

# THE TIES THAT BIND

By John H. Burkitt



Fox Den Press



*By the Author of Byron on Wells*



# THE TIES THAT BIND

*Stories of the Foxworth Clan*

*by*

*John H. Burkitt*

*The author may be contacted at [magescribe@comcast.net](mailto:magescribe@comcast.net) and your comments and questions are appreciated. All references to C.S. Lewis' "The Chronicles of Narnia" are made with the utmost love and gratitude for the pivotal role they played in his life. Visit the official Byron on Wells site at <http://royalmagi.org>.*



Dedicated to  
Lynne Riday

*My Linden Foxworth*

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## THE HOMECOMING

IT WAS PAST MIDNIGHT AT THE MOON AND Hare Inn, a peaceful interlude between the night's merrymaking and the morning's bustle. The pub was closed, the guests had settled in for the night, and the lazy moon was peeking shyly through the frosty windowpanes. Owners Nickaby and Elsie Otter were freed up for a late family dinner with their fox pup helper Thorny.

Thorny looked down at his porridge, too tired to eat and too hungry not to. His eyes half closed and he yawned without bothering to cover his mouth with a paw.

"My oh my," Elsie said with an affectionate lilt, "there's a sleepy red head that is going to bed!" She patted him on the shoulder. "Will the bench in the great room be all right?"

"Fine, fine," Thorny said. "I did it before, and I can do it again."

Elsie smiled. "I'll fetch the green wool blanket and set you up like last time. This time you'll have a proper pillow, not rolled up bedclothes." She looked at the fox pup intently. "Are you *quite* sure that's enough?"

He yawned again. "It's fine, Mrs. Otter. I could sleep on a rock tonight."

"That you could," Nickaby said. "It's been a long day, lad. Long and busy."

Just then someone knocked at the door. Nickaby looked about as if wondering what to do. The knock was repeated.

Nickaby he pounded his paw on the table. "Garn, it's cold outside or I'd let the bloke pound till his paw fell off. Who's about at this hour demanding service?" He glanced down at the fox pup and scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Thorny, would you be a good lad and get that?"

He brightened. "Yes sir."

"You remember how to show guests to an empty room?"

"Yes sir."

"And to get the money in advance?"

"Yes sir."

"And remember what I always say?"

The fox did his best imitation of Nickaby's voice and mannerisms. "Services are strictly for cash. No credit extended."

The knock repeated, more urgently. Thorny got up from the table and hurried off.

"Look at him go!" Elsie said with a grin. "He was born to be an innkeeper."

"Right as rain," Nickaby said with a chuckle. "What did we ever do without him?"

"We stared at our porridge and missed our Sally." Elsie poured another cup of tea. "He brings life back to this house, Nicky. I wish he'd stay over more often. When it's just us, we don't know what to talk about."

"He's a little chatterbox, I grant you."

"Too little," Elsie said, glancing at the kitchen door, worriedly. "It's too late for him to be opening to strangers, dear."

"I'll check on him."

Before he could leave the table, the door opened and Thorny returned with a faun in tow.

"Vicar Chios?" Elsie asked.

"What's left of him," the faun said. "It's a chiller out there." As if to underscore the point, his face was red with cold and there was snow on his cape.

"The stove is on," Nickaby said, "Seat yourself and I'll fetch you some tea."

“No thank you, this is official business.” The faun mussed the fox pup between the ears. “Give us some privacy like a good lad?”

“Yes sir.”

Chios watched until Thorny left and closed the door behind him. “That’s a fine young helper you have there.”

“Yes, Vicar. That’s Thorny. He’s a quick study and always eager to please.”

“You’re lucky his parents let him work here.”

“His mother, actually, though I’ve never met her.” Nickaby settled back in his chair. “Thorny’s father died about a month ago. They’re poor but proud, not the sort for taking for charity. Thorny wanted a job to bring in a little extra cash. Well, you know me, Chios; I didn’t have much to do, but I found something to keep him occupied. Sweeping here, washing some dishes there, and once I asked him to take all the blankets out of the cellar and put them in the attic. The next day I pretended to change my mind and had him put them back below. You get my meaning, friend. Anything to work around that pride of his and justify some spare crescents.”

“Very thoughtful, no doubt. Yet it’s past midnight. Are those fair working hours for such a wee lad?”

“Garn, Vicar, he’s not working. We’re letting him stay the night. It’s too cold and dark out for a long stretch of the legs, and besides he said his mum wouldn’t mind.”

“No doubt,” the faun said, leaning forward. “She’s dead.”

Nickaby dropped his knife. “Excuse me?”

“There was a fire about a month ago at the Foxworth place. We thought everyone had died; Rufus, Luna and the twins. Poor as river rats but good hearted folks, generous with what they had and quick to lend a paw.”

“Dead?” Elsie said, hanging on that word like a cloak fixed on a peg. “They can’t be! They just *can’t* be!”

Chios sighed. “We dug through the ruins but only found three sets of remains. We thought someone had crawled away to die. We searched the surrounding area for the body but found nothing. Then we started hearing rumors of a fox pup living in alleys and huddling in porches with only a blanket to keep warm.

Elsie buried her face in her paws and began to sob. “No! Not our Thorny!”

Nickaby put an arm around his wife and comforted her. “Lord have mercy!” he said. “The poor lad! Any time I ask him how he is, he says ‘Fine, Mister

Otter, and how are you?’ Not a tear, not a sigh! Oh, the poor, dear lad! Losing his folks...sleeping in alleys? Not anymore, I daresay.”

Chios sighed. “He’s in shock. He’s blocked it out completely. That’s very dangerous, Nicky. He needs help if he’s ever to dig the pain out and deal with it.”

“I’ll do my best. What’s your advice, Vicar?”

“You won’t like it, Nicky. He’s a homeless orphan with big problems. He needs to find a relative, and if we can’t locate one soon, other arrangements will have to be made.”

Elsie looked up. “You mean cart him off to an orphanage?”

“Not ‘cart him off’ as you say. As a last resort, The Crown offers a suitable environment in Willow Fork for a young creature to live with supervision and safety...”

“There’s more to life than supervision and safety,” Nickaby retorted. “Not to be disrespectful at all, but if you can’t find relatives, why not make some instead? The wife and I are fond of him and we are gainfully employed. We would gladly open our home to the lad. He loves us. If he’s going to open up, it will be *us*. You saw my daughter Sally. She’s turned out well if I say so myself.”

“Yes, a delightful girl.”

“Though he’s not my own blood, or even my own kind, I’d love him no less. All I’m asking for is a chance.”

Chios sighed deeply. “I know, Nicky, and that’s what makes this so hard. You have a mortgage on the Moon and Hare Inn. The law is quite clear on this. Debtors cannot adopt.”

“But I never miss a payment, Vicar! *Not a one!* It’s not like I was poor, and besides when the wife and I pass on, Thorny will have a legacy. Right now all he has a jacket and a cap.”

“You’re not making this any easier,” Chios said, biting his lip. “The law is the law and I’m sworn to uphold it, pleasant or not.”

“This is ridiculous! Look, give me time to talk with Lord Cutshaw. If we can come to some sort of financial arrangement, will you help us? *Have a heart, Vicar!*”

“I *do* have a heart, Nicky, and I’ll give you two days. But you owe five years of payments. Lord Cutshaw is a first rate fellow and he’s generous to the poor, but I doubt he’ll write off that much money. Do what you will do, but I’d advise you not to tell the lad about this. It would be cruel to get his hopes up and then leave him jack flat.”

“You speak to *me* of being cruel...”

Chios sighed and looked down. “Nicky, I’ve never had a child of my own, but I *do* understand. Really, I do... I value your friendship and I try my best to warrant it.”

“I know,” Nickaby said. “Don’t take this wrong, Chios, but I need to be alone now. If you don’t mind...”

“I am so sorry, Nicky. If there’s anyway I can...”

“Please, Vicar...*just go!*”

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After the Vicar left, Thorny came back blissfully unaware of the situation. His appetite had wakened and he looked to grab a last bite before turning in.

Nickaby said, “It’s rather late and you’d best finish up and get some rest.”

Elsie wrung her paws nervously but kept her composure. “I was in the kitchen today when Thorny did the dishes.”

“I bet he did a great job,” Nickaby said.

“Better than you, dear. I don’t think I’ve ever seen dishes that clean before. I could see my face well enough to groom myself.” She put a paw on Thorny’s shoulder. “Just like a mirror. You’re such a fine lad.”

The fox pup half smiled. “Thanks much. It’s all in how you dry them. That’s what my mum says.”

Elsie turned away and gasped with emotion. “Does she, now?”

Nickaby asked, “What’s the matter? Did I burn the stew, dear?”

“No, Nicky.” She said, in a trembling voice. “The stew is just fine. Fine.” She grabbed a napkin and pressed it to her face, then rushed from the table and shut herself in the office.

Thorny sat down his own knife. “Did I say something wrong, Mister Otter?”

“No, son. Elsie’s rather fond of you, and when you compare her with your dear mother, she gets all teary eyed. Does are like that, you know. Especially with our daughter grown and out of the house.”

Thorny stirred his porridge with his spoon idly, then said, “I’m rather fond of Mrs. Otter too. And you too, sir. You’ve been awfully nice to me.”

Nickaby managed a sad smile. “I’d like to be even nicer to you. If you ever need my help, or you want well-meaning advice, knock on my door anytime. I realize your poor Daddy is in Aslan’s Country, and I’m sure he’ll be happier...we *all* will...if there’s someone that cares for you that will steer you in the right direction and keep an eye on you the way he would have done.”

“I suppose so,” the fox pup said, pushing his bowl away half full and getting up from the table. “May I be excused, Sir?”

“Sure thing. I’ll get the green blanket and your pillow.”

