

The

Wimsel Loop

Mike McGraw

-

Dave,

Cleaned out the rest of Hahm’s barn the other day, finally. Inconceivable amount of junk, as you can imagine. The auction guys (the ones who were brave enough to go in there, anyway) didn’t want to deal with half of it, and they take pretty much anything. Remember the table leg?

Found this (partial) book stuffed in a large wooden footlocker with a bunch of other odds and ends in the stuff they left behind. So now I’ve got all the leftovers to deal with too, on top of everything else. Like I needed that. I’m sure Hahm finds this funny, wherever he is now.

The kid’s obsessed with finding the rest of the book, and identifying the “teeth marks”. So much her mum, that one. She’s been bugging me all frigging week to send it to you because we don’t have “google” here (no, I don’t want you to explain it to me either). I told her that’s not really the kind of research you do, but I couldn’t exactly make her understand, since I don’t really understand what it is you do either, do I?

Anyway, let me know if you recognize the author, will you? She wants to know what happened to the kitten (in the story, I mean).

How’s Margie?

*- Bent*

The

-Whimsel Loope-

(14th draft)

*Ignatius Fallings-Worthy II*

Faint and false advanced praise for

the Whimsel Loope

*“... a white-hot mess of anthropomorphic nonsense, really. Still, I cannot help but keep turning just one more page, if only to discover what new literary outrages await around the bend...”*

***- Glassworks Daily Observer***

*“A fun read when you’re stuck in a Wyvern bunker for a few hours, with nothing else to do.”*

***- Rift Engineers Quasi-Monthly***

*“Overall: 72.8%. Mental age rating: 13-34. Words: 60,001.”*

***- Fictional Accounts Analysis Department (Area 77)***

*“The author – who wisely chooses to remain anonymous behind a cloud of quill names and alter-egos - does not seem to grasp even the simplest facets of the inner life of females (name a species). Typical.”*

***- Wytchfeld Falls Elder Tribune***

*“Pick a genre! Jeebus.”*

***- Garden Bridge School Literary Review***

***Journals of Ignatius Fallings-Worthy II :***

***On Following the Whimsel Loope***

*I have lately been taken*

*both to whither and to wonder*

*whether will I in more ways fare better*

*to walk with this self in its long looping line*

*topped high and full in great many measures*

*all in sufferable toils and careening adventures*

*Or rather to tread only the common directions*

*having bound in hand a peerless collection*

*of mortal lives lived large by myriad souls*

*so my written world becomes composed*

*instead and forever completely of those*

*With each their written reach*

*extended throughout time*

*by the longings, livings*

*and leavings of mine.*

*The writer‘s will wants for its reading*

*The reader’s will reaches for prose*

*The Wheel’s will needs both a top and a bottom*

*in this constant and calamitous chase and oppose.*

*My journals of these past two years have led me (I should have thought inevitably), to ask myself whether I have been more a reader or writer of journals during my own life, perhaps which is the better path for me now, given my time left in this world, and whether this is a particularly useful question.*

*In order to tell this tale in the manner I should wish to, I will need to confess up front that I did not in fact write the words of this journal, save for this introduction, and a very occasional margin note, when I simply could not help myself. I have put my name on the whole thing nonetheless. I was asked to do so, asked not to credit the original author directly, and asked not to concern myself in the reasons overmuch, for the story was being passed on to me as part of an artistic collaboration of sorts, a great many years in the making.*

*As someone who aspires to make art as I can, the mysterious nature of the stranger’s request, that I please plagiarize him (or her), only served to pique my curiosity all the more, and seal the deal in ink (and some blood, as it happens). I mean, once we had lawyered the whole thing into the ground, that is.*

*I hope these accounts find some mark, and inspire better journalists than I.*

**-** *IFW2*

Chapter 1

Onefoot, Awaiting a Wizard

The young Crow had become somewhat impatient by now, awaiting the Wizard slowly working his way across the low mountain’s misty heights.

Men seemed to have not yet mastered the art of walking about in nature at all, as far as she could tell. They were excellent at getting lost though, and practised it often. It was both frustrating and fascinating to her, watching them for hours as they moved in harried squiggles, there-and-back-again loops, and gentle, accidentally arcing paths, through tangled wildlands clearly designed to suggest they go elsewhere. She often surprised herself by her own curious concern for men, whenever she caught sight of one far afield from his dwelling. She considered people primarily an indoor species.

Most creatures just got well out of the way when the familiar, furtive rustle and crunch of boots on the earth announced, in spite of the traveller’s self-conscious care taken to conceal his passage through the neighbourhood, the presence of a Man on a Wilderness Trek.

Other, less skittish creatures were naturally drawn closer to investigate the sound of civilized folk caught out of their element. These were the creatures the young crow kept her left eye on, whenever men came trampling about. Her right eye, as always, was busily gazing into spaces neither mortal nor woodland creature could see.

The Crow was called Onefoot Down by the others, due to her habit of standing on one leg when she had a concern (she was on her left one, at the moment).

In the Crow world, Onefoot was a Seer. Strictly speaking, the title crows use among themselves is tricky to translate precisely, to the tongues of men. In the language these accounts have been written in, the most fitting word is more likely to be “Imaginer”, but when dealing with those not of Crowkind, they are simply Seers, to avoid creating unwanted confusion.

Seers are not so uncommon among crows, but uncommon enough to warrant identifying at an early age, so that the necessary precautions can be taken. It is the job of the extended crow family to prepare their gifted young for the perplexing visions that will vie for their attention throughout life, up until the eve of their mortal death. For Onefoot, that final day was nowhere close at hand, and so she had a lot left to See, and also Imagine.

It was common knowledge among the crows in the area that the gift had been visited upon Onefoot at an unusually early age. She was, as far as she knew, the earliest-identified Seer that any crow she had ever met had ever recalled meeting, or hearing about.

Her elder sister, Moremice Thankyoumuch, greatly enjoyed re-telling the story of how the freshly-hatched Onefoot (not yet named so, of course), at the moment both her eyes thought to open in unison, became instantly so overtaken with vivid, overlapping visions of close-at-hand worlds (both real and imagined), that she popped right away from her nest, tiny wings flapping in an excited panic, and flew straight down into a large, soft mound of colourful leaves, twigs, and coyote scat, waiting for her below. There, at the foot of Old Moss Grey Spirit, their family’s ancestral birthing tree, Onefoot was left to thrash about in a terrific tizzy for many long hours, all among the branches, poop, and fire-hued leaves, until she tired herself out completely, and fell into a long and fitful sleep.

It had been late October when she had taken the Big Hop (as Moremice called it). As was the custom when it came to welcoming a young Seer into the world, no crow was permitted to come near her during this period of her first revelations in the leaf pile. She needed to learn for herself how to direct her sight back toward the mortal realm, and so begin the life-long journey of mastering the ancient crow art of seeing from each eye independently.

To other animal kind, this tradition of early non-intervention seemed at times unnecessarily harsh, but crows know all too well that a Seer who cannot control her own visions - even at such a tender age - will grow to be a great danger to others over time. Thankfully, the hatchling soon managed to attune her sight, and on the second morning since falling from the nest, wiggled her way from the warm sanctuary of the leaf mound to find herself covered in filth, and surrounded by family. They had prepared a feast of crickets and berries for the occasion. It was a happy day for all.

That was late October, nearly two years ago now. Onefoot had become quite proficient at navigating her visions in that time. The lookout tree she was perched atop of at the moment was her favourite of the lookout trees she frequented, because things rarely came down from this side of the mountain, and so she was left mostly alone with her own thoughts, of which she had many.

Onefoot angled her head upward again toward the rounded crest, peering through the dense fog to where the Wizard had come to a swaying standstill.

His approach across the hilltop had taken most of that morning, and the crow was beginning to wonder if he had been out drinking late the previous night - or was perhaps suffering from some other illness of the mind that often plagues women and men - as his path up it had been alarmingly erratic. He had also spent a considerable amount of time standing near the summit itself, muttering nonsensically to an invisible companion named Will.

Onefoot could not see Will anywhere. Given she could see more things than most, this concerned her enough that she had to switch feet several more times.

The laws forbade any crow from contacting wayward travellers near the mountain, so the crow had simply waited, growing increasingly worried for the man’s safety, and also for the circumstances that had brought him there in the first place.

Witches, incidentally, had never had any issues traversing the squat summit, as far as she was aware. Then again, they rarely felt the desire or need to do so. They were too busy teaching their young, and preserving their lore, both of which were precious and vulnerable. This was a full-time job. Wandering around for the sake of getting lost - or in far worse trouble - was not really their thing.

Was the Wizard on a survey? Did he plan to build a road over *this* hill? He seemed smarter than that. The man was on some kind of mission - that seemed certain enough - but he was now clearly caught once again in the most dangerous glamour of the Hedge Wilds, and seemed to have forgotten his purpose there entirely.

A trio of field mice peered up at Onefoot from the base of a nearby tree stump. *They are from the North side of the mountain*, she thought. She recognized them, but did not recall their names. They had become annoyingly accustomed to feeling unthreatened by her. She was exceptionally keen when it came to sensing nearby danger of any kind, so the mice in these parts often hung around her when they felt like kicking back and taking it easy for a while. It ruffled the crow’s feathers a little that they didn’t think to at least act nervous in her presence. It would have been the polite thing to do.

Perhaps men’s need to periodically tempt disaster out in the natural world was nothing more than an evolutionary strategy to keep their population under control. Onefoot found it puzzling in any case. They certainly spent a good deal of time and energy going back and forth from one place to another, for reasons they often couldn’t or wouldn’t articulate, until they’d reached wherever it was they had been going, or had otherwise ended up arriving at.

According to crow Lore, the civilization of women and men could (more or less) be explained like so:

Men had a compulsive desire to wander (it was not the Lore’s place to explain why this was), which would drive them into the Hedge Wilds, in search of other places, perhaps better suited to soothe their wandering spirits. They learned to build roads over time to facilitate this activity, and structures made of wood, brick, and stone at the crossings of these roads. In these places, they could properly trade supplies and travelling advice with other men on journeys to or from places both new and old to them.

Around these structures, they planted delicious crops, built low barriers around those to ward off hungry woodland creatures displaced by all the construction, and then raised other creatures to be poor at climbing and jumping, so they could be kept inside the same barriers, to be eaten later.

The men would employ one another to guard and maintain all of these things, because some of them, being less inclined to the hard toil of it all, were more likely to simply take things from somebody else when they weren’t looking. This mistrust in their own nature drove some of their very greatest technological achievements, which was of dubious value to anybody, in the end.

At some point, if everyone had managed to settle into a somewhat safe routine in spite of it all, a number of them would soon grow impatient, and head back into the Wilds in order to build new roads to other, perhaps better, places. The women kept things from falling apart logistically during all this moving around, and taught their children how to grow up without permanent roots.

People otherwise conducted many more obscure and mysterious activities related to the planning, building, maintenance, and protection of these elaborate travel and food-storage networks, and when the roads from one tribe of wandering people began to intermingle with the roads from another, pretty much anything could happen. It wasn’t always good. Not at all.

