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THE SECRET WOOD by S.G. Overton

CHAPTER NINE

“TO TOUCH THE SKY”

Looking over some of these stories, it strikes me that Peter is a very brave boy. I think many children have a great deal more courage than most adults give them credit for. By courage I don't mean having no fear; I hope no person can truly say that of themselves, for fear is a very good thing at times. Courage, however, is being able to ignore our fear for a good cause. Perhaps the only difference between courage and foolhardiness is which causes one considers good.

Part of the courage children have is from the fact that strangeness is nothing new to them; it is a common part of every day that they learn and grow. I suspect that the strangeness of The Wood would frighten a child less than an adult, because grown-ups are so set in their ways.

In any case, I'm not sure that I would have liked to have been Peter on a certain morning as he climbed down from his tree-house.

He was in no hurry. He planned to go over to Léolin's, but there was no rush. The day was warm, with no wind and few clouds to be seen from his front window. And so Peter couldn't figure out why he felt so uneasy. It was as if someone were watching him, he realized, as if eyes were peeking out of the shadows or peering over his shoulder. He turned around.

And fell flat on his behind.

His mouth was as wide as it would go and he held his breath as his eyes swept up, up, up, and still further up, until finally he had to lie on his back.

It was a mountain. But *such* a mountain!

The word that first came to Peter's mind was 'huge', but that was like a mouse calling a full-grown bull elephant 'somewhat large'. The like of this mountain has never been seen in our world, for it would make poor little Mt. Everest feel like an ant hill. All the more impressive considering that it stood where there had been nothing but trees and bushes only yesterday!

Peter stared for so long that the ground probably thought he had decided to plant roots. Of course he had no such desire, and finally got up, but he had to stop looking at the mountaintop or he would quickly have fallen again out of dizziness. Instead he only glanced over his shoulder from time to time as he made his way quickly to Léolin's; often enough, however, that he fell over Gypsy, ran into three trees, stubbed all ten toes, and almost broke Léolin's nose

with the side of his head. The Elf, needless to say, had been looking in the same direction as Peter: straight up. In fact it took them a moment to realize that they had bumped into a friend and not a tree.

“Did you see that?” they both said at the same time. They both nodded and looked upward again, in time to see a cloud strike the mountainside and slip past, about a third of the way up. Two voices gasped. Gypsy barked. Unfortunately, they all watched for too long, and were soon on their backsides on the ground. Then they took notice of each other at last.

"Holy smokes!" Peter said, "That mountain is ... is" He gave up. There just weren't words.

Yet even without words they knew that they were both feeling the same urge. The mountain must be *climbed!* Never mind how, or why; those questions can't be allowed to stand in the way when one feels as strongly about something as they did. It had to be done, and that was that.

A much easier question to answer was: 'when?' Because they would simply have to do it right away or not at all. The mountain had never been there before and would almost certainly not wait another day. They quickly decided to run home, pack a lunch or two, round up some rope and things, and meet back at Peter's house in five minutes. Oh, and someone would have to

tell the others. This job was finally given to Gypsy because she wasn't much help packing a lunch.

When everyone was gathered together in the clearing they all stood for a moment, staring at the rocky peak towering over their heads. Webster spoke first.

"I can't go," he said. "Afraid of heights." He spoke quietly, as if ashamed, but Harriet soon said:

"Don't feel bad Webster, I couldn't make it either. We're just not made for climbing mountains." Everyone knew it was true, and no-one tried to change their minds. If a person just isn't suited for something, it's no good forcing them or making them feel bad about it. Fowler spoke up:

"I'm no good at climbing. Could fly up once in a while, though. Keep an eye on you. Maybe tell the ones down here how things are going." Everyone thought this was a good idea, including Jackson, who decided that he would do the same thing. Gypsy looked up at Peter with her ears back and her eyebrows pointing into a peak.

"I don't know if I'll be any good at climbing either," she said, "... but I'd like to try."

Peter scratched her behind the ears and said, "All anybody can do is their best, Gyps." She nodded, and smiled a wide doggy smile, with her tail wagging like crazy. Slinging packs over their shoulders, the three mountain climbers set out, with high hopes and the very best wishes of those who stayed behind.