The old otter went to the linen closet and pulled out enough trappings to make a decent bed. Then he fashioned a crude cot and coverlet on the bench, carefully smoothing out the wrinkles so that it would be comfortable, and finished it with a pillow. He stood back to observe his work. “How about that?”

“That’s fine,” Thorny said, “Good night, Mister Otter.”

“Good night, lad.”

The otter started to walk away when the fox pup said, “Are you sure Mrs. Otter will be all right?”

Nickaby stopped, turned, and regarded the furling tenderly. He knelt and put his arms around Thorny, holding him close and stroking his rusty head gently with a paw. “Mrs. Otter will be fine. Just you make sure you’ll be all right. I’m used to having you underfoot. Actually, it’s more than that. I love you, and if I ever lost you, I’d lose part of myself.”

Thorny laid his head against Nickaby’s and sighed deeply. He said nothing...he did not have to.

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Nickaby felt strange not being busy in the kitchen during the early breakfast rush. He knew Elsie was doing double duty while Thorny was pouring his heart out to be as useful as he could be. Nickaby felt even stranger walking down the pathway through the formal gardens toward Cutshaw House. It was hard to believe anyone in Byron lived that way, with marble benches under well tended grape arbors, fountains and a patchwork quilt of different colored flowers without a dead head in sight.

Usually he enjoyed his infrequent tours of the manor, but there was no joy in his heart as he fought to keep himself erect and proud rather than slumped and trembling.

As he passed through the massive oak doors and entered a long hallway lined with dour portraits of ancestors and armorial crests, he found it harder and harder to keep his resolve and refrain from outright begging.

At the end of the polished marble hall, Nickaby saw Wilbur and Daisy Cutshaw with their little daughter Nellie.

“Hi ho!” Wilbur said, looking up at him. “Well met, Nicky! You’re just in time to see Nellie’s first steps!”

“Nice girl you have there,” Nickaby allowed. “She’s cute as a button.”

“She has her mother’s eyes,” Wilbur said.

“She has her father’s spunk,” Daisy said, pointing the small furling at Lord Cutshaw and saying, “Go to daddy!”

The elfin otter toddled forward, arms outstretched, and after a couple of halting steps forward she stumbled into Wilbur’s waiting arms, giggling.

Lord Cutshaw looked up. “I doubt you came all this way to see Nellie take a few steps.”

Nickaby nervously doffed his cap. “Yes, milord. I mean, no, milord. It’s about the Moon and Hare Inn.”

“No trouble, I hope?”

“Oh no, milord. Business is really booming. What I was hoping is... I mean, what I’m getting at, milord...Wilbur...”

“Well Nicky, what *are* you getting at?”

“It’s like you with the little lass. You love her, I can tell. You understand how important the bond between a father and child is.”

“Indeed I do.” He nodded at Daisy and she took young Nellie from the room. “Nicky, you’re trembling.”

“Begging your pardon, milord. I promised the Missus that I wouldn’t beg, but milord...Wilbur...I’m begging you! Help me!”

“Easy, you’re among friends. Speak your piece.”

“I want to adopt a furling.”

“I see.” Lord Cutshaw looked down for a moment. “For days the Vicar told me about the fox pup haunting the neighborhood. I saw him once myself and had Hesslett take him a hot tea and some raspberry tarts, but he ran away.”

“You saw him?” Nickaby nervously crushed his cap in his paws. “His name is Thornton Foxworth. The wife and I call him Thorny. He came to us looking for odd jobs. I was going to give him a few crescents. I gave him my heart. Elsie and I love him, and he loves us too. And he’s so easy to love, Wilbur. Every kindness you give him he pays back tenfold. Such a good hearted lad, and so in need of love. We can give him that love.”

“And you want to cancel the debt.”

“Not cancel it, milord. I’m so grateful to your family for rescuing us. Your father was a friend in need, and you are too. I’m looking forward to paying off the loan and in five more years it will be paid in full. But Thorny doesn’t have five years. He only has two days. If I can’t gain custody by then, he’ll be bundled off to Willow Fork!” Nickaby sighed. “Isn’t there some way it

could be a gift, and investment, any other sort of arrangement just to grant us clearance?”

Wilbur laid a paw on his shoulder. “I thought about that. Really I did. But it’s dishonest doings, and that’s no climate to raise an honest child.”

Nickaby’s eyes filled with tears. “Then you’re condemning him to death! Not his body but his heart! It’s me he loves, and I’m all he has left! For one moment don’t be Lord Cutshaw, or even Colonel. Be Wilbur for me. I’m desperate. I’ll do anything!”

“Anything?”

“Anything. Just ask.”

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Elsie Otter went to answer the door, her face drawn with worry. Nickaby stood there, battered cap in his paws.

“Back so soon, dear?” She searched Nickaby’s eyes for some clue.

“Yes. Not much to say.”

“How did it go??”

“It won’t be the end of the world if his last name isn’t Otter. Not that it fit him, you know.”

“Then we’ve lost him...”

Nickaby could no longer stand keeping her in suspense. He threw his arms about her. “We’re not going to lose him, Elsie! Old Blood-and-Guts is going out on a limb for us!”

“Nicky, are you sure he’s ours? Are you sure?”

“Yes, dear. He’s going to adopt Thorny, but we are going to raise him. We are not to tell Thorny...in fact we’re not to tell anyone.”

“It doesn’t matter. I don’t want a piece of paper, I want a son.”

“A son. A fox son. Our son Thorny! Think about it, Elsie! I hope you’re ready to be a mommy again!”

She breathed a great sigh. “For him I would be ready. Thank you, Lord!”

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Thorny left the kitchen. “I’ve finished the dishes, Mr. Otter.”

“I see you have. Well I have one more thing for you to do before lunch.”

“Yes sir?”

“Here’s the key to Room 22. I want you to go upstairs and get it ready for a very special guest.”

“Who’s coming, Mr. Otter? Anyone I’ve heard of?”

“You’ve met him before. His name is Thornton Foxworth.”

He thought a moment, then said, “Me?”

“Yes, you. It is your home away from home, and when you need a place to go...no questions asked...you may go there to sleep or be alone or whatever your heart desires.”

The fox pup looked intently into Nickaby’s eyes. “How much is it going to cost me?”

“Let’s see. You know my saying...all services strictly for cash?”

“No credit allowed,” Thorny said.

“However, for Room 22 we’ll take either cash or love. You don’t have much cash, but I think you have some love tucked away in your heart. Care to spend it on a couple of old otters that think the world of you?”

Thorny was scarcely able to contain himself. “You know I love you!” He grabbed Nickaby in a crushing hug.

“And if you want to stay about for meals, you know when we eat. Just let us know to set another place.”

“Whenever I choose?”

“Whenever you choose. No questions asked.”

“Thanks much, Mister Otter. You too, Mrs. Otter. I don’t know what to say!”

“You can start by calling us Nickaby and Elsie.”

“Yes sir!”

Thorny took the key, admiring it like a great treasure. It had been hung from a cord like a pendant and the fox put it around his neck where it hung right over his heart.

“Take good care of it,” Nickaby said, resting a paw on his shoulder.

“I promise,” he said, looking into the otter’s deep hazel eyes. “Do you have a moment...Nickaby?”

“Of course lad. What’s on your mind?”

Thorny stood stock still for a moment, the look in his eyes too painful for words. Then he turned to leave.

Nickaby said, “I once had a little girl named Sally. She could tell me anything,. Anything at all. When she had something on her mind, she would unburden herself on me and it made her feel better.”

The fox turned and looked at each of them. His ears slowly lowered and his tail slumped.

Nickaby gently stroked his face with a paw. “You can do it, son. There’s nothing you’re going to tell me that will get you in trouble or make me dislike you.”

“Mister Otter? Nickaby? I told you about my father, didn’t I?”

“Yes, son. I never met Rufus Foxworth, but if he’s anything like you, I know he’s with Aslan right now.”

“My brother’s name is Willie,” the fox said slowly, as if the words hurt coming out.

“I like that name. I like it a lot.” Nickaby took Thorny’s paw in his own and gave it a little squeeze. “What is your mother’s name?”

Thorny’s eyes began to flood with tears and his chin trembled.

“You don’t have to tell us if you don’t want to,” Elsie said.

Thorny’s mouth opened as if about to say something. He stared at the otters for a moment, then turned and headed for the stairs.

“Maybe this isn’t the right time,” Nickaby said. “When you’re ready, I’ll be here.”

Thorny paused at the foot of the stairs. He whimpered softly, then raised his paws slowly to his face. “Her name,” he said in a trembling voice, “is Luna. Luna Foxworth.” His hackles raised and his whole body shook.

“Thorny??” Elsie cried.

“Momma!!” The fox drew in a deep breath and let it out in a piercing scream, collapsing at the foot of the

stairs. He lay tightly balled up, gasping in breaths and screaming.

Nickaby lifted him up and put his arms about him tightly. “Thorny, I’m sorry! I’m sorry!” He held him tightly until the poison of denial had worked its way out of his heart. The fox leaned his face against the otter’s and he moaned softly.

Nickaby cradled him gently in his arms and kissed his tearful face. “I can’t imagine how you must feel. I wish I could bring them back, lad, I swear I do. But come what may, Elsie and I love you very much. We’ll help you build a new life with us. It will be different, but it can still be happy.

You will live here with us and you’ll never be lonely again. Now you hop upstairs and take a look at your new lodgings. We’ll have you some fresh bedclothes and a basin of water and some candles in a wink. Anything else you need, just ask.”

“Do I have to go right now?”

“No,” Nickaby cooed, stroking his face tenderly, “You have all the time in the world.”