All of this fascinated Onefoot to no end, for reasons she couldn’t clearly explain. Most crows simply thought of people as something to be avoided, or perhaps observed from a safe distance with mild, morbid curiosity, like a slowly spreading grassfire after a lightning storm.

This particular fellow in any event was expected by others of his kind, for reasons no doubt important to all concerned. Humans had by far the largest footprint of any creature she knew, relative to the actual size of their physical feet. When one of them chose to crest this particular hill, it was a significant portent of new possibilities, and for a Seer, that was something which could not be ignored.

The man had been standing still for approximately forty slow breaths now, swaying almost imperceptibly to the low frequency pulse of the hill’s heart. He seemed to her distressingly unaware of the danger that lay close by, at the hill’s rounded summit - the deep and dark pit the Deerkind in those parts called *Never-ever-approach-this-hole*. It was an open maw from which the hill’s breath could be felt most fully, and the Wizards who occasionally journeyed there could not see or think properly in that place, and so had never been able to study its true nature, or the implications of following the hill’s low, throbbing dirge to its real origin.

This man had come closer to the entrance than any of his kind had for years, just this very moment. Nothing good would come of him lingering there, she was sure of that. Twenty or thirty long strides forward and somewhat to his right, and he would never likely return, in fact. He hadn’t brought enough rope. Or weapons. He hadn’t brought any of either, in fact.

She was back on her right foot now.

Crows are often making decisions. They don’t particularly enjoy making decisions on behalf of others, especially for those not of their kind. *Especially* especially on behalf of wandering men, who generally cause a lot of unnecessary decision-making wherever they go. Many crows simply dismiss this extra mental work as the cost of having a nearby supply of garbage to rummage through, when food gets scarce. Just as many others are quick to point out the rather obvious irony in that, and once you get a bunch of crows arguing the subject of irony, you’re in for a long, loud discussion.

Onefoot, more than most, found decision-making particularly stressful. *Hoppingly stressful*, is what Moremice called it, whenever she meant to tease Onefoot, which was mostly all the time. Funny. That Onefoot found decisions stressful was not all so surprising really, considering how many more factors she had to allow for when making them. Moremice could not of course be expected to understand that, and so did not really try to. She had enough to worry about anyway.

This discomfort with decision-making was the main reason the young Seer spent most of her free time out here, lingering at the quiet periphery of her family’s territory. Decisions she made while patrolling the borderlands mostly involved if and when to announce the comings and goings of creatures (there was a well-established protocol for this, and so it required little thought), and on occasion, whether to harass an intruder, which was always a judgment call based on what she could see of their immediate intentions, as well as other things.

Now and then, she might accidentally happen upon some carrion, and would then feel obligated to bring it back to the family. Not her favourite task, but she understood its importance. She would not kill anything that had a heart. The others, recognizing that each crow is on their own unique journey, naturally never begrudged Onefoot this personal principle. Moremice made up for her sister’s lack of hunting in any event, and was quite happy to do so.

The man coughed thoughtfully, considering his next course of action. He looked as though he was about to sit down, to continue thinking.

*The Wizard is in great peril*, she thought. Something had pulsed along the root system nearest to the top; the mountain had awoken, and was paying far too much attention to the intruder now.

At a certain point, an absence of action is, for all intents and purposes, no different than action. Some decisions are simply intended for a particular crow to make, or to not make. Onefoot scanned her surroundings worriedly, but of course saw no-one else present or willing to make it, or not make it, for her.

Chapter 2

Oakely, Atop and Over an Odd Mountain

Oakely neared the crest of the massive, rounded hilltop, which was now densely blanketed by an unnatural fog.

From what direction had he ascended? Had he travelled in a straight line the entire way up, as was his intent, or veered off unknowingly in one strange manner or another? He didn’t know, and never, when ascending this particular hill, had he ever fully known. It was not for mortal men to know with true certainty, he believed, given its nature.

On one trip, he had even unwittingly descended the hill along the precise route he had just come up - through his own wide boot prints in fact, though the time that had elapsed between that ascent and the subsequent descent could not have allowed for it, in the mortal realm.

This hill did not exist in the mortal realm, however, but at the intersection of several. It was one of a handful in his own world that did so. Navigating slopes of this sort was never his strong point, a fact which the other guild engineers had always found satisfactorily entertaining. Engineers had blunt senses of humour - this was commonly known.

Oakely felt that gravitational anomalies in these unnatural places had unavoidable and disorienting effects on the mind. Elmur, his closest friend since they were both seven (how many decades ago that was, he’d long ago forgotten), claimed you could *smell* your way entirely over its crest, by observing the quality of the air, in all its nuances. The odours of the plants and animals, of course, were the easiest to discern (so Elmur claimed), but more important still, was the underlying aroma of the earth itself.

When considered in light of what one could learn of the known worlds’ distinctive seasonal cycles, these all could inform you of which direction through both place and possibility you were heading.

Presumably.

Elmur, it must be said, had the grandest, most impressive nose of any engineer Oakely had ever met, so it was small wonder *he* would say that.

In their youth, the friends had always taken to comparing personal characteristics, assigning numerical values to each, in order to measure which of the two was the best person. Valuations of body parts deemed to be of the most practical value were naturally their first rubrics. Elmur would score points for his nose every time, in spite of Oakely’s continuous and failed attempts to develop the size and capabilities of his own (a secret project which he would never admit to anyone that he had tried, or how).

Every aspect of their physical selves – and, as they grew older, aspects of their characters, when they came to recognize they had those as well – factored into the complex formulas they would devise and revise regularly, in order to calculate their respective scores in all of the relevant categories. In this way, they could effectively track who was the best, from one season to the next.

Some of the notable categories the friends came up with over the years included:

* First to kiss a girl (Oakley, by the age of 15, no contest)
* Longest time spent standing in one spot (They stopped scoring this one in their early twenties, once Oakely finally admitted that he could never, ever best Elmur at standing still)
* Most well-travelled engineer (Neither would become an engineer until they were much older, but once they had, Oakely won this every year, due in large part to his problem with standing still)
* Longest possible lifespan (Elmur, by about 25 to 27 years)
* Longest probable lifespan (they could never fully agree on a means of calculating this, but it remained an important topic of discussion)

There were many other categories adopted, modified, and retired over the years, including a few they did not openly discuss with others, or commit to print, being gentlemen of sorts.

They never stopped questioning and tweaking their formulas – which naturally became more complex and obscure as their mutual understanding of mathematics and astrology grew – and of course never once thought to question the value of the practice itself. To an engineer, Life and Measurement are very nearly the same thing.

In the absence of any preternatural ability to find his way around by scent alone, Oakely had developed a personal technique over the years for navigating the areas surrounding nexuses and other hazards, which he simply referred to as his Force of Will. Force of Will involved praying regularly to a fictional god (whom, in service of the obvious pun, he called Will) for the presence of mind to stay on task and not get turned around by external distractions, self doubt, fatigue, or dark witchcraft.

He was also, as it happened, exceedingly stubborn in both body and mind, so fortunately his false and personal god Will was not without power, and often came through for him when called upon, in spite of not (strictly speaking) being present for any of it.

These Will-bound prayers were always mumbled beneath his breath, to avoid attracting the attention or concern of creatures in the immediate area, and followed no formal conventions, as he reckoned there was little to no reason to go so far as creating those.

Many long minutes (or was it nearly an hour?) had passed now, and he sensed that he must be over the crest, since the slowly swirling fog that forever cloaked the hill’s upper half was wrapped now so close and thick about him as to render his sense of time and place of little practical value. The ground was only discernible by vague details passing close by, on either side of his boots. He was, for all he knew, walking entirely in place, as a stream of pebbles, roots, and twigs slid past him, moving steadily away from the hill’s crest, perhaps having collectively decided it best to not be up there after all.

He stopped, then waited a moment for his sense of balance to return. The air here was nearly liquid, and cooler now. He felt lightly covered in a cloying mist both inside and out, and a heady scent of earth, pine and rock had begun to settle over and adhere to his clothes and hair.

Distant bird sounds, a slight whistle of wind through the evergreens, from a direction he could not discern – from all directions. He tugged absently on his travelling cap.

*Don’t stand here too long*, Will cautioned, *you’ll get turned around again, somehow*, but Oakely needed to stop and think for a minute or two, and so he did. In spite of the stern warnings given all engineers regarding how not to linger this close to a nexus hill's summit, he wanted to observe the place for a short moment. The opportunity was too rare. He wished he could see and think well enough to take some proper notes.

There was something about the knot of world fabric gathered tightly in these places that gave the engineer a sensation of both standing utterly still, and also moving at an impossible speed, in all directions at once. An exhilarating vertigo, like an obscure clue to some obvious secret. This place had been waiting for him; it wanted to show him important things.

A mild wave of static trickled lightly over his skin, prickling the hair on his arms and neck, spreading down his spine, and outward, and everywhere. Every part of him was vibrating almost imperceptibly. He felt dense, but not heavy. Pinned gently in place. Comfortable.

*Wake up.*

Oakely was no longer breathing air at all, but only the fog, which felt now almost as thick as water, seeping into him, from the inside and out.

*You’ve been lured here.*

*Find the way down.*

His legs nearly sat him on the ground, then and there – an almost alarming notion – but a crow, somewhat below him and to the left, cawed loudly, four times; piercing sounds that jolted his thoughts back to the present moment, for the moment. His eyes (when had he closed those?) opened in an instant. He heard something large moving through the brush up ahead.

Oakely lurched himself forward and to the left, straining to reconnect his mind to the body he knew was still there, and made haste in the call’s direction, trusting in Will to not lead him face-first into the stabbing needles of a pine tree, or stumbling into a foot-wrenching rut in the ground. He had regained use of his muscles, but now had little real idea in what direction he was moving. Faith was the only compass he had to guide him anyway, now that he was over the crest and heading downward again. The descent would be a gamble, he was sure – more uncertain given his inability to know by exactly how much he’d gotten turned around on the way up.

He whistled once, and was answered by another short call from the bird, still some distance away. He adjusted his course again, and crashed through the brush blindly, toward where the sound had come from. His senses were beginning to grow somewhat soft and featureless, like the smooth, clinging mist flowing around and over him. At this point, descent in any direction would be preferable to remaining any longer near the top. He had simply pressed his luck too far, being up here this long. The mountain wanted him to keep climbing forever.

There was a loud cracking sound to his right, and half-startled, Oakely pitched sideways, his left foot going out from under him as he gave himself over to gravity, having no longer any idea of his own where up and down were located. He began to slide and then roll, seeing only blurred shapes spiralling past him through the pearly mist, as he tumbled between trees and over small rocks, gaining momentum quickly. He drew in his limbs as best he could, feeling and hearing objects in his pack and pockets jostling and breaking over one another.

The earth disappeared briefly from beneath him, and came back hard a moment later, knocking him breathless. Then he was, all at once, no longer in the fog.

