



Nostradormouse

Chris Tinniswood

Published: 2009

Categorie(s): Fiction, Fantasy, Juvenile, Animals, Mice, Hamsters, Guinea Pigs, etc.

Tag(s): "salmon of wisdom" Fantasy animal children anthropomorphic magic celtic norse myth mouse dormouse

Preface

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First published in 2009 by Histrionic Downs
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www.histrionicdowns.com

ISBN: 978-0-9561611-0-9

Designed by Chris Tinniswood
Portrait of Author by Sally Tennant

For Paula

Prologue

*The hooded mouse treads a solitary path;
The pack-mind catches the scent of prey.
The largest shall bow to the smallest's will,
And the youngest will identify the prophet .*

Wrapping his hooded cloak tightly about him, the dormouse pressed on through the darkened forest. The wind was blowing hard against him, but his will was fierce and so, undaunted, he continued his way towards the centre of The Great Woods.

The moon appeared briefly through a gap in the trees. It should have been a welcome relief for him, but instead it brought fear; for although it lit his way, it also revealed shapes in the bushes; shapes which he had glimpsed before. They barely made a sound, even when the wind was not howling through the branches and whispering nightmares into his ears. They were his constant companions these past few hours; if they were friends, why did they not reveal themselves? If they were enemies, why did they not strike?

The dormouse paused for breath against the roots of a silver birch. Its bark was smooth to the touch, and he could smell the earth beneath his feet. It gave him some small comfort, which he craved. He sighed heavily, and sat down to rest, grateful for the shelter against the wind. He had come a long way these past few moons, but he knew that he still had far to go. He wished that he was safely back at home with his parents, but knew that it could never be. If only he hadn't eaten that nut. But he had, and that one meal had changed his life forever.

A shriek pierced the night, and the dormouse sprang up onto the root, his head darting back and forth, his whiskers twitching as he strained his ears to detect the source of the sound.

There it was again! He paused, suddenly aware that whatever danger was out there, he was just one solitary mouse. What could he do? His instinct told him to run and hide, and yet he felt a compelling urge to help. He knew he could make a difference. And so, despite the fear he felt and the knots in his stomach, he sprang off the root and ran towards the source of the shrieks. He was someone's only hope.

Just ahead of the dormouse was a small clearing. The trees cast long shadows across it, and leaves whispered in the wind like soft applause. In the centre of the clearing was a family of rabbits. They huddled close together; not against the cold, but in fear of their lives. Surrounding them, and closing in, were a pack of hungry wolves. Their mouths slavered with the anticipation of the meal to come. Again, the rabbits shrieked, and the wolves snarled viciously in reply.

The dormouse did not hesitate; if he had, things may well have turned out very differently. He ran straight under the wolves and skidded to a halt in front of the rabbits. Gasping for breath, he smiled timidly at the astonished animals, and then turned slowly to face the common enemy.

The wolves stopped; their hackles rose, and the tone of their snarls changed. The leader of the pack sniffed the air; he detected the smell of fear, and the dirt, and the rabbits. These smells he welcomed, but the smell of this rodent was something he couldn't quite grasp. It was not that of just any mouse; it was a smell he'd been tracking for some days. He looked down at the dormouse and a look of amusement grew on his face. He watched his tiny chest rise and fall. The wolf chuckled, and his chuckle turned to laughter; it rippled across the others in his pack as if they were sharing an unspoken joke. This was, in fact, exactly what they were doing; these hunters had a unique bond which they called the pack-mind; it allowed them to speak to each other in complete privacy by thought alone.

The mouse thinks himself a hero! thought the leader, but I reckon he'll make a tasty starter! Again the wolves laughed.

The dormouse cleared his throat, and said, 'Don't come any closer, or I'll...'

'You'll what?' replied the wolf, lowering his head towards the dormouse, 'Squeak at us?'

The pack leader could see the fear in the dormouse's eyes. This will be too easy, he thought. Then, something shifted, and the wolf saw the terror disappear, to be replaced by something else; something that terrified him. This tiny, cloaked creature was no longer afraid. Indeed, he was now looking at him as if he was an equal. This he could not tolerate. The pack-mind met in silent conference; What are you waiting for? Attack! Kill them! The other wolves couldn't understand the delay. They were hungry and impatient. This insolent mouse thinks he's as good as us!

The leader took a step forward, even though the fear he now felt was painful. The wolf took another faltering step and then stopped. He could go no further. He looked into the eyes of this strange mouse, and saw at once all the selfish and evil things he had ever done reflected back at him. If the wolf had possessed an ounce of conscience, it would have sent him mad. Then the dormouse spoke these words, and his voice was heard in the hearts and minds of all hunters everywhere:

*'All pilgrims on this path may pass without hindrance;
From the smallest to the largest, their way shall not be barred;
For those whose hunger ends the life of another, know this;
Until their journey is done, they shall not eat of flesh.'*

Something changed within the wolves at this moment; the craving in their bellies ceased, and a calmness silenced their growls. The hunting instinct left them, and their pack-mind agreed that the importance of the journey overcame whatever selfish desires they had. Reluctantly, they backed away from their prey, their gaze never leaving the dormouse for a second. The pack leader saw him blink twice, and knew that whatever it was that spoke through him had left as suddenly as it had arrived. The dormouse looked as surprised as he was that they weren't attacking.

Silently, the wolves trotted away, but their pack-mind was feverish with thoughts: What's going on? Does this mean we've got to go vegetarian?

Just before the forest consumed them, the leader turned back to face the dormouse.

'You have made an enemy of the wolves,' he growled. 'The next time we meet you will not be so lucky.'

The dormouse gulped. This was not good. He had left home reluctantly; he didn't want these powers, but they had been thrust upon him. Now he had enemies, and he would always be looking over his shoulder. Then, something whispered to him, and he knew that there was one thing left to do.

'Go well, Remus,' he said.

'What did you call me?' replied the wolf. 'I have no name. We wolves do not need names.'

'Nonetheless, you have earned your name this night.'

Remus considered this for a moment. The pack-mind was silent. Finally, he said, 'Then Remus it is, but you will get no thanks from me.'

'And I expect none,' replied the dormouse.

Remus turned back to his departing companions and trotted after them. The woods swallowed them up and the clearing was left in silence.

The dormouse turned to the family of rabbits and smiled sweetly at them.

'Everything is okay now,' he said, 'they won't bother you again.'

'How did you do that?' asked the father, 'I've never seen anything like it!'

His wife nodded her head in agreement.

The dormouse thought for a moment before answering. 'To tell you the truth, I'm not sure I know. I really thought I would be eaten, but it's as if there's something inside me that takes over. It's still me, but it's also something far bigger than me. I can't explain.'

One of the three children tugged at the mother's forearm and she bent down to hear what he had to say. The child whispered it to her and she nodded.

'My son wishes to know if you're the mouse everyone's been talking about?'

'What mouse is that?' he replied.

The little rabbit looked at him, and gained some courage.

'The mouse that heals,' he said, 'The mouse that tells the future.'

'Ah, that mouse!' came the reply, and he chuckled.

'You are, aren't you?' the little rabbit said. 'You're Nostradormouse!'

'At your service!' he said, and his eyes twinkled like dancing fireflies.

'Would you care to travel with us for a while?' said the father.

'It would be an honour,' came the reply.

And so, the family of rabbits and the hooded dormouse set off into the woods. The rabbits felt safer with their companion beside them, and Nostradormouse was glad of the company. They all knew where they were going, but only the dormouse knew why. He could hear a pulse, like a heartbeat, coming from far off in the distance. It summoned him with the promise of wonders. Once or twice, he caught the father rabbit looking at him, and he could almost taste the thoughts from his new friend: Who are you? Where did you come from? How can you know the future?

By rights, the dormouse should not have been aware of his beginnings. And yet, he did know the truth of his origin and the future that was yet to come; it was an enormous responsibility, and it still scared the little dormouse. But still, he soldiered on towards the centre of The Great Woods, and the pulse grew ever stronger.

His story begins many moons ago, at the shores of a deep lake, and that is where we will start...

Chapter One

*The tail begins to grow;
From nine, only eight shall pass through.
One shall never reach the up-streamer,
And the smallest shall begin a big sleep.*

Long ago, when the Earth was young, there was only one continent, covered almost entirely with trees. It was known to its inhabitants as The Great Woods. There were no seasons, and the animals that lived there had yet to earn their names. Although they could speak, they had no wisdom to utter and no knowledge to tell. At the centre of these woods stood an ancient tree; nothing grew under its branches, which remained leafless and lifeless.

Several leagues from this ancient tree was a deep lake. One morning, as the rising sun sparkled on its surface, a stag appeared out of the mist, and drank at the water's edge. A salmon bobbed to the surface, and welcomed him.

'Hello, Fintan,' replied the stag.

The salmon was somewhat surprised. 'Why did you call me Fintan?' he asked.

'Because it's your name, of course!'

'It is?' said Fintan.

'It is!' said the stag.

'Oh! So what's your name then?'

'I'm Find.'

'I didn't ask how you were,' said Fintan, who was now thoroughly confused.

'I said Find, not fine!'

'Oh. Right. Sorry,' said Fintan. 'How do you know this?'