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When Thorny was able, Nickaby and Elsie went with him to the ruins of the old cabin to cry and reminisce and plant three red roses about the stone chimney for the three lives lost. Thorny returned the following spring to add another red rose for himself, along with two white roses for Nickaby and Elsie Otter. There was never a paper to call them a family, but then families are not made from paper. Over time, the rose bushes merged into one, the glory of life renewed among the ashes of past dreams.

# THE PERFECT GIFT

*As Related by Faun Chios*

A LONE FOX BRAVED THE BITTER DECEMBER wind. The leaden sky threatened snow, and most folk kept warm indoors, but not Thornton Foxworth. I had sent him to see my Uncle Erastos.

Thorny never had time to study the gentle arts for he had worked from a very early age. He needed help, quickly, badly, a help I knew only my Uncle could provide.

Thorny found the dancing lawn snowy, silent and empty except for one very old faun who used a staff to help him get about.

Was that him? How could that old relic teach dancing, and in the sharp teeth of inclement weather? Thorny's expectations were low to begin with, and the sight of my uncle leaning on his staff, plunged them even lower.

He timidly approached the faun. "Please sir, your nephew Chios sent me here. Can you...I mean will you...teach me to dance?"

Erastos glared at the fox. "Why do you want to know?"

Thorny shifted uncomfortably in the scrutiny of his baleful stare. "There is this vixen, Clara, that I've invited to the Christmas Ball..."

Erastos heaved a sigh. "As I suspected. You want to impress her, right? Sweep her off her feet? Son, that is not dance to me. Find yourself another teacher!"

"No," Thorny said urgently, "it's not like that! Not at all! I am poor and uneducated. It doesn't take much learning to see that. My love words are awkward, and all I know about is waiting tables and washing dishes. Clara is a fine lady, so wise and graceful, and when I see her dance I feel like I'm in a waking dream. I ache to hold her in my arms."

Erastos' face softened. "I see. This sounds serious."

"Oh sir, I would gladly spend my life with her, but I'm sure I'll only get to hold her once. She has so many wealthy and educated suitors, and they guard all the doors to her heart. But when I asked her to be my date for the Christmas Ball she accepted! *I was stunned!* It's the greatest thing that ever happened to me and I want it

to be perfect in every way. I want it to be something I can remember when I'm old and alone and feel like I've really lived." Thorny looked down. "I may be ignorant about many things, but I know what loneliness is. And since I saw her, I know what happiness is. *Please help me!*"

Erastos laid a hand on Thorny's shoulder and gave him a little pat. "I see a poet lurking inside you. I'm always a patron of lost causes and poets. My nephew was right to send you here, but please understand; I had to make sure you were worthy to receive this gift."

This puzzled the fox. "Is it such a secret that you guard it so jealously?"

"You will understand. Dance for me, son."

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The faun lifted his mahogany flute and began to play. At first Thornton moved stiffly and awkwardly. Then as the melody took hold in him and began to grow and flourish, all the conflicting voices in his head, the clamor of confusion and self doubt, gave way to one clear melody of incredible beauty.

He blinked his eyes, unable to believe what was happening. Spring had heard the tender yearnings of the sleeping blossoms, the cries of the threadbare meadows,

the mournful whispers of the barren trees. Spring had come to wipe away the tears of winter and cajole the weeping birds to song.

As the wind made the trees nod and sway he became one with it, nodding and swaying in time. He floated with the white clouds, realizing that nature had a rhythm and he could dance to it. He embraced it in his soul as he danced, not clumsy as before but in perfect oneness with all creation.

Clara peeked shyly from the willows, a coy smile lighting her lovely countenance. Then with a rush she came to him like springtime, like the first blush of red on the roses. He bowed to her, took her in his arms and pressed her close. With triumphant joy he lofted her as if she were an autumn leaf. How alive and warm she was in his arms!

Drunk with happiness, he danced about in the tender shelter of her embrace. All at once the whole of nature was suffused with saffron-hued warmth, and her languid eyes sparkled with innocent mirth.

The clover soft beneath their feet perfumed the meadow with its honey. Swallows swung and soared about them in giddy rapture. Panting with revelry, Clara clung to him as a vine to the arbor. Her smile was a wine that warmed his heart. He gazed into her hazel eyes and trembled with love.

At that one perfect moment, Thorny's heart could have stilled, his breath quenched, and yet his whole dreary life would have been worthwhile.

Then the music stopped. Clara had disappeared and the brief April fled before the harsh jealousy of December.

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Thorny trembled, and not from the cold. "Oh, that was wonderful! But did it have to end so soon?"

Erastos sighed deeply. "That is all I had."

"You mean the magic won't work twice?"

"It's no longer my magic. Can't you tell?"

Thorny *did* feel different. He felt graceful and more passionate about life than he did before. He could also sense that the old faun was somehow more frail, more empty of vitality than he was before. The bittersweet enormity of the gift made him gasp. "You gave all that up...for me?"

Erastos leaned on his staff as if to underscore his words. "In this old body all my memories could do is gather dust and fade away. In you they will prosper and inspire the glory of young love."

Thorny was aghast. "I cannot take them from you! They're yours! It wouldn't be right!"

"You didn't take them; I gave them to you. Besides, I still have my music. Now go and have your happy Christmas, son."

"I already have," the fox said, embracing him tightly. Thorny's heart was so full of love and joy that he scarcely noticed the bitter wind. The kiss of Springtime lived on in him and the lonely Winter would never blot it out.

And that is the story of the perfect gift, the gift of one's own self.

All went well, and I had the honor of joining Thorny and Clara in marriage. But that, my friends, is another story.

# TIT FOR TAT

## *How Buck Met Bramble*

JASMINE BADGER WAS RIFLING THROUGH THE kitchen, urgently seeking her prized cache of cane sugar. As an imported good, it was already valuable, but finding this hidden treasure obsessed her far beyond its face value. She had seen it only yesterday so it had to be *somewhere* yet it wasn't *anywhere*. In her growing frustration she left boxes and bottles and packets strewn across the kitchen counter, drawers hanging open, and tea towels lying in a heap. It was the second time that week she had lost track of something important and that nearly drove her to distraction. "Bucky," she said at last, "are you *quite sure* you didn't borrow it?"

"No, Mum. I'm *quite* sure."

Young Buckthorn Badger was busy helping his mother look as earnestly as he could, but he was only peering into places Jasmine had already searched. And

his efforts only yielded some spilled cloves and a chipped vase.

Oakley Badger called downstairs. “Dearest, when is breakfast going to be done?”

“If you’re lucky, *sometime today!*”

Oakley was taken aback by her angry tone. “My my, someone woke up on the wrong side of the bed. And it wasn’t me.”

Jasmine sighed. “I’m looking for the cane sugar. You haven’t seen it, have you love?”

“Not lately.”

“Then I must go through everything again, this time in an orderly manner from left to right and leaving no stone unturned.” Jasmine put her head in her paws. “Oakley, dear, *please* take Bucky to work with you today.”

“Jasmine...sweetheart...dear...” He put his paw to the side of his face as if feeling for an idea. “We’ve had this discussion before. My work is too dangerous to have such a small furling hanging about. He could fall in an open pit or step on a nail.”

“Well my kitchen is dangerous too,” she answered with an exasperated expression. “It’s getting deadlier by the minute.”

“Jasmine! Not even in jest...”

She sighed again. “I’m sorry, love. I didn’t mean to shout, but you keep your workshop running smoothly. The kitchen is *my* workshop, and I can’t get my work done. It’s bad enough that I can’t find the cane sugar, but with Bucky helping me look for it, I’m...” She stopped, looking down at her son who had quietly crept into the room. She had no idea how much he’d heard, but his glum expression was not a good sign. “Bucky, my son, I love you more than anything, but when I have three things going on the stove and two more on the counter, I need my concentration and my space. Must you stay underfoot while I’m busy?”

“I was just trying to help,” Buck said, looking down. “You wouldn’t have to be so busy if you’d give me some of the work. I could roll out the dough. You said no one could roll out dough like me...”

“I know, sweetie. I know.” Jasmine sighed. “Mum doesn’t want to be upset with her little tookie. But you need to be outside. When Oakley was your age, he was out fishing and skipping rocks and getting some sunlight.”

“True enough,” Oakley said. “Of course I grew up in a large family. I always had folk to play with. It’s harder when you’re an only child.” He rested a paw on Buck’s shoulder. “How about your friends? You have Violet and Heather...”

“Those are girls,” Buck said. “They just want to talk about girl stuff.”

“Oh. But surely you have other friends you can play with?” Oakley waited for a response for a painfully long pause, then shook his head. “Don’t you?”

“Not a one,” Buck said. He turned to Jasmine. “Mum, I promise not to break things or spill things. I’ll be good, really!”

Jasmine’s tense features melted and she tenderly put her arms around him and gave him a little squeeze. “Bucky, I’m not angry. Not anymore. But please try to understand...”

Oakley went to the basin to wash up. “Look, son, your mother’s right. You need other friends your age. Not just to keep you busy but for your own good. I learned a lot of life’s great lessons from having brothers and sisters to share with and play with...and sometimes just tolerate. Maybe you don’t have brothers and sisters, but there are plenty of furlings your age running about. You won’t find them in here, so as soon as we finish breakfast, you’re going to go out in that big beautiful world and enjoy yourself.”

“Oh dad, must I?”

“You’re going to have fun outdoors, and that’s that. Now wash up for breakfast.”

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Buck went into exile out by Silver Creek sailing his toy boat. Though he had been a bit much to handle lately, Oakley and Jasmine loved him very much and they bought him the best toy boat money could buy. It was a splendid craft, and yet Buck felt let down. He would have even rather heard Violet and Heather talking about girl stuff than to be left alone with his thoughts, even if the boat did have real silk rigging. That's when a fox pup happened along with a fishing pole.