Oakely waited a moment for his vision to clear, and the faint buzzing in his ears to subside. He found himself sprawled on the ground, twenty feet from the shoreline of a large, tranquil, blue-green lake. Surrounding it in the distance and on all sides were ridge lines of mixed soft and hardwood trees, the latter already beginning to turn the vibrant colours of early Autumn. He had been expelled from a wall of mist and evergreens behind and slightly above him.

A large crow stood upon a man-sized rock at the water’s edge. Pulled up next to the rock was a sizable boat, with what looked like an old outboard steam engine slung off the back.

Oakely gathered himself up from the ground, regarded the crow, nodded once. “Thanks for that”. The crow looked him up and down. It was standing on one foot.

Oakely’s woollen cap was hanging low on his head. He removed it, wiped his brow, and took in the shoreline. The trees here were large.

The crow shifted to its other foot and blinked at him three times, rather rapidly.

Looking back to the slopes he had just descended, the engineer could no longer see the hill’s crest, where he had been standing, only a moment before. It was just fog, trees, and then more fog, giving way gradually to the blue sky above. It was impossible to see exactly where the mountain began, and where it came to an end. He wasn’t sure how he had made it down so quickly, without being broken or impaled on something during the descent. He must have fallen several hundred feet through the trees, by his estimate. There were bruises and scratches over his exposed skin in a hundred places, but he was, miraculously, still in one piece.

The engineer looked down at the cap held in his hands. Was it... thicker than when he had put it on this morning? He looked back to the large crow, who was still regarding him sternly with the side of its head.

“I think I’ve shrunk a little”, he said.

The crow's eye was a black orb, neither confirming nor denying that he had, or had not, changed size. It seemed unnecessary to confirm it; everything here, now that Oakely had a chance to take a better look, did seem oddly large to him. His clothes were hanging off of his frame in a manner suggesting that he had, quite probably, shrunk to what he estimated to be 4/5ths of his former size.

“Can you take me to the Engineering Guild Hall?”. Oakely wished he had thought to draw a measurement line on his arm. He had read about this shrinking phenomenon in the books, but had not met anyone who had experienced it for themselves. What direction had he come down?

The crow spread its wings and hopped onto the boat’s bow. Oakely didn’t feel like spending any more time here than necessary, and so walked around to the back of the boat, giving the crow a respectful distance, and tossed his rucksack in. He hauled the craft from the shore, his loose, heavy pant legs dragging behind him in the water, and then, somewhat awkwardly, rolled himself over the side and into the thing. This sent the boat bobbing gently to and fro as it slowly drifted away from the lake’s shore. The crow’s wings flapped as it shifted to maintain its balance at the front.

Oakely soon had the engine stoked, and they began to churn toward the middle of the lake, trailing a puffy grey cloud of ash as they went. By the time they had reached halfway to the lake’s centre, the engineer was beginning to have trouble seeing over the gunnels, and he had to remove his old vest, heavy shirt, and boots to avoid getting tangled up in them. His pants were huge now. He was still shrinking, and rather quickly. He bundled his things at the bottom of the boat for bedding, and lay down, gazing upward through the wispy ash plumes.

The sky above was a clear, brilliant blue, and the sun was at its zenith now, staring down at them harshly. There was a single, fluffy white cloud lazily drifting along, high above the lake, as though on a solitary pilgrimage to wherever clouds go when they decide to finally question their life's purpose, and then set off looking for answers.

Oakely needed to sleep. He needed to find a place to sleep. He didn’t know how small he would be by the time he found a place to sleep.

The crow looked like a great, black eagle to him now, and the engineer idly wondered when it had eaten last. *Maybe I should feed him soon*, he thought, trying not to sound too concerned in his own mind. The crow looked at him indignantly. Or so he felt. Crows were hard to read; they always looked bothered by what they were witnessing. What were they witnessing? Did he want to know?

Then all at once, things went darker.

Chapter 3

Maeve, Becoming Confused with Adults

“Maevis Morgan, please report to principal Gantt’s office!” crackled the loudspeaker, with rather too much enthusiasm. The grade 7 class swivelled their thirty-four heads toward the Exact Centre of the Classroom, where Maeve’s desk was: Fourth row of seven, third column of five. Boom. Centre.

Maeve had been busily carving an emoji (Boredom) into the linoleum desktop with her grandfather’s sturdy, ancient compass. It was the last of a series of six symbols she had been patiently perfecting for the better part of the week.

The announcement was easy enough to pretend-not-hear. There were so many of them throughout the day, as though the office staff were trying in vain to kill the antique P.A. system once and for all, and were willing to shout almost anything into it at this point to get the job done.

Her classmates, however, always eager for a third-period plot twist, had now forgotten their books completely, and their collective attention was washing over her like a heat lamp on a hot dog. There was a rustle of excited whispers, as conjectures were hurriedly swapped back and forth, trading-card style. What would it be now? Would the consequences be terrible, or just embarrassing? Everyone had opinions, everyone needed to know.

Eyebrows furrowed in feigned concentration, Maeve absently poked at a few ringlets of hair attempting yet another escape from her ball cap. She didn’t like being interrupted in the middle of art projects.

*Fine*... She looked up, looked around. Eyes. Eyes everywhere. Seventy eyes.

Mr. MacReady, swathed head-to-toe in blue and black denim as was his habit on Thursdays, was looking at her from the front of the room over his cheap prescription sunglasses (which he got online), not without some admirable concern. “Maeve, sounds like you’re needed in Principal Gantt’s office. You can go”.

Maeve blinked twice; carefully put the compass into its red, scuffed plastic case. She snapped the case shut, as slowly and quietly as one can.

*Snap*.

“Well, I don’t think I’m actually *needed* in the office”, she thoughtfully corrected, staring down and to the right, at a neighbour’s green shoe. “Principal Gantt is a capable man”. Nobody said much, not wanting to miss anything. MacReady figured there was a punchline, and cocked an eyebrow to indicate she could proceed. Maeve cleared her throat, her voice lowering to a husky, accidental, almost-whisper. “I’ve seen his work. Assembly halls. Poster arrangements. Solid stuff”.

“Maeve”.

The teacher preferred to understate his disapproval, when at all possible. He was all about strategy; he played Risk, like, twenty-five times a week or something.

Maeve let escape an inaudible sigh, which got betrayed by her shoulders. She put her books into her pack, exchanging knowing looks with her desktop’s near-complete emoji family. Frustration. Wonder. Chagrin (her personal favourite – she had captured the eyelids perfectly). Resolve. Surprise.

And now Half-Boredom. Really just a little winking dude, and not a proper emotion at all. She *really* hated not finishing projects. Half-Boredom seemed unconcerned with the situation. Maeve got up and walked from the room, dragging her classmates’ attention with her to the door, which she closed behind her like a magic spell. *Click*. *Go back to your Things people, eyes front, nothing to see here*.

Principal Gantt’s office consisted of a cluster of three small rooms, all connected to one another by unnecessarily heavy wooden doors with narrow, reinforced glass windows in them, so whichever room you were in, you could stare into either of the other two and feel equally confused as to why you were there. The high interior-window-to-floor-space ratio allowed visitors to feel observed from all angles, and the actual windows in two of the three rooms invited the outdoors to join in on the observing.

Maeve entered the first room (which she called the Antechamber) from the main hall. There was another kid in it already, sitting in the farthest of three chairs placed there for waiting and worrying purposes, and so she sat down next to him, in the middle chair. He leaned very slightly away from her as she did so. One of the ceiling lamps flickered faintly for effect.

“So, what are you in for?” asked Maeve. It seemed like a reasonable way to break the ice. Open with a joke.

The Antechamber was small. Too small to properly ignore the other person or people (it could only comfortably fit up to three people) who might be sharing it with you. In addition to its three chairs, the room had three doors, a small end table piled with an array of rapidly aging science magazines, and a handmade magazine rack stuffed with brochures and pamphlets explaining various facets of life, in case you’d missed anything important up to that point. It was an oddly stuffy-breezy room, and it had a knack for encouraging its occupants to reflect on past decisions, while perhaps reevaluating future plans.

There was no receptionist here, because there was no conceivable way to fit a desk anywhere, without blocking at least two of the doors. The administration staff had actual work to do anyway, and so were located further down the main hall, near the building’s main entrance, in a large, functional room with a (more-or-less) balanced mix of computers and sunlight.

Most kids, when they got sent to see Principal Gantt for some reason, were sent alone, and so were there by themselves, sitting in either the first or third chairs. If two happened to be sent there at the same time, the middle chair was the buffer, and usually held the bags of one or both visitors.

If there were *three* kids in the Antechamber, it could get a little uncomfortable. Sometimes in these cases, if one of the kids was quite secure in their own introversion, they’d eschew the middle chair and stand instead at the magazine rack, rifling through its contents, as though deeply engaged in important, pamphlet-based research. Occasionally, an unusually brave kid would refuse to feign interest in the magazine rack altogether, and just sit on the floor near the tiny table, in mute solidarity with the displaced science literature, waiting patiently for their time to be up.

Maeve could sense this boy was regretting not taking the floor spot.

“Awkward silence”, observed Maeve. The boy’s head turned somewhat further away from her, presumably to more closely examine the texture of the door leading into the second room, which was full of files, boxes, and old posters. Maeve called that room the Storage Closet, even though it had two doors of its own, and an impressive window looking over the front parking lot, which most real, genuine closets do not have.

Maeve leaned slightly forward in her seat, trying to re-invade the boy’s peripheral attention. He was probably just shy, but shy people never bothered her much. She found them to be an interesting challenge. The more she leaned forward, she observed, the more the boy leaned slightly away, and slightly further toward the Closet door. He was getting a really good look at it now. Probably onto something big. It occurred to her that the two of them must have looked a little odd.

She wondered if she could make the boy touch the door with his forehead.

“Maeve, come on in, please”, the ruddy face of Principal Gantt had appeared through Door #3, across from the trio of chairs. “Hello, Niall” he added. The boy quickly looked up, shot Maeve a sidelong glance that, in her opinion, was not all that friendly, and then turned back to examining the veneer on the door to the Storage Closet.

“See you later” Maeve said to the boy’s turned head, as she got up and entered the Inner Sanctum (Gantt’s office). The boy did not respond, but she could feel him relaxing considerably as she left the room, which made her slightly sad, if she were being totally honest with herself.

The Inner Sanctum was roughly twice the size of the Antechamber, which is to say, it was a fairly small room for the principal of an institution the size of Edgar P. Hillary Memorial Middle School. E.P.H.M.M.S. had almost 1300 students, and (so the rumour went) boasted the largest class sizes of any middle school in the quad-county area. In other words, it was a Big Deal to go there. It really should have had a bigger principal’s office.

The room instead got its sense of grandeur entirely from the ancient, massive oak desk which took up two-thirds of its floor space. It was heavy and impressive, and one of its sides (the one mostly covered by a tall, long-suffering rubber plant) was scarred with years of hieroglyphics carved into its varnished surface by generations of students - armed with compasses, pocket knives, and thumbtacks - recording their passage through the area, on route to bigger and better things. There was probably nearly a century of notes etched into its pockmarked side panel.

