THE GOSSIP TREE

A Sparrow's Fable



Wendell Beckon

Artworks by Gw Baker

For my son, Leo.

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Foreword

What happens when we suddenly find our reality turned upside down and the things we took for granted are not what they seemed? The realization that our worldview might have been distorted, often arrives with an uneasy dissonance. While the internal alchemy that follows an epiphany is ultimately liberating; awakened souls often find themselves on the outskirts, among friends they did not expect.

The Gossip Tree

“You alright?” Sam Sparrow asked.

“No! I think we’re next.” Susie twitched, her feathers puffed frantically.

“Next for what?” Sam grumbled.

“Termination!”

Sam flipped around, staring blankly at Susie.
“Termination?”

“Yes, I overheard Maggie Pie whispering to her husband that the Crows are planning to take us out.”

“That’s just a conspiracy theory! You can’t believe a word Maggie Pie says. You know Magpies are notorious know-it-alls.”

“Well, have you not noticed how all the Sparrows have been pushed onto the lower branches, and if we venture beyond the pasture, the Crows threaten to limit our feeding?”

“I did hear one squawking at Swallow that they’d impose a tariff if they didn’t stay within the barnyard,” Sam muttered.

“Maggie Pie might be a bit odd, but she said she had proof.”

“Proof? What *proof*? You’re buying into nonsense.”

“I have no idea, but are you trying to tell me there are no conspiracies, seriously? What about that thing with the Pigeons and the sudden destruction of Swallow’s nest in the barn last year? Just a coincidence after they were all seen kibitzing with Farmer around the porch?”

“He has a bird feeder!”

“A bird feeder for Crows and Pigeons?

Who does that? Bird feeders are for, I dunno, Cardinals or Blue Jays—birds worth seeing up close. Heck, we’re a lot cuter than those bumbling Pigeons. Ever notice fewer bees around these days?”

“That’s true. Weird one, that. Where are all the bees?”

“See? You’re a conspiracy theorist!”

“I didn’t offer a theory, just that I also noticed the bees.”

“It’s the Pigeons I tell you! They’re up to something and the Crows are in on it.”

“Crows? Pigeons?... Farmers hate Crows! And they don’t care much for Magpies either, truth be told.”

From behind us, a sudden blast of wind thrust us forward, forcing me to grip the branch.

I felt a chill.

Fwump, shwuff, whoof – clask!



There sat Cassius the Crow, folding in his charcoal wings as he slowly turned his head to stare at us. He wheezed a rasping breath, his beak glinting like a polished dagger, as I glanced up into his cold, obsidian eyes.

"Good afternoon, friends," his voice low, simmering with a hint of guile.

Time collapsed. My neck feathers turned into pins stabbing me as I observed him from my right eye. Susie dropped a line of chalk, frozen puffed round, gurgling faint clicks to herself.

"I don't suppose that I might have a moment?"

Susie pooped again. "I have somewhere to be," she chirped, and darted off, leaving me alone with Cassius the Crow.

What the hell? We were just talking about… How is it he…?

“I can’t imagine…?”

“—Why I’d take time to visit the little Sparrows? Oh come now,” he purred. “It’s just that sometimes things are not what they appear and so we should look beyond the trees to see the forest.”

Before I could think— *fwump, shwuff, whoof.*

He was gone.

I stared inward towards my addled thoughts, bobbing in the morning light on the shaking branch.

Long shadows crept their way up to the tops of the old pines that hold the land in place. A palisade of fleurs-de-lis silhouetted against the morning sky as the new day emerged as it has my entire life. It is always said the day is new, but somehow I know the sun is old. Seasons age like epochs for Sparrows, while Old Owl says that time is clipped for the larger beings of this world. I only know that life is short. The dandelions show their yellow faces and turn to ash in days, and clouds of dragonflies appear one day and the next they are gone. Winters feel painfully stretched by some cruel hand that paints the skies in prison grey. We live for the morning light that parts the canopy shadows, singing its praise in the choir of the hemlock cathedral.

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“I couldn’t bear it!” Susie shuddered, recalling her panic. “I had to flee—get out of there!”

“What did he want? That demon Crow?”

“I… I’m not sure. I didn’t really get what he said… what he meant. It was something about looking through the trees to see the forest…”

“Well, that’s just bloody strange! Maybe Maggie Pie was onto some… nah, on second thought, I suggest you forget it. You were right the first time. It’s just nonsense!” Susie rambled, searching for an exit.

Things are not what they appear and we should look beyond the trees to see the forest, I remembered.

“Yeah, nonsense… I should go. I have something to do.”

I dove off the branch, sweeping down to the tall ochre grass of the open field, flying low on my way to the big pine gate with the deer skull at the top of the yard. The ragged scarecrow tilted forward between the furrows of wheat, looking like a fool with rows of whistling Horned Larks perched across its arms. I took perch above the skull between the antlers thinking they should provide a little cover. It was the gate to our world, and it was rare for smaller birds to use it.

