



THEY MOSTLY
COME OUT
AT
NIGHT

BENEDICT PATRICK

CHAPTER ONE

ONE

Splintered wood, teeth and claws, blood in the night. Lonan had seen these events so many times before. He knew exactly what was coming.

“Can’t you get him to shut up?” The voice belonged to Lonan’s father. This was a dream about that horrible night eight years ago, and back then, Lonan had been unable to stop screaming.

His father grabbed him roughly by the shoulders. “Boy, you have to stop. They are above us, we can hear them through the floor. You will lead them straight to us.”

Lonan was a young man now, but could not help the guilt he still felt about that night. He had known that to survive the dark, he should be silent. If a child needed to cry, they did so with their head tucked under their pillow. But Lonan also knew that back then, back eight years ago, he was desperately trying to tell them all something.

Nobody had listened.

“I don’t want to do this,” his father said, before slapping young Lonan across the face with the back of his hand.

That was the last exchange that took place between Lonan and his father before the cellar door cracked open and the creatures took his father’s life.

As always, it was as those sinister clawed hands reached into the cellar that Lonan woke up. The dawn bell was ringing, signalling it was safe to go outside. Lonan knew he was going to be in a foul

mood after his dream, so he chose to slink out of the cellar and make his way into the forest without having to speak to anyone.

Most of the village hated Lonan. Even now, years later, they blamed him for the events of that awful night, for the multiple breaches and the lives that had been lost. It had easily been the worst night in Smithsdown's history. The villagers were right about one thing - there was somebody to blame for those events, but it was not Lonan. However, back then, nobody had wanted to listen to the boy who they believed had led the monsters to their doors, and now nobody wanted to listen to the man he had become.

Lonan made his way into the forest because he had roots and herbs to gather for the village healer. However, as often happened after he dreamt of his father, Lonan instead wasted the day away dealing with his anger, taking it out on the forest so as not to mistreat the few in the village who still cared for him.

As the sun began to fall, Lonan returned home, eager to see the village buildings before the sky darkened. As he crossed the river that ran close to Smithsdown, he stopped, looking downstream. There in the distance was Branwen, the woman who used to be Lonan's closest friend.

On seeing her, Lonan quickly hid in the bushes. Branwen had not welcomed the sight of him for a long time. Out of all of the villagers, it was she who hated him the most.

What's she doing? It'll be dark soon, and they'll be coming. Why is she still here?

From his crouching position in the bushes, Lonan strained his neck upwards to look at the setting sun. In truth, it was still around two hours until nightfall, which gave her and him plenty of time to return to the village and to safety. However, like many of those who lived in the forest, the hairs on the back of Lonan's neck always stood on end when the sun began to fall. Worried, he turned to look at the young woman he was hiding from.

When they were children, they had spent as much time together as possible, playing on the village green or in the wild of the woods. But now...

Now, Branwen despised Lonan most of all. He knew they could never have a future together anymore, all because Lonan had been blamed for a crime committed by another.

Worst of all, Lonan's boyish affections for Branwen had changed too. His memories of his childhood friendship with her

were precious to him, and as he had grown into a man, his feelings of affection towards her had deepened. This was why her attitude towards him hurt so much.

He gave a small breath of relief when he saw Branwen finally gather her washing, adjust the small bundle she held swaddled to her chest, and left for home. Once she had disappeared from sight, Lonan stood, stretching his thin legs and ruffling his scruffy, dark hair to loose any brambles that had become tangled in it. It had been a number of weeks since he had last seen Branwen. Even now, he dared not get too close. His battered heart could not cope with the inevitable look of loathing she would give him. Worse still were the recent changes in Branwen's life. Lonan had been actively avoiding seeing her because he feared that the sight of Branwen and her newborn baby would finally convince his heart to give up on the chance of ever being able to be in her life again.

His journey back home after a day foraging in the woods brought him past families whose talents contributed to the endurance of the village as a whole - seamstresses, tinkers, fishermen, pottery makers - and all gave Lonan dark looks as he walked, some opting to include a sneer or a whispered comment to their companions at the sight of him.