Maeve often wondered where the principal had been, when the carvings were actually being done. Or, for that matter, how they had gotten the desk into the room in the first place. Was it built here? Did they take a wall down to fit it in? Did somebody – decades ago, when the area was still farmland – just find it in a meadow, and decide to build a school around it, because hey, free giant principal's desk? She once asked for permission to write a history paper on its origins, and the subjects and authors documented on its surface, but had been politely refused. She was beginning to think that asking for permission was not always the most effective way to get real science done anyway.

The Inner Sanctum had three full-size people in it already. Principal Gantt was in the middle, and had by now already slow-waltzed his way past the plant, and was carefully wedging himself behind the desk and back into his chair. Mr. Claudreich, her almost-retired homeroom teacher, was on the left, propped awkwardly on the corner of the desk, in his signature Very Grey suit. Dr. K, the youngish school counsellor, dressed comfort-sensibly as always, stood on the right, in front of this room’s Storage Closet door, sporting her best I’m-here-for-you look. Behind the Principal’s desk was the Inner Sanctum’s only window, half the size of the Storage Closet’s window (though it did have a view of two trees, when you sat in the right spot).

Dr. K had a small stack of papers in her arms. Maeve’s assignments from the last few weeks, no doubt.

Principal Gantt motioned politely to a lone chair placed in front of the desk. It occurred to Maeve that the seating arrangement would make it difficult for her to see all three adults at once – an interviewing tactic she thought seemed a little heavy-handed to use on a twelve-year old. Then again, the room’s configuration didn’t allow for many options. She wished Mr. Claudreich at least had chosen to call in on his cell phone. He looked uncomfortable trying to balance on the edge of the desk. She thought about offering to trade spots with him.

“Maeve”, Dr. K said, in her kindly professional voice, “Will you please take a seat? Thank you”.

Maeve had closed the office door, sat in the offered chair, and was now backing it slowly against the wall, to best address all involved parties. “You’re welcome”, she mumbled.

Mr. Claudreich’s mouth had already begun to swing slowly open, as he drew in the great amount of air he’d require to express the full measure of his disappointment over whatever she had most recently done, but Dr. K. Continued.

“Maeve, we’re all a little concerned about you”.

“Oh”, keeping it neutral, “Is something happening to me?”

Principal Gantt pursed his lips, jowls wiggling slightly in vexation. His jowls were wonders of nature, and must have had specialized muscles not granted to the average set of jowls. Mr. Claudreich was already expelling his unused air audibly, somewhat deflated at having been pre-interrupted so soon. Dr. K. Continued.

“Your schoolwork. It’s very well-written, as always... but if you don’t mind my saying so, you don’t seem to be taking it very seriously”.

Maeve thought about that honestly for a few seconds. “I didn’t know that was a requirement”. *Uh oh*. Claudreich had twitched involuntarily, which Maeve caught out of the corner of her eye. Dr. K took a step forward, opening the assignment on the top of the stack.

“*Stress Makes People Unreasonable and Annoying: an Essay by Maevis Morgan*”. You wrote this last week? Dr. K looked up for a confirmation.

Pause. “Yeah”.

The counsellor nodded slightly, and flipped to the next assignment. “*Metaphors and Nonsense: Why Writing Fiction is Stupid, by Maevis Morgan*”. She flipped through the paper briefly, pausing to examine one of the diagrams. “I thought you liked fiction, Maeve”.

Maeve shrugged. “I’m on the fence”.

Mr. Claudreich was shaking his head, faintly. Principal Gantt un-twined and re-twined his fingers, a thing he liked to do to help keep conversations moving along smoothly.

Dr. K opened a third assignment, looking up at Maeve as she recited the paper’s title, “*Statistical Analyses of the Emotional Viability of Children from Single Parent Houses: a Research Paper by Maevis Morgan*”. Dr. K waited to see if Maeve had something to say.

“I interviewed 112 students. The data’s at the back, in a spreadsheet. LibreOffice Calc”. Maeve avoided Dr. K's eyes and looked past her to the small window, but of course couldn’t see the trees from this angle – just sky, or maybe a painting of a sky. “That’s open-source software”.

“The data *are* at the back”.

“Right, sorry”. Maeve’s cheeks reddened ever-so-slightly. She did not enjoy making mistakes in front of Dr. K.

The counsellor put the stack of assignments on the desk, and exchanged a look with principal Gantt, who handed her a small bundle of pale blue paper, bound with fuzzy yellow yarn. Where had they dug that one up? Maeve tried to remember what she had written in there, and when, but couldn’t recall. Was it from her Secondary Colours phase?

“*Why I Want to be a Cyborg and Not a Girl Anymore, by Maeve M*”. The counsellor inclined her head somewhat, regarding the girl with a curious mix of concern and... something else. The woman was all kindness and professionalism, like a fluffy blanket with a PhD. A lump had stuck in Maeve’s throat, out of nowhere. Through the window, she caught sight of a blurry crow flying by in the distance. Maeve had a wet spot on her eye. *Unfair move, Doctor*.

“These topics were not *assigned* to you, Ms. Morgan” Claudreich stated, long and flatly. “They also do not match the subjects that you submitted them for. Not even a little bit”, he reached over and took the next assignment from the stack on the desk. Dr. K was still watching Maeve with… that new look. The one Maeve had already decided she wasn’t sure she liked all that much.

“Mr. Claudreich”, began Principal Gantt, but the elder teacher held up two fingers, and ignoring the Principal, announced the next assignment’s subject, somewhat dramatically, “*Who Shot First? Analyzing Newly Re-Uncovered Evidence of Artistic Revisionism in the Late 1990’s: A Controversial Research Paper by Maevis Morgan*”. There was a pause, in which the adults seemed to consider this briefly.

Claudreich recovered, “You submitted this in place of your mid-year Mathematics assignment”.

“Well, there’s a lot of trigonometry in it. It’s on pages 6 and 7, and then later on page -”

“*Miss Morgan*...”

“That’s fine, Maeve”, Dr. K was now between Mr. Claudreich and the girl. She collected the assignment from the teacher and the papers from the desk, and placed them all neatly on a cabinet next to the windowsill. Claudreich sat back down, gloomily and awkwardly. Principal Gantt rapped his baby knuckles on the desk, hoping the counsellor had a plan to tie the matter up soon. He had things to do. Principal things.

Maeve sat staring at the broad, as-yet-unmarred front of the enormous desk. She really wanted to scratch something into it. Badly. Out in the hall, the P.A. system crackled an important amendment to the cafeteria seating protocol.

Dr. K thought for a moment, and then carefully added, “Maeve, you’re not in any kind of trouble for these reports, you know. They are quite good. I’ve always been very proud of your ability to express yourself clearly”.

Maeve’s face revealed nothing. She had managed to quickly wipe the drop from her eye while everyone had been briefly looking elsewhere, and was now envisioning the dragons-fighting-robot-samurai mural she would enthusiastically hack into that desk someday, when she could afford to buy it at a school-closing auction. *Go on*, she thought.

“The issue is”, the counsellor sent a quick glance Mr. Claudreich’s way, who did not return her look, “*I’m* not a teacher here, as you know. Assignments do have to be handed in to the teachers who assigned them to you. It’s not entirely fair to them to have to come find me to retrieve your homework. I understand that you have a note from your mother, but -”

Principal Gantt’s eyebrows had shot up, almost in unison. “Wait, hold on. Maeve, have you been submitting your *homework* to Dr. Krishna-O’Murphi?”

Maeve was, in fact, doing this. It made more sense, since Dr. K was the only teacher – that is, adult – who understood her. The rest tried hard, but really.

“Well, yeah. I got a note from my mom. She’s OK with it. I figured Dr. K, you know... that she had the time”, she paused, looking at the floor. “She’s not… you know, exactly busy here”.

Something shifted in the counsellor's demeanour just then. Maeve made a mental note to get better at reading the woman’s body language, and continued.

“I mean, there aren’t a lot of kids in the counsellor's office most days, right? I'm in there, like, two or three times a day, and there’s never anybody in there”. She looked back to the young woman now, “I thought maybe you could use something to do to pass the time. You know, marking papers, filing stuff”. Maeve had always been a bit concerned for Dr. K’s long-term employ-ability at E.P.H.

But the three adults were only half listening to her now, and sharing a perplexed, adult moment between themselves. What was going on?

Principal Gantt spoke, “Maeve... that’s fine. You can go back to class now. We’ll talk about this more later. Everything’s fine. Thank you very much for talking with us”.

Maeve sat still for a couple of seconds, wondering what had just happened. Gantt just smiled awkwardly and nodded. She looked to Mr. Claudreich, but there were no smiles being offered by the man – just a pensive expression, not meant for her. Dr. K was looking at the floor, arms folded, betraying nothing of her thoughts or feelings. So Maeve stood up, took her backpack, and walked at a neutral, medium speed out of the office.

*Well, that was weird*, she thought, passing through the Antechamber, and past the boy, whom she had forgotten had been sitting there. He watched her leave, and as the door to the main hallway closed behind her, he said, “See you later”.

Five, or maybe six seconds later, the door opened again, and Maeve’s face reappeared. The two sized each each other up for a slightly longer than normal moment. Then Maeve cautiously disappeared again, the door clicking shut behind her. The boy blinked twice.

Chapter 4

Wimsel and Quid, Outside of an Inn’s Outbuilding

Quidbury and Thor arrived at the inn just before dawn, peddler’s cart in tow. The cart was folded up like a ramshackle, mobile puppet theatre, covered high in bags, poles, blankets, pots, and other instruments of travel and commerce, strapped haphazardly together by lengths of mismatched rope. Quid had left behind all the meagre trappings of his former life only two weeks ago, for this assemblage of different things that were now the tools of his new profession.

Thor was a burrow, given to Quid by his aunt Elynore and Uncle Bertrand, when the young man left his home village of Grumpledon to travel the kingdom and make his fortune. Thor, as a rule, did not form opinions about things that happened around him, so he had been mostly content to pull the cart about while Quid tried to figure out what they were both doing there, and where their ultimate destination might turn out to be.

Quidbury had just turned twenty-one last week. Something about entering his third decade (although *that* had technically happened the year before, when he turned 20, as his uncle liked to point out) made him take stock of what he had been doing with his life up to that point. Mostly he had helped out on his aunt and uncle’s turnip farm. They grew excellent turnips there – prize-winning turnips in fact – but Quidbury was a dreamer, and spent more time out in the patch imagining ways to improve the lives of his fellow peasants than he did actually tilling, and digging, and planting, and… whatever else real turnip farmers spent their time doing. He did not exactly absorb all of the minute details of the business, that much he would admit.

So when he got it into his head that he needed to explore the world, and bring his particular brand of genius to the good people of the kingdom, his aunt and uncle did not hesitate much to round up all of their spare bits of wood, leather, burlap, rope, and tin, and send him off into the world to make his fortunes selling… whatever it was that he could make, which others might pay silver for. They loved him dearly, it was true. They just never really understood what made him tick, despite all those years of effort. What they *did* come to know of their nephew was that he needed to go and follow his heart, wherever it might lead him, because the boy had always been mostly heart.