Acrobatic Swallows dived and swept like kites in and out of the hayloft door. *Real flyers… them,* I murmured to

myself. Farmer was throwing seed to his chickens and ducks. *His… chickens and ducks.* I paused. Russell the Collie was crouched outside the gate at the front of the coop. It looked like he was coiled, ready to dash somewhere at any second, while Charlie the tuxedo cat sat on the corner post staring down at him with disgust. Across the yard in the muddy pen, the pigs had found their slop and were grunting noisily while they gobbled at the trough. Puffs of white smoke idled from the house chimney in a slow rhythm that reminded me of something that I couldn't quite recall. I gazed into the yard through the morning haze thinking of what Cassius had said. The farm seemed at once alive and like a machine.

Fwump, shwuff, whoof – clask!

There she sat, at the end of the gate, staring towards the fields of sheep and cattle in the verdant pasture across the road. She spoke into the wind.

"I'm Cassandra. I don't think we've been introduced," her voice rippled silken smooth. She glistened in an iridescent shimmer of purples, blues and silvers against her midnight black feathers. It had never occurred to me how stunning a Crow could be.

"Fascinating, isn't it? All those living beings oscillating to and fro with each other as if nature had intended it that way. I suppose the question is, who or what—*is* nature?"

“Cassius didn’t come to you as an enforcer. He arrived as a messenger.”

“I can’t say that I understood his message. How do you know about all this?” I asked.

“Did you see the scar under his right eye?”

“I’m not sure… It all happened quickly and I was…”

“—nervous,” she interrupted.

“Yes, nervous. We were just speaking about the Crows and the Farmer and a rumor passed from Maggie Pie and suddenly Cassius was there!”

Cassandra looked over her shoulder at me. “I don’t blame you.”

“It wasn’t an accident, that scar. It was a pitchfork meant to end him the moment he defied the Council. It was Sabalo. Cassius questioned the sanctioning of the Sparrows, sending Sabalo into a rage. As Cassius flew for the barn door, Sabalo knocked the pitchfork over, catching Cassius across the face. He fell to the floor bleeding, unconscious. Adon screamed for Sabalo to end him amidst the chaos. I couldn’t just watch him die. I swept down from the rafters, snatched him and flew blindly through the meadow in the pitch of the night. He felt dead in my grasp. Old Owl didn’t speak as we hurried to cover him with fig leaves from the Farmer’s garden. The night pressed a crushing silence.

“Morning sky was breaking when Cassius opened his eyes. Old Owl had stitched the gash with three neat little sutures. ‘You’re at Old Owl’s nest. We didn’t know if you’d make it,’ I said in a hush.

“‘I saw everything,’ Cassius spoke. ‘I was in a tunnel of light that passed into a soft space that felt like a dream, only it wasn’t. I was awake and felt safe. A Great Blue Heron appeared from the light, followed by three others. They spoke our language into my mind, saying my life had a meaning and that it wasn’t my time. It felt comforting, and yet something about a Great Blue Heron meeting me seemed strange. I’ve never known a Heron. Why are you here?’

“‘We’re here to guide you back,’ he said. ‘You need to let them know all is as it should, and has been made perfect by the Lord. You have to go back. Your life is not finished yet.’

“‘Yet… And so when it is, then what will happen?’ I asked.

“‘You will return and we will guide you to the next journey.’

“A bright light opened.

“‘Suddenly, I was above Old Owl’s nest and could see you both beside my body. I heard Old Owl say, “*They will be looking for you.*”’

"'I floated into my body and felt the shard of pain under my right eye.'

"'You will heal. Sabalo and the Council are a bigger problem,' I said to him. 'We will need to stay clear of the East Side. There will be many spies about!'"

I gazed in a reverie into the yard. "Sabalo?... Council?... stitches?... this is just… a farm!"

Surveying the woods east of The Gate, she stopped. "Things are not what they appear…"

"Do not turn to look. It's hard to see among the birch, but there is a Raven watching us from the shadows. That is



Kaell. We are being observed."

I couldn't help slowly pivoting toward the woods. Scanning the shadows, my eyes fell upon him among the

dark patches of birch. His armour of black onyx plates was set against a sharp broad bill that curled downward into a pointed gaff. His head lowered slightly as he met my gaze. An image flashed in my mind of him tearing off my wings.

"*Fly!*" she yelled.

Cassandra flipped backward, twisting in a swirl of black feathers, aiming toward the western trees at full speed. I dove down behind the crossbeam, using the gate as cover, then rolled and pitched back up, rowing hard to catch her. We threaded through the trunks and branches, clipping several on the wing. Rising toward the canopy, she shouted, "If you lose me, make your way to the meadow!"

Behind us, Kaell's huge black wings swept open as he landed heavy on the gate. He bellowed a thunderous "*KRRAAAK,*" rattling the deer skull, making his presence known to everyone.

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I arrived at the gnarled old snag north of the meadow. It was a Ponderosa Pine in burnt-sienna, scorched by lightning. Its twisted trunk was charred with blackened scars where a fire had devoured its belly. It was long dead. Tufts of moss hung from the bark and boughs like

sage hoarfrost. Beside the gnarled branch at the top, Old Owl's nest was an arched portal hewed out by a Pileated Woodpecker. It was… dark. I dared not enter.

Perched near the end of the crooked branch, I glanced about for Cassandra, hoping she was here. As Old Owl's grey shadow slowly emerged from his chamber, I took a step back.

He was enormous, wearing a thick robe of billowed ashen feathers. His great round head was set in shallow bowls rippled with rings of white and grey. His large golden eyes seemed lit by age itself.