The village itself was unremarkable. It was made up of a selection of about a dozen stone, wood and thatch buildings, home to as many families. The most prominent building in the village was its titular smith, and as always Lonan gave it a wide berth. He travelled west of the main buildings of the village, doing his best to avoid the busier central area.

Dragging his heels, he finally made his way to his mother's cottage. He gave himself a few moments at the doorway, pulling in a deep breath before entering.

The cottage was dark, lit only by the small tease of natural light that made its way into the building via two windows set into the east and west walls, and by the coals in the fireplace opposite the doorway. The stone walls provided the family with only one room, as was common in Smithsdown, and as a result the room was very busy. It was dominated by the large table in the centre of it, currently covered in a number of pots and plates that his mother was using to prepare dinner over the fire. These would soon be cleared away in time for the meal, and as usual Lonan would uninvite himself. Lonan's mother kept her back to him, not

acknowledging his entrance. He was used to this response, and instead turned to the owner of the blonde curls whom he spied crouching behind some grain sacks off to his left.

As he made his way over to see his sister, Lonan dropped a hemp bag onto the kitchen table with a small thud. "Found a family of mushrooms. Thought they might be different for you both."

His mother's head turned slightly to glance at the parcel, but otherwise she did not respond.

Lonan tossed a smaller bag to his sister. "Here you are, don't gobble them all in one go."

"Berries?" Aileen asked, wrinkling up her nose as she picked up one of the small fruits and squashed it between her fingers, letting the purple juice dribble down her sleeve. Lonan put his hand on her head and gave his sister a playful push, just enough to force her off her knees and onto her bottom. "Blueberries, stupid. Good for eating, and for making a mess." He pointed a finger at her face to suggest he was getting her into trouble, but the playfulness in his eyes betrayed his true intent. "And I gave you them for eating, so no messing, you hear?"

His sister giggled in reply, plunging her fingers into the bag and squashing a sticky mass into her mouth, prompting her to let out a large chortle.

Like a mother hen suddenly alerted to her brood's peril, Aileen's laughs prompted Lonan's mother's immediate reaction. She dropped the copper ladle that she was stirring her stew with, allowing it to tip up in the pot, sending it and a generous amount of food careening to the floor. With a stern face she rushed over to her daughter, shoving Lonan out of her path.

"What is that?" she barked at Lonan, her eyes never leaving her daughter's mouth, which was now pinched between a calloused forefinger and thumb. "What have you given her now?"

"Poison, of course. Thought it was about time we got rid of her." Lonan's reply was laced with spite, but he made sure to catch Aileen's eye so she knew he was not serious. He should not have worried - his sister was used to how the rest of her family interacted by now.

His mother gathered a lick of purple juice on her finger and placed it on her tongue, sneering her lips in response to the sharp sweetness of the fruit. She chose this moment to finally look at her

son, the glower in her eyes showing that she was clearly unimpressed with his gift.

Lonan's lips pursed at his mother's disapproving gaze. The blood boiling behind his eyes urged him to say something to her, to invite her into an argument. History had shown him that his mother was more than willing to fight. But Lohan had long since learnt the cost of these arguments, how hollow and alone they made him feel afterwards, so he bit his tongue and said nothing. Lohan still loved his mother even if she was unable to love him back.

His mother swiftly gathered the remaining fruit into the pouch and hurried back to repair the damage left at the abandoned cooking pot.

"Don't you have somewhere else to be?" Again, this was uttered without looking at her son. Instead, her eyes were focused on the meal.

"You know I've nothing better to do than enjoy our witty banter," Lohan shot back, regretting the harshness of his reply instantly. He had never heard a kind word from his mother, never even seen her smile, since the night that his father had been killed. Her love for Lohan had died that night too, and Lohan struggled to remind himself that this was not truly her fault. She believed that Lohan had been responsible for the death of the man that she loved, a lie that the rest of the village was also guilty of believing.

