


WINDBLOWNE

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windblowne

S T E P H E N M E S S E R

Random House  New York

Oliver sat back on his stool. He was finished. His hands were blistered, his head ached, and his nostrils burned with the stink of boiling glue, but he was sure this one would work. After a lifetime of embarrassments and disappointments that made his toes curl to think about, he had finally done it. This time he would fly.

For two days Oliver had snipped and sewn, boiled glue in the glue pots, lit new candles when the old ones had burned down to nubs, cursed and sucked on his cuts when he was clumsy with a knife, and paced back and forth crumpling up papers covered with his carefully drawn designs before hurling them into the corners in disgust. Then he would sit at his workbench to draw up new designs, and snip and sew some more. All the while, the midsummer winds had howled ceaselessly outside the treehouse.

Oliver stood, kicking aside discarded fragments of bamboo spars. With a triumphant sweep of his arm, he cleared the workbench. Everything spilled onto the floor with a tumultuous crash. He pulled open drawers and laid out his tools. He had new twine, new reels, his handvane, and several other useful odds and ends. He jammed it all into his pack.

He dashed to the window and threw it open. Cold wind blasted into the room. Oliver leaned out into the tossing branches of the oak. He closed his eyes, listening to the winds as they blew over the mountain and through the oaks. They were just right for flying, he decided, but twilight would be settling soon. If he hurried, there would be time for one test flight before the night winds came.

He slammed the window closed, then tore off his smock and hurled it over a stack of rejected spars. He donned his warmest flier's outfit: leather gloves, fur-lined boots, loose-cut pants with toughened knees, a thick sweater, and a heavy wool cap fastened under his chin. Feeling very professional, he slung his pack over his shoulders and, with his creation tucked under one arm, peeked down the hall.

No one had bothered to light the lamps, of course, and the hallway curved into darkness in both directions as it followed the shape of their tree. The only light was a faint flickering spilling through a doorway halfway to the stairs. From within that room came the continuous scratching sound of pen across paper.

Oliver crept down the hall. He had nearly mastered the pattern of the creaky floorboards: *Left two steps, right one step, now over to the wall, then a hop, then left... no, right!* The floorboard groaned, and Oliver froze as a voice called out.

"Oliver, lad, is that you? Fetch me a cup of tea, will you? There's a lad." As usual, his father's voice sounded distant and distracted.

Oliver peeked into the study. There was the customary sight: his father's back hunched over a desk piled with books and pages covered with cryptic scrawl. The room was nearly dark, as the shades had not been opened and a last flickering candle was about to die. Just beside his father's arm was the untouched cup of tea, now cold, that Oliver had brought up hours ago.

"Yes, Father," Oliver said, trying to hide his creation behind his back on the remote chance his father turned around. "I'll bring it right up."

“There’s a lad,” his father replied vaguely. His pen had not stopped scratching.

Oliver hurried to the staircase and dashed down into the kitchen. The rest of the treehouse was silent and dark. As he passed the pantry, his stomach growled, and he realized that he had not eaten all day. *No time for that*, thought Oliver. *I’ll have a victory dinner when I return*. Yes, a triumphant homecoming involving crowds of people apologizing for all the mockery he’d received over the years. Thinking these happy thoughts, he pushed open the creaking front door.

He stopped on the landing, forty feet up, and looked worriedly at the signs of Windblowne preparing for the coming of night. In the treehouses of nearby oaks, lamps were sputtering for life. Townspeople were reeling in the rope bridges that connected one treehouse to another. On Windswept Way, far below, people were hurrying home, hands thrust deep into pockets and shoulders hunched against the suddenly cold winds.

A brown oak leaf drifted by. Oliver plucked it from the air. *Another one*, he thought. The leaf was dry and brittle, as though midsummer had been interrupted by autumn. He’d been seeing leaves like this for weeks, and what was most curious was that Oliver, who could normally tell from which of the giant oaks any leaf had fallen, did not recognize these. They had to be from an oak he didn’t know, and he was certain he knew almost every oak on the mountain. This meant he was never lost, but from looking at this leaf he could see that the map in his mind must have a gap in it somewhere.

He shook his head. No time to waste on leaves. Oliver yanked his handvane from his pack. He snapped it onto his wrist and held it high. The pointer spun before settling southward. Oliver studied the result with an expert eye. He might not be much good at flying, but he was a superb wind-reader. The north-by-northeast wind was still blowing, best for flying, but the pointer was trembling, indicating an increasingly unsteady flow. The wind’s direction and speed would be changing soon. Night was drawing near.

Dare he risk it?

Oliver nodded his head. He did. The kite must be tested tonight.

Down the circular staircase he ran, winding dizzily around the trunk of his familiar home oak, sliding his hand along its bark for luck and comfort. On the ground, he raced across the small front yard. Off to one side was his mother’s workshop, and coming from it was the usual cacophonous assortment of muttering, the clash of hammer on chisel, and the occasional loud curse. Surrounding the workshop were several—Oliver was not sure what to call them—perhaps sculptures? that his mother was working on, or had already finished. Oliver could not tell either way. Maybe they had just fallen over. Oliver sighed and kept running.

In a moment he was on Windswept Way, Windblowne’s only road, which curled round the mountain from foot to crest like a coiled spring. Oliver ran upward, passing under treehouses high overhead as the winds pushed him higher, faster. He kept furtively to one side of the Way, hoping that the late hour meant he wouldn’t be noticed and snickered at. Or worse, prevented from going to the crest at all. He kept running up, up, up as the Way wound higher.

Oliver’s fears were realized when he spied a member of the Windblowne Watch waddling

down the Way and lighting the oil lamps on either side. Like all members of the Watch, he was fat and friendly and long retired from a life of flying. Normally the Watch had little to do in peaceful Windblowne, but each midsummer they were forced to rise from their usual sea on the balcony of their tavern headquarters to manage the crowds of tourists who came for the Festival.

Oliver put the kite behind his back and slowed to what he hoped was an inconspicuous stroll.

“Oh! Hullo, Oliver!” the Watchman said cheerily as he lit the next lamp.

“Hullo,” said Oliver quickly, edging past.

