

The Heroes of Houndsmouth

an unofficial [Armello](#) novella

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I

Night had fallen over the kingdom of Armello.

In the great white castle in the center of the kingdom, the king was still awake, brooding and muttering. The lion had not been sleeping lately.

In rat clan's shantytowns, couples were dressing up in their finery, hoping to sneak their way into the parties held in the mansions of the upper crust.

In the grand warren of the rabbit clan, the rabbits slept beneath their caverns of earth, stone, and gold.

In the northern mountains, wolf clan cubs pestered their packmates to spar with them on the snowy ground.

In the forests, bear clan sages slept in their caves and dugouts, trusting the Wyld to keep them safe while they dozed.

But scattered between these grand places of the kingdom are towns, villages, and hamlets, all homes for the creatures making their way through life in Armello.

In the town of Stag's Landing, pine marten cheesemiths had finished flipping their last cheese wheels for the night and were starting home. In the hamlet of Greenguard, the badger leatherworker and his apprentice had finished setting up their work benches for the next day's orders.

And in the the settlement of Southbank, almost everyone had locked themselves in their homes.

Those who hadn't had gathered together at the Golden Trough Inn and Tavern.

* * *

Within the tavern, a half-dozen rat merchants whispered at their corner table. Lone wolves and scarred hares waved the hog proprietor over for another round. And at the back of the room, near the stairwell to the rooms, a fennec fox sat, studying a map beneath the glow of her lamp.

It was the usual hustle and bustle, but subdued. Everyone was waiting for the news.

At the door's click, conversation halted. Everyone lifted their heads and twitched their ears towards the door. Only the fennec ignored them, tracing a line on the map with her finger.

It was only a trio of cats, hurrying in off the street. The door closed behind them, cutting off the scents of the cool spring air. No one bothered to razz them over the fussy styling of their pelts. Instead, the crowd searched the felines' faces.

The cats shook their heads no. The hog snorted, uneasy. The rest of the patrons turned away, muttering.

A hare with a scar across his jaw turned to his companion, a wolf with one eye. "You'd think he would have taken one of you."

The wolf growled. "And risk getting infected by those Rot-infested birds? No thanks. Besides, the prince won't have anything to do with outcasts like us. And I wouldn't want anything to do with him. *Huh!*" He snorted. "Do half his dirty work and get zero glory. That's pack life for you. I'll never regret leaving!"

The hare beckoned the hog, watched the level of his Killer Carrot rise in the glass until it was refilled. He asked for extra hot sauce.

"Still," said the wolf, peering into the bottom of his mug, "wouldn't want to see anything bad happen to him. He's distant kin, but still kin. You get my meaning?"

The hare rolled his eyes. "Course I do. Everyone's kin in rabbit clan, sumac-licker."

The wolf's lip raised in a snarl and his paw went to his sword. But just at that moment, the fennec's huge ears spun around to the front.

"He's back," she said.

The bar hushed. The wolf's paw lowered, offense forgotten.

Voices could be heard outside, joined by the mad strumming of a lute. The sound swelled with power chords, and then the door exploded open. A possum cartwheeled through the door. A makeshift headdress of black feathers had been formed by huge pinions stuck into his red cap.

A vixen slid into the room. She hammered a dramatic sting before scream-singing:

"BAD BIRDIES BETTER FLY WHEN THEY HEAR THE WOLF CRY!"

"OW-OW-OW-AWOOOO! OW-OW-OW-AWOOOO!" replied the crowd. She jumped onto a table a second before a grey wolf wearing armor and a sword leapt through the door. He was covered in black and purple ooze, but grinning like a loon. He lifted his fists in triumph and the inn leapt to its feet.

"Your prince has returned!" he shouted. "Let the real estate market recover. The bane is vanquished!"

Deafening cheers went up. Coins began passing between the merchant rats.

The hog tossed the prince a bar towel and the wolf began cleaning up. The possum scuttled up to the bar and grabbed a menu.

"A round for everyone," said the prince. "My treat!"

In the approving roar that followed, no one noticed the lanky maned wolf shuffling in after the wolf, carrying a mucky spear, equally mucky helmet, and a cracked shield in his arms.

The hog passed out mead as though he had six hands, and soon the bar was roused again by spontaneous toasts.

“To Thane Greymane!”

“Three howls for the Winter Wolf!”

“Here, here!”

“Thank you, Prince Thane. I don’t have to pack up my shop!” said one of the rats, pumping the grey wolf’s paw.

“Which is great,” said his friend, “cos you know how us packrats hate moving!”

They laughed.

The maned wolf stumbled into a corner, collapsing on the chair, but carefully setting down the gear.

“So what happened?” an otter asked Thane.

His golden eyes glittered. He turned to the fox.

“Hit it, Rusty!”

2

Being a leggy maned wolf, Simon Tallgrass cut an impressive figure when he was standing. Not so much when he was sitting, as he was now, cleaning Thane's armor. He sat in the corner of the room, dropping bane-slimes into a bucket. When he was done, he would be sharing this room with Zeke and Thane. Rusty usually got her own room so long as the inns they visited were on her concert circuit, but now she was sitting on the rug, doing chording exercises up the neck of her lute. The bard could sing like a lark, croon sweetly as a dove, and had the ability to transform a tragic ballad into a piece more haunting than a loon's cry.

She could do these things so well and so easily, in fact, that it bored her. She was beginning to experiment with a new technique she called "scream-singing", a style which played very well at the rougher taverns, making her coin purse heavier than ever before.

The door behind her was open, letting in smoky amber light, the clank and bustle of the pub downstairs, and the occasional townsfolk thanking Thane for saving their town.

The wolf prince himself was seated on the only bed, going into his fourth battle reenactment of the night for a sow and her litter.

"—dove for me so fast its feathers sliced off the tip of my whiskers!" The wolf bent low to show the young piglets his now-uneven whiskers.

"Are bane feathers sharp?" one asked.

"Of course they are, mudbreath!"

"Language," warned the mother sow. Simon lifted his head.

"They sure are sharp, little one," said Thane. He set his paws on his thighs and pushed himself back upright. "But not as sharp as my sword! See, when the bane dove, it thought it'd be able to fly right back up into the sky. But it didn't count on getting its wings clipped by old Banebreaker!" Thane patted the now-pristine scabbard belted to his waist.

"Whoa!" exclaimed the piglets.

"Once I cut the primaries off the one wing, why, all it could do is fly in circles!"

The pig family all laughed with him. Simon looked up again as Zeke the possum wobbled in, arms heaped high with baguettes, jarred peach jam, and roasted turkey. A pitcher of punch hung on the loop of his naked tail.

As if by magic, Rusty's lute was back in its case.

“Ah! Our feast arrives!” said Thane. “Stilts, be a chum and clear off your table there, will you? And let’s move it to the bedside here, we can all sit and eat.” Simon slid the bucket into the corner and began packing armor away.

“Uggh, hurry, Stilts, this is heav-vy!” said the possum. For every item Simon cleared off, Zeke laid two more down. He was already licking his small, pointed teeth.

“Madam, would you care to join us?” Thane asked the sow.

“Oh—we couldn’t,” said the mother. “We’ve potato casseroles at home that need eating before they turn. I’ve just been too nervous to eat, not knowing whether or not we’d have to leave our home.”

“Well, ma’am, I’d wager your litter’ll grow up in that same home now, unless you fancy a move on your own, of course. I hear Blueberry Town has some excellent schools!”

The mother tittered. “No, no moving for us—thanks to you, Thane—”

Simon blocked out the rest. He was too focused on trying to move the fully loaded table over to the bed without spilling anything. By the time he set the table down, the pig family was gone and everyone was licking their chops. Zeke put the dishes on the table, quickly poured drinks, and the pack fell upon the food. Everything was eaten in ravenous silence. Since the townspeople had all chipped in for the meal, there was a lot of food to go through.

When they were done, Zeke rolled back onto the floor. He placed a finger under his belt and undid the buckle. His belly blossomed forth like a bubble beneath his shirt.

“Oh man, stop me! I’ve got the chicken wing sweats!”

Rusty was familiar with Zeke’s bottomless appetite. “So...you’re saying we should put in another order of them for you in an hour.”

The possum moaned. He didn’t so much as twitch when the hog knocked at the open door.

“Come in,” said Thane.

The hog dropped a coin purse on the table. “Th’ reward,” he said, then left with the dirty dishes.

Thane’s tail wagged as he undid the purse’s drawstring. Rusty’s face stretched in a dreamy smile.

“Always looks so pretty,” she said, leaning this way and that to watch the glint of the gold twinkle in the lamplight.

“Now, Rusty, don’t start drooling...the barkeep already took away our napkins. Here’s your share, twenty two coins for the excellent publicity! The meal quality’s certainly gone up since we started working together.”

“My liege!” she curtsied, but only so she could swipe her coins into her skirts. She drew out a coin and turned it in her chocolate brown paw. “Oh yes, you’re Mommy’s favorite! You’re gonna buy Mommy some new strings, yessooare!”

Thane chuckled. “And as for you, my master gourmand...”

Zeke popped his head over the table, nose twitching.

“...though you may be a marsupial, you’re as loyal as any wolf I’ve run with. Seventeen coins for your share!”

“Seventeen ain’t bad, boss, but...listen...how many times have we eaten out together?”

“Oh, let’s see...” the wolf leaned back, “A good half-dozen times, I’d say!”

“Yup. And how many times, of those meals we ate out, did you get poisoned?”

“Why, zero!”

The possum wagged a pink finger.

“And before you hired me, how often did you get sick?”

“Never!”

Rusty crossed her arms, tail swooshing. “You sure ‘bout that, Your Highness? What about that meat pie in Stag’s Landing?”

Thane’s ears fell at the same time his mouth twisted. His paw went to his belly as though reliving the memory. “Well...there *was* that...”

The possum narrowed his eyes. The flame of the lamp gleamed in their reflection.

“And how many gold coins would you pay to have that not ever happen again?”

“Ugh...Here, four coins more—but you can’t have more than Rusty, she’s been here longest. Like my second-in-command!”

The vixen punched the air. “Seniority, baby!”

The possum took his coins and put them in the pocket of his red vest.

“Now, as for you, Stilts—how many bags are we up to these days? Don’t count the armor, now.”

“Five, sir?”

“Don’t count your own.”

“Oh. Four, then.”

“Then your share is twelve coins. Chin up! You’re a superb squire, you can only go up from here!”

“Thank you, sir.”

Simon took his coins and tucked them into the compartment on his belt. When he was done, Thane closed the purse and handed it to the maned wolf.

“In your bag, sir?” asked Simon.

The prince clicked his tongue and winked. “You won’t be omega long at this rate!”

Simon crouched over the prince’s rucksack and stored the gold in the appropriate compartment, along with the rest of the prince’s money. He crawled towards the bucket, ready to do more cleaning, but stopped when another visitor knocked and closed the door behind her.

It was the fennec.

Thane jumped up, arms outstretched.

“Nattieee! Nattie Fenn, always good to see you! Here, take my spot—good thing the dishes got cleared, eh? Zeke, grab a lamp, would you?”

Zeke jumped to as the fennec pulled up her robes and sat at the table. Thane took the chair next to Zeke, across from the fennec, while Rusty and Simon stood behind them, leaning in to get a better look at the map the fennec was rolling out.

“How’s the spy business?” said Thane.

The fennec’s tail lashed. “Lousy, if you don’t keep your voice down!”

“Sorry,” said the wolf, but his tail kept wagging. “What’ve you heard?”

“Plenty, lately.” Her finger slid across the map as she spoke. “Three bane sightings on the outskirts of the kingdom, and the King’s guard are never close enough to stop them before they demolish a town..” She looked up, wriggling her whiskers. “Southbank is VERY lucky you were here when you were.”

“Only following your tips, my dear. So, you want us to go after those three banes, do you?”

“No, I don’t,” said the fennec. “And if you want to hear all I’ve heard, you’ll need to pretend your neb isn’t as big as my ears, begging Your Highness’ pardon.”

“Sorry, Nattie.” Thane’s tail wagged again.

When he had been quiet (but still grinning) for a whole minute, the spymaster went on. “I myself overheard one of the rabbit clan heiresses trying to put together an envoy to the bears.” Her ear flicked. “Quite an odd tale she was telling, of seeing the King’s guard destroying a spirit stone underground.”

Thane scoffed. “Pfft! When they’re the only cure for serious rot? More likely that rabbit breathed some fumes down there, addled her wits.”

“I’m not so sure, Thane. The things I hear get are getting scarier every day.”

“Well, if the royal guard’d stop chasing their tails and hunt these banes down as fast as they bite ticks off each other’s rumps, that’d take care of it,” said Rusty. The possum nodded in agreement.

The fennec frowned at the map. “From what I’ve heard, the banes are the symptom, not the disease.”

“Go on, Nattie!” said the wolf prince. “You say there’s trouble—tell us how to fight it!”

The fennec peered into their faces. The candlelight flickered, lighting up her honey gold eyes.

“I’m thinking this next task will have less fighting and more talking. Or, I’m hoping it does. A warcaster bear came to market this morning. Bought berries and separated out the red ones into a red pouch, different than his food pack.” The fennec rolled her fingers around an imaginary berry. “Then he bought a new flint, even though he already had one around his neck. Finally, he bought an earth-glow amulet off a rabbit.

“I think the druids are near, and that he will try summoning them with these objects.”

“You think?” said Thane.

“But,” said Simon, “he didn’t say anything. About who he was seeing, I mean.”

“Actions speak louder than words,” said the spymaster. “The red berries could be an offering, as could the fl—” The fennec stopped, ears turning to the door.

“Get that please,” she said, before the knock came, *Ba-dokka-DOK!*

Simon opened the door. A chinchilla kit, homeless by the holes in her coat and the scent of spring mud on her feet, nosed her way past the maned wolf. She scampered up the bed and covered her snout, whispering into the fennec’s awaiting ear.

