



Three Trees
by
Richard Adamski

THREE TREES

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“There’s magic taking place down at the woodland.”

ONE

A wispy cloud slowly moved across the face of a full moon, but barely hindered moonlight from touching the ground. All was calm and still, except for a faint breeze that stirred the night, yet failed to even move a leaf.

Over a cornfield flew a barn owl, its flight precise as it glided through the moonlit air with perfect ease. Two pipistrelle bats were flying together, their tiny bodies darting to and fro over the golden-coloured corn. The barn owl flew to an oak tree and settled down on the bough of a branch that faced the moon; he was quickly followed by the bats. The oak tree was one of three in the center of a large cornfield surrounded by woodland.

The woodland suddenly became alive with creatures in motion. All the woodland creatures were on the move, except those who were too ill or infirm to travel. Non-nocturnal creatures were even out, the day birds flying very slowly in small groups, with each group led by a pipistrelle bat.

“Whoa, whoa, whoa! Slow down a little, for Lord Noble’s sake. We’re not in that much of a rush, are we?” Hogarth Hedgehog said somewhat wearily.

Robert and Abbi Rabbits stopped and looked back at Hogarth, as did all the other creatures in close proximity.

“Let’s have a rest for a short while,” suggested Robert.

Everyone stopped a bit, so Hogarth could catch up.

Three moths named Charlotte, Constance, and Mildred flew overhead, then slowed down to an eventual stop, Their wings frantically moved up and down to keep their bodies stationary in midair. “Is everything all right down there?” asked Charlotte, who was beside her elder sister, Constance. Next to Constance was Mildred, their adoptive niece.

“No problem,” replied Darren Adder. “We’re just waiting for Hogarth to catch up, that’s all.”

Wesley and Willamena Weasels looked at each other, and Wesley moved his head slowly from side to side, as if in disgust.

“Don’t you say anything,” said Willamena with a serious look on her face. “Understand?” This came out as a threat that enforced the severity of her expression.

“Well, the old fool shouldn’t have come along,” Willamena heard Wesley complain. “We’d have been at Three Trees ages ago if it wasn’t for him.”

“Stop moaning.”

“All right, Wesley?” asked Mildred, who had swooped down low so she was level with Wesley’s eyes.

“Fine,” returned Wesley with an appreciative smile. “Things couldn’t be better.”

“We’re just waiting for Hogarth to catch up,” said Willamena.

“Good things come to those who wait,” said Wesley sarcastically.

Mildred was a bit unsure about Wesley’s remark.

“So how are you and Mathew getting on? Are we going to be hearing wedding yells

at Three Trees in the not too distant future?” asked Wesley semi-seriously.

Mildred’s face dropped a little, and she let out an exhausted-sounding breath. “You know how it is?” she said, and it was more of a statement than a question.

Wesley and Willamena gave each other a smile.

“I’ll get off,” came from Mildred, and then she shot up quickly to join her elderly aunts.

“Good old Hogarth, my foot,” muttered Wesley under his breath, then he quickly hushed up, because a threatening look from Willamena prevented him from saying anything else.

The sounds in the woodland were prolific, with the woodland creatures chatting to each other as they headed for the cornfield at Three Trees, where three Nobles were waiting to speak to them.

“Things are happening tonight,” commented Boris Spider, shaking off a sticky grain of soil from his fourth leg.

“I can only agree with you there, Boris,” said Darren with a series of quick little nods. “I mean, when was the last time we all had to go to Three Trees at night?”

Boris gave a thoughtful, “Hmm,” followed by a confident-sounding, “It must be at least three seasons ago.”

“It will be,” agreed Darren with another series of adamant nods.

Boris gave Darren a somewhat fearful look and lowered his voice so only those in close proximity could hear him. “Of course, that was the time Hogarth had the fight with Ron Crow at the Mallard Duck Pond.”

“Yeah, bad news that—*hiss*,” said Ken with a serious expression on his face.

Most of the woodland creatures had entered the cornfield, moving between the rows and taking great care not to disturb the corn.

Noble Arnold Barn Owl was sat between the two Noble pipistrelle bats named Pip and Stella. There were nine other Noble creatures of the woodland, but this moonlit night, Arnold, Pip, and Stella were in command of all the woodland creatures, including the other Nobles, who were already in the cornfield at Three Trees.

The three oak trees stood in circular parade in the center of the cornfield, and there was very little difference in height and shape of each tree. They were a commanding presence and were looked upon as a gift from Lord Noble Tawny Owl.

Arnold looked at Hector and asked: “Is everyone here? If so, we can begin.”

Arnold looked out across the cornfield and adjusted his eyes to telescopic mode. He saw Hogarth Hedgehog stepping with Boris Spider in the direction of the cornfield. He shifted sight to the cornfield and saw Robert and Abbi Rabbits hopping through the corn. Not far behind them were Wesley and Willamena Weasels. He caught sight of Darren Adder moving at a quick, slithery pace, and he soon joined the other creatures in the cornfield area near Three Trees.

“Sorry I’m late, but Hogarth slowed us up a bit,” said Darren, using his tail to wipe away sweat from his brow.

“That’s all right, Darren,” returned Arnold with a smile and a friendly *hoo-hoo*. “We won’t start until everyone’s here.”

Hogarth and Boris entered the cornfield.

“All right, Hoge?” asked Boris with concern. He could see that Hogarth’s back leg was giving him some grief.

“I’m all right, Boris; it’s just that this back leg plays me up now and then.”

“I understand,” said Boris and gave a sympathetic smile. “My legs play me up sometimes too. We’ll soon be at Three Trees.”

“I forgot about your legs, Boris—arthritis, isn’t it?”

Boris nodded seriously. “It comes on at odd times. They’re all right tonight, Hoge. Don’t worry about me.”

“Any idea why the Nobles want us at Three Trees?” asked Hogarth. He felt a constant aching in his leg but didn’t make any mention of it to Boris.

“I’ve got no idea, Hoge,” replied Boris.

“Whatever it is, it must be important, or they wouldn’t have asked us all to go to Three Trees,” said Hogarth seriously.

Boris agreed with his customary series of nods. “Can I give you a leg, Hoge?” he asked with a friendly smile.

“That’s very good of you, Boris.”

“No problem.”

The woodland creatures waited for Hogarth and Boris to arrive at Three Trees, and no one objected or moaned at them for being late.

“Shall we begin?” Pip asked Stella.

“I think so,” replied Stella. “Everyone who can make it, is here, so we might as well start. Okay by you, Noble Arnold?”

Arnold gave a singular nod. “Okay—*hoo-hoo*.” His wide, round eyes surveyed the scene of the woodland creatures below.

They were sat in total silence, their eyes fixed on the three Nobles. No one but a Noble was allowed to occupy the boughs of Three Trees, and this rule had existed for a very long time. Not even a Noble was allowed to enter the area between the mighty oak trees, as Lord Noble Tawny Owl had once stood there when he planted the three original acorns in the ground.

“Let us all say the Lord Noble prayer—*hoo-hoo*,” said Arnold solemnly.

Pip and Stella folded their wings in front of themselves, and Arnold followed suit.

“Our Lord Noble, who art thou in the Spirit Woodland . . . the power and the glory, forever and forever, acreature.”

Arnold spoke first. “We have asked you to come to Three Trees because we have some very important news to tell you.”

“Is it bad news?” asked Robert Rabbit.

Arnold looked down at Robert. “I’m afraid so.”

All eyes below were on Arnold.

“You all know the importance of the cornfield. We take two seeds from each corncob at harvest time and store it in the hollow of the yew tree at Old Woodland Glade. We need the corn to survive the hardship that comes with the cold season, and our need is sometimes great, particularly if the white stuff falls on the woodland.”

Everyone nodded in agreement.

“We fertilize the ground in the season after the darkest one and carefully bed down each grain of corn when it is planted by the strange creature. We reap what effort we put into our work, and the yield is always excellent. We must protect the cornfield at all cost.” His serious tone was met by equally serious nods of agreement by most of the woodland creatures.

Arnold glanced at Pip and Stella before he continued speaking.

“The bad news I have to tell you is that the crow twins and raven gang have returned to this area.” His ending *hoo-hoo* sounded dismal this time.

A deathly silence fell, flattening all sound completely. It was a silence so intense that it was almost deafening.

“Are you sure of this?” asked Darren, his hiss concerned.

“I’m afraid it’s true,” replied Arnold with an expression that endorsed what he said.

“We heard about the crows from a reliable source,” Stella made known with a series of nods.

Hogarth took several steps forward, which caught the attention of the three Nobles. “So we know the crow twins are back in this area, but why have they returned? Do you know that?” he asked seriously.

It was Pip who replied. “We don’t know, Hogarth, but we believe they are after a lot of the corn. And I don’t think it’s a coincidence that they have returned to this area at the time the corn is almost ready to be harvested.”

“And it is known throughout the woodlands that the corn at Three Trees is second to none,” said Tod Toad, and all the creatures nodded in agreement, including the three Nobles.

“And as we can all see, it will be a bountiful harvest with healthy corn seeds,” said Arnold and gave an enthusiastic *hoo-hoo* this time.

The woodland creatures looked at the corn, then up at the Nobles, and nodded in agreement.

“Could they be planning to do what they did last time they came to the woodland?” asked Hogarth seriously.