'Because,' said Find, 'I'm the spirit of wisdom.'

Fintan grew quiet for a moment. 'Are you sure?' he said at length, 'you look like a stag to me.'

Find laughed. 'What should I look like, then?'

'I don't know,' replied the salmon, 'you're the wise one!'

Find was not used to being spoken to like this, but decided to ignore it, as the salmon didn't know any better.

'Why are you here?' asked Fintan.

'Watch and learn,' replied Find, and with a graceful sweeping motion, he lifted his head and then shook his antlers. Thousands of bright sparks flew off in all directions; many of them dissipated into the air, others fell into the water, and some floated upwards into the sky. Nine of them, however, floated off on the breeze which blew in unexpectedly from the South. They coasted on the air current and then dropped out at intervals, as the wind whipped round the lakeside. The earth seemed to swallow them whole, and then the wind died down as fast as it had arrived.

'What was that?' asked Fintan.

'You'll see,' said Find.

The earth trembled, which sent ripples all around the lake. Then, nine green shoots sprouted out of the ground where the sparks had fallen only moments before. They grew rapidly upwards and outwards until nine Hazel trees stood proudly at the lakeside. Find addressed them all.

'I charge you with a most sacred duty,' he said, as his voice carried out over the lake. 'You must all grow one special hazelnut, unlike any you will ever grow again, and you must drop this nut into the lake.'

The trees shook the leaves on their branches to indicate that they understood. Find turned back to the incredulous Fintan.

'And you,' he said, 'must eat these nuts.'

Fintan stared at Find for a few seconds.

'Do I look like a mouse to you?' he said, fins akimbo.

Find didn't smile this time; he was deadly serious. Fintan gulped.

'Eek?' he said, and then disappeared into the depths of the lake with a splash.

Find's plan was simple; once Fintan had eaten all nine nuts, he would be the wisest creature on Earth. He could then swim out of the lake into the rivers, spreading his wisdom to the world as he swam.

One by one, the Hazel trees did as they were told, and Fintan ate the nuts as they fell, becoming wiser as he did so. And as he ate them, bright spots appeared on his body, until there were eight.

One Hazel tree, however, would not give up its nut. Fintan grew anxious, and summoned Find to the edge of the lake.

'What is it, Fintan?' said Find.

'I've eaten eight nuts,' said Fintan, 'but this tree won't give me the ninth!'

Find turned to face the tree. Its leaves started to shake nervously.

'Why do you not do as I asked?' he said.

Fintan was amazed when he understood the tree's reply. 'I cannot,' it said, 'for it is no longer mine to give.'

Find grew angry, and was about to tear the Hazel tree out by its roots, when a mouse emerged from a hollow in the Hazel's trunk.

'Please don't hurt the Hazel,' said the mouse, 'it's been very kind to my family. It was me who took the nut; I wanted to make sure my family have enough to eat.'

'Where is it?'

'It's with my horde,' the mouse replied, fearing for its life, 'And I don't know which one it is.'

Find considered the situation carefully; maybe eight hazel nuts was enough? After all, whoever shared his wisdom wouldn't miss one nut, would they? After much thought, he realised what would happen, and saw there was much to be said in letting the mouse keep his pickings.

The stag called out over the lake, and Fintan bobbed to the surface, looking a little agitated.

'So?' said the salmon, 'what's your decision?'

'Patience is a virtue, my friend,' said Find.

'I know,' said Fintan, irritably, 'and so is kindness and humility. I have eaten eight nuts of knowledge, you know!'

'And you'll have to make do with that,' said Find. 'Now go; swim out of this lake and spread your knowledge and wisdom.'

'Finally!' replied Fintan, and leapt with joy. 'No more waiting!' He swam round the lake, leaping up out of the water to say goodbye to each hazel tree. Then he headed out into the river, and with a final swish of his tail, he was gone.

Time passed. Find stayed in the Hazel grove to think about the meaning of these events. He lay at the base of one of the nine Hazels, and was gazing at the sun's reflection on the lake, when he felt something bounce onto his head and then to the ground. He looked down and discovered it was the shell of a Hazelnut.

Immediately, he knew this had been the ninth nut of knowledge. He rose to his feet and called up into the tree. A young mouse, trembling with fear, timidly made its way out onto a branch.

'Did you drop that shell on my head?' asked Find. The young mouse nodded silently.

'And did you eat the nut that was inside the shell?' he continued.

Again, the young mouse nodded without saying a word. At that moment, the young mouse's father emerged from the hollow in the trunk. He gasped when he saw Find.

'It appears your son has eaten the ninth nut of knowledge,' said Find. 'Such an important event carries with it enormous responsibility.'

The two mice exchanged nervous glances, then looked back at Find. The young one opened his mouth as if to say something, but instead an enormous yawn came out. Neither mouse knew what a yawn was, for until that moment, no mouse had ever felt tired, much less needed sleep. After all, there was always food to be gathered and homes to be maintained.

All that was about to change.

'Your son,' said Find to the father, 'Will need to sleep for quite a while after that sort of meal. In fact, to call it sleep would be something of an understatement. I think 'dormant' would be a better word.'

'Dormant?' repeated the father, not quite grasping the meaning of the word, 'My son's going to be a dormant mouse?'

'Yes,' confirmed Find, allowing a soft chuckle to emerge, 'A sort of Dorm-mouse, you might say.'

'Oh,' said the youngster, and with a final yawn, promptly fell asleep in his father's arms.

'When will this 'dorm' cease?' asked the father, as he carried his son towards the hollow.

'Your son will remain asleep for six moons. On the seventh moon, he will wake. Listen carefully to the words of wisdom he speaks at this time, for all that he utters will surely come to pass.'

Chapter Two

*The prophet's words are disbelieved;
The restless one shall make a fateful decision.
In the centre of things, one barren sleeper
Shall be strengthened by rumours of spring.*

For six moons the parents of the first dormouse kept watch over their son, and on the first crescent of the seventh moon, they watched with tears of happiness as his little eyes blinked open.

He sat up in his bed, yawned, and stretched his limbs. Both parents gazed at him as he rubbed his eyes. The dormouse looked at them, blinking, trying to focus. He wore an expression of complete confusion. Then, a quiet voice in his head whispered to him. Do not fear, little one, it said, the nut has given you a wonderful gift. Let my voice of wisdom speak through you. The voice calmed the dormouse, and his senses became filled with the knowledge and understanding of Find. His parents saw that something had shifted in their son's eyes. It was as if the night sky were alive in them. They listened closely for his first words, and then he said:

'The tree that has been dormant will thrive again.
Its roots will slither & four branches will see the forest king's mark.
Golden feathers will adorn its crown & the dray-dweller will move upon it.
After three moons, the giver of nostrums will reside over the spring.'

The dormouse let out a deep sigh, and the sparkle dimmed, his eyes returning almost to the way they were. He shook his head, and twitched his whiskers.

The parents looked at each other in confusion. Surely this was not their son speaking? How did he know such language, and more importantly, what did it all mean?

'Are you okay, son?'

'I think so, Papa,' replied the dormouse. 'That was strange!'

'I don't like it,' said the dormouse's mother, 'I don't like it at all!'

The young dormouse's prophecy spread quickly to all the creatures that dwelt in The Great Woods. The rabbits, squirrels, beavers and rats laughed to hear that a mouse would dare to try and tell the future. Such gifts were not given to rodents. The bears, wolves, badgers and boars barely even listened to such rumours, as it was beneath them to do so. The lizards, snakes, frogs and toads blinked in surprise before dismissing such idle talk. Only the deer stopped to think a moment, as their kind were wiser than most.

The moon waxed and waned and life went on in The Great Woods, but in the grove of nine hazels, all was not well. The young dormouse was restless. He sat in deep thought, often refusing to eat, or paced the

hollow, stopping now and again, a frown on his face. His parents became more worried with each passing day.

'He's too young for all this worry,' exclaimed his mother. His father nodded in agreement. This wasn't right.

As night approached, the parents of the first dormouse were sitting on the branch outside their hollow, hand in hand, watching the moon rise over the lake. Their son came out and sat down in front of them. The moon was full, and it framed his head like a halo.

'Mama? Papa?' he said, his whiskers twitching.

'What is it, son?' said his father. His mother knew what her son was about to say, and she'd been dreading it for days.

'I have to go on a journey,' he said, but his mind was in turmoil. Is this the right thing to do? Am I ready?

His mother began to weep, and his father comforted her, tears welling up in his eyes.

'I'm sorry, Mama,' said the dormouse, 'I don't really want to go, but... I have to. It's hard to explain. I just know that if I don't go, something bad may happen.'

'Is it to do with that strange voice thing?' asked his father.

The dormouse nodded. 'I think so.' Then tears welled up in his eyes, and his mother held him close and gave him a hug.

'It's all that stag's fault,' she said, rubbing his back, 'him and his bloomin' nut knowledge!'

The dormouse laughed, and his little shoulders shook. Then, he wiped his eyes and stood up. He kissed both his parents and turned to leave.

'You're going now?' asked his mother. 'So soon?'

'I can't put it off any longer, Mama. I'm sorry.'

'Wait just a moment, dear,' she replied and hurried off into the hollow. Presently, she returned with a bundle in her hands. She handed it to her son, and he opened it eagerly.