“Good work, little whiskers!” The fennec’s paw moved, and gold clinked into the kit’s paw. “Have a bed and soup on me,” said the spymaster. The kit zipped out of the room. Simon closed the door after her.

“My lookout. The warcaster is moving towards Cedar Vale. Track him down, see if you can find out more about this bane problem. And if you eavesdrop on his conversation with the druids themselves, so much the better. I hate having half the pieces to a puzzle. But if you’re going to track him, you’d better leave now! No one knows the forests like these bears, and he’ll likely kill you if he spots you following him!”

Thane had already slung his pack over his shoulder. The others scrambled to toss their supplies into their own packs.

“Thanks, Nattie! You’re the best!”

“Hush, you loudsnout wolf! I’m surprised the bear hasn’t heard you already!”

The door shut behind them.

3

Hours later, rain drizzled off the trees as Thane led his band through the outskirts of Cedar Vale forest. Simon, bearing the shield and armor, was bent double under the weight. Normally, its polishing cloth was bundled between it and the wolf's back, but at the moment it had been tied across the top of the shield so the falling raindrops wouldn't ring against the metal and give them away. Simon was strongly considering going to all fours; he wasn't built for skulking anyways, and it'd take some of the weight off his back.

Pit, pat, went the rain atop Rusty's felt hat, now pulled down low over her eyes. Zeke had turned his jolly red vest inside out so the dull lining would blend better in the green-grey forest—though nothing could be done about his rumbling stomach.

They all felt due for a nap, but knew they couldn't stop until the bear did, and even then they'd have to post a lookout.

Thane, on the other paw, seemed unaware that he was tracking a bear through the rainy woods after fighting a bane and getting no sleep. His whiskers shivered and his yellow eyes glinted; he had paused at the far side of a stream, tasting the cool air to confirm the bear had stomped straight across the water.

Good. If he's not trying to lose us, that means he doesn't know we're here. He checked over his shoulder for the others—*good old Stilts, up closest to me so I can get the shield in a hurry!*—then lowered his head to sneak deeper into the forest.

It was two more hours before the bear halted in a clearing walled off on one entire side by a stone cliff overlooking it. The bear was bent over now, making his fire, presenting a clear view of his back to the group. They took a long look at the paw-wide scars carved into his back, special conduits of his Wyld power. They wondered if they hadn't made a mistake, running off after the wolf prince on the fennec's word; a fennec who, right now, was dry and warm and safe back at the inn, and not out here in the dark and wet with a bear sorcerer with more Wyld power in his stubby tail than all four of them put together.

Thane didn't seem bothered. He flipped his tail once, then set off to one side, taking them in a long half-circle through some brush, until they came out at the top of the cliff. Thane stuck his

nose over the edge. The bear had thrown a cloak over himself and was sitting close to the fire. The rain had stopped, allowing the crackling of the flames to be heard from this viewpoint.

Thane scented the air. *Doesn't smell like druids.*

Three more noses joined his. They all watched the unmoving bear. Then, without a sound, Thane tapped Simon for the first watch. The wolf prince and the others went to the back of the rock to curl up in their tails atop their unrolled sleeping mats.

4

They followed the bear for six days deeper and deeper into the woods, to where the boughs of ancient trees grew interlaced with one another, turning the light of day into a hazy green overcast beneath the canopy. The morning dew never seemed to completely dry from their fur, though fortunately the ground wasn't so marshy that they couldn't keep up with the bear.

And water was plentiful, coming from little rivulets that crisscrossed the floor of the forest. Food was a little harder to come by, although Zeke came in handy whenever they came across questionable mushrooms, and his bright eyes and little hands made for quick foraging on the move.

The rain had been gone for two days, but Rusty kept her hat pulled down. Though she fully expected to come out of the expedition with another hit song, tracking meant she couldn't play her lute, which put her out of sorts. She didn't smile much, or speak unless spoken to.

Simon didn't like the woods, feeling far too ungainly for maneuvering over roots and under lower branches. Most of all, he didn't like the limited visibility. The Tallgrass family was used to seeing for miles off. Having trees cut off his view every few feet made him reconsider the venture more—more so than the equipment bending his back every day.

Only Thane seemed unaffected by the journey; in fact it seemed every trace left by the bear energized him. It was well known in Armello that the wolf prince was always spoiling for a fight, but few knew about his delight in tracking, taught to him as a pup. Though of course his enthusiasm sharpened considerably when there was a possibility of a fight at the end of the trail.

The bear's scent led into a dark tunnel. Thane halted them and they pressed together on one side of the entrance so they wouldn't be silhouetted against the brighter light aboveground.

Crouching low, Thane sniffed the rocks. The bear had gone through the tunnel, that was for certain. What's more, given the size of the bear against the tunnel mouth, he would have had to have gone in on all fours and with his war staff on his back.

Maybe not the worst place to encounter the brute, thought Thane, though I'd like it better if I knew how wide this tunnel got!

Thane turned and tapped the possum on the shoulder. He motioned Zeke inside. The possum jumped.

“Why me?” he whispered.

“Better night vision.”

Thane gave him a little push. Stifling a groan, Zeke went to all fours and scuttled inside. Rusty went next, but only after Thane motioned *chop-chop!* She slinked inside, her flame-red tail disappearing into the tunnel dark without a sound.

Simon looked at Thane, wondering who would be last.

“Go on,” whispered Thane. “I’ll be the rear guard.”

Even on all fours, Simon had to scrunch tight to fit in, and even then, he had to mince forward in idiotic little steps to get anywhere. He followed the leather scent of Rusty’s lute case in the dark, trusting that the vixen was following Zeke’s trail. Only the feeling of a little warm breath on his tail told Simon that Thane was behind him.

The pack scooted through the dark. The ground beneath them descended, and for a while Simon feared they would wind up in one of the underground stone caves of Armello, home to plenty of venomous creatures he didn’t want to meet in the dark. He could have sworn he smelled the distant smell of Rot and wet stone, but the bottom of the tunnel began to rise again as though the tunnel had been dug in a U-shape.

Simon blinked. He could make out the dark shape of Rusty’s lute case against the clothes on her back, which he hadn’t been able to do before. As he caterpillared forward, the light grew brighter and the air fresher—

Screaming broke out ahead. Rusty’s tail bristled, filling Simon’s entire view.

“What was that?” hissed Thane, but Simon couldn’t answer; Rusty was already darting ahead and he struggled to keep up.

He burst out into the green light, Thane at his heels. Their eyes adjusted, showing Zeke dangling from the paw of the massive warcaster bear.

“*Wheek! Wheek!*” cried the possum. The acorns in his pockets from this morning’s collecting had fallen out and were scattered about the ground beneath them. His tail whipped around, swatting the bear, but he may as well have been a gnat, for all the notice the bear took.

“Unhand my *praegustator!*” said Thane. He drew himself to his full height. “Unhand him at once or I shall best you at single combat!”

Rusty and Simon looked on, eyes wide. The bear stood two heads taller than Thane, and was three times as broad.

The bear’s voice rumbled forth, smooth as black honey, deep as boulders rolling. “Who are you and why have you been following me?”

“Tell me your name first!”

The bear sighed. “No.”

“Then I shall not yield my name! You hold in your paw a member of my pack!”

The bear scoffed. “A possum, a fox, and a false-fox on stilts. You pick odd packmates, little pup.”

“Nevertheless, I am in charge of them and they mean no harm to you. Unhand him so we may talk.”

“Of what?”

“Of your mission to the druids.”

The bear glowered. “Is that what you think I’m doing.” He lowered Zeke as an afterthought. The possum fled behind Rusty’s tail, still puffed up to twice its normal size.

“Yes,” said Thane. His itchy paw dropped from his sword’s hilt to his side. It still itched. “That’s what the red berries and the new flint and the amulet are for—to curry favor, I’d wager?”

“You have keen eyes, little pup. But you’d lose your wager.”

“So what are you doing?”

“Nothing that concerns you, little pup. Go back to your towns and battle where everyone can see you. You’ll win no acclaim interfering in my business.”

At this remark, the wolf’s ears flexed back. “I need no acclaim from you!”

The bear looked at him. “Then why do you fight?”

Thane couldn’t answer.

“Humph. You conquer banes for the song and drink and praise of Armello. My people fight the horrors in the woods, where no one sees but the finches and the ancient oaks. Go home, little pup. Tell them you fought something in the woods, and lick up their adoration. Let the real warriors heal the Wyld.”

Thane’s temper had been building—until that last word. He frowned, puzzled. “What’s the Wyld got to do with the banes?”

“Nothing,” said a new voice.

Thane’s itchy paw drew his sword while the whole pack jumped. All the bear did was turn his head.

An old, hairless rat in red robes and a mask stepped out from the deep shadows beneath the trees. His eyes were blank white, but he did not move as if he were blind, though the frequent wriggling of his whiskers may have had something to do with that.

“Hello...friends.” He gave them a yellow-toothed smile.

“How long have you been there?” asked Rusty. She turned to her companions. “Could any of you smell him?”

Simon shook his head.

“Can’t smell him now,” said the possum, peeping over her tail.

At the sound of the vixen’s voice, the rat beamed with delight. “Is that the famous bard Rusty I hear?”

“Y...yes,” said Rusty, slowly reaching for her lute case. In a pinch, it could do as a weapon.

The rat squeaked. “If I had known you were coming—but, ah, fate is fickle. Do you take requests? It’s been ages since I heard ‘My Silken-Whiskered Sunshine of Armello.’”

Rusty's tail dropped. "That's a one-hit wonder from about a century ago. Even by standard standards, that's...*ancient*."

The rat blinked. He scratched his ear. "You think? It was popular when I was young. Well, let's call it a classic." He winked one unseeing eye. Rusty shuddered.

Thane jumped between them, sword raised. "Enough! Leave my promoter alone, or I'll cut you down where you stand!"

The bear put his massive paw over Thane's and squeezed.

"He is here to meet me. Now go."

"Yes," said the rat, "our business is priv—" He broke off, staring into the air. His whole body began to shiver and his eyelids fluttered.

"Is he all right?" the possum asked.

Paws still trapped in the bear's grip, Thane bared his teeth at the warcaster. "What's this tomfoolery?"

The bear snorted. "How should I know?"

"He's *your* rat!"

"I just met him! He sent word to the council that he needed a bear. They sent me."

Simon pushed aside his fear and crept towards the rat. He poked his cheek with a brown paw. The rat didn't respond.

"He's not cold," said the maned wolf.

"Is he under a spell?" asked Thane.

"No," said the bear. "There's no Wyld power upon him. Or Rot, for that matter." He released Thane and pulled out a pouch. He rolled a couple of red berries into his paw, careful not to gouge them with his long claws.

"Are those all red berries?" said Thane.

The bear gave him a look. "So Wolf Clan's spies are better at tracking than their royal family. Huh."

Thane's tail puffed.

"Calm yourself, pup. Yes, they are all red. Maybe they will revive him."

Zeke sniffed the air. "But those are just currants!"

The bear lumbered over to the rat. "I will try it." He pushed Simon aside. But before he could wave the berries under the rodent's nose, the rat blinked hard, sneezed, then shook himself. Simon loped away in a hurry.

The rat's head swiveled until he scented the berries.

"Ah! Thank you, Brun." He felt around in the bear's palm and, finding the currants, popped them into his mouth. "Did you bring the rest?" he asked through a full mouth.

"...Yes," answered the bear. He handed it over. The pack watched as the rat gobbled them down.

“Refreshing! *Just as was foretold!*” The rat finished the last of the currants and offered the pouch back to the empty air. The bear stared at him a moment before he took it back.

“I was mistaken,” said the rat, wiping his mouth. “Thane and his company may stay.”

“What?” said the bear. “Your message to the council said to come alone!”

“It did. And you continue to be a highly valued member of the team. But, well...it’s always good to have backup, isn’t it?”

“How did you know my name?” asked Thane.

The rat startled. Then grinned. “Who doesn’t know of Thane Greymane, slayer of banes and prince of the wolves?”

“Some arrogant rabbit, I suppose, down in one of their gilded holes,” muttered the wolf.

“Precisely. As for the rest of the civilized world, well—your songs precede you.” He turned to Rusty. “And they are *catchy!*”

Simon slunk to Thane’s side.

“I don’t—”

“Shh! Let’s hear him out!”

“My fine ursine, marsupial, canine, vulpine, and golden dog, I—you—we have been gathered together today to save lives in the village of Houndsmouth. For lo, soon a terror will be upon us, the likes of which has never been—”

“A terror?” said Rusty. “Likely to be one you’ve conjured!”

“You heard the bear. There’s no scent of Wyld or Rot on me.”

“You don’t got no scent at all!” said the possum.

“Indeed. Rot scent would show up on me like skunk stink, wouldn’t it, my fine sir?”

“..Yeah,” said the possum.

“All this is why you can trust me when I say a terror is coming to Houndsmouth and all of you must be there if you are to stop it.”

“What about you?” said Rusty, crossing her arms.

“What about me, my dear?”

“Aren’t you going to be there?”

“Well, yes, I’ll have to be! But the point is, we have to get going.”

The rat turned as if to march straight off to town alone.

The bear stalked to his side. “Here.” He placed one of the rat’s paws onto his enormous scarred arm as a guide.

“Thank you kindly.”

The rat turned his head, not quite looking at Thane. His hairless profile stood out against the greenery in front of him, pink and liver-spotted.

“Your Highness?”

Thane growled softly. Nattie wanted him to follow the bear, and the bear was clearly going off with the old codger. But he didn't trust that rat as far as he could scent him. Or not scent him, in this case.

But return to town and tell Nattie he'd given up? Never.

"Fine," he said.

The rat grinned. "Wonderful," he said. "Before we leave, there's just one thing." He raised his head to the bear. "Do you have the amulet, friend?"

Brun pulled it out of a pouch at his waist and put it in the rat's awaiting hand.

"Does it glow?"

"Yes."

"Good. Sir Possum? If you would just come here..."

After an uncomfortable glance, Zeke stepped to the rat's side.

