

Excerpt from
THE BOOK OF SORROWS

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Chapter Forty

Beside the Nest, and Pity in Their Breast

So it was first of all Wodenstag Mouse who crept out of the hole and across the snow like a thief. Next, Donnerstag Mouse. Then one after the other, Sonntag, Montag, Dienstag, Freitag, and last of all the youngest of all, Samstag.

Not that Pertelote recognized each tiny face. It was midnight. They looked like nothing so much as purposeful hairballs. But she'd known Wodenstag by his manner and had counted the rest. Besides, the thieves were gathering at the root of her Hemlock, and as their number grew, so did the noises of one telling another to shut up.

Mice and a midnight raid.

Pertelote had nearly tucked her head beneath her wing again when a change in the noises drew her attention and a curious activity held it. No, it was a very daring activity—for Mice. While six stood semicircle, staring straight up with their noses, their mouths hanging open, the seventh Mouse had begun to climb a tree. He had all four legs extended as wide as they would go, like a daddy-longlegs on the wall; each paw had its little nip of bark; and he was trembling so furiously he looked like a plucked rubber band. But his expression was earnest. And somewhere inside of him was the conviction that he could climb a tree, and somewhere, too, the notion that he *should* climb a tree.

Pertelote forgot, for the moment, the torments of the day in watching this tiny test of fortitude: *Well, can you do it, Wodenstag?*

The Brothers whispered upward, "Are you going to fall? Should we get out of the way?"

But grand efforts are always performed in solitude. Wodenstag answered them nothing. What he did, stuck to the trunk of a tree: he trembled. His chin drummed the bark like a woodpecker—and lo! His eye lit up. It must have been the chin-drumming that imparted him a flash of insight, because he suddenly called, "Bite the bark!" And Pertelote felt a little cheer in her throat. "*Bite* the bark. There's the ticket!" Wodenstag bit the bark. So then he could let go successive paws to move them higher up—and what is that if it is not climbing? Why, it's climbing of the finest sort! Pertelote wasn't tired. She was enjoying a miniature triumph. *Bite* the bark! What a breakthrough.

So then up the tree trunk, one by one, with instructions from Wodenstag on a branch above, and encouragement from Brothers on the snow below, a constant buzzing of grunts and information. Mice climbed the tree. A string of thieves up a tree. And how they patted Samstag, and how they praised that youngest Brother when he had gained the branch with them. How they congratulated one another all around—and then!

Then they turned in unison to look down the branch itself, and the Hen at the end of it. So that stilled their jubulations.

"She's probably sleeping," they said in dreadful quiet.

"So much the better," said Wodenstag. "She needs to sleep."

Pertelote experienced a true softening in her breast, and her head inclined for gladness. Why, the Tags were thinking of her!

So Wodenstag came balancing along the branch, picking his inches with monumental care. And after him, frowning severely, Donnerstag. And Sonntag, and so forth, all staring at the wood in front of them as if the staring itself were gripping. And then this is what they did: they lined up next to Pertelote, side by side, sitting on two legs (aye, *there* was the peril: two legs) and facing south the same as she. And then they were done. This was it. This is what they came for. As solemnly as worship they sat still.

Rather, they tried to sit still. In fact, they had all begun independently of one another to rock. Forward and backward, in an effort to keep their balances, like round-bottom pepper-shakers. Too far forward ("Whoa!"), too far backward ("Whoa! Whoa!"), but all done with the greatest solemnity and an air that it was right to be here; no other place to be, amen.

Pertelote the Hen for whom they had come, she could only shake her head. There was a pressure in her heart that might have been laughter or might have been tears, either one.

"Tags," said Pertelote.

"Ah, Lady. Ah, Lady, we didn't mean to wake you up," whispered Wodenstag as though she were still sleeping. He began to pat her side.

"But here you are," she said.

"Yes," he said, simply because it was the fact. "All of us."

"What a remarkable thing for you to do."

"It isn't easy to climb a tree," said Wodenstag.

"Whoa!" said Montag. And Sonntag said, "Whoa!" spinning his forepaws like whirligigs.

"But it's night," said Pertelote.

"Yes," said Wodenstag, patting her, patting her. "And a very dark night, too, I think."

"Aren't you going back to sleep?"

"Whoa!" said Dienstag. "Whoa!"

"Maybe we could sleep right here," said Wodenstag. "We thought that this would be a very good spot for a sleep."

"Whoa! *Whoa!*" It was Freitag who tipped too far backward, too far altogether. Up shot his hind legs, and down went the whole mouse, plump into a snowbank.

Pertelote seemed the only one to notice his departure. "I don't suppose," she said, "that it's easy for a Mouse to sit this way?"

"Roosting," Wodenstag explained.

Samstag went over head first- "*Whoa!*"-and plopped into snow.

"We talked it over," said Wodenstag. "We agreed that this would be an excellent way to sleep sometimes."

Donnerstag dropped.

Freitag began to climb the tree trunk again, whispering, "Bite the bark."

"Whoa! Whoa!" said Montag and Sonntag together. They had locked arms.

Wodenstag himself still patted Pertelote. Sometimes he clung to one little feather; but then he patted her again

"Why, Wodenstag?" said Pertelote. "Could you tell me why you decided all these things?"

Samstag was on his way up the trunk again, and Freitag on his way out the branch.

"Yes," said Wodenstag.

"Whoa!" roared Montag and Sonntag together. Together they hit the snow.

Wodenstag kept his earnest composure. "To keep the dear Lady Company," he said. "She's got no easy day of it, and at night she's lonely-don't we know that? So we said- Whoa!

Wodenstag's turn. He flew out to emptiness. But he caught a feather and so was left dangling from her breast. "So," said Wodenstag, gazing down at the ground, "we said, -Let's keep her company.' We have us. But she has no one special just now. We thought that we would give her a little bit of us and since she can't fit in the hole, we came to roost—"

Pertelote sobbed. It was *both* tears and laughter in her heart- she sobbed through an absolutely dazzling grin. And the sob felt good, but did no good for Wodenstag, who lost his grip and punctured the snow beside his brothers.

"The carefulest, kindest friends I know," sighed Pertelote "so special to me indeed." She spread her wings and sank to the snow herself. Instantly all the ascending Mice became descending Mice, and Pertelote purely laughed.

"Don't you think," she said, "that you could sleep on the ground tonight, if I sat with you?"

"Oh Lady!" cried Wodenstag. "What a fine idea!

"We'll and what if you nestled beneath my wings? What about that?"

Little Samstag couldn't stand it. He began to laugh at the top of his lungs because his gladness was so great.

And Freitag said, "Just like the old days!

And Pertelote whispered the nearly unspeakable profundity of Freitag's words. "Just like the old days," she sighed.

Then under her wings seven separate paws took to patting the down of her heart and her love, and she was not alone. Wodenstag popped his head out with an afterthought: "Don't feel bad you sobbed and I fell," he told her. "It's okay if you cry.

It was okay. She did cry. Pertelote bowed her head that night and wept the blessed tears of consolation.