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THE LOST ARMY

Patch & Barver

Patch Brightwater sat near the cliff's edge, watching the sun rise over an unknown sea. From a cord around his neck hung the cross-eyed owl, Wren's favourite Fox and Owls playing piece. Every morning since they'd arrived in this mysterious place, he'd done the same thing: look out to sea, and think of Wren.

This was the third morning.

Nearby was the cave where Barver slept. Patch missed his dracogriff friend during the night, of course, but it was right that Barver spend time with his father. Patch made sure to send him off in the evenings, reassuring Barver that he'd be perfectly fine here in the camp.

In truth, he wasn't fine. He didn't feel *unsafe*, though. Alia was there, and Tobias; both were formidable Pipers,

and Alia had the added bonus of being a powerful Sorcerer. There was also the small army they'd brought with them, with forty Battle Pipers and two hundred and thirty soldiers – as well as the three griffins who'd helped them in their doomed quest to track down the Hamelyn Piper, two of whom were still seriously wounded.

So, no, he didn't feel unsafe, but he did feel miserable, and strangely *alone*.

Last night, Patch had noticed Merta Strife, one of the griffins, sitting awake by the fire near where the two injured griffins lay sleeping. He went over to join her.

“You can't sleep?” he said.

Merta shook her head, and nodded to the slumbering griffins, Cramber and Wintel. “Cramber is healing well, Tobias tells me,” she said. “But until he regains consciousness, his life remains in the balance.”

Cramber was laid stretched out with one wing tied to his side, allowing the dressings on his chest wound to be changed without having to move him. Wintel was beside him, curled up with her head under her wing. Cramber's breathing was ragged; Wintel's was regular and peaceful, but she'd taken a severe blow to the head.

“How's Wintel doing?” asked Patch.

“She spends most of her time asleep,” said Merta. “When she wakes, she's confused, and can't see anything but a blur. The next few days will be key to how well she recovers.”

Patch thought back.

They'd been so sure of their plan.

The Hamelyn Piper had been vulnerable, they'd thought – hiding out in the forests of the Ortings with a small group of his own soldiers. They'd known he'd created a suit of magical armour, one that would make him an even more powerful Piper than before; they'd known that he was looking for an ancient amulet that would grant him immortality.

Even so, they'd believed they would easily outmatch him with the army they'd brought. At last they would bring the evil Piper to justice!

Instead, it had been the Hamelyn Piper who had outmatched *them*, ambushing them in Gossamer Valley with a huge army of mercenaries. They'd not stood a chance.

“Wintel was so brave,” said Patch. “You all were.”

“We did what had to be done,” said Merta. She gave Patch a kindly smile. “But it's Wren we all owe our lives to.”

Patch clutched the cross-eyed owl, feeling tears prick at his eyes. *Wren*. She'd come up with the only plan capable of saving them. A plan that meant sacrificing herself, but which allowed their entire army to escape certain destruction, magically transported to this unknown place.

Unable to speak, Patch simply nodded.

He felt like everyone in the camp had said it, or

something like it, in the last few days. Every Piper, every soldier, seeing Patch's heartbroken face, would put a hand on his shoulder and say, "*She will always be remembered.*"

And he wanted to scream at them to *shut up*. Because they all thought the same thing – even Alia, and Tobias, and Merta too. That Wren was gone for ever.

Dead.

And that was why he felt so alone at night, once Barver had gone to his father's cave – because Barver was the only other person who hadn't given up hope.

So here sat Patch, looking at the sunrise, and waiting for his friend to wake up. At last, he heard the sounds of movement from the cave, and a few seconds later Barver sat down beside him.

"Morning," said Barver.

"Morning," said Patch.

"Can I?" asked Barver.

Patch nodded. He took the precious owl from around his neck, and set it in Barver's hand; Barver held it tightly. They sat in silence and, together, thought of Wren.

Hoping.

The smell of smoke, and of meat cooking, made Patch realize he was hungry. They headed back towards camp.

"Did your dad say much last night?" asked Patch as

they walked. Barver's father had been a prisoner here for over twelve years, utterly alone, not even knowing why he'd been captured. The sudden arrival of others, and of his own son especially, had seemed so strange to him that he didn't think it was real most of the time.

Barver smiled. "He talked and talked as usual, like he had a decade's worth of words to get out, yet I didn't mind. Just hearing his voice is a gift I never thought I'd get again. His eyes shone when I told him about my adventures – although there's a lot to tell! I had to cover the Hamelyn Piper and the quest of the Eight before I could even *start*, because when he was captured none of that had happened yet." His smile faded. "He made little sense most of the time, though," he said. "He claims he's never seen a single ship, or even a bird, out to sea. He warned me that sometimes dense mist rolls in and 'everything changes'. He wouldn't explain what that meant, but the idea seems to really upset him. If we're going to find a way out of here, we need anything he can tell us, though until he starts making sense I'm not sure how useful it is."