Before leaving, he knelt down to Aileen again, giving her a heartfelt hug, enjoying the feel of her blonde curls tickling his ears. "Magpie King protect you," he whispered into her ear.

He pulled back to look at his sister and was greeted by a face full of curiosity. "What's up, spud?"

"Is he real? Really? Niall Tumulty says there's no such thing, like bears and dragons."

Lohan gave a knowing grin. "The Tumulty boys know nothing. 'Course he's real. Who else looks after us at night?"

This was the response his sister was looking for and she gave her brother a stronger hug before he got up to leave. By now, a bowl of stew was waiting for him on the table. He picked it up and left the cottage without further disturbing his mother, fearful of further darkening her mood.

Once outside, Lohan's eyes went immediately to the sky. It was getting darker - he gave it less than an hour before nightfall. He

trudged slowly down the village paths, gathering big chunks of stew onto his spoon before gulping it down his throat. It was mostly grain, but a mix of carrot, trace amounts of bacon and a healthy assortment of herbs served to turn it into an interesting meal. Lonan's mother no longer loved him, but he could still enjoy the benefits of her Knack for cooking. It was a good skill to have in the family, but unfortunately it did not provide them much to barter with. His mother was certainly not the only cooking Knack in the village.

He marched in a circle around the village, giving the Tumulty boys an exaggerated nod as he passed by them coming back from the day's harvest.

"Knackless," Callum muttered in return, a clear insult.

Otherwise, they ignored him, which was probably the best response Lonan could have hoped for. They were a family of farming Knacks, experts in sowing and reaping, and this made them indispensable for life in the village. They did not let their importance go to their heads and had the reputation of being a friendly, generous bunch. Lonan was the exception to this rule.

Giving himself time to finish his meal, Lonan quietly settled outside the north window of the Hammer household. Smithsdown had no storytelling Knacks, not any more, but Grandfather Hammer still knew a fine selection of tales and, best of all, he was loud. It was not uncommon for him to recount one to his grandchildren before they locked down for the night, and as luck would have it, he was beginning a tale right now. It was the story of Wishpoosh, the giant beaver. Not one of Lonan's favourites, he had heard it so many times before, but one of the young Hammers often requested it. However, it did have Artemis in it, and it was tales of Artemis that Lonan preferred. That sly man was ever the outsider, yet never let anyone talk down to him or deny him anything. Lonan rolled his eyes at the screams of the Hammer grandchildren as Artemis yet again tricked Wishpoosh into swallowing him whole. Lonan chose this moment to take his final walk of the evening, not needing to stick around to hear the end of the tale.

He paused briefly outside the blacksmiths. This was a building he dare not look at directly for fear of his own reactions to the sight of it. So many of Lonan's formative years had been spent inside it, watching his father beat metal into pots, cauldrons,

weapons and decorative items. The sounds of the smithy - the clang of hammer onto anvil-pressed iron, the hissing protest of water as angry metal was lowered into it, the crackling of coal in the forge - had been a balm to Lonan as he had watched his father's powerful Knack at work. When he had been truly focused, Lonan had seen his father's eyes turn amber and sparks fly from them to mirror those he crafted by the beating of his hammer, the sign of a truly potent Knack. The other families of Smithsdown provided for all of the inhabitants of the village, but it was Lonan's father's skill, and the skill of his father before him, that had made Smithsdown just as important to all of the Corvae people, or so Mother Ogma often told Lonan. In the days when people had moved more freely throughout the forest, other villages had sent envoys on day-long treks to place an order with the Anvil family. It was said that the Magpie King himself had regularly sent his people from the Eyrie to claim Lonan's grandfather's taxes in the form of wrought-iron decorations or weaponry, but the last contact with the Eyrie had been made before Lonan's lifetime.