Old Owl's voice carried an ancient timbre. "You are a long way from yesterday, my little friend. While things might not be what they seem on the lower boughs, you *can* sometimes choose a higher vantage. I'm glad you have arrived, Sam. Come in out of the wind."

I hopped down the branch into Old Owl's den. I was met with the pleasant scent of pine needles that neatly carpeted the floor around the twigs and moss. It was not what I expected. The space was lit with warm rays of light that crisscrossed from cracks in the space above. As my eyes adjusted, I found Cassandra and Cassius resting beside Old Owl's down squab in the centre.

"Sam! I'm so relieved! We got lucky; Kaell didn't pursue us. Are you alright?" she asked.

"I… am okay. A few scrapes threading the trees, but I'm fine. *He…* that Raven, looked right at me. The blood left my face and I could see him tearing off my wings. I don't know why I'm here… I was just telling Susie…"

"Have a drink." Cassius slid a walnut half of water toward me.

I glanced up at the scar under his right eye and took a sip.

"It is a perilous world we're in, Sam."

"Why did you come? Why did you tell me this?" I asked.

"I saw something," Cassius began, his voice trailing off. "I lived among the murder of Crows resigned to my role. We are taught to see past the… to focus on our own.

"I was at the western pasture accompanying Sabalo on a boundary run when we came across a Meadowlark sitting on her clutch of eggs. He insisted on stopping, on harassing her.

"'Let it go, Sab, leave her! She's a Meadowlark. They sing!' I protested.

"'So you're a defender of songbirds now?' he scoffed. 'Besides, Miss Meadowlark here is on our land.'

"'She was shaking, clearly frightened, yet she stood defiantly in front of her clutch, shouting, "Go away! Go away! Go away!"'

"'I'm afraid it is tax season, and you are late,' he sneered then lunged past her, knocking her aside with his wing. Like a man with a pickaxe, grunting at his work, he smashed her clutch of eggs into oozing, broken shards with his sharp beak. Satisfied he had dealt his toll, he raised his head, licked his beak and grinned. Then in a rush of feathers, he flew off.

"I stared down at her yellow apron, ashamed to look at her. While I had seen my share of hostility, the way she stared at me showed me… to myself. I had never burnt so fiercely with remorse, until then. Shame, until then.

I can't do this. I won't…

"I took wing toward the meadow."

Old Owl stood like a granite pillar in the centre of the hollow, listening with his eyes closed. As Cassius finished his story, the Old Owl let out a dry rasp, slowly lifting the lids of his huge yellow eyes. His ashen coat of dappled grey folded down, shrouding his arsenal of rapacious weapons peeking out beneath his pleated down. It reminded me of what he was—of what he is.

"You burnt with shame, Cassius, because you looked at a songbird and saw yourself," Old Owl's voice scraped like river stones. "You are not supposed to see. Sabalo smashes the eggs because the Council demands order, and order exacts control with a heavy foot on the neck of

the small. They envy and despise those who live outside their coterie."

Cassius muttered, facing the door, "A Meadowlark that thinks for herself is an anomaly."

My voice felt like a dry twig snapping on the forest floor. "Then Susie was right. The rumors… the Crows… they really want to terminate us?"

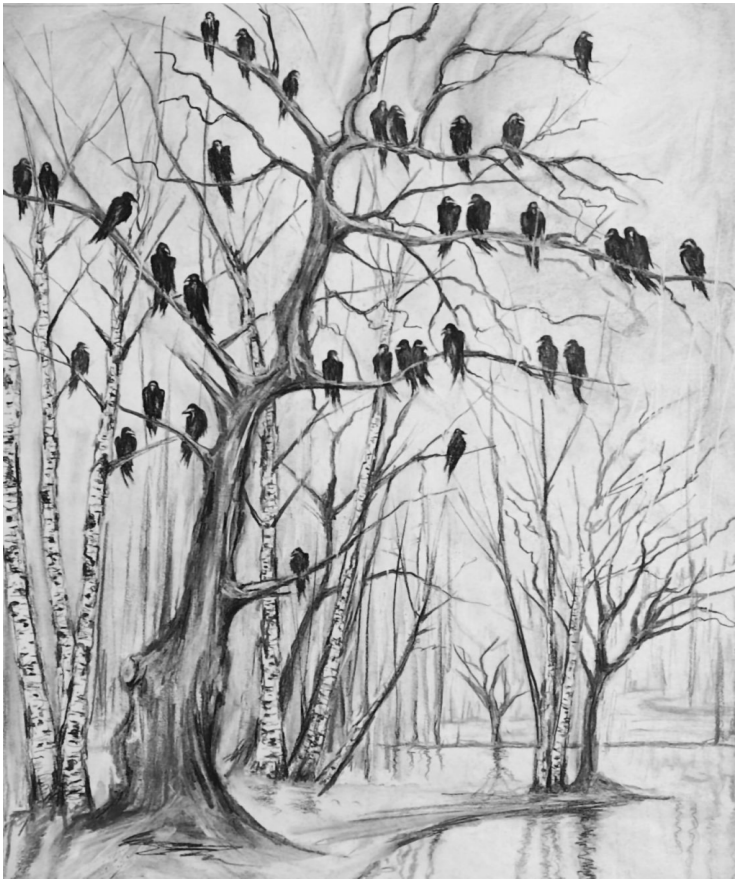
"Sparrows eat grain, Meadowlarks sing, and Owls hunt mice—that is the world, Sam," Old Owl replied. "But the Farm system has commodified it. The Crows aren't acting out of nature; they are acting out of an artificial scarcity to hoard their abundance. They are simply managing the inventory. And while they may own the boundaries, they do not own the air between them."

