



Adahy watched the shadows slink like poison through the streets. From his position high above the village, and with the training that he had already received from his father, he clearly marked their movements as they did their best to merge with the pools of darkness cast by the moonlight. Every now and again, one of them would leap on top of one of the crude homes of the villagers, scurrying around on the rooftop for moments before rejoining its brothers on the streets. Adahy had been taught that such activities were meant to breed fear, and from fear generate the chaos of panic, which would make the shadows' task all the easier.

All of the tribes that Adahy's people had contact with worshipped a different totem animal - the Leone worshipped the lion, the Tytonidae the owl. However, the Wolves were more than just another tribe who had picked a particularly vicious animal to associate themselves with. Even from this distance, Adahy could make out that the Wolves were not quite human. Sometimes they walked on two legs, sometimes running on all fours. Despite the clear humanoid shape of their limbs, they acted more like animals as they prowled through the village below, scratching at doors and sniffing for food, doing what they could to gain entry into the guarded homes.

The villagers of the forest had long ago learnt how to protect themselves from the Wolves, locking themselves away beneath the earth when darkness fell. Further trickery had been added to their tactics across the years, and often some homes would be abandoned altogether, or offerings of fresh meat were left for the Wolves to sate their hunger. Alas, it was not mere hunger for food that led the Wolves to hunt. It was the hunt itself, and the thrill of the kill. A child's scream would be all that it would take to direct this band to an individual house, and then it would become a war between Wolf claws and the carpenter's door. Adahy was to defend these people. It was his calling to hunt the hunters, to be the thing that the beasts that stalked the darkness feared. This was Adahy's first time outside at night, and he was terrified.

Down below, the shadows continued to roam the streets, but Adahy was beginning to see a pattern form in their movements. All dwellings were getting attention from the Wolves, but more and more of them paused to sniff and claw at the cottage beside the blacksmiths. Adahy tutted again at the fact that the smithy's chimney was still coughing forth smoke from the dying embers of its forge. Did they not know that such a signal would surely draw attention to their home? He would have to have an envoy sent to the village in the morning to chastise them for their slovenliness.

"Where iz he? I see no one," came the frustrated call of Celso Dulio, an envoy from the Muridae people from the grasslands to the south of the forest.

The two guardsmen who were assigned to him motioned for silence.

"I want to know where 'e iz," the little man continued in his strong, buzzing accent. "Why elze would I be freezing my balls off out 'ere except to see thiz great god in action."

This further outburst only awarded him with a thump from one of the guards' spear shafts, which he wisely did not respond to.

"He's no god," Adahy muttered under his breath, turning again to look down at the ant-like shadows. "He's a king. And a hero."

Celso's people worshipped the mouse, and as such, Celso was clothed in grey furs and a ceremonial hood that was shaped to look like his people's totem animal. Maedoc, Adahy's whipping boy and closest friend, joked that the diplomat must have had a thousand mice killed to make his clothing for this journey. Adahy suspected that moles were actually the unwilling donors. His own people, the Corvae, were fortunate their totem animal, the magpie, left plenty of feathers on the forest floor. Looking around him now, he felt proud at the sight of his Magpie Guard in their long black and white feathered cloaks, matching his own, and their dull black helmets.

Only Maedoc stood out, wrapped in a thin grey woollen cloak, with a basic tunic on underneath, as befitted his lower-born station. The scrawny, wild-eyed young man had grown up with Adahy at the Eyrie, yet Maedoc was not of noble blood. It would not have been fitting for a prince of the Eyrie to be beaten when he misbehaved, so instead Adahy had been allowed to befriend this young orphan, and it was Maedoc who had been punished when Adahy did something wrong. Many years had passed since Maedoc had last suffered because of Adahy's actions - both because of their age, and Adahy's fearful obedience to his father - yet Maedoc remained a constant presence at the young prince's side.

"Damned Mouse is going to get us all killed," Maedoc confided with Adahy, rubbing his arms in a vain attempt to generate heat inside his cloak.

Adahy could not disagree with his childhood friend. Today was to be an important part of his own training, to witness what he would eventually be called upon to do. It was unfortunate that the visiting Muridae had caught wind of what was afoot in the Eyrie and had pressed to be allowed to attend.

*Those who are not of the forest cannot understand the dangers that night holds here. The Mouse thinks of its squabbles with the Serpent and the Owl and assumes that their conflicts are mirrored the world over. The Wolves are different. They are not human, they cannot be reasoned with, and they have very good hearing.*

The Magpie Guard stiffened, snapping Adahy out of his thoughts and drawing attention to the distant scene. The Wolves were clearly converging on the blacksmith's hut now, with a number of them prowling on the roof and the rest scratching at the walls on the streets below. By Adahy's count, there were about a dozen of them down there, but their frenzied movement made it hard to track them with complete success. However, what had generated a response from the guardsmen was the appearance of another shadow, this time on the roof of a building to the north of the small village. This figure moved slowly, more precisely, and by its careful steps made it clear that it wanted to remain hidden from the violent throng. Furthermore, this shadow was considerably larger than those cast by the individual Wolves, and seemed to ripple in the breeze.

"By Alfrond's whiskers, what in the hells iz he doing?" Celso gasped, completely abandoning his composure in the tension of the moment. "He iz down there alone? Those things will tear him apart."

A guardsman gripped the Mouse by the throat and thrust him to the earth. "You speak again and I put this through you," he thumped the butt of his spear onto the earth in front of Celso. "Get yourself killed in your own time, we will not let you endanger the young prince."