Quid and Thor stood side-by-side now, in the first rays of early morning light, taking in the details of the small roadside inn. Its outside lantern had caught their attention as they had emerged from Mosswood Forest about a quarter-of-a-mile back, in the predawn gloom. They had just crossed a small, sturdy wooden bridge spanning a nameless, bubbling brook that separated the patrolled lands of the Duchy of Addlebright (where they were now) from the wilder lands through which the two had just journeyed.

They had seen an elf two days ago, in the forest. An *elf*! At least, Quidbury had been fairly certain the fellow was an elf. It was a bit hard to tell for sure. Thor had thought it was a bush, but what did he know. The Mosswood Forest had certainly been a very different place than the farmlands he had grown accustomed to. Perhaps elves looked like bushes, to burrows.

The inn did not appear to be open at the moment. There was a small stables nearby, with two horses tied up in it, absently munching on carrots and ignoring the newcomers completely. The inn itself was a squat, two-story stone structure, with a thick, steep straw roof, and many tiny, shuttered windows peeping out in just about every direction, except perhaps straight upward. There was a fat, crooked chimney attached to the building’s side, and black smoke curled lazily from it, unhurriedly fading into the crisp morning air.

“Smell that air, Thor! It’s so… exciting! I think I can actually *smell* adventure!” Quid took a big, giant gulp of air. “Or maybe what I’m smelling is... *adventurers*!” His eyes got wide. Thor could smell horse, pig, smoke, and stale beer. He wasn’t sure what an adventurer smelled like. Maybe just those things?

A wooden sign hung over the inn’s front door. It read, *The Roosting Rogue*. There appeared to be a hunter’s arrow stuck jauntily into it. It was not immediately apparent to either traveller whether this was an intentional design choice, or if somebody had recently decided to use the sign for target practice.

To Quidbury, this was all quite beyond perfect. This was the sort of place where legends began. Everybody knew that heroes of great renown – swashbuckling swordsmen, noble knights, mysterious sorcerers – congregated at roadside watering holes just like this one, seeking fame, fortune, and perilous quests to save the kingdom from disaster. Or at least a princess from a curse. People like *these* would certainly value his services highly. He was about to make a colossal name for himself, of that he was certain.

For his part, Thor did not especially like that they appeared to be considering staying at an inn called “The Roosting Rogue”. He also did not like that he had apparently started forming opinions ever since they had left the farm.

“The inn will be open in about an hour” said a voice from the general direction of the stables. “That is, it opens whenever Henry wakes up and starts looking for his breakfast. There’s really no sleeping, once Henry gets hungry for breakfast”.

Quid had turned toward the stables to see who had spoken, but all he could see were the two horses, whose heads were still busily munching carrots.

“Are you from here?” the voice continued. “I don’t think I’ve seen you here before”. The voice was female, but with an odd lilt to it, which Quidbury could not place.

“Hello there. I can’t see you”, he responded, and took a step toward the stables. Thor wished they had brought some carrots.

“I’m having an invisible day”, responded the voice. “I’m here”, and with that, Quidbury all at once saw that a bucket had been hanging in mid air in front of the horses. From it, a carrot suddenly leapt, and carefully inserted itself into the appreciative mouth of the horse on the right.

Quid was not precisely prepared for this particular scenario, and so just stood on the spot, trying to contain the waves of enthusiasm now building in his stomach, the place from which his zest for life sprung unbound, several times a week, ever since he was first able to grasp that he lived in a world of mystery and magic – a world of possibilities. An involuntary squeak escaped his throat. He was talking to an *invisible person*.

The bucket floated to the ground, and came to rest between the horses, who quickly got on with the business of nose-wrestling for the remaining carrots inside. Thor watched them morosely.

The soft sound of padded sandals could be heard, and soon Quidbury noticed a slight impression of small-ish shoes had appeared in the ground in front of them.

“My name is Wimsel. I work here. I pay for my food and lodging by helping with the animals. The owner is not that fond of animals, I’m afraid”.

“Where are your eyes?” asked Quid. He could guess within an arm’s span or so, based on the sound of the woman’s voice. He did not want to inadvertently speak to her shoulder, or the top of her head. Or really, anywhere that wasn’t her face.

There was a small pause, and then the sandal prints stepped closer. He felt the presence of a person now, and looked down, to the spot he felt her face might be. A soft hand tentatively touched his chin, and made a careful correction to where he had pointed his head. She must have been only five feet tall, putting her head just level with his heart. The hand withdrew quickly.

“Hello, Wimsel”, Quidbury said politely, at the space where her eyes probably were. “My name is Quidbury Fallweather Cotterpin, of the village of Grumpledon”. Would she know where that was? “That’s to the South, through the Mosswood Forest”, he added, with a short bow as an afterthought.

“Hello, Quidbury Fallweather Cotterpin, of Grumpledon”, the voice responded, “My name is… just Wimsel”. The voice sounded slightly apologetic.

“Hello Wimsel”, Quid said again. Another pause. Thor made a snorting sound. “This is Thor, he’s my travelling burrow, and business partner”.

The warm presence moved past him, and Thor bowed his head slightly, quite aware of when a good head scratch was about to happen. He was not disappointed. “Hello, Thor. You are an excellent burrow”.

It occurred suddenly to Quidbury that he had never fallen in love before.

=== Begin Intermission ===

Hello. Please enter your user id.

> user017

Please enter your password.

> \*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*\*

Welcome, user017.

> load world 1201

Please wait . . . done.

> show flags on wmsl

asleep, happy, healthy, invisible.

> set flag on wmsl, visible

Done.

> set flag on wmsl, silent

Done.

> spawn Hunter, type 2

Type 2 Hunter spawned, id brgn.

> Set target on brgn : wmsl

Done.

> exit

Goodbye.

=== End Intermission ===

Brom Roghan had been searching for as long as he could remember.

He did not grow tired, because he chose not to. There was no time for growing tired. He had a bounty to collect, and his quarry was close at hand – he could feel it. Resting happened after bounty collection. That was the order of operations.

He was alone in the woods, leaning against the trunk of a large oak tree, picking his teeth with a splinter of wood, and scrutinizing the map he had been given by an old witch who had had no patience for questions. Addlebright was a small duchy, but the soldiers that patrolled her borders were alert enough to warrant caution. Brom did not want to have to escape from another tower or dungeon, or dispatch any guards who didn’t need dispatching. That would be a waste of his time and talents.

The map was weathered, as though it has been through many calamities, but the lines were legible, and Brom could tell he was near the alchemist town known as Glassworks. He had come from the North, where the places had names like Gutforge Pass, Hill of Seventeen Claws, and Ogrewatch Firekeep, and found the place names here … delicate. He imagined breaking a lot of things while chasing bounties through towns with names like “Glassworks”.

A flock of something whipped itself into a flurry through the trees ahead. Brom looked up and scanned the area quickly, looked back along the path from which he had come, and then ahead again, where it continued to wind its way through the forest. He flicked the wood splinter into the nearby brush.

His quarry would not likely be wandering the wilderness, but rather taking sanctuary in one of the villages or inns scattered around the large, farm-speckled valley that made up the bulk of the duchy.

*Wimsel*, he repeated in his head, carefully drawing his thick finger across the witch’s map. Who – or what – was Wimsel? What defences did they possess?

Finding Wimsel would be the easy part, he knew. The trick to having a long career in this business was not finding your quarry, but observing it carefully once found, to mitigate risk during the grab. One never knew how many allies a target might have, that might need to be dealt with in the process of collecting a bounty. Most bounty hunters did not practice caution at all, which is why most did not last as long in the business as Brom had.

A group of travellers appeared around the bend in the path up ahead, but Brom had already stepped behind the Oak tree, large hand wrapped calmly around the hilt of his sword. He stood motionless, observing as three men leading a pack-laden horse passed slowly by, not twenty paces away. Two merchants, one armed mercenary bodyguard. The horse was about to swing its head in his direction, but the bounty hunter put a finger to his lips, and it got the message. The group continued along the path from the direction he had just come.

Brom dressed in greens and grey, which he found effective for blending into the terrain in this part of the kingdom. Despite his powerful build (and impressively chiselled, if not slightly aged, countenance) he did not go in for flashy shows of excessive weaponry or armour. His sword, hunting knife, and short length of sturdy rope were functional enough, and were all he usually needed to get the job done.

He folded the map and carefully put it in a small pouch hanging at his belt, where he also kept the entirety of his wealth, which at the moment wasn’t very much.

He took the silver coins out (all seven) and arranged them in his palm. Each bore the stamped face of either a queen or king, alive, dead, or perhaps trapped somewhere in between. He let out a slow, contained sigh. Everywhere his journeys had taken him, he had carried around tiny metal portraits like these, depicting people he had neither met, nor would likely ever meet, and it occurred to him with great clarity in that moment – as it had several times during several other moments in the last couple of weeks - that he too had been sought and found, a long time ago.

Three hours later, a family of deer from the area had gathered nearby, to watch with mild curiosity the large, armed man who was now sitting cross-legged under the Oak tree, lost in thought, staring at a handful of silver.

The deer just wanted the tasty Sagegreen that grew at the tree’s trunk, but weren’t about to risk finding out if the man had anger or hunger issues. So they just hung back and waited for the situation to change. Men never sat still for long, after all.

Brom had admittedly been having some problems lately, staying motivated to hunt people for money. It was solid work – there were no shortage of bounties to be found in any given town of decent size – and he was really and truly good at it. He had achieved a level of skill at blending into his surroundings that many hunters would kill for (if they could figure out how to kill you and take your skills, that is), and animals tended to show him a degree of grudging respect when he was out and about in the wilderness. He felt pretty good about that. But having to deal with dark witches, embarrassingly wealthy barons, irate tax collectors, and other disreputable clients day in and day out was starting to bring him down, in spite of the daily affirmations he’d been practising religiously since his last big job had ended.

Sometimes he wished he could just turn himself into a rock, and let the sun go by a few hundred times without him. Maybe the world would have righted itself by the time he awoke.

One of the younger deer, called *Leaps-from-danger-reluctantly*, had finally had enough of the waiting, and tentatively broke off from the group to approach the man, who she was beginning to suspect was sick and dying anyway. She kept her head low to the ground as she circled nonchalantly toward him. She wanted that Sagegreen, and was also perhaps slightly concerned for the hunter, though she could not explain why.

The other deer were beside themselves with worry now, bobbing their heads and stamping about nervously. It seemed certain they were all finally about to witness *Leap*’s premature end, which they knew for a long time had to be coming. The young doe was an arm’s length from Brom before he even noticed she was there. She paused, took a step backward, swung her head low and cautiously. For a moment, the two simply considered the moment, together.

Brom slowly pulled a fistful of Sagegreen from the ground next to him, held it out. The deer stepped forward, and took it gingerly.