Now you might remember, way back in Chapter Two, that when Peter and Léolin walked to the top of the great cliff, they got there much sooner than Peter would have expected, considering the distance to be traveled. It was a part of what made The Wood special, and they all soon came to count on it. Otherwise it would have been simply ridiculous to try to climb such a mountain in only one day. Even so, you mustn't think that this would make the climb easy. It only made it barely possible, instead of absolutely hopeless.

The slope was gradual enough at first that they made good speed. They didn't need to use the ropes for quite a long way, so Gypsy had no trouble keeping up with her two friends. In fact, she was so full of energy that she managed to jump to the tops of many of the rocks that the boy and the Elf had to climb. From time to time Jackson and Fowler would fly up to see how the adventurers were getting along, but there wasn't much to tell at first, so the birds would wish them another 'Good Luck' and wing away, riding the updrafts that shot up the sides of the slope.

Before the climbers were a third of the way, however, much of their earlier good fortune ran out. They strode up a sheltered little valley, clambered over a few boulders, and found themselves at the bottom of a sheer cliff face that ran as far as they could see in both directions.

Peter and Léolin looked at each other in dismay. They had brought lots of rope, in case of coming across just such a cliff, but neither looked forward to the dangers of climbing one. Nonetheless, they knew they had no time to hesitate if they wished to reach the top before midnight. They were soon roped together and Léolin began to search for the first handhold.

It was a long, exhausting climb, handhold by foothold, centimeter by centimeter as Léolin tried to find a grip for her fingers in the tiniest cracks of the rock. They moved slowly from stop to stop, keeping so close to the face of the wall that they held their breaths as they hauled themselves up, afraid that the rising of a chest with a deep breath might push them back far enough to lose their balance. I hate to think what would have happened if a stray gust of wind had tried to squeeze its way between their bodies and the cliff. But none did. At last they lay panting at the top of the sheer face.

I'm sure you've been thinking, 'Surely no dog could climb a cliff that way.' Well, you're quite right, Gypsy had stayed at the bottom. Léolin was clever with ropes and had fashioned a kind of harness that would hold her securely. Then Peter had let the rest of the rope out slowly as he climbed, so that they would be able to pull her up afterward from the cliff top. For the puppy, the hardest part of the climb had been keeping herself from barking as she saw a body sway too far outward, or a foot begin to slip. A sudden noise might have distracted the climbers enough to cause a disastrous fall.

Once Peter and Léolin had caught their breath they looped the rope over a smooth rock nearby and pulled her up. Luckily, there was still no wind, and so she made the trip with only a bump or two.

"You could have left me behind," she said quietly, once she was safely beside them. Peter shook his head.

"Not if I can help it," he told her, which made her tail wag with relief. No-one likes to feel they are holding someone else back.

They rested for a few moments, looking out over the forest. As they did, a fluffy cloud suddenly swept into their faces, then dragged away, leaving a trail of dampness. But it didn't dampen their spirits, for they realized that the ground was far behind, and only two-thirds of the mountain still lay ahead of them.

It was high noon. The sun seemed to shine from the very peak of the mountain like the crowning star on a Christmas tree, and it sucked the dewy trail into the air like a sponge. The three friends shielded their faces and gazed upwards at the slopes they had yet to climb. Suddenly a gleam like the sun appeared in Peter's eyes, and he gave a shiver at the thought which had just come into his head.

"Léolin, Gypsy," he gasped, "Look where the sun is." Of course they knew better than to stare right at that dazzling brightness. They glanced upward for just a second, and then sat looking at Peter, waiting for an explanation. "It looks almost like it's sitting on the top of the mountain!" the boy continued, but his friends still shook their heads, not understanding. Peter tried to calm down and speak more slowly.

"This mountain is so high," Peter told them, "That it almost reaches the sun. Now ... by the time we reach the top the sun will be gone. But by then the Moon will be on the way. And it rides lower in the sky ...!" And suddenly it came to the others with such force that they sprang to their feet and darted a glance at the sun once more.

"Do you mean we would be able to see the Moon up close?" spoke the Elf quietly, really knowing what Peter was going to say next.

"No," Peter smiled, shaking his head slowly. "I mean we might be able to *touch* it!"

Gypsy burst into excited barking. "That would be wonderful," she yapped, "incredible, amazing, stupendous ..." and she went on for several minutes, hopping in circles, until Peter had to grab her to keep her from dancing over the edge. It was quite understandable. Most dogs are fascinated by the Moon, and to think that she might actually be able to touch it!