He stopped. His feathers ruffled while his huge head swivelled toward the arched porch. The warm rays of light went dim. A cold, wet draft swept into the den, carrying the burnt, heavy scent of charcoal and river clay.

"They didn't look for you in the meadow, Cassandra," Old Owl hushed. "Kaell brought the whole East Wing straight to the pine."

"They are here," Cassandra whispered.

I hopped to the edge of the portal, pressing against the bark to peek out into the blinding light.



The green meadow was gone, devoured by angry sheets of torrent rain falling from the morbid sky. The air was thick with the smell of bog and wet fur. In ranks clustered throughout the birch trees sat the Black Scythes of East Wing. They did not utter a sound; they perched silently in a dead, unblinking echelon. Rows of dripping beaks and raven plumes glinted like plates of armour,

turning the trees into a gallery of reapers. At the centre of the line, perched below his phalanx on a lower branch, sat Sabalo.

Old Owl didn't fly out of the hollow. He marched. Stomping down the crooked branch, his heavy talons gouging the bark, his wings spread wide. The wind whipped his feathers, while his piercing eyes scanned the ranks of Ravens lining the birch trees. His gaze landed on Sabalo.

"My name is Strix Nebulosa Grey Owl!" he fumed, glaring at his trespassers with an ancient fury. "It has not passed through a hundred generations to fear the likes of a few buzzards!"

Sabalo shifted his weight, glancing about as he tried to maintain his posture of authority. "We have no quarrel with you, old one. We are here under the mandate of the Council. Give us the Crows, and you may keep your hollow."

Old Owl did not reply. His head tilted slightly; his eyes flashed with rage. He cascaded upon Sabalo like a shattered glacier. The Crow leapt and screamed to meet him, his talons forward. Before he could lift his head, Owl's massive wings split the downpour with a heavy *thwump*! It hit like a shockwave. He snatched Sabalo, slamming him into the ground below in an iron grip.



“You didn’t find a Meadowlark this day, did you!” Old Owl growled in his face, squishing him in the mud. He raised his free talons like a sword, then swept down, cleaving off the quills of Sabalo’s wing.

I sat helpless at the hollow entrance. There was nowhere to go. Cassius and Cassandra stood on the gnarled branch, guarding me from the front.

“Keep still, Sam,” Cassandra whispered. “If they attack, fly as high as you can, then plummet like an Osprey for the trees in the woods.”

The Ravens shrieked and flailed in a hysteric clamour when Old Owl cleaved Sabalo’s wing. They took flight and began to encircle the pine tree in a dizzying maelstrom of squawking, wind and shadows. We were caught in the eye of a cyclone of screaming Ravens. Kaell suddenly veered in from the storm, flanked by two others.

He shouted at Cassandra, “There you are little harpy—no escaping today!”

Like a shot, he banked hard inward, dive-bombing toward her, knocking her into the air in a barrage of feathers. They gnashed at her, three on one, while Cassius plunged onto Kaell’s back, fighting to pull him off. The rolling cluster of black birds fell to the ground with a *thump*. Two soldiers hooked Cassius by the wings, ripping him off Kaell, who pinned her under his talons.

“I should have done this sooner!” Kaell snarled, sinking his hooked bill deep into her neck.

All at once the flock stopped circling and went silent, landing in clumps around the base of the tree. Blood dripped from Cassandra's mouth as Cassius broke his captors' hold, rushing to her side.

"You're alright, dear; Old Owl can fix this," he said softly.

"No… No, he can't. Not this time," Cassandra spoke. "Not this time, Cass. I have to go meet your Herons. I always liked the Blue Herons. Get Sam home. He needs to go back to the Gossip Tree."



The rain stopped as the clouds broke. I spread my wings and stepped off the gnarled branch, circling down like a feather caught in the morning light.

Old Owl leapt off Sabalo, gliding over to stand with Cassius. I landed on a round stone beside her head. Her midnight black feathers still glistened in an iridescent shimmer of purples, blues and silvers. She was beautiful, even in death.

Kaell leapt back in fear when Old Owl approached, taking flight into the trees. Sabalo pulled himself out of the mud and skulked away toward the woods, holding his severed quills. Most of the Ravens had flown off while a few remained staring down at their feet.

"*I… am a long way from yesterday,*" I said, searching for words. "I stand among companions that I could never have imagined. She… gave her life to save me, to save us… I will not forget."

I picked up a pebble that lay on the ground beside us and set it on her chest. Cassius and the Old Owl did the same. The few Ravens who remained gathered soft, round

stones and placed them neatly on Cassandra until we had formed a mound for her resting place.

"She will have found the Blue Herons, that I am sure. I will guard her place beneath the pine for as long as I am here," Old Owl uttered. "The meadow is hers now."

Battered and scarred, Cassius looked about at the tufts of feathers on the mud around us. "It should have been me. I just couldn't…" He paused. "Let me get you home, Sam."

No… I'll head back on my own. I am… I'll see you both again."