The others could not believe what they were seeing. They always knew *Leaps-from-danger-reluctantly* was more or less insane (by deer standards) but *this*… this did not happen between deer and hunters. Yet there was the young doe, eating Sagegreen from the man’s hand, while the rest of them could only stand back and watch, in fear.

- --- --- -

The following morning, Brom arrived at the Roosting Rogue. An enormous hog was making an impressive racket at the front door of the inn, as though trying to batter the whole place down. There were two horses and a burrow in the open stables, and a pile of junk strapped to a pair of wooden wheels parked next to it.

The front door of the inn had started to open just as Brom reached the other side of the small wooden bridge, and before it had finished opening, he was crouched motionless behind some rose bushes nearby. The man was like a ghost when he wanted to be.

He had resolved the previous night to make this his last bounty. He wasn’t sure what he would do for silver after it was over, but that wasn’t a concern at the moment; he still had his professional pride, and a job to do.

He would find this Wimsel, and bring her back to the witch, by the book.

Chapter 5

The Engineer and the Tempted Murder

It took a rather long time, by his own standards, for Oakely to grasp what was happening to the sky. He had just begun to drift off into an anxious sleep at the bottom of the wooden boat, swaddled in his now-too-large clothing, when the sunlight began to dim, and the air took on a seething black quality all at once.

At the aft of the boat, the stoked motor belched ash and steam as it chugged the craft in the general direction of across-the-lake, and away from the hill and its unknown perils. At the fore of the boat, his new crow companion had settled into clinging firmly to the side for the journey (it was obviously *able* to use both legs just fine), and seemed content to let him nod off, or not. It was as though where they were headed, and whether Oakely was in control of that (or even wanted to be) were both equally acceptable, or unacceptable, as far as the crow was concerned. That it was staying with him simply meant it had some personal interest in seeing the trip to its next development.

All of the noise and vibration from the engine had begun to lull him into feeling that none of that at the moment should concern him either. He needed to sleep, so his head could clear; he needed a clear head so that he could think straight, and make proper decisions.

However, the sky as seen through his half-closed eyelids was now a sudden, fluttering darkness, and he wondered at once whether he had begun to dream already, or whether the sinister mountain had opened and sent forth a whirlwind of dark magic to enfold and take him back to it, or to some other place.

His crow pilot – who was a *she*, he now surmised, chastising himself for making hasty presumptions – watched it all calmly unfold around them, his plight perhaps not something that involved her, but only something she was only there to observe.

Oakely rolled out of his vest-blanket, and, hiking up his now absurdly large trousers, reached back to flip the engine's toggle to smother the flame in its belly. The boat briefly shuddered as its momentum drove it to bend port-side. The sound of thousands of black feathers had filled the air around him, and he was buffeted slightly backward and to his knee by the air, as a thick murder of crows descended onto the gunnels of the boat, like a single creature, with many more still filling the sky overhead; a dome of birds. The boat swirled into a gentle spin in the midst of this, as the weight of those coming to roost on the craft caused it to bob and shift haphazardly.

And then at once, the engineer stood, somewhat shaky and small, in the midst of an impromptu conclave of a hundred crows or more, as though gathered there to consider his origin, implication, and fate.

The discussion was loud, and began immediately. Those who had come to alight on the port side launched in with a great, enthusiastic cacophony of noise and beating wings, while those lining the starboard gunnels calmly waited a half-moment before forming a sharp and loud response in loose unison, back at their counterparts across the floor of the vessel. Those who had not found a seat circled above, vulture-like, a living ceiling to the cage in which the man now found himself.

The exchange was intense, seemingly involved each member of the conclave voicing their own opinion for or against each of the others, at a volume just loud enough to not require the point to be repeated, and was over in a few short moments. Several of the port-side members seemed to regard him with harsh suspicion, while those to the starboard turned their general attention to the crow at the front of the boat, his new companion-guide. It *–* *she –* had not spoken during this initial exchange, but instead seemed intent on hearing everything that was being said. She had regarded several of the members as they spoke in turn, rapidly, and glanced a time or two at the sky, perhaps to gauge the mood of those circling above, who would caw an occasional thought.

A crow near the front port side, perched near the female, addressed the assembly, its shining dark beak clacking and clattering rapidly – and, imagined the engineer, somewhat urgently – occasionally ruffling its feathers for dramatic effect. Another from across the floor interjected, and half a dozen more from both sides quickly began cawing for or against either or both points that had just been made. Two crows had hopped from the gunnels and into the boat, pointing themselves cautiously but threateningly at the Engineer.

He did not feel things were going particularly well for his case. He was not sure if he *had* a case, to be certain, or who was representing him in defence.

A heavier, older crow from the starboard side had pushed its way past its smaller neighbours and clattered loudly at the assembly, and the general screaming subsided somewhat. It addressed the crows who had hopped on to the floor in front of him, and they swivelled their heads to hear what it had to say, taking a tentative step backward, away from the engineer. The elder began to express itself at length.

What the elder had to say, Oakely could only guess at. He had only met one other person who had ever claimed to be able to understand Crow. She had once attempted to explain its structure to Oakely, but the explanation had done nothing to help him break the code, though he had spent some significant time trying to. It was a complex language, laced with social context and mysticism. Parsing the meaning of Crowspeak required (apparently) an intimate understanding of the speaker's social dynamics, familial relationships, personal history, and individual convictions. Oakely knew how to speak four languages well, and two or three more well enough to muddle by, but despite this, had come to expect words to mean just what they meant. Language to him worked best when the ways available to interpret what was being uttered aloud were very limited. This was the efficient way to communicate, in his view.

Crows did not apparently share this point of view, much at all.

The speaking crow seemed to have some authority – that much was fairly obvious. The initial belligerent exchanges across the floor had ceased, and now only select members from both sides seemed to briefly interject with their own beak-chatter. Those who remained witness but did not speak – he estimated that was a full 3/4ths of them – seemed to divide their attention equally between the discussion at hand, the female crow at the boat's fore (now back on one leg, he noticed), and the engineer himself.

Oakely tried as best he could to shape a robe / cloak out of his former shirt during the exchange. If he was to be the subject of a high noon tribunal on the water, he would at least face his jurors with some kind of dignity. He would probably need to fashion suspenders out of his belt, once he got out of this. If he got out of this.

The elder speaking bird apparently concluded whatever it had to say, and there was a general murmur and agitated low croaking from the port side of the floor. One member from each side then launched itself into the air without delay, and both were immediately gone, disappeared through the cloak of young crows overhead.

A rustle shot swiftly through the assembly, and their collective attention seemed to shift all at once to the crow at the fore of the boat again, who was now regarding him in an unsettling fashion with the side of its head, its eye, impossibly dark and penetrating. Black holes tend to take information in, but rarely give any back.

Then, in his mind, Oakely heard, *why did you come here?*

The engineer waited a half-breath, glancing about at the assembly, but if any had heard the question asked, they did not reveal it. They seemed now to be waiting for something from the female. The two crows who had jumped onto the boat's floor were also to be waiting, poised at the edge of some decision.

“My name is Oakely. I'm looking for the Engineers Guild in this place”.

The answer didn't seem to impress the crow, as she waited for him to supply more of it.

“I'm here to fix a problem. I came from over the hill – it was a hard trip”. Perhaps appealing to their charitable natures might work. Did they have charitable natures? He could not recall, or imagine.

The female crow shifted to its other leg, but said – or thought toward him – nothing more.

The engine now had sputtered out, choked of air. He felt they must be near or past the centre of the lake, and perhaps drifting, but he could not tell in what direction. It occurred to him then that he had a strong desire to not drift back in the direction of the hill. If he found his way through this present circumstance, Oakely imagined he might have to stay here for a while, regardless of what size he had ended up for coming to this place the way he had.

He felt he was at this point approximately no more than two and a half feet tall. Larger than any crow for certain, but he knew well what a group of them were truly capable of, and how quickly their decision-making often went. There would be no getting overboard and into the water if they did not want him to do so. The too-large-for-him boat had come to feel like a steep-sided cauldron, and there were far too many cooks here for his comfort.

“I don't know what the problem is yet”, he carefully continued, “That's the nature of my work. It's important”, though he wondered as he said that, if it really was important, to crows. “I need – I would like to connect with my peers here, to consult with them”. He looked into the crow's orb eye, which was still gazing back, searching for the right answer to its unspoken question. “Do you know where I can find them?”

A moment passed, the female's feathers ruffled gently in a slight gust travelling across the lake surface.

*Yes*.

“Will you take me to them?”

A pause. *No.*

The two regarded one another for another two breaths, the surrounding black wall of crow patiently hunched along the gunnels of the drifting vessel. High above, the remaining onlookers were circling ever higher, and gradually dispersing into the horizons.

“What will happen to me?”, Oakely kept his tone neutral.

*Nobody can know that for certain*.

The engineer nodded, in grudging acknowledgement of the observation. “What are you planning to do with me, then?” He had adopted a slightly wide-legged stance for balance now, and it was giving him a small shred of extra confidence to keep up this line of questioning, as though he had some leverage in the whole situation. Improvisation was a skill he had always tried to practice for these sorts of social circumstances (well, he had not ever pictured this circumstance *specifically*, to be sure), and he slightly regretted now not taking the practice somewhat more seriously.

The crow placed its high leg back on the boat, tentatively.

*The Witches are to be informed. The nearby Human village is theirs.*

Oakely had a unique and confusing moment where the relief of knowing he was not going to tempt a crow murder that day mixed with the realization that he had evidently arrived near a community under the purview of witches. The moment was his instinctual attempt to calculate in which direction his fortunes had suddenly gone, and the results were frankly ambiguous. The crow seemed to be observing his moment as well.

“My history with witches...” He trailed off. The crow just blinked at this. “It's complicated”, is all Oakely could think to say, by way of explanation, since he could not really know what the crow might already know. The rest of the group had become still and silent.

The young female blinked thrice more, and twitched its head slightly. In a brief flurry, the entire conclave dispersed almost at once, sending the boat to rocking wildly about, as it released the dark flock upward and outward.

When Oakely regained his balance, the female had gone as well, mixed in somewhere among the birds flying in all directions toward the shoreline – except, he noted, in the direction of the hill, which by now was no surprise to him. The simple truth that most animals chose never to approach those places was something many engineers conveniently chose to ignore, but he was not in the habit of forgetting encountered patterns in the natural world, when they were considerate enough to present themselves clearly.

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Moremice had made some excellent points during the assemblage, when Onefoot thought about it. Her elder sister had wanted to drown the man, because what did any of them know about him anyway? Mortals who wandered into the Hedge Wilds were either dangerously stupid, or actively trying to find trouble – that was the common consensus. This man had admitted to coming there in search of his kind, because of important Human reasons. He had crossed the hill on purpose, in other words, and acted as though he had done so before.

Whether a man intentionally surveys some ground in order to cover it with artificial material, or simply stamps it down through repeated use, roads are almost always the result, and roads always invite more travel. Their hill had not seen a visitor in some time, and for all the different creatures living in the region, this was quite alright.