“I say,” said the Watchman in surprise. “That’s not a kite you have there, is it?”

“No,” said Oliver.

“Oh,” replied the Watchman, looking puzzled. “Well, that’s good. The night winds are coming, you know. No time to be flying!” He pulled a sheet of stiff paper from within his coat and affixed it to the lamppost.

Oliver resumed his dash for the crest the moment the Watchman’s back was turned.

Oliver had been trying to ignore those papers, but it wasn’t easy. They lined the Way ever since midsummer, tacked to trees and fences and lampposts and the occasional wagon. They littered the lands beyond the mountain too, their message carried far and wide by the wind. Some of them blew across his path, mocking him, and he kicked at them savagely. He knew their message by heart:

YE OLDE FESTIVAL OF
KITES
IN ITS 455TH YEAR

THE MOUNTAIN TOWNE OF
WINDBLOWNE INVITES
ONE AND ALL

COMMENCING ON THE NINTH
DAY OF THE SECOND MOON

FIVE DAYS OF FANTASTIC
CREATIONS AND DARING
FEATS

THE WONDER OF ALL THE WORLD

THE LEGENDARY FLIERS OF
WINDBLOWNE AND THE
TOURNAMENT OF CHAMPIONS!

Today was the Fifth Day of the Second Moon. Four days remained.

The wind blowing down from the crest brought a chorus of young voices, shouts mixed with laughter. Oliver grimaced. The voices belonged to those he had most been hoping to avoid, but there was no help for it. He marched grimly upward, gripping his kite.

A group of children came into view, all carrying kites. Oliver felt his usual shudder of envy, and a surge of embarrassment for his own kite. For his classmates' kites were more than just kites; they were brilliantly painted eagles, bats, and dragons. The elaborate kites had hinges and latches that allowed them to be folded flat and carried, and then opened to full size when launched. These were kites that were, without question, worthy of the Festival, and all of the children were brimming with excitement and confidence.

They spotted Oliver. He braced himself.

"Marcus, do you see that?" one of them called, in mock astonishment. "Oliver has gotten hold of another kite somehow!"

Marcus held his eagle kite behind his back as though shielding it. "Oh, Oliver," he said, shaking his head sadly. "What did that poor, defenseless thing do to deserve this fate?" He turned to his friend. "Alain, do you think there's room in the trees for another one of Oliver's kites?"

Alain looked thoughtful. "I'm not sure," he said. "They're getting pretty crowded up there. It might be more merciful just to burn this one. Need a match, Oliver?"

Peals of jeering laughter were carried off on the wind as Oliver quickened his pace, leaving the others behind.

All but one. A black-haired girl with a dragon kite broke away and hurried after Oliver. She had a red knit pouch slung over one shoulder, and it bounced on her hip as she ran. He groaned. Of all the humiliating episodes in his ill-fated flying career, this girl represented one of the worst. She had spent months making one of the most beautiful kites Windblowne had ever seen, a school of flying fish fashioned from silk and bamboo. In a moment of poor judgment, she had asked Oliver if he would like to fly it. Unable to resist, he had accepted the reels—and to his horror, had promptly steered the kite directly into the ground, destroying it. The violence with which he had managed to accomplish this was a frequent topic of discussion at school.

"Ilia!" Alain shouted from down the Way. "Better stay away from Oliver! Bad luck before the Festival."

Ilia ignored him and dashed up beside Oliver. "Oliver," she said anxiously, "you're not going to the crest, are you?"

He did not answer. He wished she would stop being so nice about everything. She ought to hate him for what he had done.

"Well," said Ilia after an awkward pause. "Be careful, Oliver. The night winds are coming."

“Ilia!” shouted several of the others.

“Wait!” she called. She rummaged in her red knit pouch and produced a tiny golden kite charm on which a name had been etched—*Ilia*. She offered it to Oliver. “For luck. You can give it back to me tomorrow.”

Oliver shook his head, wounded. Why did Ilia think he needed her luck? “No thanks.”

“Well, good luck anyway,” said Ilia. Before Oliver could react, she pressed the charm into his hand, then raced down the mountain to her friends.

Well, that’s over with, thought Oliver miserably, dropping the charm into his pocket. But then he heard more voices, carried on the wind—more classmates, coming home late from practice. More ridicule. He would have turned around if he weren’t so desperate.

He paused. How desperate? Desperate enough to use his secret path? It lay just ahead...

No, he reminded himself sternly. *That’s only for emergencies. Someone might see!*

But the voices were advancing, and the pointer on his handvane was wobbling violently. Anything qualified as an emergency, this was it.

He spied the entrance to the path, hidden behind a seemingly impenetrable wall of brush. He would never have discovered it were it not for two oaks located on either side, like two sentinels guarding the trail, their lower branches dipping down just so.

Here lies the path, the sentinels seemed to say.

The voices were nearly upon him. He dove into the wall of brush, gliding through an almost invisible gap. From the safety of this hiding place he watched as more children passed laughing and waving their wonderful kites. He burned at the sight. He burned particularly because he wanted to join them so very badly. When the children were gone, he turned around and stumbled up the path.

Although it was a more direct route to the crest than Windswept Way, the path was overgrown and difficult to traverse. Fallen tree limbs mostly concealed what remained of the trail. Oliver crashed along. It must have been years since anyone had walked this old path regularly. He had used it only a few times himself.

A flash of color caught his eye.

Oliver crouched beside a sharp bit of broken oak limb. Hanging from the tip of it was the tiniest scrap of crimson silk. He touched it.

Kite silk.

Someone else had come this way.

Oliver stood, furious. This path was *his* secret! Now that he looked, he could see other signs—snapped twigs, footprints. Someone else had been through. Not far along he found a low branch that had a torn bit of wool on it, like the wool from which his own flying cap was made.

Oliver began to smash along. Maybe the person was still on the trail. Maybe he could catch up. Perhaps the other person would be willing to keep the secret. It would be better than having all of Windblowne tramping up and down the path every day....

But whoever it was had not gone to the crest. The trail of snapped twigs and footprints and

torn thread ended abruptly, halfway up. Or rather, it didn't end but turned off the path and went deeper into the forest.

A cascade of dead leaves tumbled past.