“We have considered that,” replied Pip. “But the corn seems the most obvious choice, as it is almost ready to be harvested. But we must not drop our guard, for if the crow twins and raven gang are planning to do what they did last time, then we have great reason to worry.”

The clawy work of Ron and Reg Crow and their gang of ravens was known throughout the woodland. Three seasons earlier they had taken over the Mallard Duck Pond area. The Tawny Owl Police and the Hedgehog Ground Force attacked the enemy, and a fight took place that resulted in Hogarth receiving an injurious claw-blow from Ron Crow on his back right leg.

Hogarth was head of the ground force at the time. Before he fell, he pulled out one of his spikes and thrust it in the right eye of Ron Crow, permanently blinding him in that eye. Hogarth had no choice; had he not done that, Ron Crow would have clawed him to death. Both crows and the raven gang escaped.

A large quantity of bark tablets were found, and it was later discovered that some had gone into circulation in the woodland. It was suspected that the crows had plotted to use the Mallard Duck Pond as a meeting place to supply the big woodland illegal substance dealers with bark tablets.

“Where are they now?” asked Hooper Grasshopper. “Do you know?”

Hooper had a good reason to ask this question, as he lived on the edge of the woodland next to Dead Trees Field, and he had the strongest feeling that the crow twins and raven gang were there. Very rarely did his intuition let him down. He never ventured into Dead Trees Field, for the area was avoided as much as the Wild Wood.

Arnold looked at Hooper and spoke. "I hate to tell you, Hooper, but we are confident the crows are in Dead Trees Field."

Hooper felt a shuddery weight pass through his body. It was so overwhelming that he didn't feel like hopping or giving a click, and very rarely did he lose the urge for such things.

"Bad luck, Hoop," was the sentiment of a lot of woodland creatures.

Stella spoke now. "But we can't be sure, as it's common knowledge that the crow twins never build a nest in a tree but always at ground level. No one knows why. So if the crows have built their nests on the ground, then it will be impossible to see them because of the tall thistles in Dead Trees Field."

"Is there no sign of the ravens' nests? Surely they've built their nests in one of the four dead dutch elm trees," said Hogarth.

Pip was quick to reply. "There's no sign of nests at all, Hogarth. Obviously, they've done what the crows do and built their nests at ground level. There's sense in that, for they won't be seen."

"Do the Tawny Owl Police have any information for us about the crows and ravens?" Arnold asked, his large eyes quickly focusing on Inspector Watson Tawny Owl.

"We have none at all. It's news to us, Noble Arnold, that the crow twins have come back to this area."

"Our information comes from a reliable source," Pip made known with an expression that confirmed what he said.

"That's what worries me," said Inspector Watson seriously. "I don't doubt you at all, Noble Pip, far from it." He was thoughtful for several moments, then added, "We'll keep you posted if there are any developments, but if the crows and their gang of ravens are in Dead Trees Field, then there's nothing we can do to stop them being there."

"Surely you can arrest them, Inspector?" said Huey Water Rat, who was stood on a corn cob at the back of the woodland creatures, relegated there because of his smelly body odour and quite frequent pungent flatulence.

"We cannot arrest anyone who wishes to reside in Dead Trees Field. Until the crows break a woodland law, we cannot do anything but be vigilant."

Huey was going to say something, but Inspector Watson looked at him with a steady eye and asked, "Would you go into Dead Trees Field without a very big, important reason?"

I wouldn't go in for any reason, came quickly to Huey's mind.

"Obviously, we have great reason to be concerned about the crows and ravens, but"—Arnold looked at Hogarth—"Hogarth showed, by his courage, that the crows are only flesh and red liquid, like us."

Hogarth nodded his agreement solemnly, as did most of the woodland creatures.

Arnold spoke. "I think we can assume that the crows and ravens are after the corn. If they're not, then we'll have to meet whatever threat when it comes; but for now, we must concentrate our main effort in protecting the cornfield at all cost."

A lot of woodland creatures nodded in agreement.

"If the crows and ravens are successful and uproot many corn plants and make a mess of the cornfield, then the worst scenario could possibly happen."

The woodland creatures looked up at Arnold with querulous expressions on their

faces.

“The strange creature may never plant corn seeds in the field ever again, and that would be catastrophic.”

“It would be, particularly if the coldest season is very cold,” said Stella.

Pip nodded grimly. “Without the corn, a lot of you will die, particularly the elderly creatures. There’ll be agonizing deaths. It will be a nightmare.”

A lot of woodland creatures looked shocked, and several elderly creatures were not far from fainting.

“You’ll be pleased to know we have devised a strategy,” said Pip.

Sighs of relief came back in return.

“The grass snakes will patrol the cornfield,” said Arnold, then looked down at Ken Grass Snake. “We’re putting you in charge, Ken. You have no objection, have you—*hoo-hoo?*”

“No problem, Noble Arnold—*hiss.*”

Realizing that there needed to be a lot more patrol guards, Arnold consulted with Pip and Stella, and the foxes were chosen to assist the grass snakes. Foster Fox was put in charge of their group.

“Is that all right with you, Foster?”

“No sweat, Noble Arnold.”

“The barn and tawny owls and pipistrelle bats will patrol the woodland, on the lookout for the crows. Inspector Watson will be in charge of all air night patrols, if that’s all right with you, Inspector?”

“Definitely, Noble Arnold,” Inspector Watson agreed seriously, and he gave a quick, stiff wing-salute.

“Very good, Inspector,” said Arnold with a smile. His expression turned serious. “We don’t know what the crows’ first move will be, but we must be prepared for anything.”

“I, personally, think the crows and ravens are after a lot of the corn and any other idea can be dismissed. It’s too much of a coincidence that they’re in this area at the time it is almost ready to be harvested,” said Stella.

Arnold nodded in agreement. “And Dead Trees Field isn’t that far from here. It’ll be easy for the crows and ravens to get to the cornfield undiscovered.”

“Could they possibly be in the Wild Wood? Have you thought of that?” asked Hogarth.

The three Nobles glanced at each other, then they all looked down at Hogarth.

Pip spoke. “We have considered that, Hogarth, but the Wild Wood is at the other end of the woodland and situated farthest away from the cornfield. If the crows and ravens are after the corn, they’d have much more distance to travel from the Wild Wood than Dead Trees Field. They would have more chance of being discovered.”

Stella spoke. “I can’t see the crow twins being in the Wild Wood. No one in their right mind sets paw or leg there. I could be wrong, but the only reason Dead Trees Field is avoided is due to its vast size and open space, whereas the Wild Wood has hidden dangers.”

“Not forgetting the weed,” said Pip seriously.

“True—*hoo-hoo.*”

Stella nodded in agreement, then spoke. “Even if it’s not the corn they’re after and

they're involving themselves with bark tablets, the Wild Wood is still too far out of the way for them to do their business. It's not in their interest to be there, whereas Dead Trees Field is ideal for them."

"I agree," said Pip. "Of course, they may have returned for another reason."

"What else can they possibly want?" asked Stuart Stoat, who was with his pregnant wife, Anita, and their two children, Stan and Eton.

"Or rather whom," said Pip glumly, and he looked at Hogarth.

"I've thought of that," Hogarth said slowly and cast his mind back to the time he and Ron Crow had the fight at the Mallard Duck Pond. Hogarth remembered what Ron said after he had been blinded in his right eye. "I'll get you for this one day, Hedgehog. I'll have my revenge." *One day could be soon*, thought Hogarth but gave nothing of his thoughts away in his expression.

Arnold spoke. "But again, we don't really know what the crows' intentions are, even though the corn seems the most likely choice. What we do know is that they don't like to stay in the same area for a long period."

"Perhaps that's why they never build a nest in a tree. It's too time-consuming," said Stella, looking at Arnold.

Arnold returned a look. "Possibly."

A lot of woodland creatures looked at each other, nodding in agreement. Mildred was sat on a corncob between her elderly aunts, when she caught sight of Mathew Moth looking at her, and she blushed a little. She knew Mathew fancied her, and he knew she did him, but they were both too shy to do anything about it.

A wing rose up, and the three Nobles saw it belonged to Wing Commander Gideon of the Pigeon Air Force.

"We're coming to you, Wing Commander," Arnold made known, putting up a responsive wing.

"Tallyho."

"Wing Commander, are your flyers ready for active service?" asked Stella.

"Fully serviced and operational," came a speedy reply.

"I'm impressed," said Stella.

"Wing Commander," Arnold said, "the role of the Pigeon Air Force is very important. It will be up to you to patrol the border of Dead Trees Field during the day, for any sign of the crows and ravens, understood?"

Gideon nodded. "Understood, what-o. We won't let you down."

Arnold gave a smile to Gideon. "I know that, Wing Commander. And if you catch sight of the enemy, inform headquarters immediately."

"Will do, tallyho."

"So now we must pick someone who is suitable to act as Commander in Chief of all allied ground and air creature forces," said Arnold and gave out a serious *hoo-hoo*.

"I think it's obvious who fits the bill," said Pip confidently. "Of course, that is if Septimus will accept the position."

"Me?"

"You've had the training, Sept, and as you've often told us, you were born to lead."

"And there can only be one commander in chief—*hoo-hoo*."

"I can't think of anyone else who will be suitable for the position," said Pip.