Adahy, however, was not interested in what was happening up on the ridge, his eyes were fixed on the village, hands clenched tight on his clammy skin.

As the large shadow jumped to another rooftop, attempting to get closer to the cottage, which was now under clear assault, it was evident from the reaction of the Wolves that they had spotted the newcomer. Like a wasp swarm, they moved as one towards the cottage the intruder was currently on top of. Realising that he had no other choice, the shadow that was Adahy's father raised his weapons and jumped into the oncoming mob.

At this moment, the moon was shrouded by a cloud.

All hope of continuing to watch the village scene was hopeless, as without the moonlight only the whitewash of the distant cottage walls was vaguely visible. Worse still was the fact that the Muridae diplomat began to scream.

"E is dead, 'e is dead - flee while you can!"

The Mouse had clearly escaped from his captor, as evidenced by the cursing of the guardsmen as they stumbled about in the starlight.

"Artemis take you, put a damned spear into the Mouse's throat before he gives us away."

Adahy ignored the commotion, instead straining his eyes towards the spot where he last saw his father alive. Taking pity on him, the moon unveiled herself again, gifting Adahy sight of the devastation down at the village. Black shadows, unmoving, littered the muddy streets, and only two figures remained, one clearly Adahy's father, the Magpie King. The last remaining Wolf was on the other side of the settlement from his pursuer, but made the fatal error of turning to cast a growl back at the assassin before melting into the forest. In the time it took Adahy to gasp, the Magpie King was beside his foe. A sharp flicking movement caused the top of the Wolf's shadow to fall to the streets below, quickly followed by the rest of its body.

"I don't believe it. One dozen of them and he bested them in zeconds. The man is incredible, he..." The rest of Celso's sentence of praise died in his throat as it was opened up by the point of a Magpie Guard spear. In death, the diplomat was finally silent.

"Count the bodies. I can only find ten. I read twelve before the clouds came. Can anyone see the others?"

"Are you certain? I thought there were only eleven."

"There are still only ten bodies, damn it. Take the prince and flee."

The warning came too late as a dark, hulking mass of fur and fangs leapt from the foliage, disembowelling the guard captain with a single swipe.

Adahy had never seen a Wolf up close before. The creature's body was roughly humanoid, but it seemed disproportionately muscular, with every sinew of gristle standing out and flexing on the thin leather of its belly. The rest of the creature was covered in dark, thick fur which sprouted from it like legs from a spider. Adahy faced the harbinger of his death with a detached curiosity, all at once wanting to take in as much information about this nightmarish figure, but also keenly aware of his impending and violent demise.

As the captain's body slowly fell, steam rising from his freed warm innards, Adahy peered into the face of the beast, grey eyes and dark fangs reflecting the now-menacing moonlight. It flexed its fingers and lowered its gaze to regard Adahy, emitting a grunting laugh. It knew who Adahy was.

The prince closed his eyes, waiting for the end.

A boyish scream pierced Adahy's serenity. He opened his eyes to the sight of Maedoc falling to the ground, having intercepted a killing blow that was meant for the prince. A thud to his right signified the arrival of a second Wolf who began to tear apart the remainder of the guard. The first creature moved closer, its lethal grin betraying the pleasure that it took in stalking the young prince.

*Magpie Spirit, give me the strength to die with fight in my heart,* Adahy prayed, yet he remained rooted to the spot. A spreading warmth in his undergarments alerted him to the fact that he had just soiled himself. He was going to die a coward.

And then the Magpie King was there. Adahy's father was just a man, but in the dark with his feathered cloak swirling about him, he seemed like a giant. In each hand he wielded two giant black iron sickles, a single one too heavy for Adahy to hold aloft for any length of time. His key distinguishing feature, however, was the mask that he wore to cover his face. The decorative iron helm protruded forward and down, mimicking the beak of a Magpie, and was connected to the king's cloak by a matching mane of black and white Magpie feathers. When he wore it Adahy's father stopped being human and took on the mantle of his ancestors, pledged to protect the Corvae and the forest.

The Wolf moved too slowly, and in a graceful dance the Magpie King breezed past it, moving to intercept the second while the first Wolf's torso slid into two halves. The last remaining guardsmen had managed to keep the final Wolf at bay with their spears and the sacrifice of two of their number. In a smooth movement, the King reached his sickle forward and opened the beast up.

Then the Magpie King was at his son's side. "Are you hurt?" The uncanny utterance of those tender words from such an imposing figure was ignored due to how welcome they were.

"Father," Adahy began, and then to his shame he embraced the Magpie King and sobbed openly.

"My lord..." This spluttered address came from Maedoc, who miraculously had survived the Wolf's blow, but his torn face would never recover.

"Quick boy," the Magpie King commanded, "see to my son. There will be more on their way, and our numbers are much depleted."

Maedoc looked briefly at his master in shock at being asked to continue his duties with half of his face hanging off, but with a muttered, "Yes sire," he thrust himself under the shoulder of a still-sobbing Adahy and limped his way in the direction of the Eyrie.

"What happened here?" Adahy could hear his father query in the direction of Celso's corpse.

"Mouse wouldn't shut up, led the Wolves right to us," came the reply.

"What a shame," the Magpie King's gravelled tones continued, "that the Wolves took him first."

A pregnant pause was followed by the remaining guardsmen's affirmations, but Adahy was already miles away. He was a coward, and he would have died a coward tonight. Even poor Maedoc, a slave boy, had more courage than the young prince.

*I will never be worthy of taking the mantle of the Magpie King when my father is gone.*