His father's Knack and his smithy should have been Lonan's inheritance. Instead, Lonan had to settle for standing outside this building and listening to the fumbling crashing of a hammer being slapped against abused copper, the resulting tune a bastardisation of the skillful notes his father used to play. Knowing it was a foolish act, Lonan could not help but turn his head to catch sight of Jarleth Quarry, wearing Lonan's father's leather apron, pummelling away in the workshop. The curly-haired young man looked up, caught Lonan's eye and flashed him a knowing, taunting grin.

Lonan snapped his gaze away from the smithy, spat the remnants of his stew onto the muddy path, and took off. His fists were tight and shaking, and as Lonan focused on the path in front of him, he had to will his rage to dissipate before he entered Mother Ogma's house. She could not abide his fits of anger.

Quarry had no Knack for metalwork. Neither did Lonan, for that matter. He had always hoped that time would allow the Knack to develop, someday giving him ammunition to claim his father's legacy back, but long before his twentieth birthday Lonan had given up the hope of any Knack materialising for him, let alone the potent one that his father had possessed. There was a lot of debate in the village about where Knacks came from. Most believed that

they were inherited, passed down from father to son by blood. Lonan believed differently. He believed that a Knack was earned, that it was a type of magic that somebody developed by applying themselves to a certain task with dedication and pride. After his father's death, Lonan had been denied the chance to practice blacksmithing, and as such had been denied the opportunity to develop his family's Knack.

It was clear to Lonan and to anyone else with experience of what a decent smithy could produce that Jarleth Quarry had never developed this Knack either. However, Lonan knew all too well that Quarry did have a Knack of his own, one that Lonan could not hope to combat or expose, and these facts made any attempt to reclaim the forge futile.

Wrapped up in his angry thoughts, Lonan was not paying attention to his surroundings. It was for this reason that he walked right up to Branwen Quarry, Jarleth's wife, just as she was leaving Mother Ogma's cottage. Lonan froze when he saw her so close. As much as his interactions with his mother pained him, this was the woman in the village who held the secret to hurting Lonan.

Branwen's scarred face - the entire right hand side of it had been mutilated - was as ugly as the emotions that she held towards Lonan, and was a constant reminder of the crime that she blamed him for. What he had feared seeing for the past few weeks, however, was now right in front of him. Swaddled to Branwen's chest was her newborn daughter, still unnamed for the first month, as was the village's custom. Lonan's eyes fell upon the babe, the child of the man that he hated and the woman that he loved, and he froze.

Branwen paused too when she sighted Lonan and her eyes narrowed to slits. She clutched her baby tighter to her chest.

"Anvil," was her only acknowledgement of him. The hate in Branwen's voice stabbed directly at Lonan's heart. He felt his anger force its way towards his throat again, threatening to come up with a retort to hide his pain. Lonan quickly quelled this urge, instead remaining silent as she stormed past.

As Branwen hurried away, she turned her head from him, to hide her face. Since her scarring, Branwen had done her best to avoid having to socialise with the rest of the village, doing what she could to conceal her face when she had no choice but to go outside. When Lonan looked at her, he often forgot that Branwen's

injury even existed. All he saw was the girl that should have been his wife. Another part of his future that Jarleth had stolen from him.

What shocked Lonan now was his reaction to the sight of the child. He had been so certain that seeing the baby - finally coming face to face with the reality that Branwen's life was attached to another - would let him give up on her. He had experienced the same fear after Branwen and Jarleth had been married. However, just as he had felt on that unhappy day two years ago, Lonan now realised that his heart was not ready to give up.

He knew that Branwen was not happy. Few people could be, Lonan was sure, sharing a life with Jarleth Quarry, but it was painfully obvious to Lonan that she hated her existence. She never smiled, she still spent most of her day down by the river, away from people. This was not the Branwen that Lonan had grown up with. Even the arrival of her daughter had done nothing to remove the scowl from her face. Deep within his heart, hiding but not forgotten, Lonan still held the belief that Branwen would have a much happier life if she was sharing it with him.