Moremice was not a cruel bird, but she was pragmatic to a fault. It had not gone unnoticed by the conclave that Onefoot had just ignored long-standing rules about helping mortals traverse the hill. The assemblage had been as much about her actions as it had been about the appearance of the stranger.

Moremice would not have her young sister be the subject of any tribunal, if she had anything to do with it. The man's life was, as far as she was concerned, forfeit the moment he chose to journey where he should not have.

Onefoot, of course, was not blessed with the luxury of so easily dismissing any kind of life as being without value. She could not. It was not her way. She understood more than most the give-and-take of making decisions about important things. That proper endeavour was not simple, and never resembled either black or white, in the manner men often chose to see things. Onefoot had no seniority in the crow community, but she was one of its only two living seers, and was the one present for the finding of the wizard. This gave her more authority in the matter than she had wanted to have. She would have been happier circling the boat with the other youth, putting on a display of strength and certainty from high above, but beyond the responsibility of having to do something dire, and at close range.

In the end, the protocols the crows in this particular region were bound to observe had spared her the hard decision anyway, because in truth there was no argument in favour of letting the man live. He was a danger, for the simple reason that he set out to arrive there, and had succeeded. More or less. But he was in witch country know, and when it came to the fates of *men*, the problem here was borne by witchkind, and not crows.

Onefoot knew all about this. Her father's side of the family did not much like it, but understood the law well enough. Her mother's side of the family had long ago determined to be done with the attempted murder of men. It was a misdirection of energy, as they saw it, and could never end well.

So the conclave had dispersed, returning to their haunts, routines, and their trading of stories, alerts, and opinions. Onefoot had chosen to perch atop a tree along the shore, from which an old truck tire hung by a rope, where she could watch the wizard make his way toward land, without influencing the path he took to get there. This would be a thing to pass some time, and would give her insight into what insight, if any, the man might himself possess. He seemed a truthful sort, and well-travelled enough to be unalarmed by Mindspeak. She did not *feel* that he had a great potential to do harm – at least, not purposefully – but these things could always change quite quickly, and so the only recourse that seemed left to her was to continue observing the fellow until she could better discern by what means he came to choose his own behaviours.

The old tire, as always, swayed somewhat under the power of whatever breeze was available to it, and under a power seemingly its own when no breeze blew. The creaking from its thick, weathered rope like a slow pendulum, tuned to a timescale all its own.

The man, had started the motor up again – it's churning hiccup echoing across the water, providing a counter tempo of its own. As the two sounds began to blend and synchronize, the man, head and neck just visible over the boat's walls, took hold of the manual tiller with both hands, and with obviously considerable effort, swung the thing about, zig-zagged for a few moments, and then eventually wheeled toward the shore where the young crow Seer watched from the tire-swing tree.

Onefoot could already make out, in the far distance, the throaty rattle of an old minivan, no doubt stuffed to the brim with witches, lumber, and groceries, making its hasty way down the dirt road leading in a most winding manner toward the still-tranquil lake.

Chapter 6

Various Animals, Enthralled by Gravity

*“... spread your tiny wings and fly away*

*and take the snow back with you*

*where it came from on that day….”*

The car radio crackled out an old classic, as the Morgans’ station wagon wound its way through farmlands and slowly upward toward the forested hills of their latest home-to-be. In the backseat, her forehead pressed morosely on the cool passenger-side window, curls jumping about in the car’s interior air turbulence, Maeve marveled at how her life always seemed to progress in rather disorienting fit and starts. No smooth transitions for her - last week, she was just another hard luck student at Edgar P. Hillary Memorial Junior High, and now she was, once again, a piece of living luggage, on route to some new and probably confusing adventure, definitely not of her choosing.

Norm, the family’s ageless pet tortoise, relaxing on a brightly checkered, scratchy blanket next to her, chewed idly on a page from the latest issue of Popular Science for Kids, which Maeve had handed over, after trying in vain to read while in motion, a thing her mother could do, but she never could. Norm seemed to prefer eating articles about biodiversity, and also occasionally clean energy. His own way of digesting the information, she imagined.

Norm was forever trying to solve mankind’s problems on his own terms, since mankind was being kind of slow about it, as far as he was concerned. That was all he would have had to say about that, had anybody thought to ask, but nobody did.

*“...The one I love forever is untrue*

*And if I could you know that I would*

*Fly away with you…”*

Good lord, thought Maeve, wiping her eyes quickly with her shirt sleeve, as she continued to count the trees gliding by. They were syncopating now, an effect she normally enjoyed well enough, but not today. She looked down at the Letter for the hundredth time and read it over again, searching for new clues and meanings. It was the note Gary Rickels wrote to her on graph paper, with a blue sharpie, two days before she and her mom packed up everything they owned in the world, and left town, without a look back. The Letter was his way of saying goodbye forever, and have a great life, and we’ll always be friends, and keep in touch, OK? It had become fairly crumpled by this point, and was taped back together in several places.

“Mom. Can you turn the radio off or something? And maybe close your window? We’re freezing back here.”

Ani Esther Morgan was absently humming along with the radio, window down, her beautifully tattooed forearm dangling casually over the door. The open road was her living room - she claimed everything she drove past, over, and through, and just as quickly released it all back to the Universe once it was no longer in her peripheral vision. Anything she wanted or needed to take with her, she had always kept in the car (Maeve did appreciate that this had always included her and the animals) to facilitate important, impulsive life choices.

It was the way she had always sorted things in her life - things to leave behind, and things that can’t be - from the moment she got her driver’s license. Technically, the sorting began the year before she got her driver’s license. She was quick to start moving at an early age.

“Too hot, Love, got to keep the breeze going for Norm”. Ani addressed Maeve in the rearview mirror with a faint smile and a wink, as she turned the radio down.

“Norm doesn’t want breezes, he wants to be warm”, mumbled Maeve, not wanting to get into another discussion with her hippy mother about the tortoise’s biological needs. It felt like her hair, face, and neck were fully saturated with seven-hundred Kilometres of road grit. She folded a free corner of the scratchy blanket over Norm, who kept chewing on his article about tide mills.

In front of her, riding shotgun next to her mother, was Dooley, the fourth member of the current Morgan clan. He had his head stuck dangerously far out of his own window, and was, as always, trying to catch all of the air, insects, and odours on his tongue and face as he could possibly manage, being that it was, to him, all an elaborate, important message from God. Dooley was, as Ani liked to proclaim, a canine of average intelligence and exceptional character. He had accidentally taught himself last year to operate the automatic car window, which was a thing Maeve’s mother had found both hilarious and also convenient, given the car’s driver-side window controls hadn’t functioned properly in years. All a person had to say was, “Dooley, window up!”, or “Dooley, window down!”, and at least half the time, it worked more or less just like an automatic window should. Dooley of course had the final say in whether or not the window actually needed to be opened or closed, but he was usually pretty gracious about it.

“Why the gloomy face?” Ani’s eyes in the mirror showed appropriate levels of concern, though not enough directed at the road in front of them, for Maeve’s liking. “It’s a new chapter for us, kid. That school wasn’t big enough for you anyway. Am I right?”

“Mom. The road, please. Precious cargo here.” Maeve just wanted to get back to her self-pity party. She knew once they reached their destination - wherever that was - she wouldn’t have enough space to do it properly for a while. Her mother always over-compensated for these surprise, permanent road trips by hovering for several days afterwards.

Dooley’s head whipped around enthusiastically, tongue launching a line of drool evenly across the backseat. Are you seeing this?? We’re driving to someplace new, again! Can you believe our luck?!!

“Dooley! Jeebus. Cut it out”. Maeve wiped dog spit from Norm’s magazine. The tortoise’s head angled upward slowly, possibly in thanks. His inner life, aside from the science research, was largely a mystery to her.

Ani turned her attention back to the road, “Maevey, you’re going to have an entire room to yourself, at Aunt Gilly’s. Did I tell you that already? We’ll just spend the week all doing our thing when we get there, promise.” There were low hills rising ahead of them now, and the trees were beginning to thicken somewhat. Dooley seemed desperate to smell every single one of them as they went by. A roadsign flew past, uncomfortably close to his thick, sturdy head.

“Mom, you’re driving on the shoulder again. You’re going to kill the dog.”

“I hear they have a tire swing”, Ani added, as an oncoming pickup truck shot past. She paused briefly, wondering whether that would mean anything to her almost-teenager at this particular moment. “And an old barn, I think. Lots of space to go exploring”. She fiddled needlessly with the radio knob for a moment, then, remembering they weren’t listening to the radio anymore, wiped some dust off the buttons with her finger. “Lots of alone time, time to read, time to think…. It’ll be great, I promise.”

Maeve wished she wasn’t constantly surrounded by women who knew what she was thinking all the time. It seemed like a pretty unfair disadvantage to have to go through life with, really. Was she that bad at broadcasting her thoughts and feelings, or did was she just destined to be surrounded by wiccans her entire life? It was a worrying notion.

She was actually pretty mad at her mom this time around. Maeve had sort of gotten used to making new friends every couple of years, but she had finally met a professional this time who hadn’t immediately tried to fix her with some novel technique or medication. Dr. K. was different, but now she was gone too. Did her mom even know about that? Would she even care if she did?

Maeve read Gary’s letter again. Bad penmanship, Gary. They had met in the first month of grade seven, at a school short ficiton writing competition. He was from a different homeroom, and it had been rivalry at first sight.  Gary won that competition (she had placed second, which was almost worse than not placing at all), and had made a pretty big deal out of it after that. He had bragged in the library (quietly, of course) about his Aunt being some famous novelist, and obviously felt it was genetic, or something. Maeve couldn’t exactly bring herself to hate the boy though, even though she tried pretty hard to for about two and a half weeks. By December, they had held hands in the lunchroom, in front of at least five witnesses, and that made them girlfriend and boyfriend, as far as she could tell.

Well, it turned out Gary had held hands with a lot of girls that year. Then everything got super-dramatic and Maeve made a stupid scene near the ancient tetherball pole one day, and basically mortified herself forever. No more men, for at least ten, maybe twelve years. A good rule. They couldn’t be trusted while their brains were still developing anyway. Plus, who writes a goodbye letter on graph paper?

Norm had dropped the magazine corner from his mouth and slowly made his way from under his scratchy blanket cover, and was now gazing up at her in what she imagined might be mild concern. Or perhaps he just wanted to be placed back in his box, it was hard to tell. His face, as always, gave little away. Maeve’s throat had tightened a bit. She wiped her eye on her sleeve again. Stupid.

“Dooley! Window up!” Ani prompted,  sneaking what she thought was a secret look at her daughter through the rear view. Dooley pretended not to hear - he was busy low-growling at a tree full of crows that regarded them silently as they drove toward a faded roadsign that read, Five Corners Rest Stop, 6km.

“It’s okay, Mom. I’m fine, really.” Maeve lied a little.