"Here, cousin." The rat held out the amulet. "A gift!"

Despite himself, Zeke's face lit up. "Shiny!" He snatched it up and put it around his neck.

"Keep it with you!" chirped the rat.

"I will!" said Zeke, admiring it.

The rat looked up again at the bear. "Now we can go."

They all trudged deeper into the forest.

5

Thane didn't like it. The rat—who finally introduced himself as Sargon—had to hold on to the bear, Brun, so he wouldn't bump into one of the aspen trees that had replaced the cedars on this side of the tunnel. But technically, they were all *following* this same rat. Madness.

The rat said he knew the scent of where they needed to be, but Thane had cast about in the air himself and had found nothing of note. His nose told him they were surrounded by green forest, and nothing more. When he brought this up with Brun, the bear didn't even look at him.

"I smell it, too," he'd said. "A wolf's nose is nothing next to a bear's."

After that, Thane had ceased speaking with him.

They walked in a tight lump, with Sargon leading Thane and Brun. Rusty and Simon stuck close by Thane's elbow, and Zeke raced to keep up so he'd be in the middle of the formation instead of the tail end.

After an hour's march, the trees began to thin and you could taste something on the air. Something foul. Thane licked his lips, trying to get the taste out.

Ugh! It's like grease and sweat and mold grown together. Is that what the old codger's been following? How can he stand it?

The stench grew stronger as they approached the end of the woods. The tree line faded in a smattering of aspens. The company found themselves ascending a grassy hill, which blocked their view. The smell seemed to be coming from the other side.

"Houndsmouth is on the other side," said Brun. "Few visit."

"Yes, it is out of the way, isn't it?" said Thane.

Simon was the first to see over the crest of the hill.

It really does look like a hound's mouth, he thought, running his tongue along the teeth of his bottom jaws as his eyes traced the peculiar outline of the snowcapped mountains. Two behemoth crags jutted into the sky, coming to sharp points on opposite ends of the valley. Between them lay smaller jagged mountains, evenly spaced. The village huddled in valley's basin, in the middle of it all. Brown and free of snow, it looked like a tidbit set before the lower teeth of some colossal dog.

The bear took a moment to gaze over the valley. Next to him, Thane frowned. The village was far too still—no cubs about playing, no one in the marketplace, no barkers selling the latest cures or entertainments.

And that smell!

"Whelp," said Zeke, "I declare all their food spoiled. I'll stay behind and gather up some grub."

"Uh huh, me, too," said Rusty, who already felt she had gotten enough songs from this trip to develop an entire one-hour program.

"No," said the rat. "All of you are needed."

"All of us! Us!" Rusty yipped.

"She's right. You're coming too, rat," said Brun.

"Yes, yes." Sargon waved them off.

Taking his first step down the mountain, the rat stumbled. Brun caught him, then yanked him back. "Why hurry? It's almost nightfall. We should prepare. We don't know what we'll find."

"What's happening down there...Hm, let's just say you won't like it if we delay too long."

"What do you mean?" asked Thane.

"I..."—the rat paused a long time—"heard rumors of this happening elsewhere in Armello. There's something going on down there, a process with a beginning, middle and end. We've arrived sometime during the middle. *We don't want to see the end.* Stopping it now is the best decision we'll make today. Your sword is sharpened, isn't it, Thane?"

"Well—" Thane turned to Simon, who nodded. "The grey wolf's tail perked. "Yes! It is!"

"And you're still a slab of muscle that can throw spells, aren't you, Brun?"

"Watch it, rat."

"I'll take that as an affirmative. Then there's no reason to hesitate!"

"Aside from my gag reflex," said Zeke.

"You don't have a gag reflex!" said Rusty. "You can't even throw up!"

"Yeah, but right now I wish I could!"

"I'm sorry, cousin, but you're needed as well. Now come, we musn't dally!"

Sliding his feet, the rat went a step closer towards the village. The bear sighed through his nose, then stepped forward with him.

Thane drew his sword, smiled at his reflection in the steel, then sheathed it again.

"Well, fellows, he's right! No growls, no glory!"

Rusty shook her head, ears back. "This is different, Thane."

"Every adventure's different, Rus, but they all mean residuals for you!"

With that, Thane jogged to catch up with the rat and the bear.

Simon glanced back, ready to agree with Rusty. But when he moved his neck, the shield on his shoulder rattled, and he hurried to be by Thane's side instead.

Zeke looked up at Rusty. "Did you keep track of where we've been?"

"What? No."

The possum's face fell. "Then we can't go back without him. We'd get lost." He started forward.

Rusty stood on the hill. All the red in her pelt screamed at her to stay out.

Thane called over his shoulder, "It's in your contract, milady!"

Rusty slumped. He had her there.

"Adventure. Yay."

She pushed aside the unease and trudged down the hill after her muse.

6

Before Rusty caught up with the group, Sargon the rat sidled up to her. He lay his paw upon her arm. She jerked, startled.

“Madame Bard, if I may have a word?”

Rusty shivered. She hadn’t smelled his approach. “If you want.”

“When you encounter a battle, do you, ah, write a song about it?”

“Sure. It’s how I make my coin.”

“And you’re worth every penny. Such splended melodies! But let me make sure I’m understanding correctly: if we were in battle—all of us—you would write a song? About the battle?”

Duh, she almost said, but she bit her tongue and nodded instead.

The rat didn’t reply.

“Oh, right—Yeah. Uh huh, I’d write a ditty.”

“And—let’s say...if a rat were to be part of the battle—helping conquer evil and such—do you suppose you would write a verse about that rat?”

Rusty’s face went odd. For a few seconds, she walked in a trance. Was this weirdo a fan?

“Or—perhaps just a line! You know. To broaden the appeal to other clans.”

“I...” She glanced down. He was gazing up at her with puppy-kit eyes—or would have been if he’d had anything in his eyes. Her hackles shivered again. She bit her lip. “I follow the music where it takes me. If it inspired me to add in something about a rat, I’d put it in.”

The rat let out the tiniest squeal of joy, bunching his crabbed hands into fists.

“O thank you, Madame Bard! You’ve made an old rat’s year!”

And then he scurried off to speak with the bear.

The hill’s grass disappeared under a footpath that wound up being the village’s main thoroughfare. They went down into the valley, past scraggly-looking fields.

Seeing them, Simon shrank. “This is bad.”

“What’s wrong, squire?” said Thane. “Smell getting to you?”

“No, sir—those fields—that’s winter barley.”

“Is it? Scraggy-looking.”

“It’s not that—don’t you see? we just walked past six fields of weeds!”

Thane stared at him blankly.

“No farmer’d ever let his fields get that bad!” Simon said. “Something’s wrong.”

Thane didn’t know how to answer.

The company went on in silence.

* * *

The dirt road leading into the village proper was almost blocked by enormous wagons with the purple stamp of the King’s crest on the side.

“What, do they take in the imperial laundry here?” said Rusty.

“Too far out of the way,” said Thane.

“It’s like the village where I grew up,” said Simon. “They probably don’t even have a cutler.”

Zeke stuck his nose to one of the cart’s wooden sides. “Smells like wine. So-so vintage. Maybe from Rabbit River?”

“Wine? No way they could afford that,” said Rusty. She kicked a wagon wheel. “Not four wagons’ worth of it, anyway.”

“The Wyld is not concerned with money,” said Brun.

Zeke had shimmied up to the top of the wagon and was sniffing around. “Think there’s any left?”

“Let’s see,” said Thane. He reached for a hinged panel on the side.

“I can break—” said Brun, but he stopped when the panel opened up without a struggle. Thane stuck his head inside. “Empty.”

“They didn’t lock it?” said Rusty. “But it’s imperial property!”

“Dunno,” said Thane. He pulled his head out. “Nothing more to see here. Let’s move on, shall we?”

Stacks of unopened wooden crates had been shunted to either side of the road. One crate, though, had been left open near one of the wagons further in. When they peeked in, stains at the bottom revealed where bottles of wine had stood packed inside it, but it was empty.

Further up the road they came to the marketplace, an open square of dirt bordered on all sides by empty stalls and even the backs of peasant houses. In the center of the square stood a stone well, though there was no bucket or rope in sight.

The pack began investigating the stalls. Some mouldered with soft apples and other abandoned foodstuffs, while others—like the one a wooden sign reading “Lily’s Linens” hanging off the front—looked like the stall owner had locked up for the night and simply hadn’t yet returned.

Simon looked up from a sprouty potato. “What’s that over there? On the ground?”

The entire group gathered around a purple length of cloth that had been strewn in the dirt.

“It’s a banner!” said Thane. Aside from a few pawprints, the golden words still shone as if someone had unpacked it that morning:

Royal Wine Tasting Festival

“That explains this,” said Rusty, holding out a paper she’d found behind the paper-maker’s booth:

“Is that paper I hear? Do read it, would you dear?” said Sargon.

“It says, ‘Drink to the health of your king! This coming evening, sample a special vintage of Armellian wine, harvested from the king’s own palace vineyard. Cub-sitting provided.’ ”

“Pfft!” said the possum. “If that’s what the king drinks, then I’m a cat! I’ve had better wine back in the swamp.”

“Mneh, some folks’ll drink dishwater as long as there’s a fancy label on the bottle. *Glug-glug*, you know?” said Rusty.

“Let’s not drink anything while we’re here,” said Brun.

“I don’t think we can,” said Simon. “The well looks dry to me.”

The rat’s blind eyes popped open. “Well?” he said. “There’s a well here?”

“Behind you, a few spear-lengths,” said the bear.

The rat pointed. “And what’s in front of me here?”

Thane gave him a funny look. “Me, old fellow—but past me, there’s the wall to a house, covered in ivy, but it’s all dried up and grey now.”

“Ah!” The rat pointed to one side, “And over here, is that the woodpile?”

Slowly, hackles raising, everyone turned to look. Winter had laid the woodpile low, but sure enough, under a little oilskin tarp, there lay cut logs, perfect for a fireplace. They silently turned back to the rat.

“How’d he know that?” Zeke whispered.

“Well, yes, that’s someone’s wood,” said Thane. “But you don’t think we’ll be here that long, do you?”

“Stuff the banner in between the wood, will someone?”

When nobody moved, the rat went to all fours. Raking his fingers across the dirt, he soon found the banner. He gathered it into a bundle so he wouldn’t trip, then walked with confidence to the woodpile, nose quivering the entire time. He went too far, though, and stubbed his toe on one of the logs. He paused to growl in pain, then threw the banner out in front of him. He bent low and began feeling the wood through the fabric, poking and stuffing it into the gaps between the logs until only a purple tail stuck out, draping in a heap on the ground.

Sargon stood back, arms akimbo and sniffing the air in an arc. He almost looked like he was admiring his work. “Sir Brun?”

“I am not a knight.”

“Do you still have the flint I requested?”

“Yes, and no gold or trade for it.”

“Just so long as you have it on your person. Now, is that a garden I smell?” He turned towards an alley next to the ivy wall and stuck out his arms, waving them in the air before him. “Help me, now.”

The bear rolled his eyes and went to the rat. Smelling him, Sargon took hold of his arm.

“Come along, everyone. Now’s not the time to split up.”

Rusty made a face and waved her paws around her head. It was a clear comment on the rat’s sanity. But when Thane went to take the point position, the rest of his pack followed.

7

“Oof. Pretty sad garden,” said Zeke when he saw it. It was a plot of peas hanging off their simple string trellises, laid out in rows. The leaves were yellow and sick-looking.

“But it’s been weeded,” said Thane. “So someone must be looking after it, right, Stilts?”

The maned wolf nodded, shrugging Thane’s equipment to one shoulder so he could stand straighter. The pea plants were quite mature, forming a screen for anyone shorter, but Simon’s head rose quite easily above it. He was gazing over the trellised rows when something made his eyes widen. He put his finger to his lips and crouched down.

“What is it?” Thane asked at regular volume. The maned wolf winced and gestured groundward with his palms, *keep it down!*

“What, now?” Zeke whispered. Simon gathered the whole party close. “There’s someone in there.”

Thane’s tail wagged. “We can chase him out!”

“Or ambush him,” said the bear in a whisper soft as falling leaf.

“I don’t think he’s very big,” said Simon. “But I can see the stalks moving, and it isn’t the wind.” They hadn’t felt a brush of fresh air since they had entered Houndsmouth.

“Zeke, go in there,” said Thane.

“Just ‘cos something’s small don’t mean it can’t hurt you!” said the possum.

“If it’s friendly, it shouldn’t be afraid of you. If it’s unfriendly, run back to us and I’ll fight it for you.”

The possum eyed the garden.

Thane threw his thumb at Brun. “Well, he can’t go in there!”

The possum shook his head, irritated. “Fine.” He went to all fours and sneaked into the garden. The vines wobbled on their strings as he passed through. Simon stood up again, tracking Zeke’s progress. He kept his voice low.

“He’s going the wrong...oh, no, he’s caught the scent...Almost there—”

A sharp gasp interrupted the steady rustling of Zeke’s travel.

Pitterpatter!

“Here he comes!” said Simon.

A raccoon cub burst out of the garden. He froze for a split-second upon seeing the adventurers, then turned to dart back into the concealment of the plants, but Thane flung himself forward and grabbed the cub by his black feet.

“Gotcha!”

The raccoon reached back, slapping at Thane’s paws.

“Be calm, little one,” said Brun. “We will not harm you.”

The cub’s eyes went wide at the bear’s sonorous voice and he pushed himself up to drink in the look of the speaker.

“Are you a druid?”

“Why, you’re a she-cub!” said Thane.

Sargon leaned forward, sniffing the air around the cub. “Assumptions happen.”

“No, little one,” Brun answered. “I am not a druid.”

The cub’s head fell. “We need a druid.” Then she looked up again, eyes white and wide beneath her mask. “You don’t work for *her*, do you?”

“No, my cub. We’re here to save Houndsmouth.” Thane released the cub. She got to her feet, ignoring the dirt on her ringed tail. She wore simple farm clothes that looked like they’d been clean not too long ago. A rucksack was thrown over her shoulder.

