the feathered kingdom

A short tall tale

Marit Boom

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First edition

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I’ve always loved a good story,

which is why I think it’s about time I wrote you my own

**

I feel the wind’s rush against my face, the free flow of air, the song of birds, and the dance of petals racing leaves for a spot in the cheerful rays. That pleasure, the freedom of simple enjoyment—I can no longer give up.

\*\*\*

They are always hanging around, up in the air, looking down on life at ground level. Observing that which we cannot see, here, from below.

 “You must come see this!” the little bird chirruped.

Beings of flight, free to glide and twirl with the breeze. Despite their constant presence, their story has long been forgotten, overshadowed by its infamous sibling. Allow me to share with you the tale of an ancient kingdom—one of the birds of the Welch wood, who make ‘The Feathered Kingdom.’

“What is so important you would disturb my sleep?” complained the larger crow.

“Strange naked flightless beings. I can’t describe them to you. You’ll have to come see them for yourself,” the little bird, a spotted pardalote of sorts, twittered beyond himself with excitement over the silly figures which he had discovered below. It was the arrival of the birds’ new neighbors.

“Come on, I’ve never seen anything like ‘em!”

The pardalote wasn’t the only bird to have observed the arrival of these newcomers. From all over their tree-topped kingdom reports had flown in of ‘ground-bound giants’, and it was those reports exactly that had worried the larger crow. For now, however, he sighed and followed the little bird, leaving the comfort of the deep weald behind.

They soared, left and right, over and under, through the woods until the pair of them had reached the edge. Here, at the meadow’s edge, a species came to view which they had not encountered in their kingdom before: human beings. The birds of the Welch wood had heard of humans, of course, but they’d just never physically flown into any within their sanctuary.

“Mmmm… they are uglier than our reports had led me to believe. Completely featherless… You were right to bring me here.” These were the first brutal observations made from the perspective of the larger crow. Our pardalote didn’t share the opinion of his melancholic elder, but as a way of showing respect and being relatively pleased with the approval he’d received for bringing the crow along, he simply nodded in agreement.

“I figured you’d want to come see for yourself,” he peeped.

“Rightfully so.” The words[[1]](#footnote-1) had come from the crow in that low murmur one uses when thinking.

He continued, “We must keep a watchful eye. If the reports are to be believed, these beings possess great power. Keep your distance, little one. Until we know more about these neighbors who’ve come to live near, we must stay aware and vigilant. They have eyes like predators.”

 And so, the wisest, their leader, had spoken.

Days, weeks, months, passed by, and the birds brought their reports in on the whereabouts and patterns of the new settlers—their strange ways. At first, the ground dwellers hadn’t seemed like bad neighbors. Our spotted pardalote had developed a growing fascination. He found them awfully complex as he meticulously documented their customs, traditions, and preferred sources of sustenance—something known as a ‘Sticky Pear Puff’ in particular seemed to garner what could only be described as a spiritual awakening of sorts from the featherless giants.

The larger crow, upon months of observations, had started to empathize with them. He pitied the humans. Never would they feel the free flow of air as they could not soar through the skies. Day in and day out, they remain footed to the ground. Mindlessly, doing whatever it was these humans did, and so, over time, the larger crow lost its vigilance. But while the crow sat secluded deep within the weald of the Kingdom, trouble began to stir.

Our birds started to encounter the initial conflict with the ground-dwelling inhabitants, for they did not stick to their territory. With the passing of time, the settlement developed, and the humans claimed pieces of the forest for its natural resources. Leveling ancient trees for timber, to expand, and grow. Dragging the trunks back to town, leaving behind a trail of tree-stumped devastation. Soon a message, carried in on the wind by an older sparrow, spoke of a deepening lack of understanding and compassion for bird tradition. Troubled trills worked their way through the dense endless veil of deepening emerald that formed the forest roof, and the birds were altered to a growing disrespect for the natural state of their kingdom.

“…another report, more grandbarks felled and there’s rumor of the destruction of an ancient nesting ground up near the northern forest border.” The hushed complaints between bird kind twittered, carried across the canopies into the depth of the wood, while a quiet scorn for these newcomers took root. It wasn’t until the annual swallow race, however, when things took a turn for the worse.

The morning was bright, and anticipation hung in the air as the year’s largest affair was about to kick off. It was tradition for the kingdom’s swiftest gliders to compete for higher ranks in the pecking order. The pecking order determined dominance in the group's hierarchy, and the annual event was the chance to rise above expectation[[2]](#footnote-2), so too thought our spotted pardalote as he prepared among hundreds of birds to embark on the day-long race, facing every obstacle nature could provide.