The badger watched him for a bit as he attached his line and settled down comfortably on the bank. He searched for something wonderful to say to make a good first impression, but all he could summon from the muses was, "Are you going fishing?"

The fox looked about. "Fishing? Garn, that's for ordinary folk. I'm angling. I'm an expert angler."

"It sure looks like fishing."

"It would to you. It takes real skill to be an angler."

The fox put in his pole and waited patiently, glancing from time to time at the badger and his nice boat. The badger looked back at him oddly from time to time, as if he were debating what to say, if anything.

"Am I bothering you?" the fox asked at last.

“No, not a bit. I was just curious. You must be an expert angler to catch fish without bait. We ordinary folk put a worm on the hook.”

The fox was disconcerted. “Eww! Why do you want to do that?”

“Because the fish won’t bite unless you do. That’s what my mum says.”

“What do girls know about fishing?”

“My mum knows everything...except where she left the cane sugar.” Buck lifted a large rock carefully with a stick, and when he saw it was safe to handle, he dug in the mud with his paws. As he scooped out the dark mud out in runny lumps he looked up. “I’m Buckthorn, but you may call me Buck.”

The fox nodded. “I’m Bramblewood, but my friends call me Bramble.” His tail twitched. “Pardon me if I don’t shake paws.”

Buck thought a moment, then looked at his muddy paws. “Oh!” He laughed. Like all badgers, his laughter was quiet but made one feel warm all over. “My my, look at all the worms! Here’s a nice big one!” He held up his squirming prize, still earthy and slimy. Without flinching he stuck the worm on Bramble’s hook. “Now you’ll angle much better.”

Bramble gritted his teeth and his ears went back as he watched the worm squirm on the hook. To see him

“angle”, one wouldn’t think he’d become a great fisher someday. But at the moment he wanted to do something else...anything else. He lowered the pole and unfortunate worm into the grass and glanced back at Buck’s prize toy.

“Would you mind if I played with your boat for a while?”

“Well, I only have one, and I’d rather not if it’s all the same to you.”

Of course it wasn’t all the same to Bramble, but he got the hint. “Well then, how about we trade? You let me play with the boat for awhile and I’ll...I’ll let you climb up to my tree house.”

Buck brightened at once. “A tree house? Where is it?”

“Oh just down a ways.”

“It’s a deal! Bramble, can I see the tree house first, then you play with the boat?”

The fox pup was shrewd. “See the tree house first? Is that a jape? We’re here already, and if we go to the tree house first, we’ll be making two extra trips.”

Buck had to nod in agreement and he handed over the boat. The fox took it gingerly, looking at it in awe. “Garn, it even has a little anchor chain and rigging and *everything*. It’s even better than the one in Bellie’s

Tackle Shop!” He scratched his cheek ruff. “No battle flags, though.”

“It’s not a war ship. It carries cargo. You know...boxes.”

“How very exciting,” the fox said flatly. Then he brightened. “Yes, boxes, but it’s a trick! All those boxes are full of sailors armed to the teeth. When pirates come on board thinking she’s an easy prize, everyone springs out and takes them on with daggers and sabers and truncheons! Oh it would be so *awful!*”

The grin creeping across his face said it would be simply *wonderful*.

Buck was about to correct the fox, but the more he thought about it, the more exciting it seemed. “It’s a secret. Don’t tell anyone.” He quietly wondered how Bramble could cringe at putting a muddy worm on a hook one moment and speak of running pirates through the next. Then it occurred to him that pirates deserve it while worms mainly mind their own business. Badgers are rather logical creatures, you know.

Bramble tried out the boat. And he tried it. And he tried it. After several minutes passed, Buck got antsy just watching the fox pup play with his boat, occasionally pausing to fence with imaginary pirates using his fishing pole sword. That was not safe at all, especially since the hook was still swinging free on the line worm and all.

Then, in a moment of ultimate peril, Bramble swung his blade wide to drive back the enemy and whacked Buck soundly across the side of his head.

“Is it a nice tree house?” Buck asked, rubbing his ear. “When can we go see it?”

Bramble could see his turn was more than up, and he handed back the boat. Then he took the badger to a nearby oak tree and pointed. “It’s up there.”

Buck put his paw above his eyes and strained to make out some structure, no matter how small. “I don’t see it.”

“Well,” Bramble said in a tone of resignation, “I call it my tree house. I’ve been up there. Many times. Honest.”

The badger glared at him. “You...you lied to me.”

“Me?” The fox was taken about.

“Look...Buck...that’s your name, right? I didn’t exactly lie to you. I was planning on building one there anyway. You meet me here tomorrow noon and I’ll build you one. I promise.”

The badger considered his promises. Something deep inside told him that he would never see a tree house, and if he did it wouldn’t be built by that scruffy little toad. “Whatever you say, Bramblewood.”

The fox pup winced a bit. “My friends just call me Bramble.”

Buck was not so sure he was the fox's friend, but he said, "All right...Bramble. Tomorrow at noon."

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Oakley saw Buckthorn come trudging in like a prisoner marching to the rock quarry. He felt a stab of guilt at forcing his son outside.

"Well, son, what have you been up to?"

"Nothing much."

"You've been gone all day. Didn't *anything* interesting happen?"

"Well I met a fox named Bramblewood. He *promised* me he's going to build a tree house tomorrow at noon."

"A tree house?" Oakley scratched his head. "You don't sound very excited about it."

"*If* I see him build one, I'll get excited about it," Buck said skeptically.

"A tree house..." Oakley nodded sternly. "That's a big job. A very important job. I hope this Bramblewood knows what he's doing."

"Do you think we shouldn't do it?"

Oakley put an arm around Buck's shoulder. "My boy, I think you should. You and your little fox friend made an arrangement, and it's important to keep your

arrangements. It's a matter of honor. We badgers are always as good as our word."

"But not always foxes?"

"I wouldn't say that. You do have a nice toy boat. Maybe this Bramblewood chap doesn't have things as nice as ours. We're really very lucky, you know."

"I never thought about that. He did look kind of scruffy."

"Scruffy on the outside doesn't always mean scruffy on the inside," Oakley said, giving Buck a pat on the back. "Somehow I think he's going to keep his word. Always look for the best in folk, and chances are you'll find it."

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After a poor night's sleep, Buck ate a quick breakfast, and headed out of the house without prompting from Mum or Dad. And hoping against hope to find Bramblewood and some timbers, Buck hurried out of town all the way down to Silver Creek Park. He quickly identified the spot where he had gone fishing, and then did his best to locate the tree Bramble had shown him. He came across a large oak tree with several promising branches that would make a splendid platform for his adventures. "No wonder he called it his tree house."

Yes, he arrived way before noon, but he didn't care. His mood had improved and he was willing to concede that he'd been too harsh on Bramblewood and that the fox pup was only trying to be friends.

And so he sat and waited, and he stood about and waited, and he walked around and waited some more. And as the minutes and hours trudged by the sun crept up higher and higher in the sky and the cool of morning slowly surrendered to the heat of the day. And he kept right on waiting.

When he'd nearly given up hope, Buck heard approaching footsteps and his heart leaped. "He's coming!" the badger said to himself, all elated. For a moment he wondered if he should be angry if Bramble didn't bring lumber for the tree house. Clearly he did not want to be angry. He was in a forgiving mood. "If he has a good excuse," Buck thought, "I'll tell him it's all right."

The badger's moment of generosity was spoiled when two otter pups happened by, fishing poles slung over one shoulder and baskets hanging from the other. Buck's heart sank. "Ahoy, fellows, what'cha up to?"

The otter pups looked one at another. "Can't tell you," one said. "It's a secret mission."

"Garn, you're tugging my tail!" Buck said, laughing self-consciously.

“We have room for one more,” the other otter said.  
“Come with us.”

By now Buck’s patience with the fox had gotten shorter, even as the tree’s shadow dwindled beneath the sun’s zenith. He wavered for a moment, but remembered his father’s words. He had to uphold a badger’s honor.

“Maybe next time. Good luck to you.”

They waved and went on. Buck watched them until he could no longer see them, then listened carefully until he could no longer hear them. And still there was no fox. And he was achingly sure there would be no fox. “It was all a big lie,” Buck muttered. “Always look for the best in folk, hmm? Rubbish and rot!”

The badger felt sick inside and thought briefly of making his own tree house, but realized even if he could get the timbers and rope that it wouldn’t be very fun up there all by himself.

Then when he was about to leave, he heard a shout. “Over here!” It was Bramble in the top of a different oak tree. “You got the wrong tree! Ahoy!”

Buck felt warm and tingly all over. “Bramblewood! Bramblewood, is that you?”

“*Bramble*. My friends call me *Bramble*.”

“Yes, Bramble!” Buck was definitely his friend.

There were a few odd boards and some twine scattered about at the base of the tree. The only way up was a spindly rope. Hardly the things to inspire confidence, especially since the tree was so tall. But that didn't matter. Bramble had kept his word, and that was the most important bit.

And just as he headed over to climb the makeshift ladder, along came Oakley with a barrow holding lots of stout timbers and a couple of coils of rope. "If you're going to do it, do it right."

Bramble hurried down. "Wow we wow wow!" There were no nail holes in the boards. The rope was fresh and smelled like new-mown hay. In short it was all brand new. It also must be worth a fortune. He looked up at Oakley, his ears lowering. "How much is all this going to cost me? I have a couple of crescents saved, and I get a crescent a week for my allowance. It would take some time, but..."

A crescent wouldn't have even paid for half of one of the coils of rope. But the fact he was going to give up something as dear as his allowance to build a tree house for Buck touched Oakley and he smiled. "Money? Bosh! How about a big hug instead?"

"Of course!" Bramble said, embracing Oakley. "Thanks much, Mr. Badger!"