Odd! Oliver thought, and for a moment he wavered. Then determination returned as he saw how the twilight gloom was gathering. He hurried up the path, resolving to come back after the Festival and explore this mystery further.

Soon he neared the crest.

As always, Oliver thrilled to the sound of the rising, rushing winds racing through the oak branches. Normally he liked to look up into their tossing branches. Not tonight, though. Tonight he kept his eyes fixed firmly on the path. *No more distractions, Oliver*, he told himself. *Focus.*

He emerged onto the crest through another invisible gap in the brush. The oakline ended abruptly at the crest border, forming a wide circle around it. From this line the open ground rose a quarter mile to the peak, where the most unpredictable and treacherous winds blew. Nothing was able to grow on the crest itself but a thin covering of hardy mountain grasses. Strong as they were, even the giant oaks could not withstand the crest winds.

He had hoped he would be the only one here at this late hour. Surely no one, at least not one who wasn't as desperate as Oliver, would risk damaging his kite or himself this close to the Festival. But near the peak, a few daring fliers were getting in some final minutes of practice. Oliver recognized them. They were all young men and women who had nearly made the final rounds last summer. They were braving the winds in these last hours, hoping to find some edge that could catapult them to the championship this year.

As he removed reels and twine from his pack, Oliver could not resist an intense and grudging admiration for those fliers. They were handling, with expert skill, the most sophisticated type of power kite, built specifically for jumping. Each kite had precision folds and angles designed to master the shifting winds of the crest. Complicated lines wound down from the kites to the reels held by the fliers, who heaved on the multiple strands, causing the kites to plunge in breathtaking dives and rise in swooping arcs. The kites danced about in complex forms, sometimes joining their neighbors to create intricate aerial patterns. Each kite commanded the air, seeming as though at any moment it might break free and fly off on its own, sweeping all of the others from the sky.

As Oliver watched, a flier left the group and fought toward the peak. Oliver held his breath.

For the briefest moment, the flier balanced herself, pulling hard against the unpredictable gusts, jousting with the wind. Then, in one expert motion, she swung her kite into the teeth of the gale and jumped.

She flew up and out, over the heads of her friends, who whooped and cheered. She twisted in flight, still in control, her legs kicking. At last she landed, far from the peak. Oliver was in awe. Her leap was just yards shy of the flat granite marker that noted the spot of the farthest jump on record. The dream of every flier in town was to break that record, but the marker had not been moved in almost fifty years. For this jumper, however, the extra practice was paying off. She looked as though she were ready to enter the first rank and threaten the mark.

With a guilty start, Oliver realized that he had gotten so caught up in watching that flier that he had delayed longer than he intended. He checked his handvane. The pointer was dancing wildly. He knew he ought to come back in the morning. The other fliers were urgently reeling in their kites.

There's still time for a quick test, he decided. He looked nervously at his kite. It was a simple flat-wing model, or at least an attempt at one. He had heated the spine too quickly, and the whole thing was rather bent. He tried to ignore the other flaws, the clumsy ribs and awkward joints. "You're not so bad," he whispered, stroking the kite in an attempt to smooth out its wrinkled sails. "I'll just give you one test flight and then fix you up in time for the Festival."

He looked around sheepishly, glad that no one was nearby to hear him talking to one of his kites, a childish habit that he could not seem to break.

He made his final preparations hastily, fastening lines to each side of the kite and securing them to the reel. He gripped the reel firmly in his hard leather glove. Time to fly. He grasped the kite with his other hand and, with what he hoped was a smooth, correct motion, tossed it up to catch the winds.

And then he heard it—an oncoming roar. The oaks behind him signaled their warning with a furious flailing: *The night winds have come!*

Oliver's kite was torn to shreds instantly. He was thrown to the ground, his breath knocked from him. He grabbed desperately for his things, but they were whipped away—his pack, his handvane torn from his wrist, all gone. Oliver crawled back to the safety of the oaks as broken branches smashed into the ground around him, leaves and dirt stung his face, and winds screamed in his ears. He reached the trunk of the nearest oak and struggled to his feet. He leaned, heart pounding, his chest thick with fear. He could have been killed.

Numbly, Oliver staggered back through the oaks to his hidden trail. Everything was gone. All of his equipment. His hope of entering the Festival. His kite. Everything.

And when he put his hand into his pocket, he discovered that he had lost Ilia's golden kite charm, too.

He stumbled brokenly down the mountain, fighting tears, hardly hearing the din raised by the oaks as the night winds battered and raged. On another night he would have listened in rapture, but tonight the sounds seemed full of despair.

Oliver had lost his lamp along with his pack, and he might have wandered in complete darkness if his way were not lit by the two moons, which traveled together through the night sky every midsummer. Nahfa, the larger, and Aspin, his smaller companion, signaled the start of the Festival when they drew near each other in the sky. Normally he would have stopped and gazed at them shining together, but tonight they only reminded him that he would be watching the Festival from the sidelines again this year, as he probably would every year for the rest of his life.

Consumed with dark thoughts, he plodded down, shoving branches aside. In his misery and fatigue, he did not notice the slim form that slipped from the shadows, wearing a heavy wool cap fastened under its chin, watching him intently as he disappeared down the secret path toward Windswept Way and home.

When Oliver woke, his bedroom was still dark. Normally he left his heavy curtains open so that the morning sunlight would wake him. Last night he had left them closed, and now his room was cheerless and dim. He sat up, blinking, wondering how late it was. It had been nearly sunrise when he had finally gone to bed.

He had spent hours eliminating everything from his room that reminded him of his failure. Gone from the walls were the paintings of kites. The racks for kitesmithing supplies were bare, and the chest that normally held reels and twine stood empty. Nothing lay on the workbench except a book titled *Careers in Mining*, which sat open to page one. Last night, he had resolved to stay up and read as much of it as he possibly could. Today, he resolved to read page two.

Even his not-so-secret drawer had been yanked open and emptied. He had tried to build a shelf in the side of his workbench, as a place to hold his most treasured possessions, but since he was as skilled in carpentry as he was in kitesmithing, the drawer was crude and obvious and terribly unsecret. Anyway, it had held only kite supplies, and was empty now, so he didn't care if it was secret or not.