“I don’t think the village can be saved. But there’s two other cubs left, they’re the ones that need saving.”

“Who’s got them?” asked Rusty.

The cub spotted Rusty and her face lit up in recognition. “Are you—”

Rusty winked. “The one and only!”

“Wow.” The cub couldn’t say anything for a moment. “Thank you for coming to save us, Rusty!”

Rusty chuckled. Thane glowered. “What am I?” he said, “Chickens’ feet?”

Before more could be said, they heard footsteps coming down the lane.

The cub waved them into the snap peas and the entire party threw themselves in.

A ferret in a green dress came hurrying up. “Naomi! There you are! When you didn’t come back from picking, I got so—why are you carrying that pack?”

The flap of the raccoon’s rucksack had popped open during her struggle with Thane. Some of the picked peas had spilled out revealing a dull red traveling cloak stuffed into the bottom.

“I..saw it in a house looking for food. I thought you might like it, Miss Nubine.”

“You silly goose! I already have enough clothes. But you haven’t answered my question about your pack!”

“Oh, well..I saw it by the cloak, and thought it would let me carry more veg back for the stew.”

The ferret wrapped the cub in her arms. “I worried so! What would we do without you? I thought you’d disappeared like the others!”

“But the others went missing at night, Miss Nubine. They were sleeping in the schoolhouse and weren’t there the next day. Nothing bad’s ever happened while we’re awake.”

“We don’t know who’s out there doing this to Houndsmouth. So far, we’ve stayed together and we’ve stayed safe. In fact…” The ferret checked around her. “We should be getting back.”

“But I haven’t picked enough food!”

“It’ll do for tonight. It’s getting dark. Come on. Let’s go back before something terrible happens.” She kept her arm around the cub and walked her away from the garden patch. The cub didn’t look back.

Long after their footsteps faded, the bear, the rat, and Thane’s pack stuck their noses out of the pea patch.

“What’s going on around here?” said Simon.

“Minor chords…Gonna need so many minor chords,” muttered Rusty.

Thane got up from the dirt. “That cub said there were others who needed saving. We must track them down.” He put his nose to the ground.

“No need to track them,” said Sargon. “That clever cub told us they’re sleeping in the schoolhouse.”

“That’s what I meant. Come on, let’s go!”

8

Dusk was well upon the party when they arrived at the schoolhouse. It was a small, white building with a red roof and chimney. Two windows on the sides faced each other, and at the front there was a bell with a chain.

“Feels like suppertime,” said Zeke, rubbing his belly. “And that smells like supper.”

“Hush,” said Thane, though the smell of simmering stew made his mouth water as well.

“Stay here while I look inside.”

The grey wolf slunk up to the window. Folding his ears back as far as they would go, he grabbed the edge of the windowsill and slowly, slowly peered into the schoolroom.

The walls had all been torn down to make spaces for the cubs to sit. A fire burned in the fireplace a little ways in front of the teacher’s desk, the front of a huge cedar chopped in half so the top was flat. Warm light flickered from the hearth, making shadows dance on the walls.

The ferret was ladling out soup to three cubs: Naomi, the raccoon kit from the pea-patch (now rucksackless), and two young hedgehogs. One of the hoglets was a little over school-aged; the other, a little under, just out of babyhood. The teacher’s desk had been pushed to the edge of the room, and extra clothing bundles had been laid out to form crumpled nests for them all to sleep in. There were at least twenty nests in the room, but only these three cubs.

The cubs went back to their nests of cloth and began to eat. The older two lifted their spoons to their mouths a few times, sipping a little of the broth, but the youngest hoglet only watched them.

The ferret was watching, too. “Darby, you should think about your brother first!”

The older hoglet nodded, setting his bowl down, but he wouldn’t look at her. He picked up the other bowl and offered his sibling a spoonful. But the littlest hoglet wrenched his head away, pinching is lips shut and pushing his brother away. Soup spilled onto the floor.

“Well, come on! You’re not even trying!” said the ferret.

Darby glanced at the raccoon cub, who had her spoon to her mouth. She wiggled her tail once, then it lay still on the ground. Thane knew it had to be a signal—it had happened too quickly. He only caught it because of his focus and his keen wolf eyes.

“Here comes the pelly-kin, Ramsey,” the older brother sang, swooping his refilled spoon through the air towards his little brother’s mouth. “Here to drop off a package! There’s a good lad.”

But his little brother pushed him away again. The ferret grumbled.

“You can’t do it right, obviously!” In the blink of an eye she had seated herself between the brothers and had the bowl and spoon in her hand.

“Hello, my poppet!” Her voice had turned nursemaid, full of cheer. “Don’t you want to grow up to be a good, strong hedgehog?”

The little hoglet nodded.

“Then you have to eat your soup, then, musn’t you. Here comes the super pelican, with a delivery to make you a mighty hog!” The ferret drove the spoon in the air. But when it approached the hoglet’s mouth, he clamped his paws over his snout and shook his head.

Darby was looking extra worried now. Dark circles showed under his eyes when he glanced at Naomi, but she made no move, her soup bowl in her lap.

Darby turned to his little brother. “Please, Ramsey! We don’t want Miss Nubine getting cross now,” he said.

“Miss Nubine’s not getting cross,” said the ferret, setting the soup in her lap and putting her paw on both brothers’ shoulders. She spoke to the younger hoglet. “She just wants to know what you want, little one!”

The little hoglet’s eyes bulged, like he was suddenly going to pop. He threw out his arms and yelled in the ferret’s face, “WANT CHIPS!”

“Oh!” said the ferret, pulling her arms away. “Well, I—”

Naomi stood straight up, bowl still in her hands. More soup splashed onto the ground. “I could go find some, Miss Nubine. I saw taters in a—”

“No,” said the ferret, grabbing the bowl and standing up. “No, no.” The hoglet was bawling now. The ferret tried to plug his mouth with a soup spoon, but that only made the hoglet throw himself down on the ground. “WANT MAMA’S CHIPS!” He thrashed, knocking the bowl out of her hands. Soup splashed everywhere. “WANT MAMA!”

“Please, Miss Nubine!” said the raccoon.

“Where would you get the oil, silly girl? Besides—”

The ferret glanced out Thane’s window. He shut his golden eyes and froze, trusting his grey fur to camouflage him with the darkness. He would give himself away if he moved.

“—it’s past dark now. No one is going out.”

Ramsey the hoglet continued to howl.

“I know what’s to be done.”

Nubine’s voice had moved, but she hadn’t come any closer, so Thane risked opening his eye, just a little.

The ferret had gone behind the teacher’s desk and was digging around. Glass clinked. While she was bent over something behind the desk, the raccoon girl grabbed the bowl from the older

hedgehog. Moving quicker than a hummingbird's wing, she turned to one of the other fabric nests and poured the soup onto it. Turning around, she flipped the clothes with her foot, so you couldn't see the liquid soaking through, nor the spilled vegetables.

By the time the ferret turned back to the littlest hoglet, the raccoon girl was back seated next to the hedgehog brother, bowls in their correct places, and empty besides.

Thane frowned. What was going on? What was in that soup that they wouldn't eat it?

The ferret uncorked a wine bottle she had taken out from behind the teacher's desk. The label on it was purple. Thane thought he could see the edges of the royal seal of Armello on it.

She pulled out one of her handkerchiefs and poured some of the wine onto it. The hoglet was still crying. She bunched the cloth so the wine-soaked part formed a point.

"If you're going to act like a baby, then I must feed you like one," she said, and she stuck the soaked end into the hoglet's open mouth.

Or, at least, she tried to. As soon as the sop hit his tongue, the hoglet thrashed again—and then tried rolling into a ball.

"Oh, no you don't!" The ferret leapt upon the hoglet. Ramsey fought, but couldn't outmaneuver the fluid-moving ferret. She stepped on his leg and grabbed his arms. The hoglet couldn't escape. His screams were joined by the soft sobs of his brother, who tried rushing the ferret, only to be stopped by Naomi, who hissed something in his ear. Darby went limp, save for the heaving of his chest as he tried to fight back tears.

The ferret stuck the cloth in, then clamped her paw around the little hoglet's snout, forcing it around the cloth. Tears in his eyes, he began sucking the handkerchief. In a few seconds, his eyes had gone distant. A minute later, he was completely limp. The ferret pulled him into her lap, reaching for the wine bottle again.

The raccoon held on to the shoulders of the sobbing brother, then looked around.

Her blue eyes found Thane's golden ones. She bared her baby teeth, but there was fear in her eyes.

"Help!" she mouthed.

Enough!

Thane sprang into action.

9

The prince of the wolf clan kicked in the schoolhouse door. His sword was held at the ready.
“UNHAND THAT CUB!”

Moving so fast she was a blur, the ferret grabbed the older cubs and pulled them in front of her just as Rusty, Simon, and Zeke burst in around him. Her back was to the fireplace.

The ferret hissed. “Who are you?”

Darby the hoglet was too stunned to say anything, but Naomi struggled against in her captor’s arm. “Rusty, help!”

The ferret balled her fists and struck Naomi in the head, twisting her body to bring extra force to the blow. The thud of the impact was sickening. The cub’s head lolled and she moaned.

Rusty saw red a moment, then bared her sharp white teeth.

“Nobody hits my fans!”

She dove for the ferret.

“Whoa,” said Thane. The fox and the ferret whirled around each other, growling and frothing. The ferret kept a firm grip on her charges, planting them between her and the fox, so Rusty wound up pulling every bite and punch she threw, fearing she’d hurt the cubs.

“Stilts! Shield!”

The maned wolf pulled the shield off his back. Thane put his arm through the enarmes.

“Zeke, test the stew and the wine, I think something’s wrong with them.”

“Got it, boss.” The possum dashed forward.

Thane threw himself into the fray. By now the ferret had pulled a tiny dagger and was slashing at the vixen when she got too close.

Thane and Rusty tried to circle her, but by keeping the chimney to her back and snapping at Rusty when she made a move, she kept them from surrounding her. Simon braced herself in the doorway, blocking the only way out. His heart thudded. He pleaded to the Wyld, *Please don’t let her kill those cubs.*

Thane leapt into the ferret’s face. Her dagger glanced off his shield. He parried it, forcing her arm wide, then launched forward with his sword level, ready to run her through. But just before his arm extended, the ferret pivoted, and suddenly the sword was heading straight for the drugged hoglet still in her arms.

Thane thought he had pulled back just in time, but a pawful of baby quills fell to the floor. A line of red of blood shone in the firelight where he had sliced the hoglet's skin.

It stopped Thane cold.

The ferret read his face, then pinned all three cubs against her with her elbow. She pressed the dagger against the raccoon's throat.

"This doesn't concern you, wolf! The king needs these cubs to serve him, and I will be the one to take them to him!"

By now Thane was certain she was mad.

"The king has everything he needs; he rules Armello and all the clans within it." He swallowed. "Surely you can let these cubs go on his behalf."

"No! I will do as my lord ordered!"

"Which was what?" said Rusty.

"And where are their parents?" asked Thane.

Pop! Gulp. Smack-smack.

Zeke had found the wine bottles.

A nasty smile grew on the ferret's face. "Drink all you want," she said. "Everyone else did. All according to plan."

Suddenly, all the fur on Zeke's body stood on end. "It's Rot! You can't taste it at first—this wine—nobody drink it, it'll infect you!" He threw the bottle, but the glass was so thick that it bounced once without breaking, then fell over on its side, leaking red liquid over the schoolhouse floor as it rolled to a stop beneath the far window.

"Rot wine?" said Simon.

"And she's been force-feeding it to cubs!" said Thane.

The pack gasped.

Thane stared the ferret down. "Are they all dead?"

"They serve the king now. They will be the seeds he sows, to raise up a new era in Armello!"

"Lady, you're nuttier than a squirrel's dessert!" said Rusty.

"And you're annoying. Leave us, all of you, or the cubs get it." She pulled the knife tighter to Naomi's throat. Her downy fur caught on the blade and drifted to the floor.

Thane faltered. Rusty was fierce, but unarmed and untrained. Zeke was even less equipped for battle. Stilts had tremendous reach, but any attack they made would be shielded by the cubs. Nubine would make sure of it.

Three little lives, in one madcreature's paws.

"Retreat," said Thane.

Zeke's eyes popped open. Simon inhaled.

"What?" said Rusty.

"Retreat. I won't be responsible for the death of innocents."

"Yes, leave this village at once, or cubs' blood will be on your paws."

The pack looked to Thane. He nodded once and sheathed his sword. The raccoon cub groaned, almost a sob.

Zeke sidestepped away from the crate of wine, then hurried behind Simon, out the door. Keeping watch on the ferret, Thane backed to the door. The ferret's arm relaxed and the knife wasn't so tight against the cub's throat.

Rusty was the last to move. She bared her teeth again as she passed by the ferret. "May the Wyld sink its fangs into your throat."

The ferret scoffed. "When the king's plan is achieved, there will be no Wyld left to punish anyone. I will be a favored servant of the king, and rule my own clan."

"Right, and tomorrow I'll be an opera singer."

"Fool. You are dismissed."

The vixen snarled over her shoulder. But in the end, she slouched to Thane's side. He gestured her out the door, but the wolf prince didn't yet leave.

The ferret dropped the raccoon girl and shoved the sleeping hoglet into his brother's arms. He hefted his brother over his shoulder as best he could—they were almost the same size—and went to the raccoon girl, who was holding her head and gasping with pain.

Picking up her skirts, the ferret avoided the puddle of rot wine and went to the teacher's desk. She bent down and heaved the wooden box of wine onto the desk.

Thane moaned. What would she do to the cubs?

Hearing him, the ferret froze, glaring and hissing at Thane. He wrinkled his nose in disgust, then began closing the door with the tip of his claw. Slowly, slowly...

"Hmph." The ferret whirled back to the box. *Clink, clink*. The shine of dark glass disappeared into the pocket of her dress. Out came another handkerchief.

