



Wind never travels by the path or takes the gate into my field, but always leaps over it and speeds above me, leaving shreds of breezes caught in my branches. Wind usually ignores me, never minding the buffeting I receive even when it plays with its cousins, Rain and Snow. But this time, as Wind leaps the gate and shoots into the clouds, it whistles down to me, almost lost in its own gales. The tips of my leaves soon glean the meaning, and my sap steepens with it:

*Man is coming.*

Man with an axe? I hope not. I hope Wind would have told me if it saw a man coming my way with an axe.

Soon after Wind departs, a young man comes up the path between my distant relations on the other side of the field. He leads a mare with a white star on her forehead by the reins. No axe. I stretch my branches into the sky and sun, hoping they'll see my shade and rest here.

The mare shudders with every step, her left hind foot only tapping the ground as she hobbles alongside her master. She still wears a saddle, and sweat darkens her hide in swathes. The young man looks at the ground, shoulders curved forward, his hands on the bridle and reins ribbed white.

Though he never looks up, he crosses the field straight over to me and stops, panting, as if he also suffers a broken leg. Head still down, he faces his horse, rubbing a hand down her rippling neck. He wears no coat, his cravat askew. Burgundy spots stain his sage-green waistcoat and the cuffs of his white linen shirt.

The man speaks to himself, a croaking voice rising into the air, as if seeping out of the ground rather than from his lips:

“ ‘Hurry as fast as you can, the baby’s coming,’ Hanson said. ‘Alf said he’s never seen Karen like this. It wasn’t like this with the first two. Hurry, Dr. Baker.’ ”

He continues stroking the mare’s neck as he speaks.

“Healthy baby. Helga. What a name.” He chuckles, no strings of regret left hanging. “She’ll be strong, like her mother, brave lady.”



His hands drift from the mare's neck to her back, and he unbuckles the girth, swinging it onto the saddle before lifting it and the rug off and setting the tack in the grass at my roots.

"You did well, Star. Baby is healthy and well. Helga. You got to her in time. You did nothing wrong. You're a heroine, a Star. It was Hanson's fault, rushing us. No, he did what he had to." He shakes his head, leans against the horse's side. "Karen? Her time had come. Helga?" Chuckle. "She couldn't wait. She wanted to live."

He slides his revolver from its holster, releases the cylinder.

Now he lifts his head, and I see tears in his midnight-blue eyes, mirroring the clouds dozing in my branches. For all their gravity, laugh lines already prick the corners of the young man's eyes.

"Don't we all want to live? Not all. Even those with souls who never perish – crafted in secret places with the image of their Creator bound on their foreheads – even they succumb to despair... Beasts are wiser, willing to run for a baby who has never given them carrots; run until their leg twists, splits, breaks; and still goes on."

Tears laden his voice. "And I tried to stop you, Star, let you breathe, let you live, but you were the wiser. You knew you possessed no soul, but Helga did. You ran like a cloud in a storm, and now I shall meet Helga when heaven and earth pass away, but no reunion for Hiram Baker and Star."

He loads the cylinder, replaces it, jams the lever down.

The mare touches his arm with her nose. Wind stirs the trees off to my left, and I remember a story about an ancient willow by Plum Creek, felled in a storm many years ago.

"You ran for the baby, Star, and here I am wishing you were a nag."

He glances at me. "Rest well, Star, with your soulless brother."