He dressed slowly. With no kite, he had no reason to wear his flying clothes, and so he dressed only in a simple tunic, jacket, and trousers. In his closet he found his fur-lined boots which he promptly kicked under the bed, where they joined the rest of his crumpled flying outfit. He peered around the room for something else to kick, but there wasn't much left. He wondered if a tourist had come across the bundle of kiting gear lying beside the Way. Maybe they'd be able to make something useful out of Oliver's things. Oliver certainly hadn't.

Downstairs, his parents were sitting at the breakfast table. His mother was wearing her dusty smock and wolfing down cold meat and berry juice while waving her knife in the air and talking to his father. Oliver saw that no fire had been made in the stove, so he began to build one.

"This sculpture will be the best yet in the Anguish series," his mother said excitedly, stabbing the air with her fork. "It represents my finest achievement in anguish!"

"Yes, dear," his father said remotely, in much the same tone as he had asked Oliver for tea. His pen did not hesitate as it flew across the pages. He was still dressed in his nightclothes and had nothing before him but his papers and an untouched glass of juice.

"I mean it," she continued. "We've got tourists coming from all over for that *thing*. The Festival, I mean. Some of them will be the sort who can appreciate art, unlike that fool mayor!"

"Yes, dear."

"When they see *Anguish Number Seven* out there projecting despair, they'll forget all about those frivolous kites and start focusing on the world around them! There's another leaf design in progress, just like six years ago. Something must be done!" She thumped the table. Dust rose from her smock and hung, undecided, in the air.

"Yes, dear." The pen scratched away.

They continued in this fashion as Oliver coaxed the fire to life. He wondered if his mother

would be having this conversation with thin air if he and his father walked out of the room and decided that she probably would. When the flames were leaping in the stove, Oliver began to fry bacon. The smell filled the kitchen.

His father sniffed and raised his head, his pen finally stopping. "Say, that smells good. Hullo, Oliver!"

"Good morning," Oliver replied, concentrating on his bacon. He added eggs to the skillet and more bacon for his father.

His mother gulped down her juice and stood abruptly, yanking on a hat. "Yes, good morning, dear. If anyone needs anything, I'll be busy in my workshop! No time to dawdle. She grabbed Oliver and gave him a fierce kiss on the top of his head; then out the door she went. Oliver knew she wouldn't be back until dark.

His father was looking around the kitchen as though seeing it for the first time. "Ah yes, the Festival," he said. "I suppose it is about that time, isn't it? I'd forgotten!"

Oliver brought their breakfasts to the table and began to eat.

His father's wandering gaze settled on Oliver. "So," he said. "Are you flying a kite in the Festival, lad?"

Surprised, Oliver paused with a forkful of food halfway to his mouth. He shook his head.

"Why not?" said his father. "You like kites, don't you?"

Oliver hardly knew what to say. He had not thought it possible, but his father had reached a new low point in his sad history of oblivion. Oliver waited for him to go back to his writing. But the man kept staring at him, a vaguely puzzled expression on his face. He had actually put down his pen, although his hand was still resting on it. It occurred to Oliver that his father must be waiting for an answer, so he said, "I don't have a kite." Oliver assumed this would bring the conversation to an end.

"Oh," his father said brightly. "You should make one!"

Oliver stared at his plate. "Thanks. I'll think about it."

Now his father was musing aloud, tapping his pen on his paper. "You know who could help you make a kite?" he said.

"No," said Oliver, hoping desperately that his father wasn't about to offer.

"Your mother's uncle. Your great-uncle, I suppose. Name of Gilbert. I seem to recall he was a champion kitesmith, decades ago. Still lives in Windblowne somewhere, if I recall." His voice trailed off and he glanced back at his papers.

Oliver stared at his father, astonished. The fact that he had a relative who lived in Windblowne and was a former champion kitesmith, and that his parents had never bothered to mention it to him, was almost beyond belief. Almost. Only his parents, the biggest crackpots in Windblowne, could have failed to understand the importance of this fact.

His father, naturally, did not realize that he had just imparted to Oliver the most significant and startling information his son had ever received. His pen hovered over a page. Oliver knew he had to act quickly. "Dad?" he asked.

"Eh?" said his father, tapping the pen, lips pursed.

“Where does Great-uncle Gilbert live?”

“Windblowne, I believe.”

Oliver stifled his frustration. “Yes, but where in Windblowne?”

“Not sure,” his father said. The pen was scratching across paper again. “Never laid eyes on him. Hear he doesn’t like people. Stormed off in a fury forty years ago over some kite business. Kicked up a giant fuss and got his name scrubbed from the records. Said he never wanted anything to do with anyone again. Hid himself away in a treehouse off in the forest and that was that. Quite the crackpot!”

His father bent over the page, and Oliver knew the conversation was over.

But he had learned everything he needed. Oliver knew exactly where Great-uncle Gilbert must have taken himself. The secret path! The mysterious person Oliver had tracked yesterday! There was a master kitesmith living near the path, and he was a relative, and Oliver had found him!

Cheered by his amazing powers of deduction, he attacked his breakfast. Surely his great-uncle could teach him how to make a champion kite. Oliver would convince him to help, appealing to family ties and so on. Oliver nearly choked, stuffing food in his mouth. He had to get up there and find his great-uncle.

He bolted out the front door and raced down the spiral stairs. There, to his horror, he saw his mother arguing with the mayor again. Oliver tried to slip by unnoticed.

“This is art! ART!” his mother was proclaiming to the red-faced mayor. She had pushed a couple of her sculptures next to the Way. A few early Festival tourists had already gathered, their heads cocked quizzically.

“Your ... art,” fumed the mayor, his eyes darting toward the tourists, “will scare off all our ... *guests!* Move it!”

Oliver walked faster, but it was too late. His mother spotted him.

“Oliver!” said his mother with delight. “What do YOU think of my latest piece?” She pointed proudly to the last sculpture in line.

Oliver glanced at it dismally. Just like all the others, it was a meaningless jumble of metal and junk welded together. He wanted nothing to do with it. But his mother and the mayor were both watching him expectantly.

