

## 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.

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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.