In the years to come, it was revealed that Bramble, who was very poor, had to scrounge his motley pile of supplies from the dump behind the Moon and Hare Inn. Foxes, like badgers, have a strong sense of honor and a large heart.

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Late that evening as the sun sank low in the sky and supper was put on the table, in came Buck a bit late. Jasmine looked up. “Bucky, you’re behind your time.”

“Sorry, Mum. I was busy with a big important project.”

“Oh my, a big important project!” She glanced over at Oakley with a coy smile. “I wonder what that could be?”

Oakley nodded. “It’s an engineering job. Seems my son is following in my footsteps.”

That was the first time Buck was late for supper, but it wasn’t the last. And that was fine by Mr. and Mrs. Badger. Oakley settled back in his chair and sighed contentedly. “So Bucky, tell us all about it...”

## EVE OF THE CHRISTMAS

IT WAS LATE CHRISTMAS EVE NIGHT WHEN Clara Foxworth sat on the side of the bed and lifted her young kits Bramble and Star beside her.

“What story are you going to tell tonight?” Bramble asked.

“It’s Christmas Eve, so I’m going to tell you a story about Father Christmas.”

“Is it a true story?”

“As true as they come.” Clara put her arms about her furlings and as they settled into her warm embrace she began to speak.

“Long, long ago, back when the world began, there were two humans that came here as King and Queen. You remember them, right?”

“Frank and Helen” Star said. She was quite good at history, like her mother.

“Indeed. And in the world they came from, a long, long time before then, there was a kindly man

named Nicholas. He used to bring gifts to the children in his village once a year on the Great Feast Day of Aslan. He never had children of his own, but everyone loved him so he was never lonely.

“One Christmas Eve when he had grown quite old, an angel appeared to him and gave him a choice between going to Aslan’s Country and eternal bliss or being given all the children in the world to give presents to on Christmas Eve Night every year until the world ended.

“Now Aslan’s Country is a splendid place, and making gifts for all the children is hard work, even when your heart is in it. Still it did not take him long to decide, for he was a kindly man and thought of all the disappointed children he would leave. He couldn’t let that happen, not on the holiest night of the year. And so he took a solemn oath that every worthy son of Adam and Daughter of Eve that asked him for a gift would receive one on Christmas Eve night. At that moment he became immortal like the sun and moon.

“When Frank and Helen became Narnian, they celebrated the longest night and shortest day of the year as their Christmas in a new land, and out of the desire to have a bit of home with them, they thought it would be fun to write a letter to Saint Nicholas...that’s Father Christmas...just like they were wont to do. Then they sat it by the fireplace.”

“Just like me!” Bramble said.

“Who’s telling this story, you or me?” Clara smiled and touched Bramble’s nose. “Well old Saint Nick was going down his list he saw added to the bottom a note to bring Frank a red woolen scarf and Helen a sewing machine...in Narnia.

“He had never heard of Narnia. He went to his friend Father Time who made it possible for him to deliver so many gifts across the world in one night. Father Time, being a very wise and ancient being, was aware of Narnia, and he made it possible for Nicholas to stop at Castle Cavarnon and deliver the presents.”

Star asked, “Have you ever seen Castle Cavarnon, Mum?”

“No living eyes but Aslan’s have seen it,” Clara said. “It was the first Cair Paravel and it crumbled into dust before my father’s day or his father’s or indeed many, many fathers far removed.

“There was a fox pup that lived in the castle with Frank and Helen. He was very much like you, Bramble. His name was Tod.”

Bramblewood asked, “Like in the song, Dear Toddy Red?”

“Yes, the same Dear Toddy Red. And when he asked Saint Nicholas what he was getting for Christmas, the old man was very sad and embarrassed. Nicholas

only brought two presents, you see. But the King said there was a mistake for he had asked for a GREEN scarf, and that RED was meant for foxes. ‘This must be yours’, he said, giving the scarf to Tod.

“Tod gave Father Christmas a big hug, and Nicholas decided there and then to bring presents every year to all the good furlings of Narnia. That’s why you sing Dear Toddy Red, because you owe him a big debt of gratitude. Now you had best be in bed before he gets here. And no peeking! Off with ye, spit spot!”

“Good night, Mum!”

“Good night, my dears.”

She tucked them in warmly and kissed them on the brow. She did not wish him pleasant dreams, because she knew they wouldn’t sleep a wink, but she did wish him a good night.

## PAS DE DEUX

THE ROSY LIGHT OF EVENING STREAMED through the windows of the deserted banquet hall, turning the white bouquets of carnations into red roses and painting shadows of mystery and suspense about the legs of tables and chairs. Starlight, a young and tiny vixen, looked about the remnants of the recent revelries, a stage where two lovers held the opening act of their new life together before family and friends.

She had not been invited to the wedding, though she managed to sneak in. She had hidden behind the ample curtains and dreamed of romance. Now the guests were gone and she was at liberty to walk about.

In a corner stood an abandoned broom. She went to it, curtsied, and said quietly, "Sir Robin, the night is young and the music is dreamy. Shall we dance?"

She paused a moment, nodded once, then said, "Oh yes, I know that step! Shall we?"

She took the broom in her arms and began to circle the room, softly humming to the waltz music in her head. "Dum, da da, dee da, ta-dah dah..."

About her, phantoms of the wedding feast swayed merrily in their finest garb, lost in an idyllic musical journey.

"Oh sir, you dance divinely!" she muttered, spinning about until the gyring of the room made her giddy. "Everyone is watching us!"

Behind the curtain someone was watching her. Thorny Foxworth watched her sway and pirouette, a smile warming his face. And when it was no longer enough to witness the moment, he revealed himself, walking up to her.

"Daddy!" she uttered in shamed surprise. "I was just..."

"Milord," he said to the broom, "do you mind if I cut in? Thanks much."

He tossed the broom aside and gingerly held the tiny vixen in his arms. As he began to dance, he sang in lovely soft tones:

*"Borne on the breast of the moonlight  
Silvery stars up above  
Gently surrender their luminous splendor  
To my true love*

*"Hark how the nightingale silenced  
Hushed is the coo of the dove  
Whene'er is winging the beautiful singing  
Of my true love!"*

Starlight's eyes gleamed and a smile warmed her angelic face. Someday a fox would sweep her off her feet and carry her to that world where lovers go to be alone. Till then her heart belonged to Thorny, her father, her partner, her best friend.

*"Life is eternally springtime  
Roses ablush with the dew  
While I am dancing the waltz most entrancing  
In love with you*

Thorny stopped, bent down and picked Star up. "Princess, it's past your bedtime."

"I know," she said, cuddling her cheek against her father's face. "I love you, Daddy."

"I love you too." He kissed her and headed out of the room, leaving it empty but for the flowers, the shadows, and a solitary broom.

## HAPPY DAY AFTER!

OLD THORNTON FOXWORTH CAME INTO THE office of the Moon and Hare Inn where Bramblewood and his wife Dawn were counting the day's receipts. "Happy Day After, Bramble! It's Day After, Dawn! Clear out of here you two and let the coins can take care of themselves!"

Bramble stopped and quickly shoved the neat stacks of coins off the edge of the desk into a lockbox and secured them. "Happy Day After, Dad!"

"Day After" was a tradition started years ago to let folk who have to work on The Christmas celebrate with their close friends. At the Moon and Hare, Christmas was the busiest work day of the year. Folk like Buckthorn and Sophie Badger would hardly get a word in sideways if they popped in at such a time. The following day was a time to relax, reflect and love.

"Happy Day After!" Dawn shouted up the staircase. Rowan, Westie and Sally scrambled down the

stairs wide-eyed with excitement. They had already received their gifts from Father Christmas, but there was an extra present waiting for them by the mantle.

“What did we get?” Rowan asked.

“You’ll find out when Auntie Star gets here,” Dawn said.

“When will that be?”

Before Dawn could speak, there came a knock at the door.

“Oy oy!” Bramble said with his paws on his cheeks, glancing from side to side. “Now whom could that be? It might be brigands and robbers! Or it might be a terrible monster!”

“Or it might be Uncle Buckthorn,” Sally said.

“Saints be!” Bramble said with a laugh. “Sally, be Daddy’s brave little girl and answer the door.”

Sally toddled to the front door and opened it. She looked up at the smiling foxes and beamed back. “Oh Daddy, it’s only Auntie Star and Uncle Dannie!”

“Only?” Star said with a laugh, “I’m sorry to disappoint you, you little tookie!”

A little vixen peeked shyly from behind Star’s husband Dannie Treemont. Thorny got up at once, kissed Star, hugged Danny, then plucked up Linden, giving her a squeeze. “Oh you little angel! My, but the apple doesn’t fall far from the tree! You look so like

your mother did when she was your age.” Thorny’s eyes sparkled. “Danny took my little princess, but he gave me this beautiful granddaughter. I love your mum, and I love you.”

“Happy Day After!” Linden said, kissing Thorny. “Come in one and all, seat yourselves by the fire.”

“Oy!” shouted a deep voice from behind them. “Did someone say fire?”

“Buck!” Bramble shouted. “Come in, come in! Sophie, dear! And all the furlings! I have presents for each of you by the mantle.”

“Presents!” said the two little badgers.

“Fire!” said Buck.

“And a steaming hot punch for all!” Bramble said, closing the door against the chill December wind and herding his coterie of friends toward the cheerful flames.

Buck stood on the hearth, warming his frozen tail, rubbing his icy hips and sighing with relief. “I can’t stand the cold.”

“You? The little badger that wanted snowball fights when I was up for board games by the fire?” Bramble laughed. “So, have you heard from Mountie yet?”

“He says he’ll try to make it,” Buck replied, closing his eyes as the warmth penetrated his fur. “Garn, it wouldn’t be Day After without him.”