The first part of the race was tricky, flying through the densest part of the forest. It was a well-established fact that, in this section of the race, different bird species teamed up to gain advantage, exploiting areas that might be considered within the rule book’s "gray section." The barn owls were notorious for twisting what they simply considered rough guidelines. They would hold on to twigs and release them to whip at their competition as they flew by. Or a small group of front runners would fuse tightly together, steer straight towards a branch blocking the view, and swoop away at the last second, leaving their pursuer no time to avoid crashing into a solid wall of wood. On top of the fierce mindset of the competition, visibility in this part of the woods was poor. The rootways weaved together to form a lace stitching which partnered the nearmost trees so tightly anyone who’d leap concentration would struggle to squeeze through.

The second leg of the race featured woodland-type terrain that opened to occasional pools of water and small clearings marked by bouncy moss and shrubby wildflowers, but it was also home to dangerous animal species. This was followed by the vast open plain, known as the meadow, where the larger birds with their broad wingspan held the advantage.

Flying into the night, they’d make a turn for the final portion of the track, skirting back past the meadow they’d re-enter the forest, tracking their way back to the center. The finale awaited in the heart of their realm, greeted by thunderous cheerful chirps as they proudly crossed the finish line.

A clear, sunny sky with the slightest northern wind offered the perfect conditions. The larger crow began his speech. Brimming with excitement, the spotted pardalote caught but fragments of the ceremony. He’d almost missed the delivery of the starting command, as he, barely, and on the brim, managed to pull himself together.

“Contestants, at the ready… NOW! Take flight and go with the wind’s wild call,” the larger crow declared with great conviction. The moment he’d so been looking forward to had arrived. In an instant, before the little spotted pardalote could fully comprehend it, the race was afoot.

They had set off, the pardalote positioned in the middle of the flock, carefully anticipating moves while slowly climbing through the ranks. He had passed one of the swallows, who was known for being somewhat cocky but competed in the face of competition.

The swallow, spiraling through the sky, had dropped and come back up, showing his skillful technique of evading branches with an ostentatious flare[[3]](#footnote-3) while trying to aggravate our spotted friend.

“I’ve been practicing evasive maneuvers since you were an egg.”

“Ha, that explains why your technique is so outdated,” the spotted pardalote puffed, as he shot up, right in front of the swallow, out of thin air—leaving his competitor behind.

That’s how the race continued, and the spotted pardalote kept making progress, bit by bit. He’d almost got sneered up by a ferocious-looking creature after a lapse in focus in the woodlands, but apart from that small error, his commitment and determination had earned him a spot at the front of the pack by the time twilight had set in and they’d reached the meadow.

Out of nowhere, a black object came soaring through the sky. The little pardalote flanked left, hard, with the full power of its little body. Another object flew towards him with exceptional speed. This time, it came close enough to hit his tail feathers as he twisted and dove slightly too late. Falling to the earth quickly, only to recover at the last moment, the pardalote spread its wings, but moments before hitting the ground, and found refuge under the hollow of a singular tree, right above the thick roots.

That’s when he noticed them. The black objects had been rocks, thrown at the birds by the human children who made their neighbors, children from the village. It appeared that the birds’ fierce twittering, as they completed the final leg of their race, had awoken and annoyed the kids. Who in turn had climbed out of their beds and gathered at the end of town to silence the birds.

It happened faster than the pardalote could comprehend—the stones, birds searing, the sound of excitement turned to chaos. The meadow offered almost no protection, making the attack nearly impossible to evade.

Then, suddenly, with a stomach-wrenching sound, the cocky swallow he’d surpassed earlier came tumbling from the sky. Crashing down in a vertical line. Unable to recover, his body still trying to make a spasmed flapping motion, he hit the ground.

As the swallow lay there, the spotted pardalote hid, nauseous from the on-sight, exhausted, and stunned by fear. The sight of his once fierce winged opponent laying there in frail twitches made our small pardalote consider *death would sooner be a mercy*.

Feeling a coward, he waited for the attackers to leave, till the chaos subdued, before coming out of hiding to aid his companion. The swallow now only exerted frail raspy breaths, and the little pardalote noticed that in its last attempt at escape, it was trying to reach out with one of its claws, grasping for something to hold on to, something he could use to pull himself away from this place.

 In a final effort to offer some solace, the pardalote placed a small twig under the swallow’s claw, so that its talons could close around.

“May the wind carry you.”

As the swallow clutched on, he let out a small sigh of relief. Then, the little bird, trembling and sobbing, stepped on the swallow’s neck.

Crushed and broken, the pardalote returned to the depth of the forest to bring its saddened report. Under the protective blanket of night, the swallow’s body was carried to a small clearing in the old part of the forest. As the birds gathered around the small broken body of their friend, the larger crow, wisest and eldest of them all, spoke clear words.

 “As your leader, I call this gathering to determine our actions. We will not stand for this.” The birds were bound to their kingdom, their wings free, but their spirits tethered to the earth and soil. This was their home, and nothing could force them away from its familiar branches.

The larger crow continued, “We will not go down without resistance. For ages, we’ve ruled these skies and will continue to do so. Legends of old warn us and weapon us with defenses for those airborne to remain free.”

A powerful eeriness filled the air as the birds lowly hummed in unison awaiting the decisions of the larger crow. The body of their friend lying as a marker. The crow paused for a bit, taking in the scene as hundreds listened, emotional over the loss of a friend.