Almost shut. The firelight threw the ferret's shadow against the wall. Thane watched it walk to the far window, bend over, and pick up Zeke's fallen bottle.

He kept his yellow eyes on her for as long as he could.

Click. The door was shut. The cubs were alone in there.

Thane looked up at his pack. A faint whine sounded from Rusty's throat. There was nothing more they could do for them.

CRASH!

A roar shook the schoolhouse, deep enough to make Thane's chest squeeze. Bright, sharp screaming seemed to ignore the barrier of the wooden doors, piercing straight through Thane's heart. He kicked the door open again.

Half of Brun the bear leaned in from the broken window on the opposite side of the schoolhouse, Wyld-powered scars shining phosphorescent yellow in the dim room. Below him, the cubs screamed, but the ferret was growling, squirming and wriggling, trying to escape the crook of the bear's elbow.

"To arms!" shouted Thane. He sprinted for the ferret.

She swiped and clawed at Brun's eyes with one paw, snarling, never still for an instant.

With a mighty huff of breath, Brun leaned back out the window. The ferret went with him and disappeared from view as though snatched away by the wind.

Thane panted, then tore out the front door, dodging around his pack as they came in.

Kneeling, Simon gathered the hoglets in his arms.

"Come here, cubs."

Naomi moaned, tried to turn on to her belly to get up, but her supper came up, making a watery pool of sick on the floor.

Another heart-shaking roar rattled the remaining broken glass.

Thane bayed. "She's loose! The coward!" His footsteps disappeared as he ran off, following her.

Rusty pulled the hoglets into her arms. "You go with Thane," she said to Simon. "You've got his weapons. Go!"

Simon hesitated.

"Her head's been boxed, we shouldn't move her," said Rusty.

"Out of the way, minor potioneer coming through," said Sargon, clawing the air as Zeke led him through the door. The possum steered him around the puddle and sat him down by the cubs.

"They're right in front of you."

The rat pulled a small bottle from his robe and wrenched the stopper out with his teeth. He spat it across the room, where it bounced and disappeared into a nest of clothes. After feeling his way around the raccoon cub's face, Sargon pillowed her head in his palm. He put the vial to her lips.

Rusty's fur fluffed. "What's that?"

"Wyldsap—the *good* stuff, too, I tried it," said the possum.

"Thank the Wyld!" said Rusty.

"Drink it all, my dear, and your headache will go away. Sour tummy, too."

The raccoon lapped the liquid down, though she made a face.

"That's it, don't let it come back up. Just a moment more, and you'll feel fine. Rusty, my dear, are you still here?"

"Yeah."

He beckoned her closer. "Come spell me—I must be off to the main square. When the potion takes effect, you and Ezekiel take the cubs and get them out of town. The hillside we came down from should be far enough from the fire..."

Naomi's eyes popped open.

"What fire?!" said Rusty.

"Get far enough away and you won't have to worry about it!" said the rat. "Now switch places with me. Wyldsap of this strength acts fast. Golden dog, are you still here?"

"Present," said Simon.

"What are you still doing here?" said Rusty. "I told you—go with Thane!"

“No no, my dear, the fates have planned this exquisitely. We are both going the same way.” Sargon stood. “Come, my friend. Fate runs on a strict schedule.”

Naomi rubbed her face, then sat up. She pushed herself to her feet, no longer disoriented.

Rusty grabbed the older cubs’ paws while Zeke bundled the littlest hoglet, still conked out, in his arms.

That was all Simon needed to see.

While Rusty and Zeke hustled out the schoolroom door, he grabbed the robed rat. Then they followed, hot on their friends’ heels.

IO

It was hard lugging the equipment in the dark through the village streets. Harder still when the maned wolf was in a hurry, and extraordinarily difficult when he had to shorten his stride to accommodate the blind rat.

But without him, Simon supposed the raccoon kit would have been in no shape to travel, so he refused to complain.

Moonlight had shown Simon the moment when Zeke and Rusty had turned off the main thoroughfare—heading for the edge of the village and hopefully getting the cubs to the hillside more quickly. He'd seen the moonlight flash silvery on Rusty's great tail as she made the turn, and then it was just him and the rat, stumbling along forward.

Perhaps by the time we arrive, Thane and Brun will be finished with her, thought Simon. *Then the village doesn't have to burn.* Though it was dark, he could imagine the different designs carved on all the wooden doors they were passing by, like his own hometown. What would it do to the cubs if they lost their friends, family, and home?

The maned wolf stepped on something. He almost tripped, but recovered his footing in time. The armor thumped on his back.

Was that a cork I stepped on?

The leaves of the pea-patch rustled.

"Almost...there..." he said between panting.

As they were squeezing through the narrow alleyway leading into the square, there was a flash of acid yellow, and the bear's roar shook dust off the bricks next to them.

"Sounds like someone's gone feral. Or, feral-er," said the rat, suddenly pulling back on Simon's arm.

Simon pulled the rat forward again, but the rat resisted. Simon gave up, deciding to catch his breath instead.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean, he's used the Wyld to make himself stronger, but at the cost of his good sense. He'll be beastly now, and may not recognize us as friends."

“That’s not what I meant,” said Simon. “What did you mean, ‘feral-er?’”

“Oh, well..I may’ve had a spell up my sleeve back there.” He lifted his chin to indicate the direction they’d come from.

“You helped a bear go feral around cubs?”

“Yes, but he didn’t notice the broken glass stuck in him as much, see?”

The yellow light shone around the corner. Another roar went up.

“STOP! You’ve got the wrong fellow!” Thane shouted.

Simon tried to shake him off. “I’ve got to go or he might hurt Thane!”

The rat’s fingers dug into his arm again.

“Take me with you. I must be in the square, too.”

They pelted down the alleyway.

The square was before them. Brun roared, swiping at Thane, who ducked behind one of the abandoned stands. The wood shattered beneath the bear’s paw. Thane was a grey blur, hopping into the next stand, keeping his shield between him and the bear, but his sword low at his side. The bear threw aside a stand, which went crashing into the middle of the square.

The ferret stood half-collapsed against the lip of the well. Her dress was shredded. Moonlight glinted on the bottle she had tipped to her lips. She drank in hurried gulps.

“Here’s where I get off. Thank you, sunny-pup!” The rat patted Simon’s arm and approached one of two poles that had been erected in the square to hold the festival banner.

He scurried up the pole. Simon goggled. *He climbed that like he rehearsed it!*

Then he shook himself. He had to help Thane.

* * *

From up on his high perch, Sargon called, “Whose mustelid musk is that I smell? It’s not one I recognize.”

The ferret yanked the bottle from her lips with a *pop*. Her gaze darted around the square.

“Who’s there?”

“It is I, Sargon of rat clan.”

The ferret puffed. “Then you are an ignorant dustwhisker if you don’t know who I am!”

Sargon grinned. “Why, I’d know those dulcet screeches anywhere! Baroness Nubine, it’s been...ages!” He managed a sort of bow from his perch, then he was half-wrapped around it.

“That’s because I was at the king’s palace, receiving the recognition I deserve!” she said. “He made me his steward!”

“He made you steward? In that tired old rag?”

“RRRGH!” The baroness raised the wine bottle. For a moment, she thought she might hurl it at the old rat and knock him off his place. Would serve him right!

But then she took a considering look at the bottle. So many possibilities...

She cradled it to her, wrapping her tail around it for good measure.

“I was his guest for a year—the galas, the feasts—it was everything rat clan never gave me!”

“A whole year? Odd—no one said anything about missing you.”

“And you know what, plebe? I don’t care! The rat clan won’t honor me, the Wyld doesn’t bless me—so now it’s the Rot’s turn!” With a nasty smile, she put the wine bottle to her mouth and chugged it.

“No!” said the rat. “Not yet!”

* * *

The bear’s claw-swipe rang off metal shield. The blow knocked Thane back a few steps, right into a dark corner. The light from the bear’s scars gleamed off his shield, dazzling him for a moment. When his vision recovered, Brun had closed in. The feral bear reached overhead for a crushing blow, but as Thane reached for his sword, a staff jabbed into the bear’s ear.

Brun wrenched away, covering his head. Just as Thane lifted his sword, a paw grabbed his shield arm and yanked him out of the corner.

“C’mon,” said Simon, wooden staff in paw. “If we can fend him off long enough, the feral spells might wear off.”

Thane ran over the debris from a quilting stand. “So that’s why the brute is after me!”

They loped to a dark corner of the square, behind a snack-grass cart.

“Where are the cubs?” Thane whispered.

“With Rusty and Zeke, getting out of town. You haven’t smelled a fire yet, have you?”

Thane frowned. “No! Why?”

Simon lifted his snout towards Sargon.

“Oh, you bumpkin, you don’t really think—”

The cart they were hiding behind lifted off the ground. Brun roared, then tossed it aside with a crash. Thane lifted his sword, but before he could get it upright, the bear had them both engulfed in his arms. Their feet dangled in the air. The bear crushed them together, the pressure forcing Thane’s paw open. His sword fell to the ground even as his shield began cutting off his breathing.

Simon desperately began roar-barking into the bear’s face, but the warmage’s scars blasted bright, and he wrenched the two fighters still closer.

Thane’s vision narrowed, began to black around the edges.

So this is it...squeezed to death like a python’s lunch...

“No!” came Sargon’s voice. “Not yet!”

This turned Thane’s head. In the whole time he’d been traveling with the rat, he’d never seen him lose his head. But to hear that crack of panic in the blind rat’s voice...it couldn’t be good.

Brun seemed to hear it, too. He groaned, seemed to fight a battle within himself for a moment, then the light faded out of his scars. His hold on the two wolves loosed. He looked into both faces, recognition rising to the surface. “Little pup?” he said. “Squire?”

“Greetings!” said Thane, smiling and forcing his tail out from between his legs.

“You had too many feral spells on you, sir; you forgot who you were supposed to be attacking!” said Simon.

“That rat,” said the bear, letting them down. He reached behind his back and took out his stone-headed staff. His scars still glowed. “Did I hurt the cubs?”

“No,” said Simon.

“They’re safe,” said Thane.

“Good,” rumbled the bear. He turned towards the baroness. “Now help me with this furred snake.”

He stampeded towards her. Thane and Simon raced to catch up.

She spotted them coming. But instead of running, she chugged the last of the wine and let the bottle drop at her feet. Black corruption crawled up her fur, making jagged patterns across her arms. She stuck her head down the well.

“Up! All of you, out of there! Your mistress speaks! Kill the bear!”

Thane continued on, but Simon pulled up short. “Why is she yelling down an empty well?”

Sargon, fleeing past on all fours, said, “Because it’s not empty! Can’t you hear them?”

Simon couldn’t, not over the battle cries. Instead, he lunged for the rat, already past him. His long arms let him grab the tip of Sargon’s tail. He squeezed hard.

Sargon squealed. “Release me! I’ve done my part, now you will do yours!”

Simon looked behind him. *No—can’t be!* He’d thought he’d seen a paw reaching over the edge of the well, like someone climbing out.

“What’s happening?”

“Fate! Just remember, you can’t save Houndsmouth—and Brun has a second flint, around his neck in the pouch. Now let me go!”

“Wylld!” came Thane’s cry from behind him. Simon looked.

It was Houndsmouth’s villagers—it had to be, there were too many of them. Climbing out the well, blank-eyed as the rat before him, mold growing in their fur, parts of them not furred, not even covered in skin, but with flesh decaying and rotting off the bone.

How long have they been down there?

Seeing them climbing over one another like ants erupting from a broken anthill did something to the golden dog’s mind, and no other thought was able to follow it. He could only think of them standing down there in the dark well, silent and blank-eyed while they had marched about above, in the empty town.

The Rot-infected animals began swarming the bear, gurgling and hissing. For every one Thane beat off the warcaster, two more horrors glommed on. Two raccoons pulled and bit the bear, who roared and swung his heavy staff.

The baroness was fleeing up the main road, towards the hill, towards the cubs, and the rest of his pack, and yet Simon still could not move. He was still lost underground.

Chomp!

The maned wolf yowled in pain and grabbed his paw. His paw bled where the rat had bitten him across the knuckles, but it was a shallow wound. Simon made a fist, found he could wince through the pain, then grabbed his staff. He ran to Thane's side.

II

The bear's scars flashed like yellow lightning every time he cast a spell, briefly illuminating the shadowy limbs of the villagers. The Rotted villagers squealed and cowered under each attack, but they were still crawling out of the well.

Thane and Simon couldn't keep up; their numbers were too great. And though the moonlight strengthened a few of the Wyld spells, the bear was beginning to flag.

"We have to even the odds!" said Thane, striking down a rangey skunk who had latched on to Simon's staff with his teeth.

Spell-light flashed; the mass of infected villagers flinched as one. The former skunk, however, did not notice, but collided with the ground.

"They don't seem to like the light!"

The final animals crawled out of the well. It was the king's guard, dogs in golden armor, covered in mud. They ignored the wolves and joined the horde surrounding the bear. Thane took the opportunity to jab his sword through a joint in the armor. The former guard fell. The wolf prince quickly went to work on the others.

Flash.

The burned smell of moon-bitten fur tainted the air. Thane coughed from the smoke. Simon jabbed his pole into the chest of a hedgehog before it got close to the prince. The smoke tickled his nostrils.

The woodpile. Simon could see the blind rat in his memory's eye, stuffing the banner between the cords.

"We need a fire!" said Simon. "The woodpile—" he pointed to the swarm of attackers hiding Brun from view "—we need his flint! It's around his neck!"

"A fire?" said Thane. "The whole village will go up!"

Simon leapt over a charging villager. "We can't save Houndsmouth. The rat told me."

"You want to trust him?"

"What else can we do?"

Parrying three more attacks, Thane scented the square for options. None were apparent, save for the banner, its gold thread gleaming silvery in the light of the moon.

“Stay alive!” he ordered, then dove into the crowd. In seconds, his grey tail disappeared. Simon almost called him back, but an infected rabbit tried snipping a piece off him. He swung his wooden shield around in time, and one of her incisors broke off. But nothing bled from the wound.