"True," Stella agreed.

A lot of woodland creatures nodded.

Septimus had moved to this area just over two seasons ago. He had decided to spread his wings a bit and got lost and ended up at the woodland, liked it, and stayed. He had told everyone that he had been a squadron leader in a woodland air force a long ways away, and it had now got to such a state that he almost believed it himself.

Ever since Septimus had been a chick, he had always wanted to be a flyer in the air force, but he had never got round to doing anything about it. His grandfather had been a squadron leader, and Septimus had spent a lot of time listening to the boring old buzzard going on about the good old seasons when, “Flying creatures were flying creatures, not like the lazy lot today,” type of thing. Septimus had learned a lot about military strategy from his grandfather.

“I propose Septimus,” said Darren.

“I second Darren,” hissed Ken.

“All those in favour?” asked Arnold and, as expected, everyone was in favour of Septimus being commander in chief.

“We’re assuming the crows and ravens will enter the woodland under the cover of darkness, but we could be wrong, even though it seems unlikely.”

Arnold looked down at Inspector Watson.

“Am I right, Inspector Watson, that the crows have committed most of their crimes, if not all, at night?”

“You are, Noble Arnold. To my knowledge, no one has ever seen them during the day.”

“I thought as much.”

“Definitely the worst criminals,” said Pip seriously.

“We don’t want to be caught unawares if the crows and ravens do enter the woodland during the day, though. There’s always that possibility. They could fly almost at ground level under the cover of tree branches. That way they will have less chance of being seen. We still have to keep on guard,” said Arnold.

“You’re right, Noble Arnold. We’ll need a day-time ground patrol as well, just in case,” said Stella.

A lot of woodland creatures nodded in agreement.

Septimus raised a wing for attention.

“Leave that to me, Nobles. The day birds can keep a lookout for the enemy, and if the crows and ravens attempt to enter the woodland at low level, I’ll have a platoon formed, ready for action. I’ll put great thought into who is suitable for daylight active service. I want the best.”

Pip spoke. “Will it take you long, Septimus? The day creatures will soon want to be going home and to sleep. It’s been a long day for them.”

A lot of daylight creatures agreed, with nods and yawns. Several were not far from nodding off.

“It’ll take quite a while, Noble Pip. There are day creatures I know who will be suitable for active service—excellent indeed, first-rate.”

A lot of daylight creatures smiled in appreciation.

“But a lot of them are as thick as two short ants, so it’ll take me a while to work out who is suitable, unfortunately.”

A lot of daylight creatures threw scowls and nasty looks at Septimus, particularly the

ants, who were sat on top of the corncobs.

“I’ll sleep on it, and by tomorrow morning I’ll know who I want, Nobles. Rest assured.”

The three Nobles conversed with each other, under the watchful eyes of the woodland creatures. The Nobles looked down at the gathered crowd, looking for someone in particular.

“Are you there, Charlie?” asked Arnold.

“Who?” asked Charlie Woodpecker.

“Charlie Cuckoo.”

“I’m here.”

“Charlie, in the morning, Septimus can give you the names of the ones he wants for active service. Will you cuckoo out all the names? I know I’m asking you to break silence at this time of the season, but can you help in this way?”

“The seriousness of the situation we are faced with demands that I do my bit for the woodland.”

Pip spoke. “Those who are called up for service will meet at Pine Glade first thing in the morning. Of course, if that’s all right with you, Septimus?”

Septimus gave a quick wings-up. “Jolly good.”

“Soon it will be time to harvest the corn, so hopefully we can bring this problem to a speedy end. I declare this meeting closed—*hoo-hoo*.”

As the woodland creatures moved away through the cornfield, the atmosphere was tense. The day creatures were keen on getting home, for they felt vulnerable, and the nocturnal creatures felt threatened by their own anxiety, which made them paranoid so that most, if not all, decided to go straight home themselves.

“All right, Hoge?” asked Boris when they reached the edge of the cornfield.

Hogarth looked at Boris, then his attention shifted farther away.

“What is it, Hoge?” Boris asked, then looked where Hogarth was looking.

Dark clouds were seen in the distance, menacing because of their size and thickness.

“The sooner we’re home, the better it will be,” said Hogarth, then stepped forward slowly, his bad leg beginning to ache again.

Boris was sure he detected something in Hogarth’s voice. Was it fear? he wondered.

Much later the dark clouds occupied a great part of the sky and moved across the face of the moon, and darkness fell upon the woodland, the cornfield, and Three Trees.

TWO

The dawn chorus of birds began when the green ray cut through the horizon and streaked across the sky, heralding the coming of day to all within the woodland. The chirping of the birds were slightly tired sounds, due to them having a late night at Three Trees; otherwise, the dawn chorus was near perfect, ever increasing in volume.

It had rained during the night, and the rain had cleansed the air and washed the woodland, watering the soil. As the warmth of the sun touched the woodland, a mist rose up, a sure sign that it was going to be a hot, sunny day.

The sun soon showed all of itself, and sunlight touched the birds' tiny bodies, illuminating them up in the tree branches, and when they finished their chorus, they chatted away to each other profusely. They had a lot to chat about this morning: the meeting at Three Trees last night; the crow twins' return to this area; what would the day bring? Every bird was having his or her say this morning it seemed.

"Oh, for Lord Noble's sake, listen to them," Wesley exclaimed in annoyance, and he stirred in his bed of pressed leaves. "Go on—yap it out, birds. Make everyone's day," he said sarcastically and much louder, so his voice went far beyond the range of the burrow.

"*Chirpy, chirpy, cheep, cheep, creep,*" came to Wesley's ears.

"And the same to you," Wesley muttered under his breath, then moaned slightly as he stretched out a stiffness in his body. He slowly got up from his bed.

Willamena stirred in her bed. "Who cares?" came out of her in a tired and monotonous flow. She yawned long, and an assuaging-stiffness slowly crept up her back.

"Wakey, wakey, rise and shine—*croak!* Be alert and be awake—*croak!*"

"What?"

"What the . . . ?"

"Wakey, wakey, rise and shine—*croak!*"

Willamena lay stiffened-still, thinking she was having a nightmare, then she realized whose voice it was. "Lord Noble, not him," she uttered laboriously under her breath.

"Wakey, wakey, rise and shine—*croak!* Be alert and be awake—*croak!*"

Wesley shook his head. "Madness is taking over," he said, and he moaned as he exhaled mightily. He recognized the voice as Tod's. "That's it. Enough is enough. If there's one thing I can't stomach first thing in the morning, it is to be woken up by a stupid toad. The birds are bad enough, but him, no way."

Willamena heaved an exasperated sigh.

"Lord Noble, all I ask for is a quiet life. Is it too much to ask?"

Wesley quickly got up from his bed and stepped outside the burrow. "Oy! What do you call this?" he asked, giving Tod a stern look.

Tod hopped to Wesley. "Good morning, Wes, sorry about all this, but orders are orders."

"Orders?"

Tod nodded. "Yes. Septimus instructed me last night to make sure that all the day

creatures are awake in the morning. Hence the wakey, wakey, rise—”

“All right, I get you,” Wesley interrupted, quickly raising a paw for emphasis. He was struggling to remember what had been said at Three Trees the night before.

Willamena stepped outside. “So what’s all this wakey, wakey, everyone up? Explain, will you? And it had better be good.”

“Septimus is commander in chief, and he wants me to wake up everyone in the woodland.” Tod was pleased to share, and flashed a big, stupid-looking grin.

“But why?” asked Willamena, her expression showing that she was trying to think of the answer.

Tod thought for a minute, then gave a big smile that turned a little crooked before he replied. “I don’t even know.” Suddenly, his cheeks puffed up, and he let out a croak straight in the faces of the two weasels.

Wesley and Willamena did not show it, but they instantly felt as sick as a kingfisher that had eaten a rotten fish. Tod’s croaks were legendary in the woodland, as was Huey Water Rat’s smelly body odour and frequent flatulence.

“I’ve just got to do something,” Willamena managed to say shakily. She let out little controlled puffs of air as she stepped quickly into the burrow. Strained-sounding coughs came from within.

“Is Willamena suffering with something?” asked Tod, concern showing itself in the expression on his fat face.

Wesley coughed repeatedly, so much that his face went red as a wild beetroot.

“Are you all right, Wes?”

Tod was very concerned about Wesley, as his face was now turning a murky white.

“I’m fine, Tod.”

Wesley felt ill.

“I think I’m coming down with something.”

“Sorry to hear that,” said Tod with a sympathetic smile, then he croaked again, and Wesley’s face instantly turned purple.

Wesley turned sharply and staggered into the burrow and collapsed in a heap on his bed.

“Was it something I said?” Tod asked himself, then hopped away, and a big grin appeared on his face as he did.

“Wakey, wakey, rise and shine—*croak!*”

Few woodland creatures got up from their beds straightaway, and most had no shine about their faces—perhaps just a dull sheen. “Be alert, be awake,” did not go down well at all with anyone, but no one was willing to confront Tod face-to-face about it and risk being exposed to one of his awful-smelling croaks.

Meanwhile, Wesley and Willamena were flat on their backs on their beds.

“We’ll be all right soon,” said Willamena, finally finding her breath. A mental image of Tod’s big, ugly face grinning at her sent a shiver down her spine.