'It's a cloak,' said his mother, 'I made it myself; it's to keep you warm on cold nights.'

The dormouse put it on. It fitted him perfectly. It felt snug and reminded him of home comforts.

'Thanks, Mama,' he said, and gave her another kiss. 'How did you know I'd need it?'

His mother winked at him. 'A mother knows these things,' she said.

He looked at his parents one final time and they saw in his sorrowful eyes that he would never return. He paused for a moment, a frown on his face; then a wave of calmness came over him again. He smiled, and

his eyes lit up as if the sun had just come out from behind the clouds. He said:

'Three moons shall pass before word reaches you of my journey.
The salmon will swim upstream, returning to the wisest lake.
Its waters will likewise journey to the well-source of all life.
Follow this stream to find me & you shall witness a wonder.'

His father squeezed his mother's hand tightly. For a moment, they had both thought that they would never see their son again, but now, a glimmer of hope had entered their lives.

'Goodbye, son,' said his father.

'Goodbye Papa. Goodbye Mama. I love you!'

With that, the young dormouse stepped out of the hollow and was gone.

Several leagues from the grove of hazels, in the centre of The Great Woods, stood the ancient tree. It is said that this tree had roots that stretched to the very centre of the Earth, and that its branches stretched into the heavens.

No creature in The Great Woods knew what kind of tree it was, as it had lain inactive for longer than memory. Its trunk was smooth, and had no markings to reveal its name. Its branches, four of which were so large that they now trailed on the earth, had not held leaves for many moons.

The tree was the subject of many myths and legends in the animal communities. Some myths said that the tree was the tree of all life, and would miraculously bloom again when the Earth was ready. But such stories are for the young, and the tree was dead. Wasn't it?

But now there were stirrings in the undergrowth, and the words of the first dormouse grew in strength with each retelling. And, deep inside the trunk of the ancient tree, four seeds trembled with the promise of life.

Chapter Three

*Friendships are made amongst mist;
Much trust is put into rumour,
The philanthropic herb is pillow-bound,
And the serpent takes root in readiness.*

On the third night of his travels, the young dormouse came to the edge of a glade. There was a light mist over the ground, and moonlight peered cautiously through the branches of the tall pine trees that towered over him. The smell of pine needles was a new delight. He had travelled a long way so far, but he knew there was much further to go. He had slept fitfully, in short bursts, and his slumber was always accompanied by dreams. They came in confusing shapes and symbols at first, but he had begun to make sense of them. Someone needed his help, and he knew it would test his mettle. He didn't feel at all ready, but the time was close at hand.

Suddenly, he heard a soft shuffling in the undergrowth. 'Who goes there?' said a timid voice.

This is it, he thought grimly. He took a deep breath and then spoke.

'I have yet to earn my name,' he said, 'But yours... is Pitamus.'

'It is?' asked the voice from beneath the mist.

The dormouse nodded, then felt a little foolish; if he couldn't see Pitamus, chances are Pitamus couldn't see him nodding.

'Pitamus,' it repeated, as though it were trying the voice on for size before buying it. 'I like it! How do you know me, stranger?'

The dormouse replied, 'Em... I don't. But, you're in need of help, aren't you?'

'Help? How did you know I needed help?' said the voice in the mist, gradually gaining a little more confidence as it spoke.

'I... I just did,' said the dormouse. *This isn't going very well*, he thought. *Concentrate. This is where the dreams have led you.* 'I know that your family aren't well, and you fear that nothing may save them.'

'You do?' said Pitamus, 'have you been talking to my cousin?'

'Er... no,' said the dormouse. *I've got to sound more confident, or he won't trust me*, he thought. He took a deep breath and said, 'fear no longer, Pitamus, for help is at hand.'

The young dormouse could almost hear the hesitant thoughts that swam around in Pitamus's head. Then, just to his left, he glimpsed the dark grey head of a vole emerge out of the mist, with tiny ears and eyes, ideal for living underground. Pitamus twitched his nose and looked suspiciously at his new acquaintance.

'I do need some help,' said Pitamus, 'but how do I know that I can trust you?'

'Em... You don't,' said the dormouse. 'Sorry.'

Pitamus sniffed the air, then cautiously made his way over to the dormouse. He sniffed again, and looked him up and down.

'You smell trustworthy,' he said, 'and my family *is* very ill.'

The Dormouse smiled. 'Then let me help.'

'Hmm,' said the vole, 'okay. Follow me.'

Pitamus led the young dormouse into a maze of tunnels just below the surface. Fortunately, he was not yet fully grown, and so had no trouble fitting through even the narrow sections of passageway, and eventually they arrived in Pitamus Vole's burrow. It was a snug affair; there was a stove in one corner, which radiated a pleasant warmth and the smell of burning pine wood. A table with several wooden chairs stood next to it. On the walls, hung on the ends of tree roots, were all manner of copper pots, pans and utensils. Pitamus's wife and children were curled up in bed at the far end of the main room, looking the worst for wear. When they saw the stranger emerge into their home, they shrank away from him in fear.

'What are you doing, letting a mouse into our home?' said the vole's wife.

'He's here to help us, dear,' answered Pitamus.

'Help us? A little mouse? What can *he* do?'

Before Pitamus could answer, the dormouse came forward. 'Pardon me, but I think I can cure your ailment.'

'Think?' said the vole's wife, and then coughed. 'Do you hear that? He *thinks* he can cure us!'

Pitamus sat on the side of their bed and held his wife's hand, then he whispered something in her ear. This seemed to sooth away her worries, and she allowed the dormouse to examine her, and then examine her children. He made various 'um' and 'ah' sounds as he felt their temperature and looked into their eyes. The truth was, he didn't have the slightest idea what he was looking for, but he had to have faith in his instincts.

Presently, he stood back from the three forms, huddled together in their bed, and stroked his whiskers thoughtfully.

'Can you help us?' asked Pitamus, afraid to know the answer.

The dormouse looked at him, then back at the three voles, and tapped his nose three times with his fingers. He smiled and nodded his head. Pitamus came forward and extended his hand. 'Thank-you,' he said, as the dormouse shook it.

'I must go out into the woods and gather the right ingredients for my nostrum,' he exclaimed, and with that, he turned and left, re-tracing his steps.

'What's a nostrum?' said one of the children, when he was gone.

'I'm not sure,' said Pitamus, 'perhaps it's medicine.'

'I'm still not sure if I trust him,' said his wife, 'even if he is the mouse we've been hearing about. Go and make sure he doesn't pick anything poisonous, would you dear?'

Pitamus looked alarmed. 'He wouldn't, would he?' he said, and scampered back up the tunnel after the dormouse.

The mist had cleared from the glade, and the dormouse stood on his hind legs and peered cautiously at his surroundings. His whiskers twitched, as they always did when he was nervous. *Look for a plant with jagged edges, came the voice of Find, and pick them carefully, or they will sting you.* Ever since he had woken from his long sleep, the voice in his head had been advising him, and sometimes it seemed a little overwhelming. When he spoke those riddles, for instance; he heard himself saying the words, but he couldn't quite believe it was him saying them. He went hesitantly over to a plant that had large, dark green leaves with jagged edges.

He was about to pick one, when Pitamus came out of the tunnel and shouted, 'Careful! They'll sting you!'

The dormouse was so surprised, he fell onto the leaves.

'Ouch!' he squealed. 'Ooh!'

Pitamus scampered over to him and helped him up. The dormouse danced around in pain, rubbing at his arms and legs, his whiskers twitching madly.

'Sorry!' said Pitamus, trying not to laugh. 'I didn't mean to startle you!'

The dormouse bit his lip to stop himself from squealing.

'Are you sure you know what you're doing?' asked the vole, between giggles.

'Yes, thank-you!' said the dormouse, even though he didn't. *Listen to that voice, he thought to himself, it's the only way.* He went back to the plant, and heard Pitamus suck in his breath. Then the voice spoke to him and he knew what to do.

'You're a nettle, aren't you?' he said, and the plant shook its leaves in reply. 'Would you spare me a few of your leaves, please?'

The nettle shook itself, and several leaves broke free and floated to the ground. Carefully, the dormouse gathered them up by the stem, being careful not to touch the fine hairs on the underside of the leaves.

The dormouse looked at Pitamus, who was staring with his tiny eyes wide open in astonishment. The dormouse winked at him, and Pitamus scurried back into the tunnel entrance.

When the dormouse had finished gathering the plants he needed, he brought them back into the burrow and arranged them neatly in piles on the table.

'What are you doing?' asked Pitamus.

'I am going to make a nostrum for your family,' replied the dormouse. 'It will cure them of their illness in no time.'

The dormouse picked up a tall, slender plant with a deep green stem and bright yellow flowers. He picked some of the larger leaves from it. He glanced at Pitamus, who was watching him intently, and said, 'Would you like to help?'

Pitamus answered, 'Me? Help? Oh, I... Well, of course...'

The dormouse instructed him to collect some water and boil it in a pan. Pitamus frowned, his confusion deepening, but did as he was asked. He collected a copper pan and scurried off down a tunnel. He came out beside a river bank and quickly dipped the pan into the water. As he brought it back out, he heard a splash to his left and dropped the pan in fright. A large head came towards him, bobbing up and down in the river.