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"Well, did you hear? Maggie Pie was telling her husband that there was some sort of terrible ruckus in the meadow! Something with the Pigeons and Crows and Old Owl. Those devil Crows! Maggie Pie said that the Ravens had to step in to sort it out. Thank goodness for the Ravens!" Susie whispered in my ear.

Staring into memory, I muttered, "I suspect things aren't what they seem."

“Well, whatever *that* means,” Susie scoffed. “I’m off to meet the choir. At least we still have that.”

I sat in the shade of the Gossip Tree watching the sun reach across the tall ochre grass of the field. The long shadows felt like branches of loneliness swallowed by the light. It is remembering that the Sparrows eat grain, Meadowlarks sing, and the Owls hunt mice; that the Farmer reaps his harvest and the world turns beyond our grasp. The wonder is discovering a wider view than yesterday. To look past the trees to see the forest.

I began to sing to the morning, as I have my entire life.

And for them.

The Black Scythes

In the days that followed, I looked upon the farm with fresh eyes.

I observed the comings and goings of all the birds and the pecking order of the Magpies, Crows and Ravens. The Pigeons suddenly seemed to take on an alien appearance, while I understood that I was the one who had changed. It was apparent they were little more than peons, who did and believed whatever they were told and gave the appearance of a well-ordered farm.

On certain days, the cult of black feathers would gather in the gambrel barn at dusk.

Aside from the Council cadre, few paid attention to Sparrows, and so I ventured to quietly move about, careful to avoid the Magpies in particular. At the rear of the barn, I noticed a grain chute sagging curiously from the hayloft. It had a tattered grain sock hung over the end of the pipe where I decided to investigate. Under the sock, I found that the chute was large enough for me to hop inside.

A muffled echo of voices emanated down, and I could see light reflecting above the bend at the top. I hopped up the rivets to the hayloft, where, from the shadows of the hopper, I could see the Council gathering and the Black Scythes of East Wing.



The Ravens stood in a horseshoe formation below Adon, Kaell and Sabalo, who perched atop wooden crates in the centre. Kaell smugly glanced about while Sabalo appeared grim-faced, his wing slumped with the conspicuous absence of his quill feathers. On the wall behind hung an ox yoke with a black braid of horsehair hanging down in the centre, above it, the scratched words, *Ordo ab Alis.*

Adonaios spoke: "Given the incident in the meadow last week, it is imperative that we lower the tensions around the farm. It has always worked best to allow Rooster to believe that he is firmly in charge and to always refer to him as Mister Rhodes. I had a word with him this morning, thanking him for his leadership regarding the rules around the bird feeder. The tragic loss of Cassandra could have been avoided, though Kaell and the East Wing performed their duty with honour. It was clearly Cassius

who corrupted the others and brought about this insurrection. He will be brought to justice. In the meantime, I want you all to remember that soft power works better than brute force. Let them think of us as protectors, not enforcers."

"With honour... soft power... protectors?" I muttered to myself.

I had no idea what *Ordo ab Alis* meant, but it didn't sound good. Adonaios had white wing feathers, which set him apart from the other Crows, and it was clearly the Council, and not Mr. Rhodes, who was the true power behind the farm.

Dust from the grain chute began itching at my eyes and nose, and I suddenly felt a sneeze coming on. Realizing that I had lingered too long, I quickly hopped backward, trying to stifle the sneeze with my wing, but it was too late. A muffled *puff* blew beneath my feathers and rumbled up the pipe as I hurried down toward the grain sock, suddenly gripped with panic.

Not knowing if I was detected, I planned to drop down into the hopper, then dash as fast as I could fly toward the dark western hemlocks. As I dropped out, a leering, jagged shadow bent across the dusty floor. Above it stood Moses Magpie.

"Well, well, who do we have here?" he sneered. "Little Sammy Sparrow, in the feather!"

Before I could think of which way to fly, Moss lunged forward, pinning me to the hopper with his osseous yellow claw.

“Thought we wouldn’t notice you thumping about in the grain chute, little spy?” Moss hissed. “Let me introduce you to Adonaios.”

He snatched me roughly out of the hopper, hauling me through the air around the barn to the open hayloft.

Adon looked down from his crate as Moss threw me down into the circle of light. He didn't look angry; he looked amused. Beside him, Kaell was busy sharpening his curved beak against the wood, while Sabalo sat pouting in grim silence.

"Well, Moss," Adon said, his voice chillingly polite. "What a fascinating little friend you've brought us. I didn't think the Sparrows cared much for politics."

"He was spying from the grain chute!" Moss gloated, bristling with pride. "I caught him right as he tried to scatter!"



"That little bugger was with Cassius and Old Owl at the meadow," Kaell sneered. "Let me have a few minutes with him and he'll sing whatever tune we ask."

"No, that won't be necessary. Our little pet will stay with us as an attraction. That way we won't need to look for Cassius—that is, unless he thinks his Sparrow friend isn't worth a falling feather," Adon mused. "Put him in the old canary cage and let him sing!"

Moss shoved me forward toward the open door of the rusted blue cage.

"Ah, yes, I see. Birds caging birds. I suppose that's how soft power works," I muttered, looking back at Adonaios. "Don't bother pushing, Moss, you can see I'm light as a feather, but clearly a threat."

Kaell clacked his beak with a sharp crack as the cage door snapped closed.