Thorny glanced at the little foxes and badgers, his mind travelling back to Christmas days long ago when the “Club With No Name” was a thriving concern. The new furlings were friends but not as inseparable as Bramble and Buck. Yet before Thorny could become too melancholy he saw Buck and Bramble embrace tightly with murmured Happy Day Afters and Lord Bless Yous, and he smiled.

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Star brought her daughter Linden upstairs. “Here it is, Room 22. This is where I lived when I was your age.”

“Garn,” the little vixen said, “it's so small.”

“It seems even smaller dear when you're full grown. But it was my home, and it holds a wealth of memories. There's even one you can see. Under my bed I carved my name with a kitchen knife. Look, it's still there!”

Linden peeped under the oak frame. “It says Starlight Foxworth. That's not your right name.”

“It was before I married your daddy. Now I am a Treemont, just like you.”

“Did Uncle Bramble put his name under his bed?”

“No, Lindy.”

“Maybe he did and you don’t know. I’ll look...”

“No need to look, dear. Bramble never learned how to...” Star caught herself and after an awkward moment, added, “He never had a knife. Why don’t we carve it there for him?” Star got down on the floor and slid her face under the bed. With her pen knife she carefully scratched “B...R...A...M...” As the letters appeared, she quietly murmured, “I should have done this years ago. Now your name, like your dear soul, will live on forever.”

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Sophie Badger was passing out gifts. Bramble’s kits took their parcels with a polite “Much thanks, Ma’am.” Bramble himself accepted his with childlike glee.

“You shouldn’t have,” he muttered. “Christmas is not about gifts but about the love.” Then he shook the package vigorously and listened carefully.

“Scarves don’t rattle,” Sophie said.

“So you got me a scarf?” Bramble ripped through the paper, paws trembling with anticipation. He held up his treasure. “Oh my, it’s a new vest!”

“Vests don’t rattle either.”

“Oy oy, you rascal!” Bramble kissed Sophie. “You fond mook! You and Buck **deserve** one another.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment,” Buck said. “Folk used to say Bramble and I deserved one another.” The badger looked thoughtful. “Whatever I did to deserve you, it must have been very good.”

Bramble bit his lip. “Well, you’re family. The Badgers and the Foxworths, part and parcel, always and forever.” He stepped over to the fireplace and said, “Oy you furlings, did I ever tell you about the time Buck and I saved The Christmas?”

Bramble’s furlings had been subjected to the story a dozen times, but they politely gathered about. Mountie and Clara Badger were anxious to hear it for the first time.

“You see, long long ago during the Year of the Great Snow, it snowed for an entire week as if nature had a mad desire to bury the world. The drifts were so deep that you had to walk carefully on the top crust, and that’s if you could get out of your house.

“Everyone in town expected to have the Christmas Banquet at Cutshaw House. Yet the conditions outside made it less and less likely that all the singing and feasting and dancing would happen. And though I was not concerned about the dancing, I did like to sing and **oh, I did love to feast**, especially when it came time for

dessert. So I climbed out one of the upper floor windows on the side where the snow was deepest and lowered myself down on some bedclothes. Then I hurried on down to Cutshaw House. And that journey was one of the strangest I ever took, for nothing looked the same.

“Anyhow, I saw the manor house with the whole lower floor shored in by snow. Out in front as if a gift from Aslan were two snow shovels freshly stove into a snow bank. When I saw them, I got a warm feeling in my heart. Somehow I knew I was meant to do this by something greater than you and I. And so as I worked away, the snow flew from my shovel with furious speed.

“That’s when your father spotted me and grabbed up the other shovel. I think we worked our hearts out for three whole hours. The only thing that meant more to me than that was when Buck was the Herald in Red and he let me run with him up the stairs of the bell tower. Such a friend as Buckthorn you could never hope for, not if all the stars fell from the heavens and you wished on every one. But he’s mine and I say Lord bless him.”

Buck’s eyes misted with emotion and he looked down. “You’d best finish the story, old friend.”

“Well, when we finally got the door dug out, old Lord Cutshaw came out. He asked us how much he owed us, and I said all we wanted was for the Christmas Party to be a success. He hugged each of us and invited

us in. He bundled us up before the fire and got us hot tea and biscuits. We sat and talked with him, Bertie and Nellie.

“About an hour later Dad came over, and finally Oakley and Jasmine Badger. So we all had a grand time together. Nellie played the harp and Bertie played the fife. He also tried to dance. The word is TRIED. Poor Bertie... Then as it got late he insisted we join him for Supper and had Heslett set five more places. The roast turkey and dressing was absolutely wonderful. And daddy let me take a small sip of the wine. You know, that made me feel like I had arrived... Anyhow we enjoyed ourselves more that evening than we did the Christmas Party itself.”

Clara looked about. “Papa, why didn’t you tell us?”

“Well now,” Buck said, shifting uncomfortably, “that’s a very fine story no doubt, and very well told. But there were a few bits of it that got turned about.”

“What bits?” Bramble asked. “It was years ago, but I remember it clearly.”

Buck smiled indulgently. “Those shovels didn’t come from Heaven, my friend. I went and got the shovels and was out looking for you. When I came back to do it myself I saw you hard at work and we finished it together.”

“YOU got the shovels?” Bramble grinned broadly. “Well if great minds don’t think alike!”

“And Bertie might be clumsy, but that day he danced a splendid hornpipe WHILE playing the flute. My my, I can't play and I can't dance, but I certainly couldn't do *both at once*.”

“He did trip over that scarf...”

“The scarf you left in the floor.”

“Oh...so I did...” Bramble said, scratching his cheek ruffs. “Well we did save The Christmas, and that’s all that matters.”

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Unbeknownst to both of them Star was sitting at the top of the stairs with Linden, listening in.

“Did Uncle Bramble really save The Christmas, Mum?”

“Yes and no. You see, sweetheart, all the acts of goodwill from all the townsfolk are what make Christmas so special. And Buck and Bramble had a lot of goodwill. But the same wind that piled all the snow against the front door also protected the lee of the house. The back door was blocked but not by much. Heslett had climbed out of one of the lower windows and went to the tool shed for the shovels. The ones Bramble saw. And

when I spotted the old otter digging in the icy mush I felt sorry for him. I got the other shovel and helped him dig out so Wilbur could go into town and hire help.

“He was so grateful that he took me inside to the kitchen for raspberry tarts. And while we stuffed ourselves by the kitchen stove, we saw someone pass by the window. Heslett was angry and shouted, ‘Someone is trying to nick the shovels!’ I told him it was only Buck Badger, and I was sure he was up to no mischief.”

“Then *you* saved Christmas?”

“We *all* saved Christmas. “

Just then as if to underscore the point, Mountebank Beaverlee came in, not as Vicar of Byron but as Mountie from the *Club With No Name*. Buck, Bramble and Mountie came together in a powerful hug without need for murmured greetings of the season.

“Christmas is not a time or a place,” Star said in a low voice. “It is a spirit that lives in your heart, my dear. Snow and ice can’t keep it out. But there **was** a party on Christmas Eve night, and it was splendid.” Star put her arm around Linden and drew her close. “Let’s not spoil their favorite Christmas Story, all right? Let’s put it in a lock box.”

“All right,” Linden said, making the proper paw gestures. “We’ll shut the lid, turn the key, kiss it bye, and toss it away.”

Star smiled and mused her head with a paw.  
"That's my girl. Happy Day After, sweetie."  
"Happy Day After, Mum."

## FULL CIRCLE

TWO FOXES ENTERED THE MOON AND HARE Inn. Not pausing for a table or a drink, they went straight to the office door and knocked. “Hullo, anyone here?”

A vixen opened the door and looked out. She gasped, “Rowan! Westie!” Dawn Foxworth threw her arms about her twin sons, kissing them. “Oh dear hearts, welcome home! Let me look at you! Garn, you look splendid in those togs! River life has done you some good!”

“It keeps us out of trouble,” Rowan said.

“It keeps *him* out of trouble,” Westie said, shoving his brother with a paw.

“Come in to the kitchen and see your Daddy! He’ll be so happy!”

“A moment, Mum,” Rowan said, kissing her cheek. “First we need a few words with you in private” The three stepped back into the office and closed the door behind them. “Wes and I are awfully sorry we

couldn't make it back in time for the funeral. News travels fast along the river, but not *that* fast." Rowan shifted nervously from foot to foot. "We hope you and Daddy didn't get the wrong idea. You see, there I was one day standing on the dock with the bobbies taking on barrels of flour when this otter walks up to me and says 'Rowan, I'm sorry your Grandpa passed away.' It fell right out of the sky. At least I got to break the news to Westie a bit softer."

"Oh Rowan!" Dawn said. "I'm so sorry! I would have come down myself, but I had no idea where to find you with things the way they are."

"Aye Mum, I know how things are. We skipped out on you and left Sally holding the sack."

"My love, we never thought you skipped out on us! Running a barge is good, honest work and we're proud of you. Very proud. Of *course* we hated to see you go. Of *course* would like to see more of you, because we love you so, and no matter how old you get, you'll always be our little furlings, and this will always be your home."

Rowan took in a deep breath and let it out in a sigh. "We love you too, as much as ever, and this place is in the very bones of us, but we just weren't cut out to be innkeepers. In all our growing-up Daddy never once got to eat a meal in peace or spend The Christmas alone

with the four of us. There's always a hurly burly around here. Maybe Dad can handle that, but we can't. At least we found something we could do as well as Daddy runs the inn. We're all suited to our calling, Mum. *Birds fly and fish swim*, as they say."

"Yes, they do say that." She put her paw on his shoulder and gave it a little pat. "They also say family is the mud that holds the sticks together. At least Mountie Beaverlee says it. And it would have been a great comfort to your daddy if you had just been here at the times he needed you most. Last Christmas he set two empty places at the table for you. He was so sure you would come. When you never showed up it broke his heart. Now this year there's going to be three empty places at the table without our Thorny." She wrung her paws. "This is a crowded inn, but it can be very lonely, and it's getting lonelier all the time."