Lonan gave a small smile. *When will I learn? Why won't I let myself stop hoping?*

And then he thought for a moment, letting his smile fade from his face. *Or... maybe I should finally do something about these feelings. If my heart won't give up on the idea of a life with Branwen in it, can I do anything to make that life happen?*

He turned to look at Branwen, but she had already entered her own home.

First things first. I will get you to stop hating me. Somehow.

With that promise to himself, Lonan opened the door of Mother Ogma's cottage.

This cottage was similar in structure to Lonan's family home, but the interior decor was completely different. Where Lonan's mother had cooking utensils and furs hanging from the rafters - practical items for the daily life of a family - Mother Ogma's cottage had shelves of ointment pots and some rare glass jars filled with unusual substances gathered from the forest over the years. She had a few kitchen items close to her fireplace as well, but the majority of the roof space was dedicated to the hanging of a wide variety of drying or dried plants, most of which had been gathered by Lonan over the years. Because of this unusual garden, Mother

Ogma's cottage was overwhelmingly aromatic, with dozens of differing scents vying for the attention of a visitor's nostrils.

"Nice day dear?" Mother Ogma questioned, cheerfully arranging some dying marigolds in a vase by one of her windows.

"Oh yes, fantastic," Lonan replied dryly. "I do so love my work."

Mother Ogma rewarded Lonan's sarcasm with a friendly tutting. "Did you manage to find me some evening primrose?"

Lonan responded by taking a bunch of long stems with dainty blue petals and placing them on the kitchen table, before moving over to Harlow's chair. Although he was technically not a permanent resident of the cottage, Harlow had lived here since before Lonan could remember. Most of the children in the village assumed that Harlow was Mother Ogma's husband, but after spending time with her, Lonan found out that her husband had died many years ago. Mother Ogma had a Knack for healing, and nobody in the village had ever heard Harlow utter a single sound, or perform any kind of action without assistance. Mother Ogma had told Lonan that when she was younger, she had found the old man wandering alone in the forest, and has cared for him ever since. His groomed, long grey beard could not hide the mess of scars that made up his face, and only one lifeless eye remained to stare blankly at the flames licking up from the dying fire.

"Dearie," Mother Ogma said hesitantly, probing at the flowers that Lonan had brought her, "these aren't primroses, Lonan. I asked for yellow petals, not blue. Mother Cutter has a bad chest again, and these won't do anything to ease it for her."

Lonan sighed. "I'll get them tomorrow. Or do you want me to head back now?" He gave her a cheeky grin as he said this.

"We can try again tomorrow," she responded diplomatically. "Right now, I need your help to get everything below. The sun is setting."

Together they moved the kitchen table to the wall and pulled aside the aging deerskin that was covering the floor underneath. This unveiled a sturdy oak door set into the floor, reinforced heavily with iron supports. Bolted firmly to the door was a worn metal ring, which Lonan fed a rope into and, setting up a basic pulley system using a hook embedded into the eastern wall, he pulled the great door open. This granted them the familiar sight of the cellar, where three beds greeted them. Working together,

Lonan and Mother Ogma helped to guide Harlow down the wooden staircase that Eamon Cutter's father had fitted years ago. Most families chose to use ladders to get into and out of their cellars to conserve space below, but some opted for the staircase to help those who could not cope with the physical strain. Mother Ogma had had the wooden stairs fitted for Harlow before Lonan was born, but they both knew that she benefited from them just as much now.

As they tucked him into bed, Harlow let out a low moan, and Lonan flinched backwards. That was the first sound he had ever heard the old man utter, and Lonan had slept in the same room as him for the best part of the last five years.

"He's been doing that all day," Mother Ogma explained as she pulled the woollen blanket up to the old man's neck, running a soothing hand over his forehead. "It used to happen a lot when he first came to me, but he grew out of it when I still had fire in my hair. Very strange."

Lonan glanced uneasily at the thick beams above him, and at the same moment he heard the bell ring out across the village to signal five minutes before sunset. "I suppose you're going to tell me that it means something?" he said, attempting to hide from the squirming sensation that the bells often initiated in the pit of his stomach.