'Who goes there?' it said.

'Cousin?' exclaimed the vole, 'Is that you?'

'Why, hello!' came the reply. 'Of course it's me! I live here!'

Pitamus's cousin climbed out of the water onto the bank. He towered over his smaller relative, but Pitamus was no longer afraid. His cousin was a stout friend, and would do him no harm.

'What are you doing?' he asked.

Pitamus quickly explained his predicament.

'I see,' said the larger vole, 'and you say this stranger is the mouse prophet we've all been hearing about?'

'I think so,' said Pitamus, picking up the now empty pan and re-filling it with water. 'At least, he seems to know what he's doing, and my family are so ill.'

'Hmmm,' said Pitamus's cousin, 'so he's making you a... what?'

'A nostrum,' said Pitamus, turning to make his way back. 'I'm not sure what it means, but that's what he's making.'

With a swish of his tail, Pitamus Vole disappeared back into his tunnel.

'Always in a rush,' mused his cousin, slipping back into the water.

In the centre of The Great Woods, there was a slithering in the undergrowth. A long, slim, brown creature came out of the grass at the edge of a clearing. She

had round eyes and wriggled along the ground (for she had no limbs with which to walk). She looked at the large, dead tree in the centre of the clearing, and smiled wearily. At last, her long journey was over and she could rest. She slithered over to the base of the tree and wound herself amongst the roots.

She lay there, still and silent. If any creature had passed by, they would not have known she was there, for her skin had the texture of bark. But the clearing was deserted, and she was grateful for the brief peace it gave her.

An owl hooted. One eye blinked open, looked around, and then closed again. She was resting, but never off-duty. The first of the guardians had taken up their post.

When Pitamus Vole arrived back in his Burrow, he discovered that the stranger had been very busy in his absence. All the plants he'd collected were now chopped, ground and neatly arranged in small heaps.

The dormouse was beside the bed, checking his patients. He looked up when Pitamus came in, and smiled warmly. 'Ah, you're back,' he whispered, 'and you've got the water. Splendid! Now make sure it's heated in double quick time.'

Pitamus looked at his wife and children, and for a moment feared that it was already too late, but the dormouse reassured him.

'Don't worry,' he said, 'they are in a deep, restful sleep. They will remain like this until such time as the nostrum is ready.'

'How do you know this?' asked Pitamus. 'Have you cast a spell over them? Are you a cunning mouse?'

The dormouse realised that Pitamus needed reassuring. So, even though he needed some reassurance himself, he knew that he had to appear to be confident.

'I do not make magic,' he said. 'Everything I do is purely natural. Look.'

He beckoned Pitamus to come forward, and lifted a corner of one of the pillows. Beneath them lay several of the long, slender plants from which he had earlier been picking the leaves. Pitamus looked up at him, surprised, and for the first time saw his eyes. They seemed to change. At first, they were kind and quite young. Then, they shifted, and somehow gained wisdom.

The dormouse let go of the pillow and said;

*'If this plant is laid beneath the patients' troubled head,
They shall fall into a sleep as if they all were dead;
They shall not open either eye; they will not stir or waken,*

Until from underneath their heads, this slumber plant is taken.'

Pitamus seemed satisfied by this explanation, as if the rhyme somehow made things make some sort of sense. He busied himself at the stove, boiling the pan of water. The young dormouse watched him, waiting patiently until the water was of a sufficient temperature to add his herbs.

Presently, Pitamus proclaimed that the water was boiling, and the dormouse asked him to remove it from the heat. He then brought the herbs over to the pan and placed them into the water.

'Would you fetch something to stir this with, please, Pitamus?' he asked.

Pitamus scurried away quickly, and hurried back with a spoon. The stranger asked Pitamus to blend the mixture, and so the vole stirred until the dormouse put a hand on his arm and said, 'Rest now, Pitamus. You've earned a break!'

Pitamus sat down at the foot of the bed and almost immediately fell asleep. The dormouse smiled, as if he had known Pitamus would do so all along.

Chapter Four

*A golden crown alights the arbour-king;
The giver of Nostrums, in silent gratitude,
Receives his title from an unexpected quarter
And resumes the path that destiny has chosen.*

The sun rose at the edge of The Great Woods. An enormous golden-feathered bird soared on the breeze. Its majestic wings gave one powerful beat every now and again, just to keep its altitude. It gazed down at the woods below him with beady eyes.

It had been searching for some time now, and soon it would be forced to rest, for even birds as strong as he have to sleep occasionally. It had flown for many moons, pausing only to catch a quick meal, and then soaring upwards to view the wooded landscape once more, ever probing, ever piercing the terrain beneath him.

Then he caught sight of something which stirred feelings of longing in his breast. With a triumphant cry he swooped down towards the tree-tops, alighting on the top-most branches of an ancient leaf-less tree.

He surveyed his surroundings, and gave a series of eager chirps, to let The Great Woods know that the second guardian had returned to his station.

Pitamus Vole awoke a good many hours later, feeling refreshed despite having slept in an awkward position. It took him a few moments to recall who it was stirring his best copper pan on the stove, and when he did remember he cursed himself for allowing sleep to overtake him.

He rose to his feet and checked on the sleeping forms of his wife and two children. They looked so peaceful, snuggled up in bed together. How he missed their excitable chatter. The place seemed un-naturally quiet without it.

'They're on the mend,' a soft voice said from behind him. Pitamus turned to the young dormouse; he was standing just behind his left shoulder, hands behind his back.

'They are?' he asked. The dormouse just smiled and nodded, then brought his hands out from behind his back. He held up a bunch of the long, slim plants that he had previously put under their pillows to keep them asleep. With his other hand, he pressed one finger to his mouth.

'Let's just say they won't need these any more,' he said.

The Vole's mouth trembled and tears welled up in his eyes. Smiling, he let out a sigh of relief. 'How can I thank-you?' he said.

'No need,' said the dormouse, 'Just take good care of them and make sure you give them regular doses of my nostrum. You'll have to coax the elder of the two; he's not partial to the taste.'

Pitamus chuckled and held out a hand. The dormouse shook it warmly. 'You have a good family,' he said, with a tinge of sadness edging his voice, 'They are lucky to have a father like you.'

'But I did nothing!' exclaimed Pitamus, guiltily, 'and I seem to have slept through their entire treatment!'

'Ah... I may have had something to do with that,' said the dormouse, and nodded his head briefly towards the foot of the bed. Pitamus followed the stranger's gaze and his eyes fell upon a bunch of the same herbs that his new friend still held in his hand. He looked back at the dormouse, who had an awkward look on his face.

'Well,' he said, 'I had to do something, otherwise you would have succumbed to nervous exhaustion, and then where would we be?'

A sigh from the bed interrupted their conversation, and Pitamus went over and sat on the edge, unable to disguise his happiness and relief. His wife opened her eyes and smiled.

'Hello, sleepy-head,' he said, stroking her face tenderly.

'I could say the same to you!' she answered, chuckling to herself. 'Fancy falling asleep at the foot of the bed, leaving a complete stranger to nurse-maid us!'

Pitamus went a deep shade of scarlet, which for a dark grey vole is quite an achievement. He began to stammer an excuse, but then saw that his wife was stifling her laughter. He grinned, and turned to wag his finger at the dormouse, but he was nowhere to be seen.

'Where did he go?' he said. 'I didn't get a chance to apologise!'

'Apologise for what?' asked his wife.

'For not trusting him.'

'I already did that, so don't worry. Anyway, he said he would slip away when he wasn't needed any more. I don't think he likes saying goodbye.'

A big yawn came from beside her, and the eldest of the two young voles awoke. His Mum gave him a kiss on the forehead, but when he saw his Dad, he summoned up the strength to clamber from his bed-clothes and climbed into his arms.

'Where's Nostra, Daddy?' he asked.

'Where's who?' said Pitamus.

'You know!' said the young vole, 'The Dormouse!'

His wife chuckled again. 'During your forty winks,' she explained to the puzzled Pitamus, 'Our friend tried telling our curious son here what he was giving him to drink. Didn't he, Piney?'

The youngster nodded. 'But I was half asleep...'

'You certainly were,' she said, 'and so, bless him; he thought that "Nostra" was his name! I think our friend rather liked that idea.'

'Well, it definitely suits him,' said Pitamus, putting his son back on the bed. 'And I suppose "Nostra" named our son "Piney", did he?'

His wife looked slightly guilty. 'He might have,' she said.

Pitamus looked sternly at her. 'And what did he name you?' he said.

'Lina,' answered his wife, fearing her husband would be angry.

'Lina,' repeated Pitamus.

He paced the floor for a few moments. Lina watched him anxiously. Eventually he smiled and Lina relaxed.

'I suppose there's a sort of symmetry to it all,' he said, then went over to the stove and looked at the contents of the pan. He took a sniff and his eyes immediately began to water. He blinked in surprise and looked back at the bed. Piney pointed at him, giggling.

'Does it taste as... lovely as it smells?' he asked, wincing.

Piney mimed throwing up. His Mum grinned, shaking her head. 'Oh, it's not that bad!' she said, 'Once you get used to it.'