Wesley felt he was over the effect of Tod’s croak. “Yeah,” he managed to say and left it at that.

“*Cuckoo*, roll call, are you listening, everyone? You should all be awake now, thanks to Tod—*cuckoo.*”

Wesley heard Charlie’s voice at half awareness, as he was half in sleep and half out of it.

“*Cuckoo*, here we go, *cuckoo*.”

Wesley smiled. “Here we go, here we go, here we go,” he sang to himself effortlessly. He was warm as moss in sunlight and felt totally relaxed. He was almost asleep now, and as snug as a bug on a moss bed; he was not far from dream woodland. “Noisy birds, early risers. They may catch the worms, but worms are too slow and boring for me.”

“*Cuckoo* . . . are you all listening? Then I’ll begin.”

Willamena lay still as a stick on her bed. She was not dreaming, even though she was not far from dream woodland. She liked to dream, and she loved the naughty ones, where she had kisses and cuddles with a very handsome male weasel. To her disappointment, though, she very rarely had such dreams, and whenever she did, she almost always woke up before she got to the cuddles.

“The following creatures are to meet at Pine Glade *ASAP*—*cuckoo*.”

Wesley felt good. “ASAP,” he murmured and added with a gentle smile on his face, “and as soon as possible too.”

“Wesley Weasel—*cuckoo*.”

Wesley’s eyelids shot open.

“What?”

Willamena let out a contented sigh.

“*Cuckoo*, Robert Rabbit.”

Wesley let out a mournful breath.

“*Cuckoo*, Hooper Grasshopper.”

Willamena’s legs were shaking.

“*Cuckoo*, Huey Water Rat.”

Wesley groaned. “Hum while you march,” he said, as if giving out an order.

Willamena woke with a jolt, and instant realization of wakefulness put a sad smile on her face.

“*Cuckoo*, Darren Adder.”

“Slithery sides,” muttered Wesley and let out a despondent sigh.

“What are you moaning about now?” Willamena slurred out, and gave a weary yawn that soon wore out to nothing. “First it was those noisy birds, then that revolting toad with his foul croak, and now you’re at it. Lord Noble forbid, will it ever end?”

Wesley made a face at her. “Go back to sleep.”

A big smile spread across Willamena’s face.

“We might as well surrender to the crows now,” moaned Wesley.

Willamena was grinning like a greedy pike just before a big bite. She wished for a moment that she could join the army and giggled to herself at the stupid notion. She heard other names cuckooed out, but they meant nothing to her in her state of mind.

“*Cuckoo*, Hattie Frog,” sounded distant.

“*Cuckoo*, last but not least, Hogarth.”

“Hogarth?” queried Melissa Gray Squirrel.

“Are you sure about that, Charlie?” asked Fred Field Mouse.

“Hogarth volunteered last night. It’s true.”

“Hogarth’s one of the old school,” chirped Sid Blackbird.

Wesley let out a breath. “Stupid old fool,” he muttered slowly to himself, then got up. As he made himself ready, though, he could not help but feel admiration for Hogarth.

Willamena looked at Wesley as he rubbed his teeth with damp moss to clean them. She never expected him to object to being called up for army service and knew that despite his moans and groans, he would serve Noble and woodland well, but she could not understand at all why he, out of all the other weasels, had been selected.

“Wonders never cease,” she said softly to herself. “Not in the woodland they don’t,” was a spoken thought. She soon fell asleep, but before she did, she hoped that Wesley would be all right.

The Pigeon Air Force was on parade and being given instructions by Wing Commander Gideon. He had been in command of the PAF for one and a half seasons and had worked his way up through the ranks, starting as pigeon messenger for the PAF (prior to joining the PAF he had worked as a post bird for the Pigeon Postal Service in civvy woodland track). From pigeon messenger, he went to flight lieutenant, then to wing commander.

The PAF was comprised of twenty-seven pigeons, and they all stood in a straight line.

“Necks straight—straighten them up,” ordered Gideon.

All the pigeons straightened their necks.

“At ease.”

All the pigeons relaxed.

“Right, then, Flyers, listen up. Our role is to patrol the border at Dead Trees Field, and if we catch sight of the enemy, we are to report back to headquarters straightaway. I don’t want any heroics. Is there any problem with that, Flyers?”

“No, sir!”

“I want you on patrol in a formation of three squadrons of equal numbers; safety in numbers.”

“Yes, sir.”

“We know what we have to do, so let’s do it.”

“Yes, sir!” all the pigeons echoed at the same time.

“So let’s have you up, and I’ll follow at the rear so I can keep an eye on you. See what you’re capable of. Remember, the element of surprise is the key to getting the best result.”

“Yes, sir!”

“Do it, Flyers, and don’t let me down. Show me what you’re made of.”

“We will, Wing Commander!”

The pigeons flew up into the air. They circled the area first, before they grouped themselves into three squadrons under the watchful eye of Gideon.

Gideon felt very pleased with himself. He flexed his wings, ready for flight, then, out of the blue, something wet, messy, and sticky dropped on top of his head. Twenty-seven times this happened, and in quick succession of each other, with no interval in between.

Boris Spider woke to warm sunlight streaming down on him, and it felt lovely. He stretched all eight of his legs at the same time and was just about to give himself the luxury of a big yawn when he noticed breakfast on his web. He reached out with two legs and caught hold of a dewdrop and had a quick shower. He felt refreshed, relaxed, and ready for breakfast.

Boris had spun his web a long time ago, and with the odd extension here and there and touch-up now and then, he had a home that was built to last. He had occasionally

thought about moving, but Pine Glade was the perfect web site for spider space, and he heard all the woodland news here first.

Boris heard further rumblings in his stomach, and his taste buds were ready to flower.

“Right, then, you ’orrible little lot—*attention!*”

“What?” Boris looked and saw the enlisted soldiers all stood to attention.

“Of course, that doesn’t apply to you, Hogarth.”

Boris couldn’t see Septimus through a pine branch that was blocking his view, but he knew it was him because of his commanding voice. “Commander in chief,” Boris scoffed with a chuckle, “now, that’s what I call a laugh.”

Boris was puzzled why Hogarth was there at first, but the phrase “an old soldier never dies,” sprang to mind. It was obvious that Hogarth had paw-marked himself up for service.

The sight of Huey made Boris smile. Not so much Huey, but the expressions on Robert and Stuart’s faces were a sight for sore eyes. They were stood each side of Huey and were right in the line of fire of Huey’s smelly body odour.

Boris lay back in his web and relished the warm sunlight on his hairy chest. Breakfast would have to wait for a while. Right now, watching Septimus and his motley crew of soldiers was much more appetizing.

Septimus stepped down the line of soldiers.

“Right, then, you ’orrible little lot—*attention!*”

Septimus gave Hogarth a quick wink.

“Of course, that doesn’t apply to you, Hogarth.”

“You’ve already said that, Sep,” said Stuart, cringing at a sudden increase of smelly body odour from Huey. When the smell subsided a little, so did Stuart’s cringe, until there was another increase of smell. Stuart knew that Robert was also experiencing the symptoms of the smell because he heard a strained “ooh,” come laboriously from him. Huey felt awfully embarrassed.

“Are we all present and correct?” asked Septimus. “I hope so, because we’ve got things to do.”

A paw rose up.

“Yes, Soldier?”

“We’ve one soldier missing,” Stuart made known, immediately wishing he had never said anything. He wasn’t really bothered if the whole platoon hadn’t turned up, but he didn’t fancy the idea of being the only soldier on parade. He cast a quick glance at Huey, then thought otherwise.

“Really?” Septimus asked and looked eagle-eyed down the line of soldiers.

Boris bent two legs behind his head and crossed three. He was enjoying all this carrying on. He saw Sid Blackbird and James Reed Warbler, but he wasn’t too sure who else was there. He recognized Hattie Frog and was certain Jake Grasshopper was stood next to her. There were so many different woodland creatures, and the only creature who knew them all by name was Judge Jude Jackdaw, who had a memory like the mythological elephant, the reason Jude was judge, and also a Noble.

Septimus looked at his soldiers as he issued a long, low “Hmm.” He stepped back a little, then lay down in the grass, his large acorn-shaped eyes looking squarely at everyone.

All eyes were on Septimus, and that included Boris, who loved every second of all this military hubbub. The sun was beating down on him in a massaging way with pleasurable strokes, and he loved every second of that too. He glanced at his breakfast and enjoyed the prospect of having a fried meal and eating all of it with glutinous glee.

“Just what is that old buzzard doing?” Boris asked himself. He chuckled at the thought of Septimus unable to get up on his own.

Septimus got up quickly.

“Just as I thought, we’re eight legs short.”

Boris lay back comfortably in his web. Breakfast was almost ready, and he felt rumblings in his stomach.

“By Jove, I know who it is.”

Boris licked his lips. “Breakfast is about to be served,” he said happily and straightened his legs for further movement.

Septimus gave himself one big nod.

“It’s Boris Spider.”

Boris froze.

“That’s who it is.”

Sudden too-quick movement by Boris shook his web, and breakfast dropped off.

“What?”

Septimus’s eyes widened. “Right, then, Soldiers, our first mission is to seek out Boris.” He was thinking hard, something he wasn’t too keen on doing, and it showed in the ruffling of his feathers. That was a surefire way to know Septimus was upset, ruffled feathers. He stepped to Hogarth and asked, “You don’t think Boris has legged it, do you?”

