken twigs. It seemed that if the creature were ever going to appear, it wasn't in any hurry. The good side of this was that the hunters slowly began to lose some of their nervousness. They were still afraid and as cautious as ever, but their minds were clear, and that is always a good thing when danger is at hand. They had time to think and to plan. Everywhere they went they kept watch for trees that would protect them if they were attacked, and they took special note of any places that would suit the building of traps. They



moved even more slowly now, keeping a careful eye out for any changes in the tracks, and likely spots to be ambushed. Under the leaves it was beginning to get darker. Suppertime was drawing near, so the sun was on its way home after a hard day's work.

The searchers had just about made up their minds to make their way back to the safe tree when Fowler came winging through the branches. Once again he reported that the monster had not been seen. Jackson was still a little way ahead, checking out a last clump of trees.

Suddenly they heard a cry! The forest ahead of them seemed to explode with noise.

"Jackson!" cried three voices together, and they plunged into the brush at full speed.

As they broke through some branches the crow flapped up to them looking very ragged and badly scared.

*"I've seen it! I've seen it! It almost got me!"* He could hardly speak but just kept pointing to the bushes. Léolin tried to calm the frightened fellow, walking him over to a log to sit down. Jackson was breathing hard and kept on croaking: "It's huge! it's huge!"

He couldn't bring himself to stay still, but kept nervously twitching his wings half-open and snapping his eyes quickly from bush to bush, as if expecting the creature to appear at any moment.

Peter's face went very grim. The monster had to be stopped. *Nothing* was going to keep scaring his friends like that, not if *he* could help it! Forgetting their plan to stick together, he left Jackson with Léolin while he and Fowler set off into the trees. The showdown had come!

Peter was so angry that he sped through the brush and Fowler couldn't keep up. They quickly became separated and Peter didn't realize his mistake until he heard a startled quack and a flurry of feathers from behind him! He'd left Fowler alone!

He clenched his teeth. This was the final straw!

"Fowler!" he screamed. "I'm coming Fowler!" And he charged like a mad bull elephant, not even noticing the branches that whipped his face.

As he broke into the clear a cloud of dust flew into his eyes. In the middle of it was the old duck, struggling with all his strength against a tawny-coloured animal, twice his size, that had him by the wing. Peter saw red. Forgetting his stick he leaped at the creature, knocking it off Fowler, and squeezing with all his might they tumbled together through the snapping branches.

Peter kicked furiously, rolled to get on top. In a flash his hands were at the creature's throat and ... he *stopped*.

A long grinning face with bright brown eyes and a huge red tongue was looking up at him. He could almost have *wept* for joy.

"Gypsy!!" he cried.

*It was his uncle's puppy!!*

A wave of relief swept through Peter, and he rolled off onto the ground, beginning to laugh from the release of his anger and fear for his friend. He looked quickly around and finally spotted Fowler hiding in a nearby bush, still looking terrified but unwilling to leave Peter alone with the monster. His heart swelled with pride for the brave duck, and between gasps of air to get his breath back, he did his best to explain that the danger was over. As you can imagine, Fowler wasn't easily convinced.

A great many more explanations were needed when they returned with the others. For a few moments, the forest sounded a bit like a zoo on fire as the animals in the tree saw Gypsy coming through the forest before their friends came into view (she could *not* be kept from

running on ahead). And I am afraid it took quite a while for the Wood animals to truly feel comfortable with the puppy. Indeed the mice never got used to her at all.

Once Peter had explained to her that things were very different in The Wood, she apologized many times to everyone she met for days and days afterward. It was difficult for the animals to understand that the ferocious behaviour that had scared them so badly had only been the puppy's idea of *play!* Yet eventually they accepted that she had meant no harm, and things began to settle down.

Gypsy was so excited about the change in her life that she could hardly walk, her tail was swinging back and forth so hard. And every few steps she took a leap into the air for sheer joy. She always had been an energetic puppy. She was absolutely delighted at being able to talk (for though all animals have languages of their own, even in our world, they can't usually understand the speech of others) and thrilled that her friend Peter was in this strange place too.

In the end, the day that had begun with so much fear and worry finished with high spirits and great fun. They laughed and danced and sang and talked far into the night, and it was decided that Gypsy would go to live with Peter. Not in his tree-house, for dogs cannot climb trees even in the Wood, so they aren't comfortable in them. But the soft grass of the clearing would suit her fine.

When the rest had finally made their way home to bed, Peter squatted beside Gypsy as she lay in the grass between two roots, and scratched her behind the ears. Then he climbed up the rope ladder to his little house. As he stepped into the doorway he stopped, and looking down at the small brown pile of fur he smiled and said:

"You know what Gypsy?"

"What?" she said.

"You *are* a monster!"

Gypsy gave a contented puppy smile and snuggled down for the night.