Mother Ogma smiled, turned to Lonan and now stroked his face reassuringly. "Mean something?"

Lonan shrugged her hand away from him, turning back towards the cellar stairs.

"Yes, I suspect it does. It means that those berries that you brought me yesterday are far too sweet for poor Harlow's gut at his age. Back to porridge for him I'm afraid. Now, shut us up, will you dear?"

Lonan walked up the stairs again and took a hold of the thick rope that was attached to the inside of the cellar door. With much effort he pulled the door closed on the cellar opening with a thud. Using the light from the candle that Mother Ogma had lit to guide him, Lonan proceeded to do up the many bolts that allowed them to lock the door from below. His job completed, Lonan prepared himself for bed, mumbled good night and crept under his covers. With everyone in place, Mother Ogma blew out the candle, plunging them all into darkness.

His eyes now useless, Lonan used his ears to reassure himself that everything outside was normal. The first few minutes were interrupted by two large thuds, which experience told Lonan were other homes in the village shutting their own cellar doors a little later than was recommended. Lonan knew that his mother's door would not be one of these - she always made sure that Aileen was secreted away well before the sunset bell. A steady wind was blowing and Lonan could hear the soothing rustling of it weaving through the thatch high above them, its constant whistling punctuated only by the occasional unusual grunt or moan from Harlow.

And then, suddenly, ears trained by a lifetime of listening for noises in the night, Lonan picked out a crunch of straw. The saliva dried up instantly in his mouth and he stopped breathing, doing all that he could to pick up anything further from the cottage roof. Sure enough, the first noise of impact was followed by three further crunching sounds, which Lonan knew was the straw that roofed the building snapping under the weight of something heavy walking across it. Lonan's heart screamed at every step, waiting in dread for any changes in noise that might signify the inside of the cottage being entered, but no more sounds came at all. After what seemed like an hour of tense silence, he heard Mother Ogma exhale in relief.

"They're out there, aren't they?" he asked her, already knowing the answer.

"Oh dearie, they're always out there. But the Magpie King protects us, so we need not fear."

Harlow gave another moan, and Lonan heard rustling which signified Mother Ogma moving over to the old man's bed to comfort him. Lonan turned around onto his side and shut his eyes to do his best to force sleep to come.

"He doesn't always protect us," he whispered to nobody in particular, and then his exhausted mind descended into darkness.



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 helms.

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 seconds. 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.

ARTEMIS AND THE THREE DAUGHTERS

A tale from the fireplaces of the Low Corvae.

Many seasons ago, seasons more than any in this village have seen, there lived an old pig farmer. He was a kind man whose wife had passed on many years ago through a sickness in her lungs, yet before she left she had gifted him with three beautiful daughters. These fine girls were the sole source of the farmer's happiness, and he guarded them jealously from the outside world. In turn, the farmer's daughters loved the old man more than life itself. They would tend to the pigs for him, prepare his food, tidy his home and sew his clothes, all to provide joy in the old man's world. But often, the girls would stare wistfully at the forest path that wound its way beside the fences of the pig farm, their minds filled with desire for the life that might exist for them outside of caring for their old father. This pang of curiosity would go unsatisfied until the youngest of the girls reached her sixteenth birthday.

When the autumn leaves laid a rust-strewn blanket throughout the dark forest, they brought trouble with them. This was not the evil of wolves or of birds, but instead was an untrustworthy, handsome smile and hard leathered feet, for the leaf fall brought sly Artemis with it. An apple in hand, travel sack thrown across his back and a patched cloak sheltering him from the misty winds, the trickster walked and skipped his way towards the farm. Indeed, he may very well have continued past it if the old farmer's youngest daughter had not decided to take that very moment to lean over the fencing of the pig sty to throw out the muck that the animals had produced for her on that day. Artemis took a greedy bite from his apple and decided he was hungrier than an apple would satisfy, so took it upon himself to go knock, knock, knocking on the old farmer's door.