“He’s got plenty to go on,” said Jake with a chuckle.

Hattie heard him and gave a series of chuckle-croaks.

“I doubt it, Septimus,” replied Hogarth seriously and gave a smile. “He put a lot of legwork into helping me get to Three Trees last night, and that could be why he’s absent. And his arthritis was playing him up.”

Septimus gave a series of nods. “Get you, Hogarth. Boris would never let us down without an important reason.”

Stuart’s paw went up. “Sir?”

“Yes, Soldier.”

“Perhaps Boris overslept.”

“You reckon?”

“Possibly.”

“That’s a good reason, I suppose. Has anyone any idea where Boris’s web is situated?”

“Yes.” It was Robert who spoke. “Boris lives at Pine Glade.”

“Excellent,” said Septimus and took several steps back so he was able to face everyone. “Right, then, Soldiers, our first task is to seek out and find Boris. Soldiers, right turn. March!”

“Sir?” said Hatti.

“Silence in the ranks.”

“We are at Pine Glade, sir,” said Robert, failing to suppress a grin.

The soldiers looked at Septimus with grins on their faces, all except Hogarth.

Septimus gave a wide beak-smile. “I was just testing you, Soldiers. Jolly good, you’ve all passed your first test.”

“Sir,” said the soldiers at the same time in a defeated tone of voice, except Hogarth, who gave himself a smile.

“I’ve got to keep you on your claws and paws.”

“Sir.” It was Wesley who spoke this time.

“Yes, Soldier?”

“Can I volunteer to get Boris?”

“Jolly good.”

Wesley stepped away.

“Right, then, Soldiers, stand at ease. That’s an order.”

“Yes, sir!”

Wesley stepped to Boris’s web and saw there was no sign of him.

“Are you there, Boris?” asked Wesley, quickly looking all around.

Only natural sounds of the woodland came to Wesley’s ears. Something wasn’t right, for he knew Boris was terrible at getting up in the morning, due to troubled sleep caused by arthritis in his third and fifth legs.

Wesley stepped back to Septimus.

“No sign of Boris,” was more of a statement than a question from Septimus.

“Yes, sir,” returned Wesley, saluting with his right paw.

“You mean there is a sign of Boris?”

“No, sir.”

“Oh.”

“Ooh, aah, ooh . . .” came to everyone’s ears just then, and attention turned to Boris, who was walking slowly forward, making the sounds of agony as he did. He was limping on his third and fifth legs so much that his body looked a little lopsided with his crooked gait.

“You’re late, Boris,” said Septimus, realizing something was afoot by the exaggerated way Boris was limping.

Boris stepped painfully to Septimus. “Sorry for being late, Commander in Chief of all allied forces, but I’ve trouble with my third and fifth leg. My arthritis is playing me up somewhat painfully.” He winced for emphasis.

Septimus’s feathers curled up for a second. Being called commander in chief of all allied forces in one go was a big bolster for his ego, and his feathers always curled up when he went on an ego trip. He gave Boris a sympathetic look. “Sorry, old spider, I didn’t realize.”

Boris pulled a face. “You’ve got to take the rough with the smooth—*ooh*.”

Septimus thought hard, and it was a painful experience, which was shown in his expression. “Decisions, decisions,” he said under his breath, then, at a confident, high pitch, he added, “Sorry, old creature, but I’ve got some bad news for you.”

Boris suddenly felt weak at the knees.

“I’m afraid you’re no good for active duty, Boris, so you’ll have to remain on civvy woodland track. We can’t have you in the platoon if you’re going to keep lagging behind.”

Boris suddenly felt at full strength in his knees, even though he was careful not to make it obvious.

“We’ve got a lot of marching to do, and that means a lot of leg work, so I definitely can’t have you in the platoon.”

Boris let out a long sigh.

Septimus gave Boris a couple of light wing-taps on his back.

“Sorry, old creature, but that’s the way it sometimes goes.”

“My croak’s sore,” whined Hattie.

“My hop’s gone,” moaned Jake.

“I feel sick,” said Stuart.

“So do I,” Robert added.

Huey passed no comment. He didn’t have to.

“Take it easy, Boris.”

Boris gave a series of serious nods, then said with equal seriousness, “I will, Commander in Chief. I feel secure knowing that my safety rests in your extremely capable wings.” This pleased Septimus greatly, and his feathers curled up evenly.

Boris stepped away, giving out a painful sounding, “Ooh-aah.” He repeated this with each limp, till he was out of sight and range of sound.

Septimus faced his soldiers. “Right, then, you ’orrible—”

Page Pigeon landed on the ground in front of Septimus, whose feathers ruffled up in a shocked response.

Page wing-saluted Septimus. “I’m here to report that the PAF has seen no sign of the crows and ravens in Dead Trees Field, sir!”

Septimus responded with a shaky wing-salute of his own.

“Jolly good, Flyer Page. We’ll be patrolling the woodland, and we won’t drop our guard. The woodland expects.”

“If you could tell me what area of woodland you will be patrolling, Commander in Chief, it will be much easier for the PAF to find you if the enemy makes a move. Otherwise, we could be wasting valuable time searching for you, sir!”

Septimus’s expression turned thoughtful. “You have a point there, my chick,” was said with equal thoughtfulness, and his feathers became slightly ruffled.

His attention went to Hogarth, who stepped to him and said, just above a whisper, so no one else could hear: “Septimus, instead of patrolling the woodland, wouldn’t it be better if we set up camp at Old Woodland Glade? It is big woodland after all, get what I’m saying? If the crows and ravens make a move, the PAF will know we’re at headquarters, and let’s be honest, Septimus, we’re not exactly spring chicks, are we? Well, I’m not. Think about it.”

Hogarth stepped back in line, and Septimus faced his soldiers.

“Change of strategy, Soldiers. It’s pointless patrolling the woodland, until there’s a sign of the crows and ravens. If they attempt to enter the woodland during the day, then the PAF can direct us to them. We want to be fully fit, not tired, so we’ll go to Old Woodland Glade and put our feet or wings up. Are we in agreement on that, Soldiers?”

“Yes, Commander in Chief,” and “Definitely,” were just two replies of several in the affirmative.

“It’s doubtful the crows and ravens will make their move during the daylight, so we should have an easy day of it.”

“No complaints in that department,” said Hattie and gave a happy croak.

“The magpie staff at Old Woodland Glade will give us a meal, I should imagine.”

“Sounds like a holiday,” said Hattie and gave another happy croak.

“So if the crows and ravens make their move after nightfall, which seems likely, the pipistrelle bats will inform us, and we’ll be fully fit and ready to face them head-on.”

Silence came back in return, and several worried expressions appeared.

“We’re not part-timers, Soldiers. The Nobles and woodland expect us to do our best.”

Everyone gave nods in response.

Septimus looked down at Page.

“Inform the PAF that we’ll be at Old Woodland Glade if there is important news for us.”

Page wing-saluted.

“I will, Commander. I’ll get back to Wing Commander Gideon and inform him where you’re located, sir!”

Septimus gave a sturdy wing-salute. “Jolly good, Flyer.”

Page flew off, and Septimus faced his soldiers.

“Right, then, you ’orrible little lot! Attention!”

Septimus gave Hogarth a wink.

“Of course, that doesn’t apply to you, Hogarth. Our mission is to get to Old Woodland Glade ASAP. *March!*”

Boris sat back in his web as contented as he could be. He felt and heard a rumbling in his stomach, then the web shook a little, and to his joy, he saw another breakfast at the top right corner of his web. “Luck’s come my way this morning,” he said with a big smile, and he rubbed his third and fifth leg together in glee, then his attention shifted to the soldiers who were marching away. He saw that Huey had been placed at the back of the line, and Boris thought that rather silly, as it was a back breeze all the way.

Everyone on duty remained alert, and the civilian woodland creatures went about their business as usual, but did not stray too far from home. When evening came and twilight began to present itself to all awake, the songbirds lost their enthusiasm for a song, and everyone was certain the crows and ravens would enter the woodland during the hours of darkness.

* * *

Mildred Moth woke with a jolt. She sighed in a contented way, and she spread out her wings and, almost lazily, stretched out the stiffness. She had had a lovely dream and had woken just at the moment when Mathew was going to kiss her. Her two elderly aunts were still fast asleep, so she did not disturb them as she flew out of the hollow of a silver birch tree and straight into the moonlit night.

Mildred loved the moonlight because it made everything look magical. She washed her face against a soft leaf that was covered in night dampness. She had something to eat and drink, then set off in full flight, looking for Mathew.

“When you are in love, it’s the loveliest night of the four seasons. Stars twinkle above, and you can almost touch them from here,” Mildred sang to herself. She flew between the moonbeams, a moth touched by love’s madness.

Mildred strongly felt that she must declare her love for Mathew tonight. She was wearing a grass leg bracelet he had given her as a gift at her last birthday, and she had vowed to herself there and then that she would only wear it for a special occasion; tonight was a special night for her.

“Willamena’s right. If I don’t ask Mathew out, we’ll never go out together, and I don’t want that. So when I see you, Mathew, I will declare my love for you, and then we both

can . . .”