“It’s, umm ... tall,” he offered. Now that he actually looked at it, he thought there might be something else about the sculpture, something interesting and familiar and a bit disturbing. Another brown leaf drifted by, and Oliver tracked it, his gaze flicking between leaf and sculpture.

His mother’s face fell. “That’s all?” she said.

Oliver groaned. Why was he standing here analyzing statuary when there were kites to be crafted and a great-uncle to be found? “I don’t know,” he said in a rush. “I have to go.” He raced away as the mayor beamed in triumph.

The Way was busier today than it had been all year. Windblowne was filling up for the Festival. Tourists were tramping up the mountain from the inns, looking curiously

everything.

Oliver found that without his flying clothes he blended in with the tourists. Normally his clothes would mark him as a Windblownian, and Festival tourists would look at him with respect (since they didn't know any better). But now they ignored him as they trudged, puffing with exertion. The only difference between them and Oliver was that he was not short of breath. A Windblownian could walk up and down the mountain all day without tiring.

Oliver passed one plodding, grumbling tourist after another. Some of the ones going up held kites; some of the ones coming down held pieces of kites. The handful whose kites were still intact were boasting to their friends. The others had forlorn faces with which Oliver could sympathize. Those with the broken kites would soon be buying new kites at one of Windblowne's kiteshops, which was exactly how the residents of Windblowne had planned things.

He was passing his favorite kiteshop now, the Volitant Dragon. Oliver thought that the Dragon had to be the greatest place on the mountain. It was built so high up in its oak you had to crane your neck to see it, and you might miss it were it not for the red wooden dragon that hung beside the Way, announcing boldly:

THE VOLITANT DRAGON

WINDBLOWNE'S TREASURE
—The World's Grandest Kites—

Vivid banners fluttered in the windows, advertising special Festival discounts. Oliver knew the discounts were a sham. All kiteshops doubled their prices during the Festival.

Just ahead stood the sentinel oaks, branches dipping. There came a break in the flow of tourists, and Oliver plunged into the brush.

He knew now the path must have been concealed intentionally. His great-uncle had done this to keep people away. Oliver was filled with admiration at the clever camouflage. How Oliver had ever noticed the path in the first place, he had no idea. For the first time in his life, he felt a rush of family pride. He supposed that if his great-uncle was a master kitesmith, then he must be good at a lot of other things, too. Oliver could not wait to meet him.

Halfway up the path, he began to search for the trail he had noticed yesterday, the one leading off into the forest's depths. It was not so easy to find. The mountain's little details changed from day to day as the wind did its work. Briefly, Oliver feared that he would not be able to locate it again. Then he noticed a flash of reflected light coming from beneath a few brown leaves, several feet off the path. He knelt, brushing the leaves aside, and gasped.

A golden kite charm lay half buried in leaves and dirt.

Ilia's charm! thought Oliver at first. Relief swept over him. *I've found it!* These small golden charms were common among the children of Windblowne. They were etched with the child

name and affixed to a kite before its first flight to bring good luck. Years ago, Oliver had bought one for himself, as his parents had not seen the point. He had promptly lost both his kite and the charm, as the wind tore the kite away and it flew—escaped, some said—over the oaks and away from Oliver forever.

He'd lost Ilia's charm too, or so he had thought. He lifted the charm gingerly and turned over, looking for her name, but found instead:

Oliver

Oliver was stunned. He had found his own charm again, years after watching it disappear into the clouds. It seemed impossible—how could the charm be here, so many years later, lying right on the path? This could mean only one thing, Oliver decided. His luck had finally changed. He pocketed the charm with a grin. His great-uncle would help him and he would be a Festival hero after all. He swaggered down the side trail, grinning happily.

He soon found the chickens.

At first it was just one chicken, a large and startling one, fluffing out its wings and bawking at him. Oliver edged by rather fearfully, wondering what one did if a chicken attacked. He turned and saw another chicken, and another—a whole flock. Most of them, blessedly, were ignoring him, squabbling and pecking in a clear space in which vegetables were growing in disorganized fashion. Here and there were rusting tools and scattered stacks of lumber. Oliver realized he must be close to his great-uncle's hidden treehouse. He scanned the oaks.

There it was, only two oaks away. The treehouse was built lower to the ground than most and it blended in with its home oak in a way that made it difficult to spot if you weren't looking right at it. The whole thing was a madcap jumble, as though the builder had simply added rooms as he went along. A short staircase came straight down to the ground at a precarious angle.

Between the chickens and the rusting tools and the accidental garden, the scene reminded him uncomfortably of his own family's cluttered yard, except instead of being covered with abstract sculptures, it looked like the inside of a workshop that had been hit by a tornado.

He looked up through the branches of this healthy, giant oak, taking note of its subtle distinctions, adding it to a small gap in his map of which he had been unaware until now.

He could see that smoke was puffing from the chimney. Oliver jogged toward the staircase, a few chickens clucking angrily and scattering out of his way, then went up and rapped on the front door.

He heard what sounded like the scraping of a chair and fast-moving steps. Oliver waited for his knock to be answered.

And waited.

And waited some more. He knocked again.

No answer.

Oliver was beginning to get the distinct impression that there wouldn't be one. His great-uncle obviously didn't want to be bothered, but of course he did not realize that the person knocking was a member of his family. And not one of the weird ones, but one who had a normal and healthy interest in kites. Oliver knocked again, harder, and waited.

And waited.

Yes, his great-uncle's desire for privacy was understandable, but at the same time, the Festival would begin in three days, and Oliver had no time to waste. Pounding on the door any longer would simply be rude, however. Maybe he could wave at him through a window. Once Great-uncle Gilbert saw the family resemblance, he would surely welcome Oliver.

There was a balcony that ran around the first floor of the treehouse, with a number of windows in view. Oliver circled it, peering in. The first room was a kitchen. But the second ...

Oliver sucked in his breath.

At least a dozen pristine kites were hanging from the ceiling; they looked as if they had never been flown. Any one of them could have taken the Festival prize for craftsmanship. Oliver had never seen such intricate designs and clever construction. The kites were not only beautiful, composed of delicate hand-painted silks, but they possessed advanced aeronautical features that showed they were intended to be operated only by the most skilled fliers. Scattered on several workbenches were another dozen kites in various stages of completion, and each looked as promising as the finished ones. Along the walls were sliding racks stuffed with more kites. Oliver longed to see them. They were all masterpieces, with one exception.