"Did you sleep at all?" said Patch.

"No," said Barver. "I came out as soon as he nodded off. I'll get some sleep later." He sighed. "It's so strange, talking to him. One moment he seems like my dad, and the next he's distant, talking aloud to himself, or speaking like a child. Although I still haven't told him about Mum. When

he asks about her, I just tell him she's well, and missing him." He looked at Patch with sorrowful eyes. "I don't know if he could take it, knowing she died. Or that we'd fallen out beforehand."

As they walked through the sycamores, the smell of cooking grew stronger, and now they could hear the sound of axes on wood. Of all the oddities in this curious prison, the strangest surely had to be the way the vegetation regrew overnight. Much of the plant life was edible – wild carrots, derdily tubers, apples and berries. Yet whatever they picked, the bushes were laden with fruit again by morning; whatever they dug up, a replacement appeared by sunrise. Even the trees, their trunks cut down for firewood (or for the various projects Alia had thought up) would regrow as if an axe had never touched them.

It was the same, they suspected, with the rabbits and pigeons, the only animals they'd found so far – their numbers seemed the same each morning, however many they'd caught the day before.

The camp was spread over several glades in the trees. In one, the horses grazed, each hitched to a ground pole. The Battle Pipers and soldiers camped in a second glade, at the edge of which the injured griffins were tended, Merta keeping a watchful eye.

The other glade in use was where Alia's "projects" were taking shape. Closest to the cliffs, and to the cave of Barver's father, this was the one that Patch and Barver reached first. Even though the morning was young, there was already plenty of activity here.

Alia spotted them and waved. She stood in the centre of the glade, while soldiers worked around her. Yesterday, they'd been gathering and preparing logs; today, they were tying those logs together.

"It's taking shape," said Barver when they reached Alia. "Whatever it is."

"*They* are taking shape," Alia said, and Patch realized there were three separate groups, lashing wood together with what looked like milkweed stems. "Two rafts and a scaffold. A resourceful lot, these soldiers of Kintner! Most of their equipment was left behind in the camp at Gossamer Valley. Luckily some of the horses were saddled with equipment packs when we *leaped*, so we have four axes and a variety of knives."

"Why do we need rafts?" asked Patch.

"And what do you mean by a *scaffold*?" added Barver. The rafts were easy to spot – a basic rectangle of lashed wood at their core – but the third construction was harder to work out, various sizes of log tied together into triangles several feet across, which were being fastened together into something much longer.

“You’ll see what that’s for later,” said Alia. “First, though...any improvement with your father?”

“It’s hard to tell,” said Barver. “Although he does appreciate having *cooked food* for the first time since he’s been imprisoned here.”

Patch sniffed the air. The smell of roasting pigeon was making his stomach gurgle. “Speaking of which...”

Alia came with them, and Barver pressed her for an explanation of her rafts and scaffold.

“We have to do everything we can to escape from this prison,” she told them. “The world must be warned of the Hamelyn Piper and his army! But how to escape? We know this is a Bestiary, a magical *zoo*. It seems to be split into enclosures. *This* enclosure is bounded mostly by cliffs, and the only way out is the large meadow beyond the sycamores. Past the meadow lie the bone trees. When the griffin Alkeran was also a prisoner here, he must have been in his own enclosure, far enough away that your father never heard him cry out. We have no idea how big this prison is!”

“Indeed,” said Barver. “Everything about it seems wrong. There’s a hill in the distance, but the air shimmers and I can’t tell how far away or even how *high* it is. If we attempt to fly above the height of the trees, we fall unconscious. And as for the creatures that live in the bone trees...”

Patch shivered, remembering the horse that had panicked soon after they’d found themselves here, all of them disoriented by their magical *leap*. The poor animal had bolted across the meadow and into the tall trees that looked horribly like leg bones. As soon as it had gone out of sight, it had been attacked by something – its screams had filled the air before suddenly being silenced.

“Exactly,” said Alia. “That’s our neighbouring enclosure, I believe. Many creatures with magical value are dangerous, but whatever lives in those bone trees seems particularly nasty. Your father said they sometimes hunt in the meadow, didn’t he? Yet they never venture into *this* enclosure.”

“Yes,” said Barver. “They only hunt in the meadow on the darkest nights. Dad said he’d never actually laid eyes on one – that if you heard the *sounds* they made, you’d not want to see them either...”

Alia nodded gravely. “Well, if they’re as unpleasant as they seem, then something must *prevent* them coming here. I think those carved posts that run along the edge of the sycamores mark out the enclosure, and act as a barrier.”