Whatever they are now, they're not fully Animal, thought Simon, pivoting so the creature charged headlong into his shield. They've got no minds; I hope the Wylde took their souls.

“Ha HA!” Several thralls went flying into the air. Thane jumped out after them, something held between his teeth. Simon ran up to him and Thane spat out the flint into his awaiting paw.

“I'll cover you—wait, use this—”

The grey wolf kicked up the ferret's dropped bottle. “If it's wine it should burn. Go!”

Simon dashed away. Only a couple thralls made a move towards the maned wolf, seemingly uninterested in anything occurring away from the bear. Thane put them down, then went back to aiding Brun. The spell flashes were fewer and fewer now.

Simon dumped the last few drops of Rot wine onto the tail of the banner. He struck the flint. The sparks caught, then flared upon the banner. Slowly they ate their way towards the wood.

Simon glanced over his shoulder. Not fast enough. He looked around the square. One of the stands was undamaged. He could jump from there, light a few of the thatched roofs...and the ivy they'd seen earlier had been crispy, dry...

He sprang for the unbroken stand, striking the flint as he went. The woodpile was beginning to burn, smelling like their traveling campfires.

Good. It's catching. He leapt onto the stand, pulled himself up onto the nearest building, then ran across the rooftops, sparks falling behind him as he ran.

I2

It wasn't the most unfair fight Thane had ever been in, but it was in the top five. The worst three, of course, were always instigated by his sister River. But she was a dirty cheat who always surprised you with an arrow across your nose. At least they'd been clan-regulated bouts, so she hadn't wound up killing him. Or vice-versa.

Thane slammed his elbow into someone coming up on his right shoulder; knowing the battle space was a sixth sense he had developed. Of course, one of the better things about fighting his sister was that he could use his teeth when needed.

Thane lunged forward, felt resistance as he ran some poor Rothead through.

Fighting the Rot-infected, though, you had to be careful. A good gouge or bite from one of them could spread the Rot to you. And if you bit one of them, well—

Thane dodged a spinning pika freshly backhanded by the warcaster.

—forget it. You'd be infected, too. And gather enough deep wounds from one of them, and you'd go corrupt yourself, madness slowly eating away your mind, poisoning your deeds and your body...

A turtle bit down on his jerkin. He yipped, then kicked her aside. Her jaw, already badly decayed, turned in the wrong direction from the rest of her beak. She fell away.

You couldn't pay a mercenary to fight a bane, or any corrupted creature, for that matter. The danger was just too great that you'd get infected yourself. From there, the road to total corruption was just a few more wounds or dark spells away...

Thane's ears twitched at the sound of loud crackling. Wood creaked, then cracked, then a spray of glowing embers rained upon his fur. The town was beginning to crumble.

The roof Stilts had gotten to first had collapsed.

The Rot-infected villagers cried out, swatting at the embers on the remnants of their clothes and fur.

"Fire works!"

Thane ducked as the bear hurled his attackers towards the flames. Thane swung his sword, forcing the creatures back towards the burning ivy.

Brun put his war staff back onto his back.

“What are you doing that for?” said Thane.

Brun’s spell light flashed. *FOOMF*. His paws were now covered in green flames. He swiped at his attackers. Fear overrode the orders the thralls had been following and they began fleeing the bear’s wrath.

Whatever the bear touched went up like a torch. Stands, cottage walls, dying plants. Green fire mixed with orange.

“Ouch! Watch the whiskers!” said Thane as the bear swatted down a fleeing thrall.

“Sorry, pup.”

Simon ran up to them. He pointed towards the main thoroughfare. “I saw her head that way. She’s stopped near the wagons; I think she’s trying to find more wine.”

“Lead the way,” said Brun.

The wolves ran and the bear followed, tossing flames towards the town as they exited. The barns and fields they had passed by on the way in were burning bright on their way out.

They came upon the wine crates and wagons at the town’s entrance.

“By Remus, Stilts, I think you’re right,” said Thane, glancing into a crate that had been scratched open. He went back to running. “She’s looking for more wine!”

“Pray she doesn’t find any,” said Brun. “Those villagers were just infected with Rot, the end stages. But if she gets too much Rot in her, she’ll go corrupt.”

“And that’s worse?” said Simon.

The Wyld firelight jumped across Brun’s features. “Worse for us.”

He set fire to another wagon. They kept running.

“What’s that?” Thane asked as they came over a rise.

A dark, twisted shape stretched as far as the eye could see.

“It’s thorns!” said Simon. “Like something out of a cubs’ tale!”

“A spell,” said the bear.

“It can’t be that bad!” said Thane.

They reached the wall of thorns. The vines were thick around as the bear’s leg, and besides the giant thorns, the vines themselves had painful-looking little spikes, no good for climbing.

Even as Thane slashed away a tendril, you could see more slithering and growing off in the distance. He glanced behind him at the burning wagons. “I don’t suppose you’ve got a spell to get us out of this, Master Brun? I don’t fancy being roasted in our own fire.”

A smile finally appeared on the bear’s face. “As a matter of fact, I do.”

He flicked his paws once at his sides and the spellfire extinguished. He draped both arms around the wolves’ shoulders. Simon looked over and gasped. The warcaster’s paws were blistered and raw-looking.

“Are you all right?” he asked.

“I will be. Now quiet.” The bear closed his eyes.

After a few moments, nothing happened. The roar of the fire behind them grew. Thane's tail thumped against the bear's legs. It was getting hot, wasn't it?

"Tails STILL." The bear hadn't opened his eyes. Thane wrapped his tail round his leg.

"Sorry. Nervous habit."

"QUIET."

Thane was certain the fire had reached them. The roar was louder than the sound of an avalanche.

Then, just as he was sure he smelled his tail singeing, the air around them began to dissipate. Smokey air was replaced with a cooler breeze, and the dark mass of thorns was replaced with the view of the hill outside down. The scene wavered around the edges, like they were viewing it through water.

Thane exchanged a pop-eyed glance with his squire before green light and the smell of cool pine surrounded the three of them.

Brun let them go. "Teleportation for three and some weapons besides. Ought to be a new council record," said the bear.

Behind them lay the wall of thorns, blocking off the burning village. Around them, the distant mountains were bright against the smoke. In front of them, the hill from which they'd first glimpsed the doomed town.

A shriek came from over the hill, and a rock shot over, whistling through the air. It landed with a thud at Thane's feet.

They heard Rusty shout: "Get away from us, witch!"

Thane drew his sword. "Rusty! Zeke!"

"The cubs!" said the bear.

They barrelled up the hill.

13

A strange sight met Thane, Brun, and Simon as they came up the hill. Baroness Nubine was at the top of the hill, weaving and jumping about in a weaselly war dance. She paused a second to gulp down more of the cursed wine. She hadn't seen the wolves and bear behind her yet. They ducked low to hide in the grass, watching.

Rusty, Zeke, and the cubs were over the hill, backs to a sheer spire of stones they hadn't seen on the way in. They were throwing rocks at the baroness, except for Naomi, who whipped them out of Zeke's bird-hunting sling.

She's not a bad shot, either, thought Thane. She knows how to lead her target!

One shot looked like it would land for certain, blurring straight for the ferret, right between her eyes. But a foot or so before it landed, green shimmering light flashed in the inferno-lit night, and the rock ricocheted off it.

"A shield," said Brun. "Wyld magic."

"Can't you do something about it?" asked Thane.

The bear held up his blistered paws. Thane winced.

"It's been a long night, pup. I am only good for biting, now."

"Don't!" said Simon. "The Rot will infect—"

"I know, squire. I fight the Rot with the Wyld. Which is why I can tell you her spell is close to wearing off. Be ready."

Thane pulled out his sword. Simon readied his staff. They crept up the side of the hill, continuing to stay out of sight.

The baroness threw an emptied bottle at Rusty. The fox ducked, but there was no need; the throw was short, and the bottle bounced on the grass at her feet.

"Have a swig, Foxy-Loxy! It just may even your odds, Has-been!"

"I'll even my odds all right!" said Rusty. She stooped down and grabbed the bottle by the neck. She smashed the body of the bottle hard against the rock wall at their back. The glass shattered, jagged edges sparkling in the fire of Houndsmouth.

"Whoa," said the raccoon cub.

"Whoa," said Thane.

Rusty charged.

Thane took a step back. He'd seen Rusty in a few bar brawls. He might not have to do anything.

Simon's ears flattened. "Um, Thane?"

Thane glanced back at Brun. Brun did nothing.

"Hold," said the wolf.

A shock of fear had lit the ferret's face, almost comically. But remembering her shield, she began scurrying side to side.

Rusty reached her, but the magical shield was like a wall of glass. She pounded a dark paw against it. Green light sparkled between her and the ferret.

"I'll cut you down, you little menace!" said the fox.

The baroness swigged from a new bottle. "Ah. So close, yet so far away!"

Rusty dug her feet into the grass—tricky, when she still didn't have the high ground—and pushed her shoulder against the invisible barrier.

The baroness found herself slowly sliding across the top of the hill. Rusty was no closer, but the ferret had been moved to the center of the hill. The ferret laughed at her.

Rusty shook the bottle. "I'm going to roll you down this hill, and when this bubble pops, I'm gonna—"

"No thanks, not interested!" The baroness stretched her neck to the side. "There you are, cubs! Come to me—looks like I'll be needing a new army. I'll keep it painless. You can join too, possum!"

"Don't you touch them!" Rusty punched the shield. The ferret giggled and continued her war dance. Thane could see the streaks of corruption darkening her sable and white fur.

"She's cracking up right in front of us!" he said.

Simon nodded.

Rusty ran against the shield. The green glowed brighter and brighter, until you could see the once-invisible bubble she fought with.

"Get ready!" said Brun.

The substance Rusty had been leaning upon gave out.

She fell forward, right into the ferret's path. Nubine squeaked and they collided onto the ground.

Rusty landed oddly and the broken bottle flew out of her reach.

"Now!" said Thane. The wolves rushed in.

Rusty snarled at the ferret beneath her.

"RUSTY, NO!" cried Thane. "Don't bite her, she's gone corrupt!"

Rusty gasped and rolled back.

The ferret's eyes burned—Rusty swore they were glowing an evil violet color, just like a bane's eyes. Nubine dove for the fox, teeth gnashing. Rusty pushed herself away, curling her beautiful tail out of reach as she crabbed backwards in the grass.

The baroness' teeth clamped down on Rusty's skirt just as Thane reached them. He chopped his sword at the ferret's neck, but she jumped out of the way, tearing a strip of Rusty's skirt with her.

The baroness whirled down the hill, towards the stone spire.

"The cubs! Zeke, look out!" said Simon, racing with Thane to the far side of the hill.

They hadn't gone far before the ferret began screeching. Nubine had fallen to her knees.

Zeke and the cubs were gone. She faced bare rock.

Rusty popped to her feet next to the wolves.

"YEAH, WITCH! I'M THE CLEVER FOX—AND PROUD OF IT!" Rusty screamed down at her.

The baroness whipped around to face her and hissed.

"Rusty, go hide," said Thane. "We'll handle this! Stilts, let's away!"

The wolves closed in on the ferret.

I4

Simon checked over his shoulder. Rusty had already fled. Nubine had stopped trying to scabble up the smooth spire and had turned to them, back against the wall.

Thane and Simon surrounded her. The smell of smoke on the air was getting stronger. Their shadows lay hazily over the ferret, outlined in orange.

“Don’t get too close. She could bite,” said Thane in an undertone. He picked up the torn band of Rusty’s skirt, which had fallen on the grass during the ferret’s struggle to climb.

“Come quietly,” said Thane. “You are no empty-headed bane; the lives of the people of Houndsmouth are at your feet. You must be brought before justice.” He held up the torn fabric. “You will be muzzled.”

“No, no—the plan failed. I can’t believe it!” The baroness buried her face in her paws, swaying in grief that made Thane curl his lip in disgust.

“Put your paws on the rock and be still.” He took a step forward with the piece of Rusty’s skirt.

The baroness wailed. “My king, I’ve failed you!” She thrashed again.

Clink-CLACK! went something in her dress. The sound of it made her eyes fly open, flash violet.

Simon leapt for her. “No!”

But she blurred out of reach of both wolves. The bottle was already to her lips. She gulped and gulped, and even when she choked on it, spraying mist into the air, she forced another swallow down.

When she was through, she dropped the bottle. The grass at her feet was dying—Rotting—before the wolves’ eyes. Her eyes glowed now, just like a bane’s.

“If the King can’t have the cubs, no one can!” She raised her paws into the air. Violet light shone about her. As it grew in intensity, the grass further out from her began to blacken.

“Run!” said Thane.

The wolves fled up the hill, grass crackling and stiffening behind them. They paused at the top.

“We’ve got the high ground up here,” said Thane.

Simon looked into the forest. The aspen trees' leaves were beginning to spot with black. Others were splitting, dying right before them. Purple light poured toward the ferret, still posed by the rock.

"Is she killing the forest?"

"Can't—not all of it—it'd be impossib..." Thane trailed off, stunned by the shape growing out of the Rot-light. Thane's tail fell.

"Oh..."

The purple light darkened and turned into night-black feathers. It was a bane, the largest either of them had ever seen. It stretched a wing whose shadow engulfed the entirety of the hill the wolves were standing on, and then some.

Nubine shouted something at it that neither of them could hear.

The Rot spirit tilted its avian head at her. Violet light flickered behind its eyes, each the size of the hearth back at the Golden Trough. Its daggerlike beak looked the same length as Thane himself.

It screeched, the sound somehow both piercing and ground-shaking. Simon flinched.

The bane pumped its wings once, then drifted gently downwards to catch an air current. Smoke from Houndsmouth trailed off the tips of its wings as it wheeled on a curving path, right over Thane and Simon on the hill.

Thane slashed at the air with his sword and shoved Simon to the ground.

"Stilts, down!"