At this moment the duck and the crow flapped their way to a landing nearby and Peter excitedly told them the new plan.

"Hmmm," Fowler stroked his chin. "We came up here to talk you out of it. Climbing all the way, that is. Storm coming up." He pointed a wing to the north. Léolin, Peter, and Gypsy could all plainly see the dark clouds gathering along the horizon, and suddenly realized that a slight breeze had been playing over them for the past few minutes. Their faces fell.

"We could never do any hard climbing in a storm," Peter spoke dully, thinking about the sheer cliff just below. "But to give up a chance like this . . .!" He groaned and dropped his head. The others felt the same. Until Léolin's head snapped up.

"Wait," she said, as a smile began to crease her face. "We're already at the height of some of the clouds. Those storm clouds look a little higher, but if we kept climbing, maybe we could outrace them." The faces of Peter and Gypsy lit up. It was a risk, to be sure, but it was either take that risk or give up the attempt to touch the Moon.

"I say let's try it," said Peter. "We might never get a chance like this again." The dog and the Elf nodded their agreement.

Fowler sighed and looked at Jackson.

“Well,” he said finally, “We had an idea you might go on. Don’t say we didn’t warn you. Good Luck!” and he gave a wink. Jackson stepped forward with a serious look.

"My very best wishes go with you. Just don't forget that you're not birds. Keep your feet on the ground: as many as possible at all times.”

The two feathered friends stepped to the edge, gave a last wave of their wings, and were off. Everyone knew it would be the last time they would see the birds that day, for once the winds really got blowing, the area around the mountain would be dangerous even for the creatures of the air. It was sad to see them go.

Léolin broke the silence.

“No time to lose,” she said, and they were off once more.

This time as they climbed the winds picked up and the temperature fell. They clung more firmly to the rocks and never trusted to their balance alone, even if it meant uncoiling the ropes for only a few meters' walking. By the time the first grey clouds began to block the sun, their fingers and paws were getting chilled, so that the sharp stones became painful to grip. Finally came the first cracks of thunder, and blasts of wind began to fling dust in their eyes.

The air around them became dark and filled with flying sand. One moment they were pushed into the rock; the next, the clouds tried to suck them away. Rain began: tiny drops at first, and then a drenching downpour. Their soggy clothes made them weigh almost twice as much, and the shoes of the Elf and the boy squished with water at every step. They only managed to keep going because they were sure the clouds couldn't reach much farther. The thunder numbed their ears while the rain took the feeling from their faces. The ropes were used all the time.

Just as they were badly in need of a rest, Léolin found a ledge that would hold them. It stood out in a jagged triangle from the mountainside, overhanging a long drop, and the only way up to it was a tricky path that wound up to its side. The path was made of twisted boulders in ragged piles, narrow sloping shelves to slide along, and a few dangerous spots where it fell away without warning.

They could not see the ground below. To make matters worse, sheets of rain would dash into their faces every few moments, blinding them and making the rocks even more slippery.

They were all exhausted when they finally scrambled over the lip of the ledge, and Léolin tied the rope to a boulder so that they could rest for a few minutes in safety.

The rope around her middle was irritating poor Gypsy terribly by this time. She tugged at it with her mouth, trying to shift it into a more comfortable position, and Peter saw with horror

that her sharp puppy teeth had frayed the soggy strands almost to the point of breaking. Just as he reached for her a gust of wind slapped the mountain, and the puppy slithered to the edge, madly trying to get a grip with her nails on the slippery rock. Her back legs slid over, the frayed rope caught a sharp snag ... and snapped!

"Gypsy!" Peter dove at her. His arms wrapped tightly around the furry body, but he'd slid too far. A strong finger of wind lifted his legs, the edge crumbled, and they fell!

Cold seconds passed as they plunged downward. It seemed like forever. Then the vicious jerk that came almost tore Gypsy out of Peter's arms. His rope had held! They hung in black space, high over jagged rocks, spinning dizzily, swinging like a pendulum.

Peter couldn't see anything through the darkness and the rain. He couldn't hear anything over the boom of thunder and the hiss of water. And he felt sick from the spinning and the swaying and the fear. Gripping Gypsy tightly with his right arm, he cautiously held out his left. The rope swung but he felt nothing. Léolin could never pull both of them back to the ledge by herself, he knew, and the mountainside was out of Peter's reach. What could he do?