On the centermost workbench lay a flat, diamond-shaped kite, the type usually given as a first kite, to be flown only on nearly windless days. Oliver thought it wouldn't be a very nice kite to get, even as a first kite. Its silk was a lovely crimson, but otherwise the kite was artless and unimaginative. The only interesting feature was its long tail, which had been haphazardly decorated with odd-shaped bits of cloth. The tail was coiled up next to the kite and was so long that it spilled down to the floor.

Suddenly one of the kite racks moved.

Startled, Oliver watched as it slid smoothly aside, revealing a dark, hidden room. Then, from another part of the workshop, an old man stepped into view.

Oliver ducked his head until his chin bumped the windowsill.

The old man, who had to be his great-uncle Gilbert, was squat and plump and dressed in a shabby purple robe. To Oliver's surprise, his great-uncle went immediately to the center workbench, snatched the crimson kite, and disappeared into the dark room that had just opened in the wall.

Oliver ducked lower as Great-uncle Gilbert emerged, no longer holding the kite. The old man hurried out of view. A few seconds later, the kite rack slid smoothly back into place.

Now Oliver was angry. He felt a bit guilty for spying on his great-uncle (he admitted that he had turned into spying), but then again, he would not have had to spy if Great-uncle Gilbert had simply answered the door like a normal person.

Oliver stalked back to the front door and gave it a resounding kick. The door shuddered in its frame. He waited a few seconds, then gave it another. And another. Determined not to tire, he reared back for an especially powerful kick.

Without warning, the door opened. Oliver, in mid-kick, fell backward. His great-uncle reached out and grabbed him just as he was about to tumble down the stairs.

“Hey!” Oliver yelled, swatting.

Great-uncle Gilbert released him, and Oliver looked the old man straight in the eye. He was only slightly taller than Oliver, and he was indeed very old, and very plump, and had a head full of wild gray hair.

He also had piercing brown eyes, and they were glaring right at Oliver. He reached out and gave Oliver a shove.

“So it’s you again!” he growled. “I thought so. I told you never to come back. Go away!”

The front door slammed in Oliver's face, shaking the entire treehouse.

Oliver was too stunned to move. This was not exactly the joyous reunion of long-lost relations he had expected. For the first time in his life, his father might have been right about something. Great-uncle Gilbert was indeed a crackpot. The condition must run in the family.

Crackpot or not, the man knew a thing or two about kites. Oliver began to pound on the door to the beat of I-need-a-kite, I-need-a-kite.

After a minute the door flew open. In that minute, Great-uncle Gilbert had somehow managed to change into a pair of dirty blue overalls and a straw hat. He looked like someone who was trying to disguise himself as a farmer and doing a poor job of it. In one hand he clutched an elaborately carved walking stick and in the other an ornate clock. His face wore a regal scowl.

"I am going to feed the chickens," he announced royally. "Kindly remove yourself back wherever it is you came from."

Great-uncle Gilbert strode forward, and Oliver, panting from all of the door kicking and pounding, dodged out of the way. His great-uncle sailed down the steps and Oliver followed, wondering if the chickens ate from a clock.

"What did you mean, 'It's you again'?" he demanded, catching his great-uncle at the bottom of the steps. "We've never met. I'm your grandnephew, Oliver!"

"So you are," replied Great-uncle Gilbert. "You can't fool me! Our visits are over. I trusted you with my secrets, and you betrayed me. Sorry you lost your kite charm—buy another. They were halfway across the yard now. Chickens were scattering in all directions. Great-uncle Gilbert dropped the clock and took several sniffs, then turned in circles, cocking his head. "There's that smell again."

Oliver opened his mouth, intending to continue his argument. He had never been here before! And how did his great-uncle know about his kite charm? But then he smelled it, too. It was faint, at the very edge of his senses. Something that smelled wrong, or felt wrong, or both. Something full of decay.

The smell drew him toward an oak standing around one corner of the treehouse. Oliver had never seen this tree before, and into his map it went. The scent grew stronger. Behind him he could hear Great-uncle Gilbert sniffing and muttering.

"It's this oak," said Oliver.

He placed his hands on the trunk. The bark had an oddly soft feeling, as though the oaks were somehow unhealthy. In the collective memory of Windblowne, the giant oaks were eternal. They were by far the largest, strongest trees anywhere in the world. None of them had ever shown the slightest sign of illness. Legend held that the oaks had been here, and would be here, as long as the mountain stood and the winds blew. So to look up the trunk of this oak and see its branches drooping, and its leaves showing a sick brown, left Oliver feeling a little sick as well. This oak must be the source of the dead leaves.

He heard crunching as Great-uncle Gilbert came up behind him. Oliver turned to meet the man's narrowed eyes.

"You are not who I thought you were, are you?" whispered Great-uncle Gilbert.

"What?" said Oliver. "I—"

"You're *you*, not him!" said Great-uncle Gilbert, louder. "You look just alike! But of course you would, wouldn't you?" He suddenly dropped his walking stick and shot forward, seizing Oliver's hands in his own. Oliver struggled to escape, but for such a plump old man, his great-uncle was shockingly strong.

Oliver's great-uncle's hands were not only strong, they were tremendously gnarled and callused, with scars from hundreds of tiny cuts. They were the hands of a master kitesmith after a lifetime of practicing his art.

Great-uncle Gilbert gripped Oliver's hands tightly, squeezing his knuckles, rubbing his fingers, examining his hands in every last detail.

At last his great-uncle released Oliver. He bent and picked up his walking stick. "So you're Oliver, from this mountain? I mean *this* one." He thumped the ground with the stick, his gaze focused on the far distance.

"Yes, that's right, Great-uncle Gilbert," said Oliver, adopting the reassuring tones of a nurse. "I'm Oliver, your grandnephew, from Windblowne." *The man is mad through and through*, he thought.

"Well," said his great-uncle. "That is very interesting." He began to walk back to his treehouse, with Oliver following.