Westie doffed his cap and crushed it nervously in his paws. "Oh Mum, I didn't know! We'll be here for The Christmas this year if we have to move mountains." He scratched his cheek ruffs. "So how is he holding up?"

She sighed. "As fine as can be expected."

Wes touched Mum's cheek and looked right in her face. "Really?"

“No.” She sniffed and dabbed at her eyes. “He’s been throwing himself into his work, the first one to rise and the last one to bed. I think that’s how he deals with the loneliness, by staying busy all the time. It’s all knotted up inside him. He seems so lost without his father.”

Westie nodded. “Maybe we can help him find his way. The river is slow and steady, and it’s a good place to sort things out.” He took a few crescents from his pocket and slipped them into her paw. “Now here’s what we want you to do...”

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Bramble stood on the dock with his twin sons looking at their barge. Getting him out of the kitchen was not easy, but once he saw the proud vessel he was glad he came and stew for twenty-nine guests was forgotten. He’d often heard about the barge in the letters the Vicar read aloud to him, letters sent from places up and down the Wells, the Rush, the Great River, and even Cair Paravel. Westie even paced it off for him, and Bramble tried to stake off the distance in the back courtyard to see what it must be like. But nothing quite prepared him for this.

She was so much bigger than the glorified rowboat Buck and Bramble named *The Adventure*, and the old fox had to laugh at his young dreams of riding it down the river to Cair Paravel. This was a ship that could reach the Great Eastern Sea in style and laugh at the strong currents. She was like the river itself, very grand yet able to drift quietly.

“It must have cost you a small fortune,” Bramble said. “How long till you get it paid off?”

“Paid off?” Rowan asked. “It’s ours, paid in full. Sure we have to pay tariffs, taxes and customs, and from time to time the old girl needs to be scraped and painted, but other than that we’re in the free and clear.”

“But that’s impossible...” Bramble looked a bit dubious. “Every brass farthing?”

“Oh absolutely.” Rowan pulled his Dad along to the bow of the ship. “And here’s the best bit. Notice the name.”

“Wes, you know I can’t read.”

“Yes, but you can read this.”

Bramble recognized the shapes of the letters because like most riverbankers he could sign his own name. “Bramblewood?”

Rowan said, “The Bramble Wood.” He added, “We knew you wanted to be a barge captain when you were growing up. Now there will always be a Bramble

Wood on the river, and in a way we'll always be together."

"The Bramble Wood!" A smile crept across Bramble's face. "Oh Rowan...I'm so proud I could burst. A ship named after me! Do you mind if I come on board?"

"I insist. Westie and I are carrying some valuable cargo to Cair Paravel. We want you to come along."

"Oh my! I'd love to, but...but I can't! It was always my dream, really, but the Inn is so busy this time of year..."

"Yes you can," Rowan said. "We gave Mum some crescents to hire on help. Sally's at the counter, and she has a head for business. You know they can spare you and we told them to lock you out till you've seen the great castle Cair Paravel. Besides, I'm holding you for non-payment of your debt."

"What debt??"

"Two, actually. You owe it to yourself to see Cair Paravel before you die. You're also owed a holiday." Rowan smiled. "We weren't here for The Christmas, but we brought your present. I hope it's worth the extra wait."

"Why you little tookie!" Bramble sheepishly grinned. "Oh my!" He reverently walked up the gangplank and looked about the craft. It was roomy and

well built and looked like adventure itself. The ropes smelled like hemp and tar. The deck was clean and varnished. It was enormous. “Oh my!” The largest vessel he’d ever stood upon was Bellweather’s ferry. *That* was a boat but *this* was a ship, and all the stories Bellie told him long ago took on new life. *The Bramble Wood* may have been a barge, not a warship, yet everything about it excited him. “Oh my!”

“It meets with your approval?” Westie asked.

“Oh absolutely!” He walked along the rail. “So what is this valuable cargo of yours?”

Westie smiled and bowed deeply. “Not what, *who*.”

Then a grizzled badger popped up from the hold. “We are, actually.”

“Buck!”

The badger saluted. “Aye aye, Bramble!” He laughed and ran over to embrace his oldest and dearest friend. “It will be just like old times,” he uttered rhapsodically. “Think about it! All the times we dreamed about this trip down the river, and now our dreams are coming true! And I looked in the galley at what we’re going to have for dinner tonight. Garn, isn’t life wonderful?”

“It sure is!” Bramble sighed. “So, what *are* we having for dinner tonight?”

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Rowan and Westie were bent double with laughter as Buck related his story.

“...then Bramble tried to carry the basket in the other paw,” the badger said, “and he had to do an odd little hop-steppy-step, hop-steppy-step like this. At the time it wasn’t funny, but looking back on it...”

“It’s *still* not funny!” Bramble said.

“Just then,” Buck added, “Mr. Kelty caught sight of us, and Bramble had to shake it up. He went hoppy-step-hoppy-step and the basket came open and things started leaking out forming a trail behind him...”

Westie pounded the bench with a paw. “Garn, Daddy, why didn’t you tell us that one?”

“Suffice it to say,” Bramble fumed, “we made it out before he caught us. Unlike the time a certain Buckthorn Badger tried to pinch one of the Vicar’s prized melons...”

Buck looked around sheepishly. “Bramble, surely you wouldn’t...”

The fox’s eyes narrowed and a toothy grin spread across his face. “Oh *wouldn’t I?* You had your dance, and it’s time to pay the piper!”

“Truce!” Rowan chuckled. “No dueling on my ship! Captain’s orders!” He quickly lead Bramble over to the tiller. “I’d better give you a job to keep you out of trouble. Sit right there and put your paw here. That’s right. You’re at the helm now, and when I let go, you’ll be steering the barge all by yourself. One... two... three... go!”

“Garn!” Bramble said, excitedly. “Look here! Look at me, Buck, I’m steering it! I’m a Barge Captain!”

Buck raised his cap. “Three cheers for Captain Bramblewood!”

“You better save your three cheers,” Rowan said. “He won’t be much of a captain if he can’t change course.” He sat next to Bramble. “Now to turn this thing about, you must remember to push the tiller to port when you want to go starboard, and vice versa. Remember to use nice, easy movements.”

“What’s port and starboard?” Bramble asked.

“Which way is vice versa?” Buck asked.

“Port is left,” Rowan said. “Starboard is right.”

“Well why not just say left and right?” Bramble asked.

“It’s a tradition. On the river, traditions are very important.”

Bramble nodded. “I want to start a new tradition. I’ll call *this* way left and *that* way right.”

“I still don’t know where vice versa is,” the badger said. He watched Bramble longingly. “It looks like a lot of fun. Is it all right if I take a turn at the helm?”

Bramble glanced at his two sons, then looked thoughtful for a moment. “It is the family barge, and not just anyone can have a go at it.” Then he looked at his palm. “You are still family, aren’t you?”

Buck glanced at his own palm and a smile spread across his face. “Oh Bramble! You remembered!”

“Till my dying day.” Bramble smiled back. “My lads, your Uncle Buckthorn really is your Uncle. When we were furlings he and I became blood brothers. We jabbed the thorn in good to make sure it worked, tied our paws together, took the oath, spit into the wind and everything.”

“So you’ve always been close?” Rowan asked.

“He knew we’d better be if he wanted to steer our barge someday.” Bramble laughed, getting up and embracing the beaming badger. Something in his laughter rolled back the long years, and once again he was that furling with the sharp thorn and length of twine. “Have a go at it, stripey dog! Sit yourself by the tiller and try not to run her aground!”

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The evening meal was a great success. Buck was right to be excited, for Westie was a talented chef with a well-stocked galley, and he prepared a simmer-and-sing stew to die for. They all ate too much, but if anyone had a belly ache, no one complained.

Bramble patted his stomach with a paw. “You must give me the recipe.”

“Don’t you know it? I got it from Grandpa Thorny.”

“My Daddy? I didn’t think he could boil water without burning it.”

“He was never much of a cook, but he could make simmer-and-sing. And when you had to go out on business, he would take us in the kitchen and teach us how use the big knives and cleavers. It was Thorny that got me interested in cooking. I also learned a lot from watching you and Mum.” Westie smiled warmly. “In my own way, I’m carrying on the family tradition.”

“Yes indeed you are.” Bramble looked out at the river thoughtfully. “How could I have been so blind? I offered you the Moon and Hare because I wanted to give you something. I realize now that I gave you the joy of making things in the kitchen and your brother the dream of being a barge captain. Not a bad legacy, hmm?”

Westie smiled. “The secret to being happy is no secret at all. You just have to make your mind up to do it, and then let it happen.”

“You were always the philosopher, Wes. You’re a lot like your Auntie Star, a poet and a dreamer. And I mean that in the nicest way. I love her, and I love you. All of you.” He looked about the table and said again for emphasis, “*All* of you. And here I was feeling sorry for myself when I’m the luckiest bloke in town.”

“Here, here!” Buck said, raising his cup.

“To Bramble!” the twins toasted, raising their cups.

“To friendship,” Bramble said. “Garn, Westie, just for that I’m going to tell you the secret ingredient for my special Duncan Pudding.”

Wes smiled and nodded. “It’s arrowroot, isn’t it?”

“A bit of that, yes. But what really gives it a kick is the *booze*.”

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As they drifted along, Buck and Bramble trolled from the back of the barge.

“Remember our first boat?” Buck asked.

“The coracle? How could I forget it?”

“No, I mean the red and white one. It had a sail, an anchor, and a nice big hole in the bottom to let the water out.”

Bramble laughed. “Problem is, the water didn’t know which way was out.”