His heart hammered inside his chest, his head throbbed, his arms ached, and a fresh wave of rain tore at his face, when all of a sudden he felt something dig into the cloth at his shoulder.

"Finally found you," a weak voice croaked. It was Jackson!

The crow looked like a wet rag and was obviously very tired. He and Fowler had seen that the climbers had not reached high enough by the time the storm hit them, and had come right away. Peter realized what the birds must have gone through, but he didn't know how they could help.

“What can I do now?” the boy tried to shout above the noise. Jackson shivered.

“At one end of your swing,” he yelled, “You come close to a rock that sticks out a meter or two. If a gust of wind will just blow you far enough, you can reach it.”

“What about Gypsy?” Peter asked, in fear.

“You'll just have to try to grab the rock with one hand,” Jackson replied. I'll tell you when.” The bird let go of Peter's shoulder and tried to keep up with the boy and the dog as they swung.

In a moment a strong gust of wind caught them, and as Peter felt himself swinging high he heard Jackson shout: "Now!" He flung his arm out, felt rock, then slipped away as his fingers failed to grip anything.

Another gust came. “Now!” shouted Jackson. Peter's arm plunged out. Missed again.

The boy was quickly losing strength. He had one last thought. The wind came, Peter felt himself swinging near, twisted, and opened his legs. "Now!" shouted the crow. Rock hit Peter's thighs but he locked his legs closed and twisted his feet together. They held.

He paused for breath, then felt for a handhold and pulled himself upright. Gypsy was shaking with fear and Peter was panting with effort. Jackson landed on his shoulder again.

"The path is over this way." Jackson wheezed, pointing with a wing. Peter struggled carefully to his feet and began slowly picking his way. When he had enough slack rope, he loosened the knot around himself so that he could tie Gypsy on once more, although the puppy was too tired and frightened to make her own way. Jackson did not want the rope but he stayed on Peter's shoulder; he was just too tired to fight that wind any longer. Larger than most birds, he was heavy enough to throw the boy's balance off a little, but Peter didn't think of complaining. The brave crow had probably saved their lives. He deserved the rest.

After what seemed an endless time, Peter found himself on the ledge once more, where Léolin came over to take Gypsy from him. In a flash of lightning he saw that Fowler was there too.

"The top of the cloud is just above us," the duck quacked. "Not more than ten or twelve meters. Come on." He led the way while the ragged party stumbled on.

It was true. At last their heads came above the clouds and the late afternoon sun made them blink. It caressed them with its warm rays and they slumped thankfully to the ground.

After all that they'd been through, none of them could bring themselves to move for a long time. They knew they'd had a very close call, and a fright like that can make you very tired afterward. Yet the day was passing, and the night would soon be coming on. When they felt they'd had as much rest as they could afford, the adventurers set out again. Jackson and Fowler weren't sure that they wanted to touch the Moon, but they were sure that they didn't want to fly back down until the storm was over. The only reason they had had the courage to face it even once was the knowledge that their friends needed their help. They could have stayed where they were to wait out the storm, but after giving it some thought, both birds decided that they might as well tag along.

The going was easier this time, or at least it seemed to be. The party sometimes had to climb cliff faces and even managed to scale an overhang, yet compared to their adventures in the storm these challenges were like a Sunday picnic.

Even so, the sun had been down for almost an hour by the time they neared the peak. The darkness might have caused their spirits to drop again were it not for the Moon having risen a short while before. Five pairs of eyes watched it gliding up the sky, as often as they dared to look up from their climbing. In fact Peter looked up once too often, missed his footing, and started to

slide. In the wink of an eye Gypsy's teeth had caught his shirt and held on long enough for him to get another foothold.

"That evens the score, Gyps," he said after he had thanked her. The puppy was very pleased that she had finally been of use.

Even the longest journey has an end. At long last they rounded a curve of the path, pulled themselves up over one final boulder, and knew that they had reached the top. The feeling was too much for them to put into words. They simply stood in silence for a long time and soaked it all in. Looking down they could see the dark clouds still covering the forest, but up on the mountain peak the air was crisp and clear. The climbing Moon was already closer than they had ever seen her, and they could barely contain their excitement. Jackson did a little dance.

"Even if it doesn't come close enough to touch it," he said, "Fowler and I will just fly up and drop a rope down to you," and spreading his wings, he stepped off a rock.