"I thought you needed to feed the chickens," said Oliver, looking at the abandoned clock.

"No, the chickens fend for themselves," Great-uncle Gilbert said grandly. "A clock is not a bucket of feed, my boy. I just wanted to get rid of you."

Great-uncle Gilbert mounted the stairs and proceeded through his front door. Oliver looked back at the sick oak worriedly. That would have to be another mystery to investigate, after the Festival. Oliver entered the treehouse, filled with determination.

"Great-uncle Gilbert," he began dramatically, "I have come to ask for your—"

The word *help* never escaped his lips as he stared stupidly at his great-uncle's living room.

The kite workshop, astonishing as it was, had nothing on this. His great-uncle appeared to be preparing for some sort of siege, or battle, or both. The right wall was bristling with fighting kites of all sizes, slick and fast and covered with razor hooks and edges. The back wall was stacked with water barrels and bundles of food. The left wall was covered with vast stretches of paper sketched all over with drawings of the treehouse and a lot of symbols and arrows that seemed to indicate elaborate plans for defense and counterattack against an aerial assault. And the room was rather dark, because the windows on the front wall were completely nailed over with heavy boards. Fortunately, a couple of oil lamps were burning. Oliver spotted barrels of surplus oil stacked in an open closet.

Great-uncle Gilbert was moving between windows, pounding in some more nails. "Ask for my what, my boy? Speak quickly, lad! I'm a touch busy at the moment." He gave one of the panels a resounding thump with his fist.

"Er ...," said Oliver feebly, trying to recover his impressive argument. "The Festival, and uh ... my kite ..."

“Kites, is it?” said Great-uncle Gilbert thoughtfully. “Afraid I can’t help you there. You must leave at once. It’s far too dangerous for you here right now. Come back in, oh, a year or two. Or three. Yes, three would do nicely. Matters ought to be cleared up by then.”

The blockade seemed complete. Great-uncle Gilbert nodded with satisfaction, then swept into the kitchen. Oliver followed.

They proceeded into the workshop, and Oliver’s puzzlement increased. He could see that there was something completely out of place among the marvelous kites, something completely unexpected, not to mention completely boring. There was an entire shelf filled with his father’s books.

Oliver could not have been more shocked if his great-uncle had suddenly sprouted wings and flown away. An entire shelf of those books! Just looking at it made Oliver feel tired. “Why do you have all of those?” Oliver asked suspiciously, pointing.

“Eh?” said Great-uncle Gilbert, sitting at a workbench. “Why wouldn’t I? Fascinating stuff those histories! Studying those old legends helped get me into this mess.” He seemed rather gleeful about it.

Oliver shook his head. If he needed more evidence of his great-uncle’s madness, here it was. “Those books are the most boring things in Windblowne,” he explained.

“Yes, boring, so true,” his great-uncle said. “In fact, they are so boring that you should run off before it gets any more boring around here. Run home and hide under the bed is my advice, until everything blows over.”

“Until what blows over?” demanded Oliver.

“I could tell you, my boy,” replied Great-uncle Gilbert, “but you’d never believe me. None of ’em would! This town is full of people with limited imaginations.”

Oliver shrugged. If Great-uncle Gilbert wanted to punish himself with tedious reading material, then Oliver couldn’t stop him. He gazed around the workshop. Losing his own kiting gear last night had seemed like a setback, but Oliver could see that his great-uncle had the finest collection of kitesmithing supplies in Windblowne. There were barrels full of bamboo stalks cut to various sizes. Bolts of tightly woven silk were rolled up along the benches. And the spectacular kites that hung from the high ceiling would supply models of perfection that Oliver could follow as he built his new kite right here. Oliver was becoming positively giddy. Certainly Great-uncle Gilbert would come around once he understood how important Oliver’s problems were.

“Great-uncle Gilbert,” he said again, “I need a kite.”

“No doubt!” Great-uncle Gilbert exclaimed. “You want to fly one of my kites in that far corner of a Festival, don’t you?” He shook his fist in the general direction of the crest. “Well, I know the rules! Most of them were written just to thwart me!”

“And the rules say you have to make your own kite,” Oliver broke in. “I know.”

Great-uncle Gilbert’s snort expressed his contempt for anyone who would stoop to such a thing. “Well, the judges would know that any kites as amazing as mine could never have been made by you.”

Whether this was true or not—and Oliver had to admit that it was—he was still more than

a little hurt. "No," Oliver said desperately, his voice tight, "I have no intention of cheating. only wanted you to teach me enough for me to make my own kite."

Great-uncle Gilbert seemed taken by surprise. "Er, sorry there, my boy," he said in gentle tones. "I didn't mean you'd cheat. It's just that I can tell a kitesmith. It's all in the hands. I've examined yours, and you don't have it in you." He scratched his chin thoughtfully. "Your talents," he said finally, "lie elsewhere."

"That's ridiculous," said Oliver. "You can't say that just from feeling someone's hands!" He felt tears coming and shook them away angrily.

Great-uncle Gilbert grimaced. "You think I'm a madman, don't you?" he growled. "Well, you're right. I am. My mind is filled with twists and turns and contradictions. But I do know one thing, and that's kites. Here, look at this one!" He snatched a kite from a nearby bench and thrust it at Oliver.

Oliver turned it around in his hands. The kite was made of slick black silk and a confusing tangle of oaken spars. Oaken spars! No one used oak for kite spars; it was far too heavy. Anyway, the thing hardly looked like a kite at all. Some of the spars came together in sharp points, and there were torn bits of colorful fabric clinging to them, and a few splinters.

"That," said Great-uncle Gilbert, "is one of my proudest creations. It is a kite that eats other kites. Swoops right down on them and chomps them to bits. The fools banned it from competition! Be careful now," he said abruptly.

With a start, Oliver realized that he had somehow gotten his hand caught inside the kite. He pulled, but his hand was stuck fast.

"I can't get it out," said Oliver.

"You'd better," said Great-uncle Gilbert.

There was a sudden sharp pain in his hand, and Oliver yelped. He yanked hard, his hand burst free, and some of the spars snapped shut. He hurled the kite-eater away. It flew gracefully across the room, and Great-uncle Gilbert snatched it out of the air. "Good kite," he said approvingly, and placed it gently back on the workbench.