**- --- --- -**

Wimpernel was a kitten, who lived in the Old Blue and Green Barn, which was nestled in the treeline at the back of an unkept field overlooking Gillys Vale. The youngest of many sisters and brothers, she had been given her name for the pitiful mewling sounds she would often make at dinner time, during her first early weeks of life. She had always been hungry then, and always the last to get her way, being the smallest.

The moment she could venture out on her own, she certainly did so, and had soon adopted, to the disapproval of the other barn cats, the name she had been given by the Old Grey Woman who still lived in the Grumbling House at the far end of the field : Whimsy.

From the barn, Whimsy could foray into the grassy field that was the House’s backyard, and practice how to hunt mice. From there, if the kitten looked toward the House, the barn was on the right side of the property. If she wandered through the tall grass and wildflowers, all the way up to the back porch of the House - a thing kittens were definitely not supposed to do - and looked back from there, the barn was (magically, to her) all of the sudden on the left side of the yard.

Whimsy had always been fascinated about how both Left and Right were not fixed directions, but directions you brought with you wherever you went. She was the only barn cat that ever thought of the barn as being both on the left side of the yard, and also the right side. Up and Down were a completely different story - which was apparent whenever she chose to jump onto or off of something. It didn’t seem to matter what direction she was looking, the ground (or floor, or puddle) always seemed to be Down, and she seemed perpetually drawn in that direction, whether she wanted to go there or not.

The gentle slopes of the Vale sometimes reminded Whimsy a bit of a very large saucer, on those early mornings when the fog from the low mountain far across on the opposite side would come rolling slowly down into it, from wherever fog came from.

Overlooking the Vale, at the back corner of the field (which was always on the same side as the Old Barn, no matter where she looked at it from) the ancient Scarred Tree stood and watched everything, as he always had, since before any of these other things were built here. He had been enormous, healthy and vibrant the day she first caught sight of him, from between the planks of the Barn’s slightly sagging walls, and was now becoming more beautiful every day, showing his best colours for the whole valley to see.

From the grand old tree’s strongest branching arm, some person had hung a most curious hoop. It was dark, close to the ground, and twisted slowly this way and that, in constant conversation with the wind. Wimpernel had been forbidden to go close to it - the others said it was dangerous, and possibly even sinister. Their father, who had no name of his own, aside from the one the Old Grey Woman had given him, which was Bill, had gone there one evening in the Spring (so the story went) and had never returned. When Whimsy met the Old Grey Woman, and acquired her own, real name, she reasoned the law about avoiding the tree no longer applied to her, having been given to a young kitten named Wimpernel, whom she was no longer. Names were powerful. That’s what the Old Grey Woman often told her.

So now, on her 100th morning as a kitten, Whimsy had formulated a plan.

*Greyspot! Psst!*

Whimsy tapped her minutes-older brother on his spot, which was on his forehead, between his closed eyelids. His spot was white, not grey - the rest of him was grey. She found his name slightly ambiguous, but of course had not been there yet to help name him, since he had wrestled past her while they were still in their mother’s womb. So many benefits were awarded the ones willing to start struggling at such a young age. She intended to get him a better name from the Old Grey Woman, as soon as she could convince him to follow her to the House. She had not succeeded so far.

The others were all off hunting, or asleep, hidden among the haphazard junk piles which filled the barn from floor to ceiling.

*Brother! C’mon, get up.*

Her brother’s eyes scrunched tighter, and he rolled left-wise to his side, swatting absently at her paw in his sleep. He was a very good sleeper. Lots of practice.

She walked around to where his face had ended up, and tapped his nose. Sometimes his nose was the thing she needed to tap, to wake him up. She had a number of methods.

*Brother. I need you. I have a plan!*

A low, sleepy growl emerged from her sibling’s throat. His nose twitched, and he turned the intrusion into a dream about chasing a fly. His hind legs kicked twice, while his mouth opened slightly, enough for his pink tongue to peek out. One of her older siblings shifted in the rafters above. The morning sunlight was beginning to peek through the leaves outside. It would not be long before the whole place was bustling and the morning meeting would commence. She needed to act quickly. She stuck her paw in his mouth, and waited.

Greyspot took about three sleepy breaths, and then began to have a hard time breathing properly. His mouth began to open and close, but not very successfully, since his sister’s paw was now stuck in there. With a sudden, slight sneeze, his eyes opened, more or less at the same time.

*What? Where are…. Wimp? What... whyyy?* Spot’s mind started to return to the waking world, where Whimsy sat waiting for him, having pulled her paw away from his face.

*Spot.* Whimsy let her brother squirm and stretch while she patiently continued. *I need your help. I have a plan. I need a distraction.*

Greyspot scrunched his eyes at his little sister, as his sight came into focus. Was it morning already? He was so sleepy. Why did she wake him up every single day? Hadn’t they discussed this? He was a growing kitten, he need lots of sleep.

*Wimp, what the hell?* He let out a short, irritable hiss. *It’s still dark outside.* It wasn’t exactly dark, but close enough.

*Language, brother. And my name is Whimsy now, I told you that three days ago.* She sometimes wished her barely-older sibling - the one she should by definition trust the most - took things a little more seriously sometimes. *It’s Whimsy, okay? I need your help, now.*

Spot rolled slowly onto his back, a trick he learned early, and one not every cat managed to master, or even thought to. *Your name is Wimpernel. You have a plan, but it’s a terrible and dangerous one.*

Whimsy indignantly stamped her front paws on the dusty newspaper Spot used as a bed. *How do you know that?*

*Because all of your plans are terrible and dangerous. You’re not even a hundred mornings old yet, and you’re not going to make it to two hundred mornings at this rate.* All of his short legs were sticking up, somewhat comically, for balance. He gazed wistfully at the ceiling. He had been having the most amazing dream about chasing a fat, juicy fly. He would never get it back now. His sister was the bane of his young existence. *I’m not helping you*, he added, for clarity.

Whimsy put her face right up to Spot’s. This was not up for discussion. Time was of the essence. *I AM one hundred mornings old, as of this morning, actually. So are you. Did you know that? And my name is Whimsy. I’ve told you that seven times now.*

Greyspot stretched dramatically, twisting away from her onto his flank again, but did not offer to get up. He could tell Wimpernel was in one of her moods. He wasn’t getting back to sleep this morning. He needed time to come to terms with that sad fact. *Wimp…*

*No, Spot. You’re my brother, and I’m going outside because I have a plan, and you need to help me. Now.* She was around in front of him again. Their various siblings, aunts, uncles, and extended family - there were about twenty of them in all - were going to start converging here soon, for the morning meeting. She needed her plan to take effect before then. Otherwise, she’d have to wait a whole other day, and that was unacceptable.

*If you don’t help me now*, Whimsy batted at his wayward feet for effect, *I’m going to chase you all day and bite your tail, all day. I swear I will.*

*Ughhhh*. Spot could not take another day of that, again. He closed his eyes for a brief moment, tried to imagine that he had had way more sleep, and was now ready to get up and go hunt something, and then, reluctantly, flipped onto his feet. *Fine. What’s your plan?*

Not long afterwards, the morning meeting commenced, and Greyspot announced that he had seen Wimpernel wander into the woods behind the Old Green Barn - a place young kittens were definitely not allowed to wander. The adults quickly went out to scour the woods, and the eldest of them stayed behind to keep the youngest from getting into trouble.

Greyspot was annoyed at having to stay in the Barn, on top of having his sleep interrupted. He was going to have to figure out how to deal with Wimpernel’s crazy plans. She was going to get herself killed one of these days - there were real dangers along the fringes of the field. Some lived just beyond the treeline, and some would fly in from across the Vale, circling overhead in search of small, careless creatures wandering where they shouldn’t be.

He sat next to a stack of old newspapers, peering through the wall planks, out toward the tall grass of the field. His sister’s tail popped up from the grass now and then, as she wound her way toward the Old House - her favourite, forbidden destination.

*Keep your tail down, dummy*. Spot really could not understand how his sister had survived one hundred mornings already. It’s like she was born just to give him worries. As if in response, Wimpernel’s tail disappeared, and did not reemerge. She had not really learned to stay in stalking mode outside for very long, but his lessons were maybe starting to pay off. When Greyspot wasn’t sleeping, he was quite exceptional at hiding, and hunting beetles, for such a young cat.

*Is Whimsy off to visit the Old Grey Woman again?* Mister Boots asked casually from behind the young cat.

*Jeezus, Boots!* Spot twitched reflexively. How did the old barn cat move around so silently? Greyspot twisted his head about briefly to give his elder an annoyed look.

*Language, son*, said Mister Boots, sitting calmly on his haunches, regarding the kitten with mild amusement. Or something. The older cat was, as far as Wimpernel and he could recall, distantly related to their father Bill’s second cousin, or maybe third. He was somewhat fat, and had a lot of orange in him, which nobody could really trace back properly, so his lineage was a bit of a mystery to them. *Thinking of chasing after her? She’s got danger on her mind, that one.*

Spot did not know how to respond to Mister Boots most of the time. Unlike the others, the old barn cat had long ago made friends with the woman in the Grumbling House, and visited her from time to time, whenever he felt like eating cooked food and sleeping inside, near Human-stoked fire. The others thought of him as not quite right in the head, for this and many other reasons, but his seniority in the barn was without question - he came and went as he pleased, and weighed in on things as his whims dictated.

Presumably, he had not fallen for the morning’s ruse - while the adults scoured the treeline for the missing kitten, Boots had decided to watch Whimsy’s brother instead.

*I’m not going anywhere, don’t worry*. Greyspot went back to peering through the crack in the wall, but his sister was now invisible among the tall grass. Perhaps she was at the back porch by now. Be careful, dummy. He settled in for a long wait. Mister Boots groomed himself, and did the same.

Whimsy was not, in fact, anywhere near the back porch by this point. Her plan had two phases.

The first was to enlist her brother’s help distracting the adults, so she could make her way into the field, toward the House, without being seen. Ever since her last foray into the field, they had all been keeping a rather close eye on her.

The second phase of her plan was to convince her brother that she was simply making another trip to the Old House, so when Mister Boots eventually questioned him about her whereabouts, that’s where they would assume she was. The older cat would understand her interest in going there - they had both formed a relationship with the Old Grey Woman, and even though they never went there together, they shared an understanding, of sorts. He enjoyed the comfort of the den and kitchen, while she enjoyed exploring the house’s nooks, as well as listening the Old Grey Woman’s stories, of which there were many.

Halfway to the House, Whimsy dropped her tail and changed direction, toward the Scarred Tree, and the mysterious dark hoop hanging from it. None of the others really knew of her growing interest in it - even Boots avoided that place, ever since Bill had wandered there and not returned. None of them would think to look for her there.

Whimsy had never met her father. The others all told stories of how he tempted the Fates far too many times with his far-ranging adventures, and must certainly have met his own, that evening he went to visit the Scarred Tree for the last time. The kitten did not think any father of hers would do something stupid, or get caught by a predator. She knew it in her spirit, in fact, for she knew herself, and he had been her father, so she knew him too, in a way.

What else could she do, but go there and see what might have happened to him? What did the others expect of her, now that she had been given her true name?