Mildred blushed slightly at the thought of kissing Mathew, and she dropped a little in flight as a consequence. Her line of sight went through the low tree branches and to the woodland river, and it was to there she flew, giggling with happiness as she sailed through the moonbeams.

Mildred marveled at the dazzling reflective moonlight on the surface of the gently flowing river. Without hesitation she flew a little ways over the water, looking at her own reflection, seeing herself as Mathew must see her.

Anton Tawny Owl flew down onto a nearby branch. His big, beady eyes watched Mildred. “Mildred,” he called out somewhat cautiously, so as not to make her jump and lose flight.

Mildred quickly flew to him and settled down on a leaf so she was at eye level with him.

“Mildred, it’s not wise for you to be flying over the river. If, for some unknown reason, you dropped into the water, the worst scenario could easily happen. That would be terrible.”

“It would,” said Mildred with the sudden realization that she would never see Mathew again.

“Stick to flying over dry land and you know you’ll be safe. It’s a big river and runs through the woodland, then the Wild Wood and far beyond. If you fell into the water, even if you survived, you could end up anywhere.”

“I’ll do as you say, Anton.”

“And don’t wander too far from home, Mildred. We’re not that far from Dead Trees Field. Even though there’s been no sign of the crows and ravens, it doesn’t mean that they are not in this neck of the woodland.”

“I won’t wander far, I promise. Mind you, I can’t see what the nasty crow twins would want with me. I wouldn’t be any threat to them, not silly little old me.”

“Just be careful, Mildred.”

“I will.”

Anton flexed his wings.

“So you have a good night, Mildred.”

“I will,” Mildred said assuredly as Mathew flooded her thoughts.

Anton flew up to a higher branch, then up into the moonlit air, and was soon flying high. Mildred flew off the leaf and straight into a moonbeam that made her face glow with happiness. The dazzling water attracted her attention, and she flew to the river, looking all around just to make sure that Anton wasn’t still about. Satisfied that he wasn’t, she once again flew over the water, looking down at her own reflection, loving every moment of it all.

It happened suddenly. The full weight of a raindrop on her back forced her down a little in flight. She looked up to see black clouds moving quickly across the sky.

“Oh, Lord Noble, no,” tumbled from her lips just as the sky began to pour rain.

Mildred flapped her wings as hard as she could so she could fly to the riverbank, but the weight of rain on her body made her drop like a stone, landing—luckily—on a large

leaf floating on the river. Mildred clung onto the leaf for dear life, the force of the rain on her body making her grimace with pain. She felt as if she was not far from death.

She had never experienced anything like this before. This was awful, a nightmare. She was terrified and wanted to be home, safe and dry, not like this, at the mercy of the rain. "Mathew." She said his name as if clinging onto hope that he would come and save her, just before she passed out from exhaustion.

Mildred woke lying on her stomach, her wings spread out on either side of her. The rain had stopped, and moonlight streamed down on her limp body. She slowly positioned herself so she could see where she was. To her relief, no wing had been broken.

The leaf had gotten stuck in grass at the side of the river, and Mildred wing-crawled to the riverbank and up onto flat land. She wanted to distance herself from the river and moved away from it until she could wing-crawl no more. She was unable to fly because her wings were wet through, and she was exhausted from the exertion on her muscles.

She noticed she was still wearing the grass leg bracelet Mathew had given her, but it was all tattered and torn. Now it looked ugly, so she removed it slowly and put it down beside her.

"At least I'm alive. Thank Lord Noble."

She slowly stood up on her wings and looked all around. Her mouth opened wide in shock when she beheld a weed plant standing out stiffly in the moonlight. It seemed to loom over her, and Mildred became afraid.

Then she saw movement and she became terrified.

Her mouth opened wide in shock as two dark forms stepped to her.

"So whom do we have here?" asked one of the dark forms.

"Yes, indeed," came from the other.

"My name's Mildred," said Mildred, terrified, but trying hard not to show it.

One dark form stepped nearer to her.

"And I'm Ron Crow, perhaps you've heard of my name?"

"And I'm Reg Crow."

Mildred wished she could just fly away, but she was too mentally and physically exhausted to do that.

"Be afraid. Be very afraid."

Mildred was about to scream, but she was stopped by Ron Crow's next words:

"In this space, no one can hear you scream."

Mildred shut her mouth tight and, trembling with fear, looked at the crow twins, who, to her, were alien things.

THREE

“It’s all quiet on the cornfield front,” said Jake.

“And that’s exactly how it wants to be,” Larry hissed in return.

“Do you know, Larry, I’m not cut out for this army stuff. I’m really not. I don’t know why I volunteered last night. I knew I should have kept my hiss quiet.”

Larry hissed again, despondently. “You’ve got to, haven’t you? It looked good, at least it did at the time—*hiss*.”

Jake gave an agreeing hiss. “Mind you, all the other grass snakes volunteered, so we would have stood out like a sore tail if we hadn’t.”

“You’ve got to go with the flow,” Larry hissed in agreement.

Suddenly, something slammed into Larry.

BUMP!

“Sorry, Larry,” came from Mulder Fox, “but you’ve always got to be aware of the unexpected.”

“What you’re expecting?” asked Larry, shaking his head quickly to put his senses back in order.

Mulder looked into the woodland. “The truth is out there,” he said seriously.

“What truth? What are you on about?” Jake asked.

“I was told by someone who was told by someone else from a higher bough, classified type of thing, that there’s a cover-up by you-know-who.” Mulder glanced quickly all around, then said with a hushed tone, “I’ve got to be careful what I say, or I could get a visit from the moorhens in black.”

Larry and Jake looked at each other with the same expressions, one that asked: “What’s he on about?”

“What are you on about?” asked Jake, aloud this time.

Mulder nodded to himself as if in disgust, then looked upwards as if saying: “I give up.”

“Well?” came forcefully from Larry, accompanied by a sharp *hiss*.

“What I’m trying to say is that I was told from a reliable source that the crow twins and raven gang are definitely going to try to steal a lot of the corn tonight.”

Jake and Larry looked at each other with worried expressions.

Mulder cast quick glances all around before he said, low-voiced, “You’ve always got to be aware of the unexpected.”

Suddenly, a loud “Boo!” was heard overhead, and Larry, Jake, and Mulder jumped in surprise.

Danah Barn Owl flew past and threw a kiss at Mulder.

“Love you too,” said Mulder under his breath, and made a two-clawed sign at her, thinking that Danah, clearly seen in the moonlight, looked like an alien creature from another woodland.

“As you seem so intent on reminding us, Mulder: You’ve always got to be aware of

the unexpected,” said Danah seriously, and added with a wide-beaked smile, “At first, I bet you thought it was the big one.”

Jake and Larry stuck up their tails in response and each gave out a hiss of disapproval at Danah, who was soon gone from sight, but not before she gave out a somewhat joyous sounding, “*Hoo-hoo.*”

The three Nobles were stood on the bough of the oak tree that faced the moon.

“All is calm and all is bright,” hooted Arnold.

“Let’s hope it remains this way,” said Pip.

Stella nodded her agreement.

Arnold thought it wise to have one special patrol near the woodland area that bordered Dead Trees Field, to observe any enemy movement. Stella suggested a company of barn owls be formed for that purpose. The barn owls’ role was to observe, and the pipistrelle bats were positioned in a line of communication so messages could be relayed by radar to HQ at Old Woodland Glade and Three Trees.

“Do you think the information is right, that the crow twins and raven gang are back in this area?” asked Arnold, his large, round eyes looking fixedly at Pip and Stella.

“If it comes from him, it must be right,” said Stella with utmost confidence.

The other Nobles agreed with serious nods.

Mathew Moth flew through the air with the greatest of ease, all the while thinking about Mildred. He had worked it all out tonight. He would declare his love for Mildred, and if he got stuck on what to say, he would simply ask her: “Will you go out with me?” He had rehearsed those simple words over and over again. He was sure she would say yes—in fact, he *knew* she would.

Mathew almost flew into a branch because his thoughts were focused so completely on Mildred. He thought he would have seen her by now, as she usually flew this way, and his heart skipped a happy beat at the thought of being with her. *She will probably be at the rotten tree stump*, came to his mind in an unspoken thought. He flew straight there.

“Aye-up, Mat,” said Sid Moth.

“Hey, there,” said Spliff Moth.

“What’s new?” asked Tricky-Dicky Moth.

“Hello, Mathew,” Sebastian Moth greeted.

“How-do, Mat?” said Marmaduke Moth.

“Init ’bout time you an’ Mildred got it together?” said Spliff.

In the presence of the other moths, Spliff grinned and made a stupid face. Everyone had a good idea that he had been nibbling at the weed. They were all weed takers, though Spliff and Tricky-Dicky much more than the others.

It was against woodland law to take the weed. Possession of the weed came with a penalty of a third of a season in the woodland jail at Old Woodland Glade, and selling the weed had an even sterner sentence, winged down by Judge Jude Jackdaw. Any involvement with bark tablets carried a maximum sentence of two seasons in jail. Everyone was well aware of the catastrophic problems that occurred three seasons earlier, when the crow twins introduced bark tablets to the woodland.