And went nowhere.

"What's wrong?" he croaked as he picked himself up. "My wings didn't work right." He tried them again but the result was no different. Fowler tried his own wings. No good. Neither of the birds were able to fly.

“The air should be thick enough,” said Léolin, “We can still breathe it. Try again.”

Thick air or not, it soon became clear that the birds would go about on their legs, or not at all, which not only spoiled Jackson’s hopes of flying to the Moon, but made the crow and the duck feel very uncomfortable as well. Never in their lives had they felt so helpless.

“Should have known,” mumbled Fowler. “Who ever heard of a bird flying to the Moon?” Peter thought: ‘Who ever heard of anyone *climbing* to the Moon?’ but he said nothing.

“It’s not going to be easy getting *down* like this,” complained Jackson.

All of a sudden the whole group stopped what they were doing and turned to each other with their mouths wide open, for his words had triggered the same thought in all of their minds: How were they going to get back down before midnight ... *when the mountain would disappear?!*

They slumped to the ground in stunned silence. Finally Léolin said simply, “It’s too late to worry about it now. We’ll just have to hope for the best.” And there was nothing more to say.

They waited and waited while the Moon drew close. It was so large that it took their breath away, and still it grew. The light from it was almost as bright as the sun, but they didn’t look away. They couldn’t. Majestically, the Queen of Night swept up the glassy sky, past the

dancing stars, as if to investigate this handful of little creatures who dared to venture into her domain on the shoulders of a giant. As the great globe swelled, the people of The Wood felt as if they were shrinking, shrinking to the size of ants. And still the Moon grew. It filled the sky. It dwarfed the mountain. They could see every hill and crater on it ... almost every rock.

At last the time came. The brilliant ball hung over their heads like an enormous lantern, so that they feared it might snap its cord and crush them. It was sweeping by ...

... And they saw that it would not touch the mountain.

“Form a ladder,” yelled Peter. The animals scrambled to get in order.

Jackson jumped up on Fowler, who hopped on top of Gypsy, who climbed onto Léolin's shoulders, who stood on Peter's shoulders. The tower of creatures rocked and swayed, but somehow didn't fall. Jackson stretched out a wing.

“Can't reach!” he yelled. Everyone shifted, trying to get higher.

“Still too far!” Jackson called.

“Everyone on his toes,” Peter instructed, and with a last effort the tower rose up another half-meter. Jackson gave a final tremendous stretch.

Suddenly Peter felt a tremor through his legs. And he knew what it was.

“Everybody down,” he yelled, “It’s *midnight!*”

Before they could move, the ground seemed to turn to slippery ice. They tumbled like a stack of building blocks, and began to slide.

Down they slid ... faster they flew ... the stars whirled past. The mountain rippled like jelly, tossing them from bump to bump, flinging them through the air. Into the storm clouds: the flash of lightning, the crash of thunder, the slash of rain, and the screech of wind. Down, down, dust, dirt, water, wind, light, dark, faster, and faster. They bounced like rubber balls, sailed like kites, rolled like stones, and fell like night. Time stood still but for the tumbling, tossing, turning, skidding, cartwheeling, somersaulting, and the raging howl of the air tearing past.

Then... *nothing*. A sickening drop through icy black. And ...

S P L A S H ! ! !

Five bodies sent mud and water flying for meters in every direction.

Stillness. No-one moved.

Finally, one by one, heads began to pop up out of the shallow pond; voices called out to make sure they were alive. And Webster and Harriet helped their friends to dry land.

“Wh ... What happened?” asked Peter, shaking the water out of his ears. Harriet gave a laugh.

“We had a feeling you might wait too long,” she chuckled, “So we've been doing a little work of our own.” Peter looked around. He was in his own clearing, his tree-house not more than ten meters away (splattered with mud, I might add), but the creek had been dammed, so that a fairly wide pond had formed. He guessed that this was the rabbit's and the frog's work, and their smiles told him he was right.

“Well I suppose you saved us a hard landing,” Peter said, and everyone thanked their two rescuers (once they were able to clear the mud from their mouths).

Harriet and Webster were naturally curious to hear how the adventure had come out, but Léolin shook her head.

“I guess you could say it failed,” she replied sadly.

“Not really,” came Jackson's voice. He sauntered over to where his friends were standing, carefully unfolded a wing ...

And showed them a small, grey rock.