Simon fell onto his back. Lying there, he felt like he was able to count each and every feather in the monster's breast as it floated over them. It seemed to take forever.

And then, it was past them.

Simon pushed himself up. "It's not attacking?"

"Not us," said Thane. "Look, it's heading over the woods!"

Sure enough, the bane was skimming the treetops. Dead aspen leaves fell in its wake, for everything the bird touched began immediately to decay. Its neck stretched before it, turning it into a black arrow.

"It's looking for the cubs! Come on!" Thane raced towards the forest.

Simon paused before he followed, checking the rock face.

Nubine was still there. Her once-luxurious green dress was torn to shreds, and she barely looked like a ferret anymore with her Rot-blackened fur and glowing eyes. Her head turned as she tracked Thane's movement towards the trees, away from her.

She fled in the opposite direction.

Simon let her go. *It's her or the cubs, and it's going to take two of us to take that bane down.*

The smoke in the bane's slipstream billowed.

At least, I hope it'll take two.

Simon went to all fours, galloping after Thane.

15

They followed the trail of dying plants, dodging tree limbs that creaked and fell onto the carpet of blackened leaves preceding them. Equipment jounced against Simon's narrow haunches, but he never flagged.

The bane pulled up. The town-smoke trailing behind it washed up against its back, rebounding in an acrid fog bank that made the wolves cough. They wheeled around it to fresher air. No longer directly behind the bane, the aspen forest was green again. They kept running, but they still weren't at the bane's front.

They heard, but did not see its next scream, long, piercing.

The sound threw fear into their legs and they slid out into the clearing in time to see Rusty standing her ground before the bane. Behind her, the older hoglet struggled in the bracken. Zeke pulled at the thorns, trying to help him break free, kept glancing up at the monster.

Rusty faced the bane, neck of the broken bottle in paw. Her hat flapped in the sour breath of the bird's cry, and her ears were twisted low against the painful noise.

The sound stopped.

But before Thane could charge, Rusty took the deepest breath Thane'd ever seen anyone take, and screamed back at the bird.

It was the beginning to "Blast Taxes," a song from her new *Anger Anthems*. A real crowd-pleaser. He'd heard it fill a pub before, but here in the middle of nowhere, it echoed as long and loud as the bane's screech.

The bane flinched, retreating a pace. Thane wasn't entirely convinced banes had emotions, but he would have sworn this one now looked confused.

The bane narrowed its eyes, then screamed at Rusty again, longer, louder. When it had finished, Rusty took a step forward and screamed again, just as wild.

Behind her, Zeke pulled the older hoglet free from the gorse. Bright quills disappeared into the shadowy underbrush, and then a possum tail followed.

The bird looked either away, as though seeking guidance. If it hadn't been the size of two barns stacked atop one another, Thane would have laughed. It looked so absurd stopped dead in its tracks in front of Rusty, who looked as tiny as a newborn quail next to its mother.

The feathers on the bird's neck rippled. But instead of roaring again, it reared back, flapping its wings. Thane recognized the move from the banes he'd fought before.

"It's going to dive!"

He raced out to get between the bane and the vixen.

The bane fell towards them. Rusty jumped into the bracken. Thane raised his sword.

Oh. It's a lot bigger from down here.

The bane, spotting the grey wolf, opened its beak. At the last second, Thane dodged, striking his sword against the bane's cheek. The bird's own momentum completed the slice without Thane having to move. Thane's claws dug into the dying turf as he fought to keep his sword pressed against the creature without getting swept up by it. He locked his eyes on the bird's wing, heading for him fast.

Three...two...one!

Thane rolled away from the bane's body, a trick that normally sent him safely out of harm's way. But he hadn't counted on the gargantuan wingspan of the monster. He was about to stand up right in the middle of the wing. He realized his mistake at the last second, and tried to stay low at the end of his roll. But the wing caught him anyway, traveling faster than a falling star. The blow sent him tumbling tail over nosetip. The wolf lay sprawled on the grass, and made no move to get up.

"Thane!"

Simon bobbed in place until the wing completely passed, then raced over.

"Aaooouh." Thane moaned.

"Don't move, don't move." Simon swung his equipment sack off and piled through it until he found the bag of Wyld weed. Not as good as the rat's Wyldsap. Simon poured the flakes into Thane's mouth. Not the ideal way to consume it—but better than nothing.

"Bluech!" Thane smacked his mouth to get rid of the taste. But in just a few minutes, he pushed himself up on his own. He breathed for a few moments, facing the blackened road the bane had decayed over the gorse.

"I meant to strike its eye."

"You can't fight it alone! It's too big, even when it doesn't mean to attack you, it can still clobber you!" Simon handed him his sword. "Wait for me next time, please!"

But Thane wasn't listening.

"That's it! We'll turn its size into its weakness! We've got to get somewhere where it can't squeeze in, like a rabbit in a hole!"

"There was that tunnel leading in...but I can't say how far away it was."

"And Rusty and Zeke won't know, they get turned around if there's not a path. Come on, we have to lead them!"

"Can you run?"

Thane pushed himself to his feet. "I'm a wolf. We're born running."

I6

Zeke wheezed and panted, tearing through the underbrush. His new shiny bounced up and down on his neck. Hard to believe a bear could move so fast, even with a groggy hoglet riding his broad shoulders. Zeke had stumbled a couple times and his hoglet, the older one, had had to help him stay upright. The hoglet was racing ahead of him now, spines bouncing.

But at least being behind meant he knew where Rusty and the raccoon kit were. The pair of red and striped tails were easier to keep track of in the dense forest where branches tore at sleeves and roots tripped tender paws.

He had no idea where they'd wind up, just that the bear had crashed out of the forest during their flight, had bellowed, "Follow me!" and everyone had obeyed.

Lucky for them the bear had waited up while Zeke got the hoglet free of the raspberry briars. And that Rusty's scream-singing—which he'd only heard before in pubs—could stop a bane dead in its tracks.

Too bad the bear can't cast or fight for us anymore. Zeke had glimpsed the bear's blistered paws, noted the war club idle on his back, and figured that must be why even the mighty wamage had turned tail with them.

A branch grabbed Zeke's sleeve. He punched his shoulder forward, tearing his shirt but not breaking pace.

And I don't have any more shirts in this color!

Assuming he survived, Zeke was going to make four new—no, scratch that. He was going to hire a tailor to make him four new shirts, in this color. He'd always wanted to have a bespoke shirt, but something had always gotten in the way before.

Stupid stuff. His tongue lolled. *You gotta do what you want while you're still alive to enjoy it!*

He stepped on a slimy mushroom and slipped. He floundered, arms circling in the air, but didn't fall. Glancing back behind him, he noticed a nearby stand of mushrooms, well picked-over.

Didn't I harvest those earlier? Where was the bear taking them?

Behind him, the bane screamed. That was enough to send ice up the possum's heart, but then he heard a rustling coming up beside him. It was coming up FAST.

The panic almost made him sick. *What could that be?* That crazy baroness? What kind of nasty tricks would she have in store for them?

The rustling crashed in his ears. It was upon him. This was it. He'd been caught! HE WAS GOING TO DIE!

His vision narrowed. Black edged in, and then the possum dropped to the ground.

17

“Zeke!” cried Simon, skidding to a halt. “He’s fainted!” He dodged back, grabbed the possum’s limp form, then caught up to Thane again.

“Poor chap, must have thought we were out to eat him.” Thane sniffed the air. “They’re just ahead—and hey presto, they’re almost at the tunnel. Fellows, it’s us!” he called.

“It’s the wolf!” said the hoglet, who’d been running ahead of Zeke. Thane passed him by.

“Thane!” said Rusty, as the wolf pulled up alongside her and the raccoon cub, whom she held by the paw. “What, bird not big enough for you to hit? It’s only the size of a barn!”

“I hit it, Rus, but it hit me right back. Good thing we had Wyld weed on us! Head for the tunnel where we met Brun!”

The wolf put on more speed.

“Well met, pup,” said Brun, as the wolf caught up to him in the lead. “That’s just where I was taking them.”

“Oh,” said Thane. “Well, then!”

Simon’s labored gasps grew loud enough for them to hear over their footsteps. The possum bounced in his arms. The bane screeched behind them.

“What happened to Zeke?” said Rusty. “He faint?”

“Yeah...think we...scared him.”

The forest thinned; they were in another clearing.

Brun stopped, looking around. The clearing was split into two paths by a thick copse of trees.

Thane pelted around the bear towards a copse of trees. “Follow me!” he said, and ran to one side of the stand.

Rusty, the raccoon cub, and the hoglet bounded after him without missing a beat. But Simon, seeing Brun at a dead stop, hesitated and waited next to the bear. His arms were shaking from holding Zeke’s weight. He shifted the possum around, hoping for some relief.

“We didn’t come from that way,” said the bear. “I think he’s scented the rat’s old trail, and now he’s gone haring off. Come, the tunnel’s this way.” Brun lurched towards the stand of trees, taking the path Thane hadn’t picked.

“I can’t leave Thane!”

“Squire, don’t you hear the bane’s wings? It will be upon us, and I have no way to defend you or your friend—or this cub. The pup’s probably on the other end of the forest by now, he’ll be safe. We’ll never reach him in time. Come!” The bear was lumbering away.

Simon had no doubt the bear knew his way around these woods better than Thane did. But the bane was out for the cubs, and Thane had two of them. He couldn’t face it alone! How could Simon call himself a squire if he didn’t aid his master?

“Wait!” said Simon. “I can bring him back!”

The bear turned around, eyes searching the sky. “Hurry.”

Simon swallowed through a thick throat. His kind weren’t known for this—the times he’d tried in the past, Thane had laughed at him—but he knew no other way to get Thane back to them.

He lifted his head and howled.

The sound was not the clear song of a true wolf. Zeke always said he sounded like he was gargling and falling off a cliff at the same time. Once, on Rusty’s advice, he’d tried adding some yips—“for color”—, but that had only made Thane fall over from laughing too hard.

But he was louder now than months ago when he’d started practicing. Hopefully he was loud enough for them to hear over their footsteps and the bane, which had started up screeching again. It sounded eager, ready to devour its victims.

He could hear the giant wingbeats now. He ended with a few desperate roar-barks and then dashed to Brun. The bear took off.

18

Thane didn't remember smelling any of this, but he kept running. Surely the tunnel was close by.

"Thane?" said Rusty. "The cubs need a rest."

He nodded, swerving to gather them under the crown of a large tree. Fox, raccoon, and hoglet bent over, bracing themselves on their knees, sucking in air.

Thane sheathed his sword and leapt up into the tree. He climbed to the top, stuck his head above the branches.

The smoke of Houndsmouth had turned the sky ashy and brown, but the body of the bane was darker still. It glided slowly now, like a thunderhead whose shadow killed. The bird's head swiveled side to side.

So it doesn't have our exact trail. Good.

"Rusty, what happened to your friend? The tall one?"

"Yeah! Thane, where's Simon?"

Thane nearly yelped. Stilts! Hadn't he been following them? Did the bane get him? And what about the bear—the hoglet—and Zeke!

After a glance at the bane, Thane stood up taller in the branches, trying to see down into the forest where they had come from. Could they be hiding down there?

Hrarrowuwuooooourgh!

No! It couldn't be!

"Stilts?" he said.

The pathetic howl sounded again. A call to gather. Garbled and awful as it was, Thane never thought he'd be so glad to hear it.

"Rusty, do you hear that?" he shouted down the tree. "It's Stilts! He's calling to us!"

"Can't hear it down here. You sure it's him?"

"Yes!" Now came two roar-barks, a sound that really carried. "He wants us to join up with him!"

"Call him back! Tell him to come to us!"

“No—let’s—we’ll join him.”

“But the tunnel—”

“I don’t think it’s near here.”

“WHAT?!”

Thane threw back his head and howled. His voice carried over the forest, an unmistakeable reply.

And a sound the monster couldn’t ignore.

The bane’s eyes flared white and its head jerked up, beak pointed right at Thane. The wolf tried to duck back under the cover of the canopy, but it was too late. The bird screamed. A hunting cry—Thane knew it well, from past battles with smaller birds.

He dropped out of the tree, staggered a moment.

“Bees and fleas, Thane, be careful! You wanna break an ankle?” said Rusty.

“Run! This way—we’re heading back to Stilts!” he dashed away.

Rusty grabbed the cubs’ hands and took off after him.

“Doesn’t he ever look back?” said the raccoon cub.

Rusty glanced at her.

“If you want to run with the wolves, you have to keep up,” she said. But privately, she thought the cub had a point. She glanced over at the hoglet. He hadn’t said much this whole time, but a longer break would have done him some good. She wished there had been a stream for them to drink at back there.

Rusty knew it was pointless to ask Thane to slow down, so she kept her gaze up, looking for the blue of his jerkin. His grey tail tended to blend in with the undergrowth. Soon, the vixen had him picked out again. “C’mon, kiddos.”

The forest was awash with noise: their footsteps, the rustle of the undergrowth as they broke through it. And once, Rusty could have sworn she heard the mix of blowing wind and plant-death-crackle of the bane’s wing passing by. But she could not hear the maned wolf’s cries.

The hoglet stumbled. She pulled him forward and glanced again at his face. He wasn’t really looking at anything now, just running, glassy-eyed.

It’s like a bad dream, isn’t it, kid? And no folks to go back to when it was over.

Thane’d better be taking us to the tunnel. I don’t know how much more the cubs can take.

Thane stopped and Rusty nearly ran into him. She watched his ears turn.

“You lost him?!”

“No no, I’ve got it,” said the wolf before he threw his head back again for another howl. The cubs clapped their free paws over their ears. The bane screamed, sounding closer than ever. Rusty almost smacked the wolf.

“You’re calling it right to us, dummy!”

Hrraw-wuff! RRRRA-OO-WOO-UFF! YIP YIP!

She'd recognize that ear-grating racket anywhere! Without waiting, she bolted towards Simon's call, leaving the wolf prince in the dust.

Let Thane be the rear guard for once!