Oliver, stunned, said nothing, but rubbed his aching hand.

"You think that's something?" Great-uncle Gilbert snickered. "I don't even keep my best kite in here. I keep it hidden with my most valuable possessions, where *they* won't find it!"

Oliver wondered if he meant the plain crimson kite. If so, then it wasn't quite as amazing as his great-uncle claimed. He decided to humor the old man. "Where who can't find it, Great-uncle Gilbert?"

"*Them*," said his great-uncle significantly. "Now shouldn't you be on your way?"

"I'm not leaving until you agree to help me with a Festival kite," said Oliver.

"Now, now, my boy," said Great-uncle Gilbert. He took another fighting kite from a rack and fiddled with its spars. "You need to forget about the Festival. I have! Other matters of far greater importance, far greater danger, have presented themselves, and I will be very busy for days to come. You should occupy yourself with something else as well." He leaned toward Oliver, his voice falling to a whispered warning. "Something far, far away from the crest!"

This was too much for Oliver. First it was his parents, who were barely aware the Festival existed and certainly weren't going to do anything to help Oliver prepare for it. Now his great-uncle, who had once been a Festival champion and who owned the most splendid workshop and kites in all of Windblowne and thus in all the world, wasn't going to help him either. Oliver had opened his mouth to tell Great-uncle Gilbert exactly what he thought of his entire, useless family when he was interrupted by a thumping noise coming from behind the kite racks.

Great-uncle Gilbert spun about, ran to the racks, and threw his back against them. "Shhh!" he hissed over his shoulder. "Not now!"

Oliver gaped. "Who do you have in there?" he said accusingly.

"What are you talking about?" cried Great-uncle Gilbert. "I don't hear any thumping! Don't be preposterous!"

He turned his head to one side. "Stop that! Stop that right now!" he hissed again. "I'll let you out in a minute. I was just getting rid of him!" The steady *thump thump thump* continued without pause.

"No, you weren't!" snapped Oliver.

"Yes, I was!" shouted Great-uncle Gilbert, and Oliver found himself propelled out of the workshop, his great-uncle's hands gripping his shoulders. He was pushed through the living room and out the front door. Oliver staggered as his great-uncle released him at the top of the steps. He turned. Great-uncle Gilbert was blocking the doorway, breathing heavily. The steady thumping could still be heard behind him.

"Well," his great-uncle said quickly, "that was a lovely visit, thank you. We shouldn't do so again anytime soon. And you must avoid the crest at all costs. That's how *he* came through and it would be a dangerous thing indeed for *you* to run into *him*. Regards to your parents. And with that, he slammed the door. Oliver heard running footsteps fading away.

Oliver sagged against the door. His final hopes had rested in someone who turned out to be a complete lunatic. Lunacy must run in the family. His mother was headed that way too, and Oliver supposed he would be next.

He turned wearily and plodded down the steps. Now what? Oliver looked at the abandoned clock, ticking remorselessly away in the cluttered yard.

The day had become cold and gray while he was indoors, and chill winds blew over him as he trudged off. He pulled his jacket closer. The winds made eerie sounds as they threaded through the oaks, bringing with them that scent of decay from the strange, sick oak, as well as the rattling patter of its dead leaves. Oliver was filled with foreboding. The giant oaks were waving their branches as the winds came through, and it looked to Oliver as though they were waving helplessly.

Oliver shook it off. He didn't intend to go crazy like the rest of his family. Not yet anyway. He was determined to enter the Festival somehow and show them all.

He turned down the hidden path toward Windswept Way, toward home. He walked quickly. He did not like the sound of the winds in the oaks, wailing and mournful. Oliver's walk turned into a jog, and then he found himself running for the shelter and warmth of

home, chased by the cry of the winds.

That night, Oliver quivered in bed, wide-eyed and sleepless. Outside, the winds howled. The treehouse creaked and groaned. Oliver thought the winds sounded angry enough to rip the treehouse from the tree's embrace and send it spinning away. Oliver longed to run across the hall and place his hands on the trunk to reassure himself of its solidity and strength, but he didn't dare leave his bed.

He could not fathom how his parents slept through this unusually powerful windstorm, but they seemed completely undisturbed. Oliver's heart pounded and his mind raced. He was covered in sweat, his sheets twisted into knots.

I'm going to light a candle, he thought. He threw the covers aside. *I'm going to light every candle I can find.*

But then

BAM

something crashed against the treehouse so close to him that the wall shook and Oliver nearly screamed. He pulled the covers back over his head. And then a sound came again,

tap tap tap

like a person rapping on the shutter. He lifted his head cautiously from beneath the blankets. That had really sounded like

tap tap tap

someone knocking to get in. But no one could possibly be out at night, sitting on an oak branch, rapping on the window next to Oliver's bed. He waited for several seconds.

TAP TAP TAP

Oliver rolled over and yanked the curtains aside. Moonlight flashed on something flickering among the lashing branches. *No,* he thought, *it can't be....*

He pulled up the window.

The winds invaded with a roar and nearly threw him from his bed. He clung to the windowsill as Great-uncle Gilbert's kite, the simple long-tailed crimson kite, came crashing in, slamming into walls and bouncing off the floor and ceiling. It thrashed uncontrollably as Oliver struggled to close the window. Then the winds slackened briefly, the kite flew over Oliver's head and out into the night, and the window slammed home.

Oliver fell back on his bed in astonishment. Somehow, improbably, the winds had gotten hold of the hidden kite. It was a colossal piece of luck. Now he possessed something his great-uncle wanted. Or he would possess it, anyway, as soon as he chased down the wayward kite.

This is a really stupid idea, said a little voice in the back of Oliver's head. But Oliver had ignored that voice before, and he was going to ignore it now. He fished his rugged flier outfit from under the bed, dressed quickly, and raced from the room.

Using the front door was out of the question. With the winds hammering at the wall, opening the door would invite disaster. Oliver went straight to the emergency wind hatch in the tiny room off the kitchen. He lifted the trapdoor and put one foot on the first rung of the ladder.

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