The old man himself answered, and his eyes narrowed at the sight of handsome Artemis. The farmer did not like this confident stranger turning up on his doorstep, but could not ignore the

responsibilities of hospitality so he reluctantly invited sly Artemis into his home.

Artemis relished the reveal of the second and third daughters, both hard at work preparing supper for that night.

"You are welcome to sit and eat with us, of course," the farmer offered the stranger, "but I will ask my daughters to stand and watch us eat. They shall not feed until we have finished and you have left our table. These three girls are the only joy left to me in the world, and it would break my heart if a strange man stole them away from me under my own roof."

Artemis agreed wholeheartedly with the farmer's suggestion, and bowed to each of the daughters in turn, begging their forgiveness for delaying their meals. The girls smiled back at the stranger, causing a knot of dread to form in the farmer's gut.

After Artemis had dined, he rose from the table to allow the daughters to sate their hunger. As was custom, Artemis enquired for a basin so he could wash himself after a day of travelling. The farmer nodded, and ushered his girls to boil water for the stranger, filling a basin in front of the stove.

"However," the farmer warned, "whilst you bathe I shall ask my girls to leave the house and wait outside for you to finish. Their eyes have never before beheld another man's body, and they shall not do so tonight. These three girls are the only joy left to me in the world, and it would break my heart if a strange man stole them away from me under my own roof."

Artemis thanked the kind old man warmly, and apologised again to each of the daughters as they wrapped their shawls around their shoulders to help them brave the bite of the evening air while Artemis bathed. The girls smiled back at the stranger, forcing the knot in the farmer's gut to writhe like a starved rat.

The girls returned inside after Artemis had bathed and clothed himself again. Being as close as it was to moon rise at that time, the old farmer was obliged to offer Artemis lodgings for the night.

"However," the old farmer warned, "I can only offer you my barn for your rest this evening. There are two beds in this house, one for myself and the other for my daughters. I cannot trust another man to be under the same roof as my girls during the night. These three girls are the only joy left to me in the world, and it would break my heart if a strange man stole them away from me under my own roof."

Artemis was in complete agreement with the farmer, and thanked him humbly for the straw and roof to sleep under. As each daughter made her way to bed, Artemis gave them a kiss on the hand to wish them goodnight. In turn, each daughter again smiled at the stranger. The knot in the farmer's gut threatened to crawl up his gullet, leap out of his mouth and strangle the stranger where he stood, but the old man was satisfied to see the handsome man finally leave his home.

However, every smile that the farmer's daughters had given Artemis had just made the stranger want them more, and the final wanton glance from the youngest daughter as she closed the bedroom door behind her had made Artemis' mind up for him. As soon as the farmer had shut Artemis outside in the cold, the trickster began to hatch a plot. During his time in the old man's house, Artemis had noticed that the farmer's eyesight was very poor, and often asked his daughters to clarify what he was looking at. This gave Artemis an idea.

After a smoke on his pipe and a stiff drink, the farmer decided to turn himself in for bed. As was his routine, the farmer lit a candle and crept into his daughters' bedroom to kiss them goodnight. His girls were sleeping restlessly that night, shuffling and squirming under the covers. A result of this evening's intrusion, the farmer decided. He moved across the head of the bed, planting a soft kiss on the pink skin of each of his daughters in turn. Confident that his girls were safe under his roof, the farmer slept peacefully that night.

The daughters were not, of course, safe under his roof. While the old man had been smoking his pipe, Artemis had secreted the girls one after the other out of their bedroom window, replacing each in their bed with a piglet from the farmer's own herd. It would only be in the morning that the farmer would realise he had not kissed any of his daughters goodnight at all. While the piglets rested, the daughters were being seeded by Artemis in the barn, having their eyes opened to the life that existed beyond the pig farm fences.

By morning, the stranger was gone, leaving behind him only an old man's broken heart, three awakened appetites and three well-rested pigs.



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