



Hearts of Wood

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We endure.

AS THE SUN COMES UP OVER THE RIDGE, it paints my cousins first with its pastel light. The green gray of their canopies bristle with golden tips, and morning light steals its way through, warming their leaves as they turn to greet the sun.

The sky thaws from ice white to pale blue, and the mist rises slowly. A veil is lifted from us, spreading the glow to my brothers and sisters in their turn, then to me, and our blood begins to loosen in our limbs. We nod at each other in the breeze from the south and tend to our tenants and friends.

We are one village next to the other, and our branches are busy. In places, our fluids seep to feed the tiniest of the creepers and those that flutter prettily amongst us. Under our coverings, lizards scurry in ticklish ways, dodging the webs and many eyes of the eight-legged crawlers. Feathered ones use their pointed beaks to clear our coverings of mining beetles and foraging ants. And while the feathered ones feast, the furred ones sleep, a nights' hunting and nesting over until the sun goes down again, many hours from now.

When the sun comes over it is hard. There is a note in the breeze that comes from the north, bringing the scent of the land far beyond the vale. The odour of livestock, twitching their tails to bat the flies; and asphalt, heated and melting; and the dried dirt thirsty for rain. It also carries the signs of our further away cousins—the gusts carry their eucalypt, with mint and citric tangs freshening the air. The currents pick up our leaves and urge them to dance, at first playful, but increasingly more demanding. We begin to feel the force of this north

wind and feel now that it brings with it a kind of dusted electricity.

The sharp zest of ozone rends the air. There was a crack, a spear from the sky lit up a cousin on the ridge. There is a new scent in the air, first clean, and then dirty, the smell is a choking smell, a warning and a beacon. The cousin on the ridge is alight.

Cockatoos screech through the sky letting us all know that danger is close. There is something alive upon the hill, but it signals death. What began with one cousin is already spreading to his brothers and sisters, and their tenants flee, taking to the sky. The branches interconnected and intertwining, form a highway from limb to limb as life pours away from the orange and red carnage up on the slope. The heat is already moving through the crowds and leaving behind it blackening shapes. You cannot hear it, but there is screaming.

My sleeping friends are roused; limbed creatures, with fur or without, shake off their torpor to sniff the air, creep and then dash down my length and along my branches, seeking escape in an instinctive sprint for their lives. The crackle from the hill becomes a roar, but more pressing is the heat. It comes in a blast, forcing small beasts to wing. The air swarms with fugitives of flight, and runners swarm the ground beneath our feet like rivulets to the sea. Every living thing here has only one choice. Go.

Not we.

We brace for the blaze.

Billows of smoke tumble down the hill and rush over us in a turbulent wave. The flame follows fast, scours our surfaces first, and takes hold of our clothes. Infected all over, we burn, and the slower tenants in our sleeves arch their backs and submit to their fates. In our favour, the heat has created its own momentum, its own speed and weather. It is in a very great hurry.

The wildfire surges on, consuming and reducing us: cousins, brothers, sisters, all. Our crowns are devoured in seconds, and as we stand in our collective pyre, we begin to shed our outers. Flaking into piles below are the remnants of our wooded selves. Lost limbs crash onto the ground like corpses to a mass grave, and still the fire licks until all black turns gray and flies away in flakes.

But we resist. One of us here, another over there, will hold true. Among the many ligneous hearts, some will remain untouched—because we are steeped in our foundations. Our feet reach deep into the earth where we each hold our secrets and our coverings hide gems that ensure we live on. Beneath the surface are pockets of hope, our talismans of survival: epicormic buds which, when it seems we are gone, will bring us back from the dead.

This fire will burn fierce, but it will burn out.

The front passes us by, and we smoulder in silence, releasing our smoke to the ether and slowly the temperature among us drops. Our ashes are borne away by the wind and we are swept bare. Blackened, but not beaten, we bide our time.

At the barest sign of irrigation—today, tomorrow, soon—we will start to unfurl from underneath. White and then green shoots will force their way to the surface and curl out from our trunks, reaching for that burning, golden sun, and searching for air. Tendrils will grow in strength and in number until they are sturdy and strong, and once more fully clothed. They will again be a home for the web-makers, the ticklish tongue flickers, the foragers and hunters, the furred and feathered nesters who will inevitably return.

We endure. Withstanding the affront until the fire exhausts itself on our sheer number, our solidity and indivisibility. Together, we prevail. We are disfigured but not defeated. ❖