Leah Butterfly had died as a result of taking a bark tablet, and it was also discovered that the hedgehog count was down. Sixteen hedgehogs had disappeared in one night. They had all taken a bark tablet and were squashed by the strange things that move fast and have piercing eyes. The night the sixteen hedgehogs died came to be known as “The night they took the bark tablets”.

Mathew coughed repeatedly for attention.

“Is something wrong, Mathew?” asked Sebastian.

“Have any of you seen Mildred tonight?”

“No, I ’aven’t.” Spliff’s answer was accompanied by negative nods from the other moths.

With a smile on his face, Spliff added, “I bet she’s gone out with her aunts somewhere. She’ll be around, kiddo.”

Mathew nodded and flew off.

“I don’t know,” said Spliff slowly. “Mat and Mildred do my ’ead in.”

“Young moths in love, how delightful,” came the mellow reply from Sebastian, as he thought back to a past event of long ago that made him smile.

Mathew flew slowly through the moonlit night and felt as if he had all the weight of the woodland on his wings. “Where are you, Mildred?” he asked himself, unable to stop the worry that gnawed at him. Something was wrong; he knew it.

Harry Pipistrelle Bat approached and slowed down before Mathew.

“Hey, Mat, I suppose you’ve heard about—”

“Harry, can I have a word with you?” Mathew interrupted abruptly.

“Sure, Mat.”

They both dropped to the ground with ease guided by wing control.

“You haven’t seen Mildred tonight, have you?”

Harry looked at Mathew with an expression that showed something was wrong. “You haven’t heard,” was a strong statement.

Mathew gave Harry an inquisitive look.

Harry returned a grim look. “Obviously not.”

“It’s Mildred, isn’t it? Something is wrong.”

Harry nodded and gave Mathew a gentle, comforting touch with his wing. “We think Mildred entered Dead Trees Field during the rainstorm, particularly as Anton Tawny Owl saw her prior to the rainstorm, and she wasn’t that far from the border of Dead Trees Field. Of course, we could be wrong, but no one has seen her since.”

“Oh, Lord Noble, no,” said Mathew, feeling terrible. His eyes fixed on Harry’s face as he added, “So that means . . . ?”

Harry nodded grimly before he stated with a miserable confidence, “The crow twins are possibly holding her captive.”

* * *

Bright moonlight lit up the twisted and misshapen branches that were in the Wild Wood. To Mildred, they were sinister shapes of alien things watching her every movement. At her right side, some distance away, coursed the river; the water made a murmuring sound of motion. This was the only sound she heard. Elsewhere was quiet as a glade.

Mildred flew down an overgrown track between the crow twins, each one either side of her, hypnotizing her by their presence, urging her to go with them up the overgrown

track that led deep into the Wild Wood. She was well aware by their menacing miens that she had no choice but to do as they told her.

Mildred was helpless to do anything but move her tired wings with anxious effort in an attempt to keep up with her two captors. She almost froze in midair at the shock of the sight of dark forms as equally sinister as the crow twins. They were all grouped together, waiting for her, so it seemed to Mildred. She knew that the dark fiends were the dreaded raven gang. Right now she was too frightened to think coherently, but was disturbingly aware of the reason why.

“Stop!” Ron Crow commanded sharply.

Mildred stopped in midair, then dropped straight to the ground.

“Ooh,” she cried out as she landed on her rear.

She looked up and saw the crow twins looking down at her, their beaks slightly apart as they smiled evilly.

“Bad landing?” asked Ron with a glint in his dark left eye, sinisterly prominent in the bright, pulsating moonlight that swamped his ominous face. His blind right eye was hidden by a leaf patch tied by a length of grass around his head.

Mildred nodded as fast as her little heart was beating, and that was very fast. She breathed in deep with sudden shock when the raven gang stood all around her, blocking the moonlight so she was swamped in blackness.

The entire gang of ravens cackled evilly at the same time. Avril Raven laughed one “he” too many, making him stand out like a sore claw. The other ravens and the crow twins looked at him sharply.

Attention soon shifted to Mildred, who stood frozen in terror.

“So, little moth, how nice of you to drop in and see us,” said Ron with a wide-beaked smile, then reached forward with both wings and picked Mildred up, to drop her again onto a dead tree stump.

“Ooh, that hurt,” said Mildred with a grimace.

“Really?” Ron was quick to reply. “I’m so sorry,” he said, in an affected tone of voice, followed by a nasty, “But tough muck.” He took a step nearer to Mildred and flashed an evil smirk. “Now, little moth, it’s time for you to tell us what we need to know.”

Ron grinned and pulled out a feather that made Reg wince, and the ravens too, particularly Craven. Ron thrust out the pointed end of the feather, and it poked Craven in the stomach. He took several steps back and bumped into Quintin, who was stood erect behind him.

Quintin smiled.

“This’ll do the trick,” said Ron with emphatic slowness, then grinned again.

Mildred wrapped her wings around herself. She began to shiver with fear when the crows and ravens looked down at her, grinning like evil weasels.

Mildred’s disappearance quickly spread beak-to-mouth through the woodland. A Noblian law said that any woodland creature in need of help must be given said help at all cost.

“The woodland expects,” said Pip seriously.

“Indeed,” agreed Stella with equal seriousness.

“And Mildred too,” Arnold hooted somberly.

The three Nobles at Three Trees gave the order for the soldiers on patrol, led by

Septimus, to undertake a mission of entering Dead Trees Field to rescue Mildred.

“It was wise of Septimus not to tire the troops out during the day,” said Stella.

“He’s a wise old buzzard,” said Pip.

“True—*hoo-hoo*.”

The barn owls on lookout over Dead Trees Field gave the message to the pipistrelle bats that there was no unusual activity taking place in Dead Trees Field—in fact, as far as they could tell, there was nothing happening at all.

At Old Woodland Glade, moonlight streamed down on Septimus and his troops. Night was almost bright as day, and the air was warm and still. The atmosphere was quite tense when Septimus stepped down the line of soldiers.

“Right, then, you ’orrible little lot—attention!” said Septimus, quickly turning to face his soldiers, immediately regretting the action as a stiffness in his back loosened itself to an aggravating ache in his wings. His feathers became ruffled, and he put them at ease by standing at ease himself. “Of course, that doesn’t apply to you, Hogarth.”

Hogarth gave Septimus a smile that belied his true feelings.

Septimus cast a stern-eyed look at everyone who was stood in a line. “We’ve had an easy time of it so far, which is just as well, as we want to be fighting fit. We’ve been given our orders by the Nobles, so we know what we have to do, right?”

“No.”

“Don’t know what you’re on about, Sep.”

“It’s a head-wrecker.”

“Tell me another.”

Other similar responses came back to Septimus.

Septimus gave out a serious-sounding, “Ah,” followed by a thoughtful, “Hmm”. Then, he added in a confident statement, “You haven’t been told your orders.” Flashing a serious look at the group, he added, “All information will be given on a need-to-know basis,” after which he winked at everyone. “I’ll tell you lot, though,” he added, and thought hard about what his orders had been from the Nobles.

“Well, spill it out,” said Roger Rabbit. He had spent all day at Old Woodland Glade with his paws up, not that he was complaining, and the magpie staff had supplied everyone with a lovely meal, but he felt it was now time to call it a day. He was finding all this army stupidity difficult to put up with. He glanced quickly at the others and thought: *Soldiers, my foot! Look at us—pathetic. We’ve about as much chance of stopping the crows and ravens as seeing the wise old animal of the woodland.* “Well?” he said forcefully to Septimus and pushed his front paws into the ground, as if showing determination that he wasn’t moving from the spot until he got a sound reply.

“Oh, yes,” came somewhat shakily from Septimus, and he lost his cool for several seconds. “Mildred Moth has been taken captive by the crow twins and the raven gang in Dead Trees Field.”

“We all know that,” said Roger stiffly.

“Yes, but it’s our job to enter Dead Trees and find her, and rescue her.”

A stunned silence followed.

“No one told us that,” came from Roger, the decibel of his voice perhaps a bit too high, as his ears rose up a little in expectation of an explanation from Septimus.

Septimus smiled. “Told you information would be given on a need-to-know basis.”

Roger’s ears flopped down in defeat.

“Right, then, Soldiers, are we all in agreement that we go into Dead Trees Field to rescue Mildred?”

“Hold it a leaf drop, Septimus.”

Everyone turned to face where the voice came from and saw Boris stepping out of the shadows and into the moonlight.

Septimus’s feathers became ruffled. “Hold what, Boris?” he asked and wondered what Boris was doing here.

“What I mean is that I wish to join the patrol, Commander.”

“You do?”

Everyone looked at Boris with suspicious glances.

Septimus thought a moment, and his eyes narrowed in response.

“Sorry, Boris, but your legs aren’t up to scratch, something to do with your arthritis, isn’t it, old creature? We can’t have you holding up the troop, you know. We’ve a very important mission ahead of us in rescuing Mildred from the crows and ravens, very important.”

Boris made a disappointed, tsk-tsk sound. “Surely, Commander, you need all the legs you can get for such a perilous mission. I don’t mind making the sacrifice, enduring the pain as we all save Mildred from a fate worse than death. Even now, she is suffering the anguish and pain of being a victim of the evil ones. I know what I have to do, and I must do it, even though I feel the arthritic pain in my legs. Nobles and woodland expects.”