The Council crew returned to their banter, either ignoring or forgetting I was there. The loft was stifling and radiated with the stench of manure, dust and hay. *I honestly don't know how the Swallows stand living here*, I thought to myself. Glancing around the cage, the slimy

water in the feeder looked about as old as me, and so I shut my eyes and remembered the shade of the hemlocks, imagining I was there.

"Oh, stop looking so sour, Sabalo! It's just a scratch!" Kaell cackled. "Do you remember that time Polly Pigeon crapped right in the bird feeder when you suddenly appeared?" He snickered. "The Pigeons kept right on gorging themselves with gurgled enthusiasm as if nothing happened!"

"That *was* mildly amusing, I admit," Sabalo grinned, and everyone laughed.

"See! All is well!" Adon declared with vivacity. "What they don't know is that the Falcons are coming!"

"*Eeeoooh* the Falcons! I just shiver thinking about them. *F-f-f-alcons—shwuff!* They say they are the fastest creatures in the world," Kaell mused. "Or is it those yellow cats in the Farmer's picture box? I don't remember, but the Falcons have a nasty way of appearing out of nowhere!"

"The same can be said for Owls, but they only hunt at night, and so Old Strixy might be in for a rude awakening," Adon muttered, facing the open doors.

I was deep among the hemlocks singing with the Sparrow-Starling choir, when Moses Magpie reappeared at the hayloft door with Susie beside him.

“Well, now you’ve gone and done it this time, haven’t you, Samuel Sparrow?” Susie sniped at me through the bars of the cage. “And I can’t say that I feel sorry for you, either! From what Moss says, you have brought this upon yourself by getting involved with that terrorist, Cassius! Maggie Pie thinks you might just have to choose exile if Adon graciously allows it, and I agree.”

Susie turned and nodded politely to Adonaios as she hopped past and took flight out of the doors.



“It seems that you have few friends, Sammy Boy,” Moss jeered.

“Friends aren’t about quantity, Mossy Boy; it’s about quality,” I muttered with my eyes shut.

“Enough!” Adon shouted. “Get the Sparrow some seeds. We need him alive if he is going to be of any use.”

And with that, everyone went silent as Moss dropped a few kernels of corn into the bottom of the dirty old cage.

The rays of afternoon sunlight cast through the cracks in the rafters, slowly inching across the loft, cutting through the floating dust. The old barn ticked and groaned like a weary, dozing giant. Small creatures stirred and scurried faintly under the bales, while the clunks and hum of the farm were muffled outside the walls. Kaell and Sabalo had gone to meet the Falcons, and Adon sat with his beak stuffed beneath his wing, snoring lightly.

I sat still, mildly nervous that the clicking of my claws on the tin cage would wake Adonaios. *Maybe Susie was right,* I thought. *I did deserve this for my nosing around. Exiled to where?... and what about the quality of friends?* I thought about Cassandra, and how she… and Cassius, and the Old Owl revealed a world… a friendship with someone so small. *Now I've put them at risk…*

Adon suddenly pulled his head up, facing the open loft. I also heard it: squawking in the distance, growing louder and louder, until Kaell and the Black Scythes swept through the door in a clamorous whirling barrage of black feathers and sharp beaks.

Fwump, shwuff, woof—thump-thump—thump!

They landed hard onto the loft floor, gripping Cassius and Susie in their talons, tossing them into the dusty light. A

pair of Falcons landed at either side of the door, appearing like pristine assassins.

"Mindless brutes!" Susie seethed at her captors, brushing off the dust. "Where's your oily snitch, Moss? I have a few choice words for him!"

"Feisty one, isn't she? Well, it appears we are going to have a reunion! The guests have arrived," Adonaios announced. "Tie the traitor to the pitchfork and throw the little one in with her friend."

Cassius was bloody and bruised. His feathers were in tatters, and his ankle looked broken. His head hung as they tied him in yellow twine to the middle of the pitchfork. He looked dead.

"Is Cassius alive?" I whispered to Susie.

"Barely," she spoke in a hush. "They beat him senseless after they grabbed us. It was terrifying! The night air was thick with silence, and then suddenly we heard a strange sound. We thought it might be Old Owl, so we stepped out to look and—*whoosh*, we were in their grasp!"

Kaell strutted among the Black Scythes, bobbing up and down cackling, rabid with conceit.

"It was brilliant!" he gloated. "We stalked up to the pine from below and the Falcons dove in from above. After we

spooked the Crow and Sparrow from the roost, the Falcons snatched them before they could move a feather! Too bad Old Owl wasn't there. I'm sure Sabalo would have enjoyed a fight with even odds, hey, Sab? Too bad the old coot wasn't there, eh?"

"Next time," Sabalo replied coldly.

Susie leaned into me, speaking low. "As soon as I left the barn, I flew to Old Owl's nest, staying low through the birch so as not to be seen. I was frantic! I didn't know what else to do! I found Cassius there. He said Old Owl had flown off to meet with his Order and didn't know when he'd return. I admit that I was leery of Cassius, obviously, but as he spoke, my fear eased. He told me why he came to you, and that we had to get you out of here!"

"I… am… sorry, Susie."

"It's me who should be sorry," she whispered sharply.

"No, I thought you were right."

"Don't be silly, Sam Sparrow! I was clueless—we're all bloody clueless! The question is, how are we getting out of this?"