'I'll take your word for it,' said Pitamus, and then frowned.

'What is it, dear?' asked his wife.

'Just something he said to me when we met. He said, "I have yet to earn my name." Almost as if he knew what Piney would say...'

'Maybe he did,' she replied. 'Maybe he really can tell the future!'

'Yes,' agreed Pitamus, stirring the pan, 'I think he probably can.'

Outside, the young dormouse reached the river bank. He stopped to have a drink, and caught the reflection of the moon in the water. He began to follow the winding trail of the river through the woods, when he became aware of someone or something swimming alongside him in the darkness. He could hear the quiet lapping of the water. Panic took hold of him. What if it were some creature that wanted to eat him? He shivered involuntarily, and was about to run, when Find's voice sent a wave of calm through him and he knew who it was.

'What can I do for you, Arvic?' he asked, without stopping.

There was a splash from behind him and a spluttering sound. He turned towards a large vole, who was struggling out of the water, an astounded look on his face.

'What did you call me?' he said.

'Arvic,' replied the dormouse. 'It's your name.'

'It is?' said the vole. 'Are you sure?'

'I'm sure. Say it to yourself and see.'

Arvic considered this for a while; he felt a warm glow whenever he thought the name.

'How did you know?' he asked, and added, a little sheepishly, '...when I didn't?'

'I know many things, Arvic. I know, for instance, that you will meet a lovely young Vole called Clethrion, fall madly in love and have a large family. I know that you will soon need the help of your cousin, Pitamus, and that your debt to him will lead to you travelling a long way. I know, also, that this will not be our last meeting.'

'Oh,' said Arvic, thoughtfully, 'Well, that told me, didn't it?'

The dormouse smiled. *I'm getting the hang of this prophet lark*, he thought, and turned back to continue his journey.

'So how come this Clethrion already has a name?' asked Arvic.

The dormouse continued walking, but raised an eyebrow, and said, 'because I just named her.'

'But,' said Arvic, determined to catch him out, 'she won't *know* it's her name, will she? She wasn't here to hear you say it!'

The dormouse still didn't stop, but quite enjoyed the challenge. 'She'll know in her heart, just as you did.'

'So, what's your name, then?' asked Arvic, 'So I may greet you properly when we meet again?'

'My name?' said the dormouse, halting in his tracks. He turned his head and looked the Vole in the eye. 'My name... is Nostra.'

'And what manner of creature are you?' continued Arvic.

'I am a dormouse,' he replied, 'the first of my kind.'

'I see,' said Arvic. 'Well, then, Nostra Dormouse, I bid you farewell until we meet again.' And with a quick flick of his tail, Arvic Vole slipped silently back into the river, leaving his new acquaintance to continue his solitary path.

For a while, he was content to listen to the sounds his feet made on the soft earth, and the gentle whisper of the wind in the willows, until presently he stopped and peered at his reflection in the river. He bowed, as if meeting someone important for the first time, and said to his watery alter-ego, 'Good Morrow, Sir. Permit me to introduce myself. My name... is Nostradormouse.'

He chuckled to himself, and then continued on his way.

Chapter Five

*Across the tree-tops leaps the dray-dweller;
As the feathered bard spreads wide his song,
So each visionary phrase becomes valid
And his wisdom is wisely employed.*

If Nostradormouse had looked up into the branches high above, he would have noticed a reddish-brown creature with a long, bushy tail watching him. She gazed down through the foliage, her four limbs gripping the branch she was perched on tightly. Every now and again, her head would dart from side to side, nervously keeping watch.

With a swift, graceful movement, she scampered from one branch to another, then one tree to the next, running down the thinnest of branches, not caring how much it bowed under her weight.

For days she had been heading deeper into The Great Woods, feeling drawn towards something she didn't fully understand. Quickening her pace, she leapt from branch to branch, tree to tree, continuing her fateful journey, pausing only briefly to eat a nut, or to hide in a hollow trunk for a moment's rest.

And then, suddenly, there it was. It stood alone in the middle of a clearing, lifeless yet majestic. Nothing grew around its edges, and all the trees that surrounded it seemed to shrink from its touch. She scampered down the trunk of the tree and, looking nervously all around her, scurried into a hollow.

The third guardian had arrived.

One sunny morning, a small, black-feathered bird with a yellow beak alighted on a hazel tree and started to sing. A mouse came out of the hollow in the trunk of the hazel, and listened for a few moments. Then, he called to his wife, who joined him at the entrance to their home. They looked at each other in surprise, not quite believing what they'd heard.

The black bird finished his song and was about to leave, when he noticed his audience and turned to greet them.

'I'm dreadfully sorry,' he chirped, 'I didn't notice you there. How rude of me!'

'Oh, that's no bother,' said the mouse, 'but could I ask you to repeat your song? It was so lovely.'

'Why, thank-you!' exclaimed the bird, 'I would be honoured to repeat it!' Proudly, he puffed out his chest, and began his song again:

*'I sing in praise of the healer of voles,
Of beavers and foxes and badgers and moles,
This giver of nostrums will know of your plight
And come to your aid when the moon shines its light.
With flowers and herbs he will mix you a drink,
Be you lizard or rabbit or turtle or mink,
And when you are well he will slip from your house,
The most humble of healers is Nostradormouse.'*

'I reckon that's our son!' said the mouse to his wife.

'Do you really think so?'

'Yes,' he said, 'I do. Well, would you believe it?'

The black bird listened intently to what the mice were saying. 'There is another verse of my song,' he chirped. 'Do you wish to hear it?'

The mice nodded vigorously, and so the black bird continued;

*'I sing in wonder, for this healer can see
What the future may hold, both for you and for me.
Ask him the question that troubles your mind,
And he will reach into the future and find
An answer to query, question or qualm,
Which he will deliver with unruffled calm
So you may rest easy, be you pheasant or grouse,
A venerable seer is Nostradormouse.'*

'You're right!' said Mother, 'Isn't that wonderful?'

'I knew he'd do all right!' Father replied.

They thanked the black bird profusely.

'Oh, think nothing of it!' replied the bird. 'That's what I'm here for. Now, I must bid you farewell. There are other ears to fill with sweet song!'

With that, he took to the air in search of new audiences. When he was gone, they gave each other a long hug.

'Do you think he's okay?' said Mother.

'I hope so,' replied Father. 'I do worry about him.'

'Me too,' said Mother. 'But I'm so proud.'

Arvic Vole was not feeling too good. For a day or so now, his limbs had seemed heavier, and his breath came in short, rasping gasps. He felt both hot and cold in turn, and would shiver and sweat in the same breath. But when his appetite dwindled, and he could no longer stomach even the simplest of meals, he decided that enough was enough. Something was most definitely wrong with him, and it needed to be fixed. But how? The one animal that could aid him had left many weeks ago, after helping his cousin Pitamus to cure his family.

Pitamus! Maybe he had some of that Nostrum stuff left? It was worth a try. Wearily, Arvic raised his aching bones from his chair and made his way through the labyrinth of tunnels that lay under the pine glade.

Pitamus's wife, Lina, met Arvic at the entrance to their Burrow and immediately guessed what was wrong.

'Oh, dear!' she said, 'you poor thing! Come in at once and lie down on our bed. Pitamus! Pitamus! Come quick!'

'What is it, my dear?' said Pitamus, hurrying in from another tunnel, closely followed by Piney. When he saw Arvic lying on his bed, he knew without being told. 'Oh, dear... Oh, deary me!' he muttered, 'What are we to do?'

'Well, husband,' began Lina, 'you can start by collecting these plants,' and gave him a list describing each herb that Nostradormouse had given them.

'Where did you get this?' asked Pitamus.

'Where do you think?' Lina replied.

Pitamus hurried out and quickly gathered all the herbs on the list. When he returned, the copper pan was already heating the water, and Lina was dabbing a wet cloth on Arvic's forehead.

'Don't worry,' she whispered, 'We'll have you up and about in no time.'

After taking the newly made nostrum, Arvic slept soundly for two days. When he awoke, he found Pitamus sitting beside the bed in his favourite armchair, whittling away at a long slim piece of wood with a knot near the top.

'What's that?' he asked.

'Oh, hello Arvic,' replied Pitamus, looking up from his work, 'It's just a small gift to say thank-you.'

'Oh, you shouldn't have!' said Arvic, 'I don't deserve such a gift!'

'No, you don't!' came a voice from the entrance to the Burrow, 'Not after hogging our bed for two days!' Lina entered, carrying the smaller of her two children. 'It's for our mutual friend, not for you!'

'Oh, of course!' said Arvic, 'I was just testing!'

'How are you feeling?' asked Pitamus, blowing away a few wood shavings from his carving.

'Never better!' said Arvic, confidently.

'Good,' said Pitamus, 'because I need you to do something for me.'

'You want me to take that gift of yours to Nostradormouse, don't you?' he said.

'Now who's the prophet?' said Lina.

Arvic smiled, and then addressed his cousin once again. 'At a guess, I take it that your gift is a staff of some kind.'

'Yes,' agreed Pitamus, holding the staff at arm's length to admire it. 'I've been working on this since he left.'

'And I have, too!' said a small voice from behind Lina.