Patch thought of the strange posts, with just simple rope between them. “A barrier?” he said. “It wouldn’t stop *anything*, let alone such vicious creatures.”

“They’re clearly magical,” said Alia. “I imagine similar posts and ropes mark out all the enclosures in the Bestiary. They didn’t stop *us* crossing them, so perhaps they’re

specific to the creatures being kept imprisoned.”

“My father is *chained*,” said Barver. “He can’t travel far from his cave. Why be so cruel, if a magical barrier would stop him leaving anyway?”

“A good point,” said Alia. “But there’s plenty of magic that only works for simple beasts. Those posts might be unable to trap an imprisoned griffin, yet they could still keep the creatures of the bone trees at bay. Now, to find a way out of here, we have the option of marching through those bone trees and fighting our way past the horrors lurking there. And then to the next enclosure, and the next, for however long the Bestiary continues! But a better plan may be to reach the sea and go by raft around the coast.”

Patch was puzzled. “At the bottom of the cliffs? Where the sea crashes into the rocks?” He couldn’t help picturing those rafts reduced to tiny splinters.

“You just need to get a bit of distance from the rocks first,” said Barver. “I could fly a raft down there for you, I know I could!”

Alia was already shaking her head. Right from the start Barver had suggested he fly out to sea and get help that way, but Alia had forbidden it and made him swear not to try. “I told you, Barver,” she said. “Whatever spell causes unconsciousness as you fly *up*, it’s possible the same would happen when you flew away from the cliff, even if it was only a short distance. And there’d be no way to save you!”

“I’m sure I could carry a raft down safely!” he protested.

“I don’t doubt your ability, Barver, but there’s no need to take the risk,” she said. “That’s what the scaffold is for, you see – we push that out over the cliff edge, and lower the raft down away from the rocks.”

At camp, there was a steady supply of pigeon and rabbit being provided by the camp cooks. Barver asked them to put some aside for his dad, for later.

They sat on the grass as they ate, and could hear the sound of Tobias playing his Healing Songs for the injured griffins. Patch would take a turn playing soon. He was proud of how good he’d become in such a short time. Not long ago, his skill at Healing Songs had been rather limited. While he’d been training at Tiviscan, his teachers had spotted that Battle Songs were one of his strengths, and had often focused on that. Yet Healing was far preferable, Patch thought, and with Tobias as a teacher he’d discovered he had a knack for that too.

“When do you think your scaffold will be ready?” he asked Alia.

“Tomorrow, I hope,” she said. “Although we’ll have some other excitement this afternoon. Some of the soldiers are intending to *climb* down the cliffs!”

Barver frowned. “That would be even slower than escaping by raft,” he said.

“They have a very important goal,” said Alia. “We know

you black out if you go too high *up*... What if the same thing happens when you go too low *down*?”

“That would scupper the raft idea,” said Patch.

“Quite,” said Alia. “By climbing down the cliff, we’ll find out if the rafts can work. My fingers are very tightly crossed! Otherwise, we’d have no choice but to face the creatures in the bone trees, and then to move from enclosure to enclosure – confronting whatever terrible beasts we come across. Not a pleasant thought.”

It wasn’t long before Tobias finished his Songs and joined them, just as Patch ate the last of his pigeon.

“Good morning,” said Tobias. He eyed Patch’s food. “I suppose I should go and get myself something to eat. Even if it’s rabbit and pigeon...*again*.”

“It’s not that bad,” said Patch. “They try their best.”

“Just imagine what I could do with the right ingredients,” said Tobias. “I keep thinking of the hedge-beet onions I bought. The vinegar makes those onions so much sweeter...” He had a far-away look in his eyes. “I’d had two barrels delivered and they’re just going to waste in Ural Casimir’s pantry. Such a terrible shame!”

“Not for me,” said Barver, grinning. Patch grinned too – when Barver had eaten those onions before, he’d burped out a torrent of fire. “Hedge-beet plays havoc with my guts. If I’d been a dragon it would have been even worse, believe me.”

“Yes, sorry,” said Tobias. “I should be grateful we have food at all, I suppose.”

“How go the patients?” asked Alia.

“Steady improvement,” Tobias replied. “It’s your turn to play for them, Patch. Focus your Song on Cramber this morning, and keep his breathing steady. Wintel is out of danger, but Cramber could slip back if we’re not careful.”

Patch nodded, and stood. Barver stood too – still rather battered after his encounter with the Hamelyn Piper in the battle of Gossamer Valley, he always curled up nearby when Patch played his Healing Songs, gaining some benefit as he caught up on his sleep.

“Oh, wake me when the cliff climbing starts!” Barver said to Alia, before he and Patch headed to where the griffins slept. “I don’t want to miss it!”

