



Time of Men

-Jonathan Rift

The ancient hardwoods swayed gently in the warm summer breeze. The wind moved the leaves ever so slightly, causing a soft rustling. A bird lighted upon a branch, fluttered for a moment as it moved in the wind, then looked about. It opened its beak and cried out. Silently it sat, listening for a response. When none came, the cry was repeated, more insistent this time. A kindred soul had to be found. After a short wait, the bird returned to the air, flying with the wind.

Below the forest's vaulted ceiling, sunlight filtered down to the leaf-covered floor. There, sitting beside a tree, was a boy. Tears streaked his face and his breaths came in quick sobs. The animals of the forest heard the crying and hid, afraid of a possible predator. The trees however, silently watched, either unable or unwilling to help.

The child looked up, part of him hoping to see his father leaning on his ax. He would look at his poor lost son and say, "Now why are you crying? There's no need. You weren't lost at all. I knew where you were all the time." Then he would pick Michael up and hug him so tight that it would feel as though Michael couldn't breath...but he wouldn't mind. Instead, all Michael saw were the wide trunks of oaks.

Michael closed his eyes again, trying to deny that he was lost. As he did, he heard something. A high, wavering note that carried far through the forest. Michael wiped his eyes with the palms of his hands. He slowly stood and listened for the sound to occur again.

When he was afraid that he had not heard anything after all, the sound came again. There was more than a single note now. It was a song. A slow sad song that sent chills down his spine and stirred something in his spirit. It was unmistakably mournful, yet insistent. Quietly, Michael followed it.

He found it hard to follow. Just when he thought he knew where it was coming from, it seemed to move. Sometimes fleeing before him, sometimes coming from behind. He was further into the forest now. In the distance, he could see a single form sitting upon a large rock formation. As he drew closer, he could see that the mournful music was being played by the figure on a type of wooden recorder. It was a child the same age as Michael.

Michael approached slowly, enthralled by the music. His foot snapped a twig, betraying his presence. The child stopped playing and looked up. Tears streamed down narrow face of the girl on the stone. Her dark hair hung below her shoulders onto her drab robe. She looked at Michael with dark, tear filled eyes. Her hair, eyes, and clothing sharply contrasted her pale skin.

"I...I'm sorry," stammered Michael. "I just wanted to listen."

The girl slowly nodded and smiled. She motioned to Michael to come nearer. He took a hesitant step, she came and sat beside her.

He had forgotten about being lost as he clambered up onto the large flat stone. Overhead, the sun shone through an opening between the tree tops, warming the rock. The girl watched Michael closely, curiously.

"Hi," he said, totally at ease beside her. "I'm Michael. What's your name?"

The girl didn't answer. She looked down as though ashamed, then suddenly looked up and offered him the recorder. He gently picked up the recorder and looked at it quickly, then gave it back. She smiled shyly, then handed it back to him. She tilted her head to one side, then made the motions in the air as though playing it. Michael started to tell her that he didn't know how to play, but her

insistent look stilled him. He slowly put it to his lips and blew gently.

A high, piercing sound issued forth, sounding nothing like the haunting sounds she had made. She laughed quickly, and the tones sounded like the music she had made. Beautiful, stirring, yet sad.

Michael blushed and handed the recorder back to her quickly. "I can't play."

She laughed again and Michael smiled widely. As he watched, she leapt from her seat and ran lightly toward a tree. Michael called out to her, but she just kept running. She knelt by a tree, turned, and rushed back. In her hands, instead of the recorder, she held a shallow bowl filled with raspberries. She offered them to Michael expectantly.

"Thanks."

Michael took some and only when he had tasted them did he realize how hungry he had been. "Aren't you hungry?" Michael asked. The girl pressed her lips together and reached for a raspberry. She looked at the berry, then Michael. Slowly she put it into she mouth. Her face con-

torted immediately as she bit into the berry and tasted its bitterness, but a glow appeared in her eyes once the bitterness had faded and the sweet taste remained. She reached for more.

When the berries were gone, Michael lay back onto the rock, suddenly tired. The girl watched him and mimicked his action, although not appearing tired. When he yawned, she did her best to imitate him, producing a humorous expression on her face. Michael's breathing grew slower and deeper until he was asleep. The girl lay beside him for several minutes with her eyes closed, then opened them. She watched him while he slept, intent on his every move. Even when his father found him, she watched.

"Where'd the girl go?" Michael cried, looking about.

But there was no girl, no recorder, no berries, no bowl. She was hidden from all who refused to see. Michael looked about in confusion, not wanting to leave the rock. All he could see were the trees and all he could hear was the wind of evening in the tree tops.

But she watched, just as she always had.