'Oh, yes,' said Pitamus, 'And so has Piney!'

'I must admit, it's rather a fine piece of work,' said Arvic. He looked gratefully at Pitamus, then turned and smiled at Lina and Piney. 'I should be proud to take this to our friend,' he said.

Chapter Six

*Eight horns herald the new world's arrival;
As insults are hurled twixt sky and earth
The wise swimmer returns to his birthplace
And sacred waters are summoned to the well.*

At the foot of the ancient tree, a coiled root stirred, then two eyes looked out upon the early morning. The creature's head turned from left to right, as if trying to pinpoint something it had sensed. It settled on one direction, then another, then another. There was definitely something on the way, it thought. Maybe several things: Things with limbs, things that could run.

High up in the topmost branches, a golden-feathered bird lifted its head from its breast, and fastened its two beady eyes on the woods below. It, too, sensed something approaching.

A head popped out from a hollow in the trunk of the tree, nervously looking this way and that. The reddish-brown creature scurried out onto a branch and looked around.

'Itsss sstarting!' said a voice from below it.

The creature scampered back into its hollow in fright. When nothing followed, she emerged cautiously from the safety of her hiding place.

'Who said that?' she asked.

'I have no name ass yet, nervousss one, but I live down here!' came the reply.

She followed the sound of the voice and was amazed to see one of the roots of the tree talking to her.

'Come clossser, bushy-tail,' it continued, 'I won't harm you.'

Suddenly, from high above, came a shriek and the beating of powerful wings. The two creatures looked up, startled. Neither were aware that anything else was living in their tree. The creature with the wings cried out something that neither of them could quite hear.

'What did it sssay?' asked the root-dweller.

'I don't know,' replied bushy-tail. 'Hold on a moment, and I'll find out!'

She quickly scurried up the trunk towards the higher branches. As she neared the top, she gazed in awe at the sight of the enormous golden-feathered bird sitting on the top branch.

It looked at her and said, 'Don't trust that slithering creature. I've been watching it down there since I arrived, and I don't like what I see.'

'It seems harmless,' she replied. 'How do I know that you are more worthy of my trust than it is?'

The bird flapped its enormous wings again and looked hard at her. 'Do you have a name, nervous one?' it asked.

'No, I've never needed one,' came the reply.

'Then I shall call you Ratatosk,' said the bird, 'for in the language of my kind, it means 'she who scurries'.'

'Thank-you,' she said, '...I think.'

'You can tell that root creature, that 'Nidhog', that I have my all-seeing eyes on it. But don't get too close. It will have you for its supper. Consider that your one and only warning.'

Ratatosk scurried back down the tree trunk and delivered the message immediately. There was something about the way in which the enormous bird spoke, which filled her with respect and awe. Following his advice, she made sure she didn't get too close to the creature, which was just as well, because it took the message badly.

'How dare he criticisssse me?' it raged. 'I don't know what a Nidhog iss, but I know an insssult when I hear one! Well, if thatsss the way he wantsss it, then thatsss the way itsss going to be!'

But before it could say anything more, there came a loud rumbling from the undergrowth and four deer came striding out of the woods from four different directions. They stopped in unison when they saw the tree and looked at each other; they seemed to be communicating without speaking a word. Then, again in unison, they walked towards the four enormous branches that trailed along the ground. When they reached them, they bowed their antlers and began to strike them against the wood. The sound echoed through the clearing, gaining momentum with every strike, until it sounded like a battle was raging.

Every creature in The Great Woods paused for a moment, listening to something in the distance, something that seemed to draw them towards the centre of their world.

The root-dweller, the Nidhog, was right.

It was starting.

It was late one evening when the salmon arrived at the lake. It had swum up-stream for many days, returning to its birth-place one final time, and it was exhausted.

The mouse was scampering about on the ground, collecting hazel nuts that had fallen from the tree in a storm the previous night. They weren't at their best, as he much preferred them green and juicy, straight from the branch, but food was food.

His wife called out from the branch above him. 'Look, dear! Look who it is!'

The mouse watched as the salmon wearily swam past him into the pool, where it could rest at last. The mouse dropped the nuts it had gathered and raced up the trunk of the tree and into the hollow, where his wife was already preparing to leave. As he entered, she turned to him and said, 'This is so exciting! We're going to see our son!'

'We can't go yet,' he said, 'it's not time.'

'It isn't?' she replied, looking crestfallen.

'No,' said the mouse, 'not yet.'

'But I want to see our son!' she exclaimed.

'I know. I do, too.'

They came out of the hollow to watch the sun set behind the canopy of trees that framed their home. They stood there, together, arm in arm, as the daylight faded. As they glanced down at the pool beneath them, they saw the salmon circling its birthplace, swimming faster and faster. Soon, it had created a whirlpool, and the waters churned excitedly. Then, the salmon leapt up from the centre of the vortex, and the waters followed it. The mice watched in amazement as the salmon landed on the ground, and the waters flowed over him, following a dip in the earth that they were sure had not been there before.

They looked at each other and laughed with joy.

'Now can we go?' she asked.

'Yes,' he said. '*Now* we can go.'

Without bothering to take anything, they scampered down the trunk of their home and began to follow the waters as it made its way relentlessly towards the centre of The Great Woods.

Chapter Seven

*A great migration gathers pace beside new banks;
During this journey a new partnership is made,
Comforting words are overheard
And four seeds come close to full term.*

Have you seen it?' cried the badger, 'have you heard it?' asked the mole. 'Have you tasted it?' said the beaver, 'have you swum in it?' asked the vole.

These were just some of the questions that the growing crowd of pilgrims asked each other as they followed the waters of the lake towards the centre of the forest.

Word of the extraordinary phenomenon had spread quickly. Soon, others joined the two mice. A family of shrews were the first, and they were soon accompanied by two raccoons. By the next day, a party of natterjack toads were swimming in the stream; the young ones were carried along by the current, and two old terrapins swum lugubriously alongside them.

Just out of sight of the main party, a pack of wolves followed at a safe distance, and, at their own pace, three young lynx kittens tried to stay a few steps ahead of their parents.

Many species of birds joined the caravan of creatures. In the tops of the trees, all manner of creatures scampered and scurried, and in the evening the frantic fluttering of many bats could be heard. A pair of peregrine falcons flew ahead of the main party and returned excitedly to report what they had seen. It appeared that this was not the only stream to snake its way towards the heart of The Great Woods; no less than four new streams were flowing towards a single source. Nothing quite like this had ever happened before, and the other streams had gathered their own pilgrims.

By now, all had heard of Nostradormouse and his healing prowess, not to mention his prophetic abilities. Many tales about him rapidly grew in stature and length in their retelling. Many claimed to have met him, and not a few professed to have been cured by him, but none could say where he was. A family of rabbits insisted that he had saved them from a pack of hungry wolves; this had provoked disbelief in many, and ridicule by the rest. The father rabbit was adamant that Nostradormouse had walked with them for a while, but (conveniently, some said) he had not stayed for long. It was as if he had vanished into the night, content to let his reputation take his place on the journey.

Of course, there were many times when various parties stopped and set up temporary camps beside the stream, in order to rest and gain strength for the next leg of their journey. You could always find at least one group asleep whilst others continued on. A great camaraderie was created between the cosmopolitan creatures; even the predators presented no physical threat to their prey. When questioned, they chose to

remain silent on the matter, but the word was out; they were fasting for the foreseeable future.

It was on one such occasion, when a party of nocturnal animals had bedded down in a vacant rabbit warren, that Nostradormouse's parents had a chance meeting. They had just settled down together when they overheard a vole boisterously trying to impress a young female of his kind with a tale about their son. Now this had happened many times before, and they had always dismissed the stories as, at best, invented and, at worst, absurd in the extreme. But this particular tale had more than a ring of truth to it.

'...and he says to me, he says, "What can I do for you, Arvic?" Just like that. And I didn't even have a name until that point! I knew then that he was something special.'

The two mice peered cautiously over the mound of earth that separated them from the two voles, and listened intently to their conversation.

'So I ask him how he knew my name, and he says, "I know many things, Arvic. I know, for instance, that you will meet a lovely young vole called Clethrion, fall madly in love and have a large family.'"

The two mice saw the expression on the young female change from bemused to surprised and then quickly to embarrassment.

'But, Arvic, that's my name!' she said.

Arvic froze in mid-flow, his tiny eyes widening at the realisation of who he was talking to. He laughed nervously, suddenly becoming very bashful.

'Oh, my!' he said, 'And I didn't even introduce myself properly! What must you think of me?'

'I think you're perfectly lovely!' said Clethrion, 'and you simply must finish your story. What else did Nostradormouse say?'

'Well now, let me see,' said Arvic, having quite lost the rhythm of his tale, 'where was I?'

'Meeting me and falling madly in love,' declared Clethrion, smiling coyly at her new acquaintance.

'Oh, yes!' said Arvic, hands shaking, 'So I was! Well, now. Em. Yes. So he says, "you will soon need the help of your cousin, Pitamus, and that your debt to him will entail you travelling a long way. I know, also, that this will not be our last meeting.'"

Clethrion was clearly impressed by this last statement. 'You mean that you're going to meet him again?' she asked.