***

Through the bars of our cage, we could peer out across the yard outside the hayloft doors. The falling daylight

cast the dark, flagging limbs of the weeping willows into eerie puppeteers silhouetted against the pewter sky. Aside from the one golden bulb casting rings of dim light across the room, it was black as pitch throughout the nooks of the barn. Adon and the Ravens perched in clusters on the crates, floor and rafters, looking like dark apparitions looming behind the shadows.

The night air grew damp and silent. Susie pressed close, shivering now and then while leaning her head on my shoulder. *I don't know how she sleeps,* I wondered. Though I was well past weary, sleep was out of reach, and so I sat in the cage lost in rumination.

I opened my eyes, not knowing when it was. The dissonant sibilance of wheezing, snores and clicking beaks was all that could be heard. The night had swallowed the weeping willows, leaving only the faint glimmer of stars between the branches.

And then I heard it. Talons faintly grasped the cupola at the top of the barn. No one else stirred, but I was sure. The pair of Falcons who stood as sentries at either side of the hayloft door—vanished like mist.

Then another, and another.

Kaell lifted his head slightly with a faint shudder, his eyes still closed. Adon opened his eyelids, gazed towards the

door and muttered lightly, “The Falcons have left,” then dozed back off.

I’ve never known anyone who has seen an Owl hunt, but the legends of these ancient forest raptors are always shared with little birds to keep them close to home. He seemed to materialize like an envisaged grizzly storm cloud, manifesting out of the darkness. He had come. Strix Nebulosa Grey Owl appeared as a monolithic phantom, sweeping into the loft with wings as wide as the hayloft door.

Wooop—shuuufff—fwuuump—cluuusk! Grey Owl stood in the centre of the loft.

Behind us the barn window burst, and through it swept a massive Snowy Owl. He glided through the dark like a ghost, taking perch on a low rafter, gazing at us with his huge yellow eyes. And then at the door, a *shriek*—w*ooop —cluuusk!* There appeared a Great Horned Owl half as tall as the door, and gripped in her talons was Moses Magpie, sputtering and bug-eyed.

Adon and his crew suddenly took on a prey-like appearance. Kaell and Sabalo and The Black Scythes did not move a feather, crouching in absolute silence.

"Please allow me to introduce my kin of the northern tundra and deep primeval forest: Lord Scandiacus Snow Owl and The Great Boreal Lady Virginianus. With all due respect, Adonaios, I believe you have mistaken me for a

Barn Owl, and while I have the utmost respect for my younger cousin, that is an error with consequences. You have abused the avian-folk around this farm and mauled my friends, and we are here to see you answer for it."

“Oh, ancient one. You misunderstand… they are our gues…”

“Silence!” Old Owl cut him off. “Do not speak another word, Adonaios! Where is the Raven, that one who mistakes himself for a predator?”

Sabalo nudged Kaell forward into the ring of light. Kaell ruffled nervously as if he were about to speak when Old Owl pounced, grabbing him in his talons behind the neck, slamming him hard to the wood. Kaell’s head twisted as he gasped for air, wings thumping on the floor.

“Get the Sparrows out of the cage! Old Owl roared. The Snowy Owl glided down to the canary cage as Sabalo hopped over and clicked open the door.

Susie and I dropped out, glancing in awe at the giant white Owl. We hopped over to Cassius and quickly started tugging at the twines. The Great Lady Owl leaned over, still gripping Moss, and snipped the strings with her beak.

Cassius dropped to the floor. “Get him some water!” Susie yelled.

“*He is barely alive. Can you help him, Old Owl?*” I asked.

“I will do what I can, Sam.”

Suddenly another huge shape appeared at the opening of the door. Standing tall, glancing about with an incredulous expression, was Mister Rhodes. Old Owl and the Lady tossed their truncheoned captives into the ring of light. Moss and Kaell ruffled and preened fervidly at themselves, redolent with disgrace.

Rhodes slowly minced into the hayloft and nodded at Old Owl. “It has been a long time, Grey,” he said politely. “It is clear that a meeting of some variety has been called without my invitation.”

“I must apologize, Red, but this was all rather… unexpected,” Old Owl spoke.

“What is the meaning of this ruckus in my barn, Adonaios?” he demanded, glaring at Adon and Kaell. Sabalo, at this point, had slipped back into the shadows out of the spotlight.

Adonaios replied, “Mr. Rhodes, thank goodness you are here! We were just about to call…”

“He is a liar!” I interrupted. “What you see here, Mr. Rhodes, is a gang of vicious thugs who have been running a racket behind your back. They have been segregating, rather—brutalizing—the Sparrows, Pigeons and other song birds around the farm.”

“‘*Brutalizing?*’... that’s nonsense, the Sparrow exaggerates!” Adon objected.

“You can see looking at Cassius, this is no exaggeration,” I charged. “Cassius dared to object to the abuse of the other birds and this is what they did to him!”