“Good thing Mr. B. was there to haul us in.”

“Good old Horace Beaverlee. Rough and gruff, but with a heart of gold.” Bramble suddenly brightened. “Oy, oy! Since we’re headed to Cair Paravel, we ought to drop in on ol’ Mountie and surprise him!”

Buck smiled. “Yes! Splendid! And when he asks us what we’re doing there, we’ll tell him we just happened to be passing by.”

“Ha, that’s a good one! Oh it will be just like old times,” Bramble said. “Well except for the tree house.”

“And the fishing hole,” Buck added.

“And Daddy coming with the lantern to fetch me when we were late for supper. Remember how angry he used to get when we were out after dark?” His smile faded. “He lived for Star and I. She was his Princess and I was his Little Tookie, and he worried about us. Staying out late isn’t fun when there’s no one waiting for you.”

“Dawn waits for you.”

“Indeed she does.” Bramble looked down. “I suppose I have neglected her a bit since Daddy died.”

He shook his head. “He didn’t get to grow old with the vixen he loved. I have Dawn, and she’s so good to me....”

“And she gave you three furlings. And they did turn out splendidly.”

Bramble nodded. “When I get home I’m going to take her up to the lake for a picnic, just like we did before we got married. I’ll even bring her a nice present.” He gave his fishing pole a slight twitch to move the bait. “So how are things with you and the Missus?”

“Sophie? Oh, fine. You know, Bramble, my big wish in life is to have what my father had. Sophie is a wonderful girl, and I’m glad I married her, though she does keep a rather tight rein on me. She brooks no nonsense.”

“Jasmine could afford to be laid back. Your daddy knew how to behave himself.”

Buck shyly grinned and looked coyly at Bramble. “You fond mook! Talk about behaving oneself! I’m surprised Dawn doesn’t lock you in the cellar and throw away the key!”

The fox got a tug on his line. “Garn, I’ve hooked a bit one! Hurry, fetch the net!”

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It was nearly midnight. Westie sat at the tiller in a warm pool of lantern light as the barge drifted lazily through the moon rich waters. Above, the stars played hide and seek among a few scattered patches of clouds. The Bramble Wood gently parted the laughing ripples that teased and caressed the stout oak planks. All in all, it was a perfect end to a perfect day.

The hatch opened and out stepped Bramblewood. Looking about, the elder fox spotted his son and headed astern.

“Couldn’t sleep, Dad?”

“I couldn’t stop thinking long enough.”

“There’s a lot to think about.” Westie motioned to the bench next by himself. “Sit ye down and listen to this.”

Bramble eased himself onto the bench. His ears turned a bit, and he even looked back at the wake of the vessel. “Listen to what?”

“You wouldn’t know, Dad. It’s called silence. When’s the last time you ever heard it?”

Bramble took in a deep breath and let it out in a contented sigh. “I can’t remember.”

“It’s my favorite time of day. Nowhere to go, and all the time in the world not to get there.” Westie’s free arm draped across Bramble’s shoulder. “I used to think

nothing could make it better. But it's extra special now that I can share it with my daddy."

Westie could feel Bramble tense up, and he was instantly sorry he said it. "Oh Dad, I didn't think of what I was saying!"

The old fox bent over, his face in his paws, and began to heave deep, choking sobs. Westie quickly tied off the tiller and cradled Bramble gently in his arms.

"In his whole life, Daddy never left town once. He never got to see Cair Paravel. As much as I want this trip, I'd have given it up for him in a heartbeat. I used to tell him all of Bellweather's stories, and I could see how badly he wanted to see the ocean. After all he done for us, it's not fair! It's not!"

"I'm sure he feels the same way seeing Aslan face to face without his Bramble and Star."

Bramble nodded. "Wes, I can't bring myself to move Daddy's chair. He died sitting in that chair and it hasn't been touched since. The other day one of the guests tried to sit in it and I shouted at him! I can't have that, now, can I? When we get home, would you move it to the parlor?"

"It would be an honor, Dad." Westie gave Bramble a little pat. "So was it easy on him?"

"I guess so. Your Mum brought him his barley soup and he was laying back all peaceful like with his

eyes closed. She thought it would be a shame to wake him..." Tears began to course down his cheeks. "He was gone, Wes! Just like that he was gone, with no good-bye or anything! Oh it was easy for *him*, but it wasn't easy for *me*." Bramble wiped his eyes and struggled to regain his composure. "I'm no one's son anymore. They're all dead, and I'm left standing alone on the mountain top with nowhere left to go but down."

"You're not alone on the mountaintop. You have Buck and Mountie and Mum. And you have us." Westie gave Bramble a little squeeze. "You will *always* be his son, just as you will always be our father and Buck's friend. We play many roles in our time, and they become part of us for always, just as Aslan is part of us for always."

"You should be on the Town Council with your fine speaking." Bramble managed a weak smile. "My father sure played many roles in his life. He was Mum and Dad to us, and he did a fine job for someone that worked as hard as he did."

"You weren't half bad yourself. Just look how I turned out, and my sister Sally."

Bramble nodded. "Don't forget your brother Rowan."

"Well," Westie said with a coy grin, "we're all entitled to ONE mistake."

“I know...but I love you anyway.” Bramble shoved him with a paw.

“Garn!” Westie chuckled, shoving him back. “You’re hopeless!”

“Well, I must say I’m proud of the two of you, and all the work you put into this barge.” Bramble settled back and looked up at the stars. Then after a long while, he spoke with a trace of tension in his voice. “Westie, I’m going to ask you something. You don’t have to answer if you don’t want to, but it would give me peace knowing the answer.”

“Anything, Dad.”

“This barge must have cost a fortune. Rowan says it’s all paid off. You aren’t doing anything illegal, are you?”

“Oh no! It’s all good honest work.”

“Then where did you get the money?”

Westie took in a deep breath and let it out slowly. “Put your mind to rest, Dad. It came from my Great Grandpa’s fortune.”

“Forest Hedgely??” Bramble frowned. “I made the mistake of going to see him once. I thought I could make him love me, but he hated my father for marrying his little girl and threw me out of his house. I can’t imagine why he’d give you a brass farthing.”

“Not Forrest Hedgely, Dad! *Wilbur Cutshaw.*”

“Wilbur Cutshaw? The old Lord Cutshaw? But he died when you were just a furling.”

“Yes, Wilbur Cutshaw. Old Blood and Guts himself.” Westie’s paw covered Bramble’s and gave it a little squeeze. “Nickaby Otter never told you, did he?”

“Tell me what?”

“I guess he had his reasons. Anyhow, Nickaby Otter owed money on the Moon and Hare so he couldn’t adopt a furling. That’s why Wilbur Cutshaw adopted Thorny so Nickaby could raise him as his own son. In the eyes of the law, you are Bramblewood Cutshaw.”

“So that’s why Lord Cutshaw was always so nice to me on Remembrance Day...”

“Yes. You were his grandson. And on the last picnic we spent together, he told us stories about his adventures fighting in the Calormene Wars. He asked Rowan and I what kinds of adventures we wanted to have someday when we grew up. Rowan said he wanted to be a barge captain and live on the river. Wilbur looked a bit sad. I wondered if something Rowan said hurt his feelings. But he kissed him and said, ‘I won’t live to see it, but your wish will come true someday.’ And the day we had our coming of age party, a messenger came to bring us the deed to The Bramble Wood.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“We didn’t know what it was till the Vicar read it to us.”

Bramble took in a deep breath, let it out in a long sigh. “Thank the Lord!”

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After the clearing of the air, Bramblewood and Buckthorn settled into a comfortable routine of rediscovering their leisure time. As the days passed they fished, sang, played skollers and watched the magnificence that was Narnia unfold before their eyes.

Halfway down, Rowan stopped the barge in Roseberry to let Buck and Bramble explore the local shops. Because it was a larger town there was so much more to choose from. Buck bought his Sophie a new tea set, and Bramble went all out and got Dawn a red coral necklace imported from The Lone Isles to accent her lovely ruddy hue. He had enough to buy a thin gold chain, but his thoughts went back to his mother and her coral necklace, the one relic of her fortune she kept for herself. Many times Dawn had seen it around Star’s throat and admired it. She would understand what it meant to him...and what she meant to him.

\*\*\*

After a week had passed, Bramble's new habit of sleeping late had become a liability. He grumbled when Rowan came down rather early to wake him and Buckthorn.

"Come up and see this!"

"See what?" Bramble asked, rubbing his eyes.

"You'll find out."

They went up out of the hold and blinked in the morning sun. There on a hill was Cair Paravel. Painted in the ruddy golden beams of the morning sun the castle stood as a sentinel over the Great Eastern Sea and beyond it Aslan's Country. The lion banners stirred in the ocean breeze. The sight made Bramble's pulses pound and he lost all hint of drowsiness.

Buck's arm slipped around the fox's shoulder. "Isn't it wonderful?"

"Oh yes."

Just when it seemed it couldn't get better than that, Mountie hurried out to the dock. "Ahoy! Over here!"

As soon as the barge touched the dock, Buck and Bramble hopped over the side and ran to meet the old beaver. They all made the secret club sign and embraced.

As soon as he regained his tongue, Mountie said, “I have a surprise for you. You’re all invited to come up and meet the King.”

“You mean His Majesty Caspian the Tenth?” Buck asked.

Mountie glanced about. “Is there *another* one?”

“Can Rowan and Westie come too?” Bramble asked.

Rowan waved from the barge. “Dad, this is official club business. You go on and we’ll tend the barge.”

“Come on, lads” Mountie said. “We’re not getting any younger!”

Bramblewood Foxworth’s eyes shined. “Speak for yourself, you fond mook!” As the three friends headed up the long, winding stair, Bramble was once again the leader of *The Club With No Name*. He had truly come full circle.

THE END