'Oh, yes,' said Arvic, casually, 'I have to. You see, I need to give him this,' and he picked up the staff that Pitamus had made for Nostradormouse and proudly showed it to Clethrion.

'That's beautiful!' she said, 'I'm sure he'll be very pleased with it.'

'I hope so,' said Arvic, thoughtfully, 'it took Pitamus ages!'

The two mice exchanged happy glances and then laid themselves back down on their bed of soft earth, content that their son would have such a reward for his kindness.

Arvic and Clethrion chatted long into the day, gazing into each other's eyes. Both quickly became entranced by the other, and thereafter became inseparable.

And the legend of Nostradormouse grew ever stronger.

Ratatosk was beginning to tire of the constant stream of insults being traded between the Nidhog and the golden-feathered bird at the top of the ancient tree. It wasn't that she was particularly bothered whether they liked each other or not; it was just that she had become their sole means of communication. Between racing up and down the trunk carrying insult after insult, and the wearisome noise of the stags' antlers striking the four branches, there wasn't time to rest, eat, or sleep.

Also, she had noticed a change in the shape of the trunk, just above the base. It seemed to be bulging, and reminded her of her mother when she was carrying her sister.

It was almost as if the tree was about to give birth...

Chapter Eight

*From North, South, East and West they come;
The dormant one quenches an ageless thirst
A generous gift proves most fortuitous
And the end of eternity arrives, bathed in light.*

After many days and many nights, journey's end approached the weary but excited travellers. From all four corners of The Great Woods they came, following their respective streams. As they grew nearer and nearer to the centre of the woods, and the rhythmic striking of the stags' great antlers grew ever louder, an eager yet oddly reverent hush overtook even the noisiest of creatures.

As the first animals arrived at the edge of the clearing where the ancient tree stood, the stags raised their heads and let out a great, triumphant cry. Then, with one last, mighty sweep of their heads, they struck their branch one last time, shattering their antlers to a thousand pieces. The sound echoed round the clearing for what seemed like an eternity, then a silence, deeper than any silence before or since, descended over those gathered.

The waters from each stream continued their journey towards the tree, passing beside the four branches, until they reached the roots. The tree drank greedily as the water sank into the earth around it.

As the minutes passed into hours, more and more creatures of all shapes and sizes gathered at the edge of the clearing, and all waited without uttering a word.

Ratatosk peered out from her hollow every now and again, and quickly withdrew into the darkness of her home on seeing the crowd. The Nidhog kept absolutely still, pretending to be a root. The golden-feathered bird sat motionless, proud and regal upon his tree-top perch. The four stags stood with heads bowed, the fragments of their broken antlers all around their hooves.

After several minutes, a low rumble came from deep within the ancient tree. It grew steadily louder, and the ground began to shake. The rumble turned into a roar which was accompanied by a thick, heady scent, and each creature felt as if their skull would split.

Abruptly, the sound ceased, and all was silent once more. No animal dared to move. Then, a small mouse wearing a cloak and hood stepped forward into the clearing and walked slowly towards the tree. An excited murmur passed over the crowd. A wolf gave a low growl, and his pack echoed him. Nearby, a small family of rabbits nervously edged away from them, but couldn't quite hide their excitement at seeing their friend again.

The rodent made its way to the foot of the enormous trunk and then stopped. Slowly, he removed his hood, and each creature gathered at the edge of the clearing knew that it was Nostradormouse himself who stood before them.

It had been exhausting these past few days, and Nostradormouse was ready to drop. All his limbs ached, and his feet were sore from walking. He so desperately wanted to rest, but Find whispered in his head, *keep going, my friend. This is it now. This is your time.*

He extended his left hand outwards, as if to ask for something. He turned his head slowly in the same direction and his gaze fell upon two voles, one of whom held a staff in his right hand.

Arvic suddenly felt all eyes upon him and looked at Clethrion nervously. She let go of his hand and said softly, 'I think he needs his staff. You'd better go and give it to him.'

'Oh! Yes, of course,' murmured Arvic. 'His staff. Yes.'

Warily, Arvic made his way over to Nostradormouse, who smiled at him warmly.

'Good to see you again, Arvic,' he said. 'I hope Clethrion is well.'

'Oh yes,' replied the vole, 'She's lovely. Thank-you.'

The two stood there for a few moments, Arvic's awkward smile fading fast. Then, he realised that he still held the staff.

'Oh! The staff!' he exclaimed, and passed it to Nostradormouse. 'It's from-'

'Pitamus and Piney,' said Nostradormouse. 'Yes, I know. You must give them my eternal thanks. Without this staff to aid me, I would not be able to do this.'

He walked boldly up to the roots of the tree and tapped one root with the end of the staff. Immediately, the root sprang to life. Arvic backed away when he realised it wasn't a root at all, but a serpent. The Nidhog's forked tongue flicked in and out of its mouth, but it didn't strike the rodent. It simply bowed its head so Nostradormouse could climb on top. Then, its head rose several feet in the air and turned towards the trunk.

Nostradormouse raised the staff in both hands and struck the trunk at the centre of the bulge. It split open, and a bright, white light emanated from within. The Nidhog lowered his head to the ground and Nostradormouse stepped off, backing slowly away from the tree...

Chapter Nine

*Four directions has The Great Woods;
Four Branches has the ancient tree,
Four seasons burst upon the earth
And bring an end to eternity.*

The tree creaked and groaned, as if it was trying to talk to the gathered animals. The fissure in the trunk grew larger, and light continued to flood from its heart.

'I can see movement in there!' exclaimed Clethrion, clasping her hands to her mouth.

'Oh, yes!' said Arvic, 'can you make out what it is?'

'Arvic, I'm scared. Hold me!'

Arvic put his arms round Clethrion and held her to him. It felt good to protect her. It felt natural.

There was a fluttering of feathers, and a young hawk surged out of the fissure and alighted on the large branch to the east of the tree. A gasp of wonder rippled across those gathered.

Nostradormouse stepped forward and said, 'Tell us who you are, friend! Why have you come to The Great Woods?'

The Hawk replied, 'My name is Spring! I bring you new life! Look to the tree and see what I have wrought!'

Another gasp came from those nearest the four branches, and every creature turned to see what the commotion was. Small flower buds were growing on them, which quickly opened into thick bunches of purple ash flowers. The hawk flapped his great wings, creating a wind which whipped up the pollen from the flowers, scattering it over everything. After the wind had died down, the hawk gave a cry and flew off into the east. When those assembled looked back at the branches, they saw the purple flowers wither and fall off, revealing beneath them feather-like green leaves, hanging from long stalks.

'Look!' said an excited pine marten, who was pointing to the main trunk, 'there's something else moving inside!'

As the assembled throng gazed in fascination, a stag leapt from the fissure and landed gracefully on the ground in front of the tree. It let out a triumphant cry, and the four stags gathered at each branch cried in unison. This stag was larger and more majestic than the others, and they bowed their heads to it in awe and respect as it moved to the southern branch.

'My name is Summer!' it said, 'And I bring you the heat of the sun and the ripening of the earth! Look to the tree and see what I have wrought!'

Again, all eyes fell on the branches as black leaf buds sprouted from the wood. They quickly and gracefully opened up into beautiful, feathery light green pairs of leaflets with toothed edges. As they grew larger, they deepened in colour and grew stronger with each passing moment, until each leaf was revealed in all its glory. All those present felt warmer.

The sun's rays, filtering through the branches of the trees in the great wood, became more intense.

The stag gave another cry and galloped off into the south. Every creature listened to the sound of its hooves fading into the distance and felt a great longing for its return.

All eyes immediately returned to the fissure in the trunk, waiting for whatever would emerge next. For a while, nothing happened. Then, the light emanating from the cleft began to change in hue, growing dimmer and darker. As if in answer to this change from within, the air around the gathered creatures began to grow colder and fresher.

Once again, silence descended upon the clearing, and with it came a feeling of unease. Many creatures became agitated. Nostradormouse stepped forward into the clearing, yawning quietly to himself.

'Do not fear,' he said, 'the waters of the four streams have stopped flowing, but it won't last for long.'

Even as he spoke these words, the water began to flow again. A sigh of relief was felt all round the clearing, then a chorus of excited voices cried, 'Its flowing the other way! The streams have changed direction!'

Then, with a blur of movement, something flipped out of the fissure and somersaulted through the air, landing with a splash in the stream that flowed past the western-most branch of the ancient tree. A head bobbed to the surface, and all could see that it was a salmon.

'My name is Autumn!' said the salmon, 'and I bring you the harvest, and the approaching darkness. With me come shorter days and cold winds. Look at the tree and see what I have wrought!'

The circle of creatures looked to the branches and watched the leaves turn from dark green to yellow, then drop silently to the ground. The air grew colder, and for the first time, those gathered could see their own breath.

The salmon leapt up into the air and came down with a splash, then swam away to the west. Nostradormouse felt drained of energy and began to move back towards the crowd, but he never reached them. Instead, he sat down suddenly, and crawled up into a ball, falling into a deep sleep. Many other creatures followed his example.