Rusty and the cubs burst into the clearing.

Brun stood at the tunnel entrance. Simon was atop a nearby rock, trying another howl. She ran up to the bear.

"Take him," said the bear, bending down on all fours. The youngest hoglet, now wide awake, trembled and clutched the bear's fur.

"Only one of us will fit into the entrance at a time," said Brun. "I want him down first, but he won't let go."

Darby released Rusty's paw and went to his brother. He held out his arms. "C'mon, Ramsey. Time to go."

The little hoglet shook his head.

"We'll go get you a sweetie, but first you have to come down."

"Uh-uh!" Ramsey shook his head. "Want mama!"

Darby's face crumpled like he'd been struck. "Please, Ramsey!"

A shadow darkened the deep forest. The leaves crackled like autumn, then turned black before dropping to the ground with a sound like a sudden rainshower. Trees groaned and fell around them.

Naomi clutched Rusty's arm to her. "It's here!"

The bane's head burst through the canopy.

The littlest hoglet shrieked. His brother grabbed him by the shirt and yanked, but the hoglet dug his claws into Brun's back. The bear snarled in pain.

The bane turned its head at the sound. Seeing Brun and the cubs, it jabbed its head forward, beak gaping.

Brun shook himself with a roar. Ramsey flew off his back and crashed into his brother.

They sat up in time to see the bear spread his arms wide, then get struck by the bane's beak. The impact sent the bear flying into the underbrush. There was a horrible heavy thud.

Everyone froze.

The bane tilted his head, then hopped forward towards the brush. The leaves didn't so much as tremble.

Naomi grabbed Darby and shoved him towards the tunnel. "Get in, get in!" she hissed and followed him underground.

The motion of her ringed tail caught the bird's eye. It barked an angry caw as its prey disappeared.

Then it saw Ramsey, lying stunned on the grass. It croaked, and something like glee made its eyes burn again. It pumped its wings and dove.

Rusty jumped out in front of it, snarling. But she could tell already that it was moving too fast. No way she could grab the hoglet up and get out of the way in time.

Shoot. And this trip would've made a great song, too.

CLANG! THUNK-CLACK!

The bane screeched. The hoglet squalled. Rusty peeped one eye open. Thane was there, slashing at the bane's face with his sword. That awful purple muck was falling from the bane's wounds. The smell assured her it wasn't a dream.

A tall red blur whirled to Thane's side. "Get in the tunnel!" said Simon.

Rusty took Ramsey the hoglet and scrambled to the tunnel. Once he'd been shoved underground (screaming all the way—*right there with ya, kiddo!*) she wriggled her way in behind him.

The bane tried to knock Thane aside with its wing, but Thane sliced it, forcing the bird to retreat. It stuck its head beneath its wing, preening the injury.

"Stilts, in!"

"But Thane—"

The wolf prince shoved him towards the hole.

"NOW, Stilts, it'll be back on us any second!"

"But—"

Thane snarled and leapt over his squire and into the tunnel. Simon almost couldn't believe it—but then a grey paw reached out and grabbed his leg.

Simon saw the bane lift its head, then let himself be dragged backwards into the hole.

He and Thane were crammed together near the front of the tunnel like newborn pups in a den. Already Thane was turning to crawl away deeper into the tunnel.

"Thane, no!"

"We're not going to kill this one, Stilts—"

"Zeke's still up there!"

Thane stopped scrabbling in the dirt.

"What?"

"I hid him so I could help the cubs down."

And without another word, Simon shot back out the tunnel.

19

The next part happened so fast, Thane hardly believed he'd seen it with his own eyes.

Simon charged for a thick clump of bushes not far from the tunnel entrance.

Before he reached it though, Zeke's bleary face popped out from the bush.

The bane saw the possum and shrieked. Prey spotted. It juttied his head for the possum, like a hawk going to snatch a gob of meat. The possum froze on the spot, but while he trembled, Stilts grabbed him up, curling his body over the possum.

The bird's beak knocked into the shield the maned wolf had been carrying on his back, and sent them both careening into a stand of trees—one further away from the tunnel.

The bird pecked at the shield. The cloth covering it turned mothworn. The bane's beak snipped at it and pecked again. Its beak hit the shield and rust exploded over the surface like frost over a windowpane.

It pecked a third time. The shield cracked.

The bane clacked its beak around Simon, snipping clothes and fur when it wasn't breaking the shield apart.

Long arms shoved something white and grey. Zeke tumbled and tumbled over the ground, away from the attack, towards the tunnel. He didn't wait for his momentum to run out, but came out of the roll on all fours and fled right into the tunnel.

He knocked into Thane before he squeezed into the darkness.

It woke the wolf up; his squire was still out there getting savaged! But the bane could easily kill them both.

I'm prince of the wolf clan. If I die, I cannot lead.

Fur flew. A flash of crimson glinted in the air.

But if I abandon my packmate, I'm not fit to lead.

Stilts—Simon—had refused to abandon Zeke. Thane couldn't do less.

Toying with its prey had excited the bane. It flapped its wings without lift, exposing the side of its breast.

Thane exploded out of the tunnel. His claws tore up yellowed grass. He ran as fast as he knew how, the fastest he'd ever run before. In the blink of an eye, he was next to the bane's breast. He stabbed his sword in, intending to plunge it into the creature's heart. But though it pierced the

razor-sharp feathers, it hit something inside, a rib perhaps, and glanced off at a strange angle, jarring his arm. The sword slid out of his paws, flew into the air, and landed feet away in a bush. Not a killing blow.

The bane squawked, though, and jumped back.

Thane didn't wait to see what the bane would do next. Instead, he ran to Simon and swept him up. The maned wolf was cut open everywhere, but his eyes were bright with fear, alive with it. So when he saw Thane and felt the prince's arms supporting him, he stumbled to and ran with Thane into the tunnel, shedding rust and torn clothes up until the moment they crammed inside again. Simon yelped in pain, but Thane kept shoving him ahead, deeper into the tunnel.

CRACK. The bane shoved its beak into the hole, brushing Thane's tail. It shot under his belly, curling tight.

"Keep moving, Simon!" The bird was twisting its beak, wrenching the whole bigger. Thane glanced back at it. Rocks and soil fell around the beak. Its head would be in with them shortly.

"You've got to keep going! It's getting in!" Thane shoved Simon again and again.

Pain made the maned wolf yelp every time, but he scrabbled and scrabbled until his legs and arms were underneath him. Muscles burning, he pushed himself forward.

Thane was right up on him. Simon couldn't see ahead. Only darkness.

Sudden exhaustion dropped upon the maned wolf. His tongue lolled upon the bitter dirt. He'd never get out. It was too far to go. He just wanted to lie down.

At least the cubs are safe. His head grew heavy, began to sink.

Then, something glittered ahead of him in the dark. Simon stared at it, befuddled, then excited. Daylight! The exit out must be nearby!

The burst of hope made him lunge forward. But when he got closer, he realized it wasn't the exit at all, but a shining object. He grabbed the twinkling thing up in his paw just as Zeke's white face popped into view. The broken chain of the necklace flopped over his paw.

Zeke! It's your shiny! he started to say, but the possum clamped his fingers around the maned wolf's wrists and yelled, "HEAVE!"

* * *

Thane trembled. He could feel the maned wolf's body surrendering in the tunnel ahead of him. Behind him, the bane caught a glimpse of grey fur and began chewing the tunnel entrance frantically. Thane pressed into Simon's warm, furry body, but the exhausted wolf didn't go any further. Thane was caught between the two. There was no escape.

So this is it. My end. Funny, I thought I'd be more of a participant—at least take my enemy with me! But it looks like I'll die like a cork in a bottle.

Thane thought of his home in the north, his pack.

Feathers scraped the tunnel walls.

River will lead. Stupid River! But she'll do a good job. Better than I ever did.

Thane turned. Even if he had to die like a snail in its shell, he intended to look his death in the eye, like a wolf.

Violet eyes gleamed at him, vicious, victorious. The bane's beak gaped.

Then, Simon's body disappeared.

Thane fell into the open space, flipped over, then thrust himself forward just in time. The bane's sharp beak snapped down on air.

"Keep going!" shouted Thane, over the roar of the bird. He wasn't sure anyone could hear him, but it seemed the right thing to do.

The grey wolf threw himself forward again, once, twice—then the tunnel dipped, into the U-bend. Thane glanced behind him. The violet eye seemed to burn with hate.

Thane slithered into the heart of the tunnel, disappearing from sight.

The bane screamed in frustration.

They had escaped.

20

They hid in the U-bend of the tunnel for hours, listening, waiting to see if the bane would find the other end of the tunnel. I never did. They came out in the afternoon light and set to work patching up Simon as best they could, using a little Wyld weed the raccoon cub had stashed away in her clothing. The maned wolf did little but lie on the grass, too exhausted to walk.

Thane and Rusty were debating whether or not to camp there for the night and let Simon rest, or try to put more distance between them and Houndsmouth when the bushes near them rustled and shook.

The company froze. Thane reached for his sword, but it was gone.

That's when Brun stepped out of the woods. The bear looked over them all, but didn't greet them until he saw the three cubs, all safe.

"Hail, heroes."

They exploded into chatter.

"How did you survive?"

"Is the bane still out there?"

"Havva sweetie?"

"A bear may be knocked down, but is not easily defeated. Especially one as big as I am. And I am sorry, but I do not have a sweetie."

The older cubs ran up and hugged his leg. Ramsey pouted, promised sweetie still unaccounted for. Brun rested his healed paws on the cubs' heads.

"They're braver than I am!" Zeke whispered to Rusty.

"Good bear," said Thane, "do you have any Wyldsap that you can spare? My squire was injured saving one of my pack."

The bear reached into the pouch around his neck and pulled out a teal-green leaf. The cubs let go and Brun bent over the Simon.

"Chew this." He stuck the leaf in the maned wolf's mouth. Simon obeyed. Green froth gathered at the corners of his lips. Even chewing was exhausting.

“Not as strong as sap, but better than dried weed. I have a cache near here. Once he is better, we can travel there and he can drink the Wyldsap I have stored.”

And indeed, a half-hour later, Simon was on his feet again, leaning on Rusty as they followed Brun and Thane.

The air around them was clear, the chatter of the cubs carrying through the healthy greenery of Cedar Vale as they walked. In this light the dark marks of Rot could clearly be seen on the maned wolf. They striped Simon’s russet fur like black welts.

Brun lowered his voice.

“Does your squire know?”

“We haven’t told him,” said Thane. “But we won’t have to. They’re all up and down his arms.”

“I have some mountain moss at my cache. That will hold off the infection for a day or two, but he cannot live off it, wolf prince.”

“I know, I know, either we get him a spirit stone—or two, the giant really thrashed him—or else hang around a stone circle and hope a druid shows up to cure him before his time runs out.”

“The druids are seen more often now. A portent,” said the bear.

Yes, of something evil, thought Thane.

“This is ridiculous.” he said. “The fellow never did anything but his duty. And he was—is—right fine at it. I don’t want to leave him, but…” His ears pressed back. “You don’t think the baroness was telling the truth, do you? That she was under orders from the King himself to do…what she did to Houndsmouth?”

“You saw the royal guards,” said Brun. “Infected like the rest. And the seal of the King, on all the wagons and the wine.”

A bird cheeped sweetly, out of sight.

“The king has gone mad,” said Thane. “He must be stopped.”

“I agree,” said Brun. “But I cannot move against him without consulting the council.”

Thane scoffed.

“It is my clan’s way,” said the bear.

They ducked under some hanging vines. They waited on the other side while Rusty, Simon, Zeke, and the cubs came through the curtain. When they were through, the bear and wolf continued on ahead of them.

“Well, I must do something,” said Thane. “Get Simon settled—somewhere, then fight. And not just banes. And I have to tell—” Thane bit his tongue. The first rule of dealing with Nattie was *Never mention Nattie*. “I have to tell the kingdom. The banes, the Rot, the king, they’re all linked. They have to be. The banes won’t disappear until he’s dealt with.”

The bear nodded, but said nothing more.

* * *

Behind them, the hoglets giggled. Darby was tickling his brother with a fluffy dandelion stem, the pain in his eyes gone for a moment. Naomi the raccoon shyly pulled on Rusty's torn sleeve.

"Rusty?" she said. "Can I come live with you now?"

The vixen barked in surprise. "With me? No, kiddo—a roadie's life isn't fit for a brave cub like you. But I gotta sister. Maybe she can take you in and I can visit. And when you're older, then maybe you can join me."

The cub grinned. Rusty mussed the top of the cub's head. "Heck, learn to sing harmony and we'll go on the road together!"

The cub hid her face with her striped tail. "What if I can't sing?"

"Then learn to dance, and you can be my backup dancer." The vixen bumped hips with the cub, and they laughed.

"That's what we're missing," said Zeke, tearing his eyes away from the Rot marks on Simon's fur. "Traveling music!"

The vixen stopped to unlatch her lute's teardrop-shaped case. The hoglets stopped playing to watch. Rusty swiped off the bane muck and travel mud and pulled out her lute, clean and golden and shining. She plucked each string, tuned the third course sharper.

The raccoon girl took her case upon her back. Rusty nodded in approval.

"This one's a classic," said the vixen. "But it's NOT 'My Silken-Whiskered Sunshine of Armello.'"

She plucked the jaunty pickup notes. Zeke grinned. Simon lifted his gaze from his Rot marks and sighed, smiling. This one was still a favorite back home.

The fox sang sweetly,

*Though your paws may travel far
my love will be your star
shining at the end of the road*

*Gold seems to always vanish
and glories turn to ashes
but don't let your tail hang low*

*Just think of us together
and turn back through the heather*

*Follow my star
Your home's not far...*

my heart will lead back to Armello!

She was still singing when they danced into camp.

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About the Author

Danielle Williams has always loved talking animal stories. Some of her favorites include *Watership Down*, the *Ratha* series, and the tales of Rick Raccoon and Scarlett Fox in *Ranger Rick* magazine.

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