Everyone was silent; they had no idea what to say. Some were proud of Boris, others felt humbled by his words, and Stuart and Robert felt sick, not because of Boris’s piety, which they felt was very suspect, but due to Huey’s smelly body odour.

Septimus gave Boris a quick tap on the back with a wing. “Jolly decent of you, Boris. Join the line, Soldier.”

Boris gave a quick leg-salute, then stood next to Roger.

“What’s all this about?” queried Roger. “Whatever it is, I want a slice of the action.”

Boris smiled, then his expression turned mildly serious. He genuinely wanted to help save Mildred, but if he told Roger that, he knew he wouldn’t believe him.

“I’ll tell you about it later.”

“Okay.”

* * *

In the Wild Wood, Ron moved the feather nearer to Mildred, and the tip caught her on the nose.

She sneezed.

“Bless you,” said Avril, regretting it immediately when everyone looked at him.

Ron looked at Reg, and the other ravens looked at each other, except Avril, who looked straight ahead, trying to apply his most intimidating expression.

“Now to business,” said Ron, turning his eye back to Mildred. He fixed a stern stare on her and added: “You see, little moth, we think you were sent to spy on us, and that’s rather naughty of you. So tell us why?”

“Why?” Mildred managed to squeak out nervously. She was shaking now.

“Why did you come to the Wild Wood?” asked Reg.

Quintin was next to Avril, and he discreetly caressed Avril’s wing with his own. Avril didn’t know what to do, so he pretended not to notice.

“So what did you hope to accomplish by spying on us?” asked Ron, and his face took

on a sinister look.

“But I’m not a spy!” Mildred protested with a sob. She wiped away tears from her eyes with a wing before she added, “I got carried here by the horrible river, and I don’t like it here at all.” She was crying in earnest long before she finished the sentence.

“What a shame.”

“Too bad, Moth.”

“Who’s a cry-see baby, then?” said Quintin.

Other similar remarks came from the rest of the ravens.

Ron and Reg looked at each other, and their expressions communicated that they both agreed Mildred was telling the truth.

“For Lord Noble’s sake, stop crying, Moth,” said Ron with a stiff expression, as if her emotion revolted him.

“We believe you, okay?” said Reg, spreading his wings a little for emphasis.

Mildred stopped crying and dried her eyes simultaneously with both wings.

“So tell me, why did the Nobles meet at Three Trees?” asked Ron, and he bent towards Mildred to look her directly in the eye. “What was the reason? And why were all the woodland creatures there?”

“Yes,” Reg asked in a nasty hiss. “Tell us now, or suffer the consequences.”

Mildred felt terribly tired. She wanted to be home with her aunts, to be with Mathew too, not here with these awful crows and ravens.

“Tell us,” said Reg.

“Now!” said Ron and moved the feather near to Mildred, so it was just a hair’s breadth away from her body.

“All right, I’ll tell you,” Mildred said softly.

Ron and Reg grinned at each other.

“Good on you, babe.”

“That’s the way to go.”

“No point in beating about the bulrush.”

Other comments came from the ravens, except Avril and Quintin.

There was a silence.

“Well?” came from Ron with a threatening gesture of the feather at Mildred.

“The three Nobles met at Three Trees to tell everyone that . . .” She hesitated, swallowing nervously before she continued. “That you have returned to this area.”

“And?”

“And?” came meekly from Mildred.

“What else?”

An expectant silence filled the air.

“That’s all,” replied Mildred with her wings drooping at her sides.

Silence fell, flattening expressions to anti-climatic responses.

“Is that it?”

“Big deal.”

“Bring on the chorus gulls,” said Quintin.

Other comments came from some of the ravens.

“Tell me,” said Ron with an inquisitive look at Mildred. “If the Nobles know we’ve returned to this area, do they know why?” He moved the feather near to Mildred threateningly.

Mildred's expression froze. She did know why they had returned to this area, and that was to steal a lot of the corn from Three Trees Field or bring those horrible bark tablets to the woodland.

"She knows."

"Yeah, you can see it in her expression."

"She knows why."

Quintin's eyes were on Avril's tail, which was stuck up, much to Quintin's delight.

Ron and Reg looked at each other then at Mildred, their expressions clearly showing that they demanded a reply from her.

"I don't know anything," Mildred protested meekly, but she could see by quickly formed austere expressions, aimed straight at her, that no one believed her.

"Sorry, don't believe you," said Reg with an affected voice.

Ron moved the feather so it touched Mildred down below, and her mouth hung open in shock, as did Quintin's beak.

Avril's tail dropped down.

"Soon you will tell us," said Ron with an evil glint in his eye.

Mildred felt the feather touching her body, and she shut her mouth tight. Her lips pressed together to prevent her crying or screaming out her agony and terror.

* * *

Meanwhile, Septimus and his troops were at the border of Dead Trees Field. The barn owls told Septimus that they had seen no activity in Dead Trees Field but, to their own admittance, the tall thistles that grew everywhere obstructed their line of sight. Even with the moonlight as strong as it was, it was impossible to even see the four dead dutch elm trees. It was as if the moonlight ignored them altogether.

"Right, then, Soldiers, you know what we have to do," said Septimus to his troops. "Mildred's safety depends upon us—"

"Hold it a leaf drop," broke in Boris, who was stood at the back of the line.

"Hold what?" asked Septimus, his feathers became slightly ruffled.

Septimus looked at Boris, who stepped forward. He noticed that Boris was not limping but upright in his gate.

"What I mean to say, Septimus, is will you let me lead the way into Dead Trees Field? Will you allow that for me, even though you are our noble leader? Call it an inner calling, whatever; I feel that it is important that I do this. Please allow me this. I ask nothing else of you."

Septimus didn't know what to say. He could see by Boris's expression that he was desperate.

The entire troop remained silent.

Septimus spoke. "Well, if you feel that way, Boris." Then, with a slightly different tone of voice, he added, "Sorry, old spider, but your arthritis could present a bit of a problem, as it could hold us—"

"No, Septimus!" Boris broke in somewhat forcefully.

Septimus's feathers became slightly ruffled again. Everyone else was struck dumb.

"My legs, look!" Boris moved his third and fifth legs for everyone to see. "It's as if I no longer have arthritis in them." He shook his legs again for emphasis.

"I did notice earlier that you weren't limping," said Septimus confidently.

"It's a miracle," said Robert.

“Not this time,” said Boris quietly. “I know that because I can still feel the pain in my third and fifth leg.” He shook his third and fifth legs again, as if there was nothing wrong with them.

No one knew what to say, as they had no idea what Boris was going on about. One moment he felt arthritis in his third and fifth leg, then the next moment he didn't. This was a head-wrecker, made much worse coming from Boris.

Roger moved nearer to Wesley and whispered in his ear. “What's he on about?”

Wesley looked at Roger with an expression that said, *Don't ask me.*

Septimus coughed twice to get everyone's attention. “I don't like to interrupt you, old spider, but—”

“Please, let me continue. I won't be long, and what I have to say involves you, Septimus.” This made Septimus's feathers slightly ruffled again, and when Boris added, “and you lot too,” referring to everyone else, this resulted in querulous expressions from all. “The pain I feel in my third and fifth leg will be nothing compared to the mental or physical pain Mildred will be going through, and it this determination to rescue her that has made me victorious in conquering the pain I feel. I feel as if I have been reborn, despite the pain still being there.” He moved his third and fifth legs for everyone to see.

Before anyone could pass any comment, Boris continued speaking.

“It's because of your leadership skills, Septimus, and the courage of you all that we are here. We are the chosen ones. The Nobles on higher bough have brought us all together. ”

Everyone looked at each other, then back to Boris.

“Overcoming the pain, I can run ahead and keep an eye out for the enemy. If the night becomes darker, I can spin a line of web to guide us back the way we came.”

“Excellent idea, Boris,” remarked Septimus, and everyone else was in agreement of that.

“I feel it is my duty to lead the way into Dead Trees Field, Septimus. I also firmly believe that by the time this darkest of nights is through, I will no longer have arthritis in my third and fifth legs because of what I will have done. I strongly feel this.”

“That will be a miracle,” said Roger, nodding his head quickly.

“Well, the Lord Noble does work in mysterious ways,” said Wesley, also nodding his head.

Septimus gave Boris a quick tap on the back with a wing. “Right then, Boris, over to you.”

Boris gave a quick leg-salute then stepped forward, leading the way into Dead Trees Field. He was very thoughtful as he did. Events that had happened and those that were unfolding made him see things with a different perspective. Magdalene Spider, known as the most religious spider in the woodland, suddenly came to his mind, and he knew exactly why he was feeling this way.

He had seen the light.

A small hollow in a silver birch tree was Mathew's home. He was the only one in, as his mother and father were out. Mathew wasn't tired, but he lay on his moss bed to rest, not to sleep. He was thinking about Mildred constantly.

“Oh, Mildred,” he said her name softly, then started crying. The awful truth was that it was possible he would never see her again, and that made him cry a lot more. In fact, he cried so much thinking and worrying about Mildred that he cried himself into an

exhausted and fitful sleep.

FOUR

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About the Author

At the time of publication of Three Trees the author was aged 62. Many years ago he was addicted to a Class A drug (amphetamine) and smoked cannabis. It was his involvement with drugs and mixing with other drug users is the reason he wrote Three Trees.