Another rumble emanated from deep within the tree; it was a throaty growl, and those who had not succumbed to sleep's comforting embrace watched as a great bear leapt from the fissure and landed on all fours in front of the tree. He paced across the clearing until he reached the northern-most branch, then stood on his hind legs and let out a roar. Every creature took a step back, fear in their hearts. Some scampered

behind larger creatures, some hid their faces. All were in awe of the mighty mammal.

'My name is Winter!' said the great bear, 'And I bring death and sleep, but also the promise of days to come! Look upon the land in my time and see what I have wrought!'

As he finished speaking, the sun disappeared behind the trees, leaving the clearing in darkness. Then, soft white flakes of snow fell from the sky in flurries. The awe-struck creatures of The Great Woods had never seen such a thing before and it filled them with wonder. The great bear let out another roar, and then something truly amazing happened. He simply burst into a shower of stars which flew in all directions, making shadows dance amongst the crowd. Then, they flew up into the blackness and became one with the night.

The tree groaned and creaked once again, and a glow radiated from the fissure, rapidly growing in intensity. Then, there was a flash of brilliance and the sun appeared once again in the sky, melting the snow and thawing the frozen heart of the earth.

Nostradormouse stirred. His eyes flickered open and he gave a great yawn. As he stood and stretched, all the other sleeping creatures woke too. From above the clearing, a cry was heard and all heads gazed upwards to see a hawk circling in the cloudless sky.

Spring had returned to The Great Woods for the first time.

Epilogue

*The tree returns to life; the tail ends with a point,
Rumours worm their way into The Great Woods,
Families are reunited; a lost couple find their way
And the prophet reveals a great bear in the stars.*

Later, in the centre of The Great Woods, the animals had all left. Apart from the steady flow of water from the four streams, there was no sound or movement in the clearing where the great tree stood. The Nidhog was sleeping soundly at the roots of the tree trunk, and Ratatosk had taken shelter in the hollow where he had made his nest. Even the Golden-feathered bird was quiet; what they felt could not be put into words.

The fissure at the base of the trunk had closed up, but there was still a scar there, as a reminder to all who saw it that time was moving on. It would take a few moons before the creatures of The Great Woods realised just what this meant to them, and many moons more before the effects of the seasons were felt.

But for now, things were not too different. The air in the morning was colder than before, and the days were shorter, and there were leaves upon the trees, even if they were still small, and curled up into buds. But spring had definitely arrived, as the circling hawk announced at every new sunrise.

There were, however, dark clouds on the horizon. They swirled and threatened to spill over the edge of the world, but hadn't yet summoned the courage to carry their inky blackness over the spring skies.

Under the earth, too, were signs that more change was on its way. In parts of The Great Wood, those animals that lived underground were often woken in the night by rumbles. Soft, gentle rumbles, and yet discomfoting all the same. There were rumours, of course. There were always rumours. There was talk of a gigantic worm that eats everything in its path; a worm so huge that it would split The Great Woods into a thousand pieces.

But rumours are for fools, aren't they? And anyway, there were those who put their faith in a more reliable source, and he hadn't said a word.

Yet.

A few nights after the events at the centre of The Great Woods, Arvic and Clethrion arrived back at his burrow. They were very tired from their long journey, but Arvic was keen to introduce Clethrion to his cousin Pitamus, and to reassure him that his gift had been delivered.

Pitamus and his wife, Lina, were standing at the entrance to their burrow, gazing up at the stars, when they heard the familiar voice of Arvic.

'Pitamus!' he called, as he came round the corner, 'I'm back!'

'So I see,' replied Pitamus, 'and you're not alone!'

Arvic gave Pitamus a broad grin and proudly introduced Clethrion. Both Pitamus and Lina gave her a big hug, for they knew from Arvic's demeanour that Clethrion was someone very special to him.

'We were just looking at the stars, Clethrion,' said Lina, after introductions were complete, 'and there appears to be some new ones!'

Clethrion and Arvic exchanged knowing glances. 'Will you tell them, or shall I?' said Clethrion.

'Tell us what?' asked Pitamus.

'Well... ' began Arvic, and then looked at Clethrion. He could see that she was eager to tell her new friends of the magical events that had transpired at the centre of The Great Woods. 'You tell them, my love,' he said.

The four of them sat by the entrance to the burrow, and Clethrion excitedly related their story: how she and Arvic had first met, how they followed the stream to the tree, and how Nostradormouse had appeared to everyone there, and rode on the back of a serpent to let out the seasons with the staff that Pitamus had made.

'He used my staff?' said Pitamus. 'My staff?'

Clethrion nodded. 'He knew you were making it for him,' she exclaimed.

'That doesn't surprise me in the least!' said Lina.

'Tell them about the bear,' urged Arvic.

'Oh, yes,' continued Clethrion, 'and this is the best bit of all! The bear was called "Winter", and it burst into stars!'

'Stars?' said Pitamus. 'Are you saying that the new stars we noticed in the sky this evening...were once a bear?'

Arvic and Clethrion said 'yes!' in unison.

'You're having us on!' said Pitamus, and laughed heartily. Then he noticed that both Arvic and Clethrion were looking quite serious. He gazed up into the night sky again and quickly found the new stars; they were easy to spot as they were glowing brighter than the others. But however hard he focused, he could not see that they had ever been a bear.

A short distance away from the Voles, two weary mice stopped by a stream for a drink. They, too, had been travelling for days, and now they were exhausted. Initially, they had followed the stream from the centre of The Great Woods, because they'd thought that it would lead them back to their home. However, they had not taken into account just how meandering the stream had become. After only a short while (mice were

not accustomed to measuring time) they had come to a tributary. Which arm of the stream should they take? On the way to the centre, the stream had only one arm. Now it had two.

They had followed what they considered to be the original arm of the stream, but the further they walked, the more uncertain of their decision they'd become. Things took more of a downturn when they discovered that the stream branched off again. Now they were well and truly lost.

'What are we going to do?' cried one of the mice. The other mouse gently held her in his arms, and comforted her as best he could.

'There, there, dear,' he said, 'it'll be all right,' but his thoughts were not as reassuring.

Just then, the moon came out from behind a cloud. On the hill beside them, it revealed a figure silhouetted against the night sky. It was wearing a cloak, and carried a staff. It started to walk towards them, and as it got nearer to them, they recognised their only son.

'It's our boy!' said the father.

'My son!' said the mother, running forward to greet the hooded mouse.

The three mice huddled together and hugged for a long time. When they finally parted, the mother said, 'I looked for you at the great gathering, my son, but you had disappeared!'

'Where did you go?' asked the father, 'your mother was so worried!'

'I'm sorry if I upset you,' said Nostradormouse, 'but I knew that I would be inundated with creatures wanting to know their future, so I took refuge in a hollow of the great tree until things calmed down.'

'Well, you're here now,' said his mother, 'and it's so good to see you!'

'It's good to see you, too,' he replied, 'but I'm afraid I can't return home just yet.'

Both his parents looked crest-fallen at this news, but they knew, as all parents learn, that their only son had his own life to live.

'You are not lost,' he told them, 'and you haven't much further to travel.' He pointed to the left arm of the stream. 'Continue along this stream and it will lead you back home.'

'Thank-you, son,' said his father. 'I want you to know we're both proud of you. Take care, and keep in touch if you can.'

'Or even better, visit!' said his mother, 'our home isn't complete without you!'

Nostradormouse smiled warmly at them both, and then kissed his mother goodbye. But when he kissed his father farewell, he whispered something to him. They watched him make his way through the trees,

until he became a silhouette once more. He climbed a bank, and then turned to look at them on the brow of the hill. He waved, and then vanished into the night.

His father wiped a tear from his eye, and then looked at his wife.

'What did he whisper to you?' she asked.

'He told me our names,' he replied.

'But what have we done to earn them?' she said. 'You have to earn your name, don't you?'

Her husband looked at her lovingly. She was so modest.

'Who did we bring into the world?' he asked her.

'Our son, of course,' she said, and then she realised just how important he had become. 'Oh!' she exclaimed, and blushed. 'So what is my name?'

'Raini,' he said, 'and my name is James.'

'It suits you!' she said, and laughed.

Just over the brow of the hill, Nostradormouse had stopped to listen to his parents. He smiled to himself when he heard their reaction to their names. Soon, there would be enough names in the world for its inhabitants to name themselves. As he continued walking, the sound of other voices drifted through the darkness, and he recognised them. He walked into a familiar glade, and before him stood Pitamus, Lina, Arvic and Clethrion. When they saw him, they greeted each other as old friends.

'I hope you're all well,' said Nostradormouse.

'Very well, thank-you,' replied Lina. 'Piney would love to see you!'

'And I him,' he said, 'but I am merely passing through.'

'You were right,' said Arvic, 'Clethrion did know her name.'

'Of course,' he said, 'and the two of you look very happy.'

Clethrion and Arvic held hands tightly.

'Will we see you again?' asked Pitamus.

'Oh, yes,' said Nostradormouse thoughtfully, 'our destinies are intertwined like the stems of ivy on an oak tree.'

'Go well,' said Pitamus, and shook the dormouse's hand warmly.

Together, the four voles watched their friend walk away. Then, they saw him stop and point his staff up to the sky. Their eyes followed its direction, and they all saw the new stars once again, but this time they could see the bear quite clearly.

When they looked back, however, Nostradormouse had gone...



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