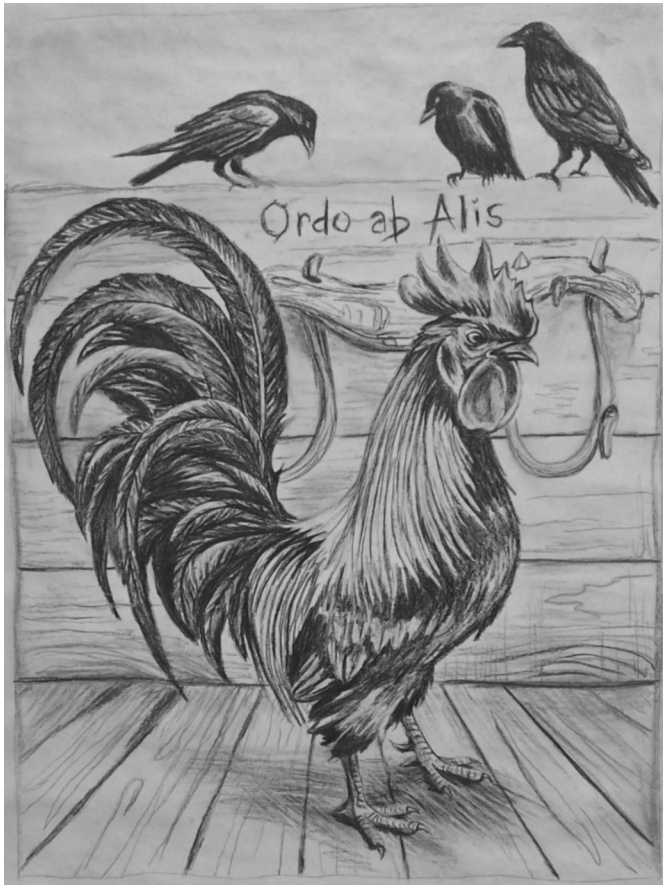
Rhodes looked down at Cassius and glanced around the loft at everyone’s face. The room went silent. He leaned over to touch Cassius with his wing, then stood back up like a decorated Admiral.

Rhodes spoke with a sonorous voice, glancing at Old Owl

“As I look at you, I am reminded that most of our ancestors came to these fields and forests in many ways, unexpectedly. They were thrust here by circumstances beyond their control and had to make the best of it. Life is hard. It was never about an ideal, though many like to make that claim. It was about playing out our roles in nature, whatever they are, with a sense of decency. Yes, the Owls hunt mice, Crows eat the grain and the Hens lay eggs for the farm. There is life and death, modesty and cruelty.

“Contrary to what you believe, I was aware that Adon was running a racket and that his sycophancy was just an act. His Raven Scythes and Magpies had grown beyond our ability to control, into a nefarious cult of black feathers and depraved influence.

“Auspiciously, the Great Owls have come to restore the balance, and to them I am grateful. We should all be grateful aside from you, Adonaios. You and your cadre of thugs are exiled and banished to the far outreaches of



these lands, and your return will be met with the harshest penalty. I trust you can oversee that for me, Grey Owl?"

"Indeed, we shall," Old Owl added. "What about the Sparrows?"

“They will sing in the morning light with the Starlings, Finches and Meadowlarks. To brighten our day a little in this harsh world, as they always have.”

As promised, the late summer morning was mellifluous. The scent of fresh cut grass and lilacs drifted on the breeze. Susie perched between Cass and me once again in the shade of the Gossip Tree. We sat like old friends watching the day gradually sweep across the grassy field without any need to speak.

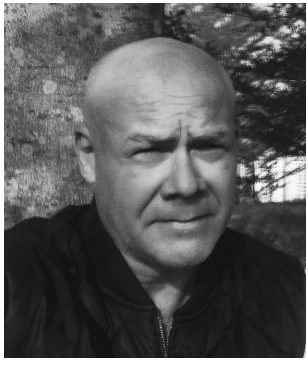
The End

Outtakes:

“So, did you feel, you know, a little embarrassed when you pooped in front of me?” Cass smirked.

“Stop it! You devil Crow!”

We all laughed.



About the Author

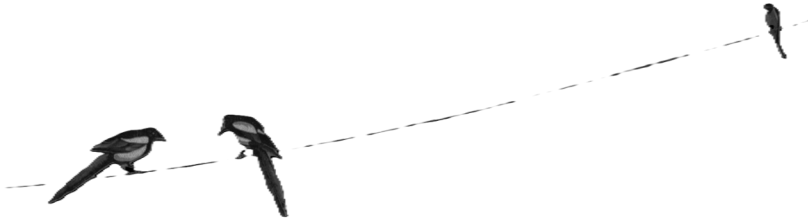
George Wendell Baker was born in Saskatchewan, Canada, in the twilight of the 1960s. He has made his home in southern Taiwan since 2005. Following endeavours in every imaginable occupation, he ultimately found himself in the roles of painter, teacher and writer. Writing under the pseudonym Wendell Beckon, he explores esoteric topics, psychological atmosphere and the liminal spaces in between. He finds the deepest satisfaction of life in family dinners, long walks in nature and spending time with cats and dogs.



Disclaimer

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Contact: supernovacentury@gmail.com

www.georgewendellbaker.com

Things are not what they appear and we should look beyond the trees to see the forest.

Seasons age like epochs for Sparrows, while Old Owl says that time is clipped for the larger beings of this world. I only know that life is short. The dandelions show their yellow faces and turn to ash in days, and clouds of dragonflies appear one day and the next they are gone. Winters feel painfully stretched by some cruel hand that paints the skies in prison grey. We live for the morning light that parts the canopy shadows, singing its praise in the choir of the hemlock cathedral.