Finally, in a weighted tone, he announced, “I evoke the NachtKrapp.”

The NachtKrapp was a creature like no other, a giant nocturnal raven-like bird that would only leave its nest during the depth of night in the darkest bit of the forest to hunt. Where it flew, storms would follow. Not animal, nor ghost. The NachtKrapp was something else, sacred among the birds of all the kingdom, an omen of death for those that would stand to defy it. It had no eyes, or so the tales would describe it, and holes in its wings. Looking up as it passed the moon or when its body was illuminated by nightly luminescence, you’d be able to see the skeleton through the creature’s thin hide. A sight that would render its onlooker paralyzed.

Upon the mention of its name, soon as the words had left the larger crow’s echo, a fog descended. The pressure in the air seemed to change as if to support the body, which by the laws of physics should have been flightless in its decay, and before the next chirp could have been chirped, the birds sensed the NachtKrapp was present.

Too scared to look at this being, our pardalote closed his eyes. The NachtKrapp did not speak and seemed to know its purpose without the need for explanation. With the exchange of a single nod between the larger crow and the creature, a contract had been struck. As swiftly as it appeared, so it left, and that very night, the first of the children who had so carelessly thrown rocks at the birds disappeared.

Not but a week later, the second child was reported missing. It’d been the middle of the night when its empty bed had been discovered. With this second disappearance, rumor spread among the town folk, rumor of a terrible being, bird-like, and vicious.

Unkind words spoke of the missing children being flown into the woods, the woods which were now labeled “cursed”, to be devoured by the winged creature. One of the townsfolk crafted an ending so grotesque, in the way only a morbid elder[[4]](#footnote-4) can, it left the mayor in charge of investigating the matter a little nauseous.

Several search parties had ventured into the woods in an attempt to find the missing children, but their efforts were in vain. The deeper parts of the forest grew too dense, with roots too thick, forming an ancient tangle of meandering ways, and without a clear path, there was no way to explore its depths[[5]](#footnote-5). Their only hope was that the children, provided they’d survived, could somehow find their way back on their own.

This brings us to the second point of investigation. With no real proof or understanding of what could have caused this curse on their settlement, the elected mayor began his rounds and turned to questioning the town’s inhabitants. To great effect, as soon, the remaining children, who had been part of that night’s tragedy, had been identified and interviewed. Understanding what might have caused their grievances, a connection formed, and the horrid, winged creature had been linked to the feathered life forms of the Welch wood.

Over the course of the next few nights, the townsfolk crafted a plan. They would conceal the children. Making sure they could not be found sleeping in their regular beds, instead they’d be safely hidden, tucked inside the bakery’s flour storage through the trapdoor.

With each dip of the sun, the town collectively held its breath, and for a night or two, the children stayed safely hidden, the town’s stresses slowly seeping away. But this was to no avail when, on the next nightfall, a strange fog set into town. An unnatural wind picked up. It didn’t howl, but, instead, stared you straight in the face—offering a direct challenge with every step. The bakery’s front door had put up a decent fight at first, but it would not hold against the forces at play. With a sudden force, the door had snapped open, and in a moment of swiftness, another child was gone.

It was late in the day, deep within the comforting embrace of the forest. Thought plagued the little spotted pardalote, still troubled by what had happened that evening in the meadow and angered over the loss of his fallen companion. Fear prevented him from venturing near the village again. Now he could only wait and listen, forced to hear other birds gloriously report on the missing children, each story more fantastical than the next.

With every new disappearance, claims of the NachtKrapp’s legend grew more outrageous. And with time, although he was still afraid, tainted by his own near-death experience, the spotted pardalote’s curiosity—his longing to learn the truth about the NachtKrapp—began to take hold. Then one late afternoon it seized control.

With the loss of a fifth child, frustrations in the settlement grew louder. The idea of retaliation, to somehow fight against the creature from the cursed woods, seemed more and more attractive.

Where at first, they’d been hopeful the children might return, the town’s conviction now wavered. When even the parents of the lost seemed to believe that the creature who snatched children might not leave them alive–their hope was as lost as their children. With that, a late meeting in the town square, discussing yet another search mission, reached a boiling point.

“I would sooner burn it all to the ground!”

Tension filled the atmosphere. It had been the father of the first lost child, a man of stern demeanor, that had spoken, and most folk in the square had nodded in agreement.

“But what if they’re alive?”

“It has been weeks, Aurelia! Even if this beast has not devoured our loved ones, how much longer could they realistically hold out for, out there, by themselves? Make no mistake, this evil will be back.”

Shouts erupted from every corner.

“We can’t go on like this!”

“I won’t risk another child being taken!”

“What if mine are next? Who's to say this creature will ever stop?”

“Silence!” It had been the mayor who spoke. To his mind, the situation seemed clear. Even if the children could be rescued, they would still have to exterminate the threat. There was nothing for it. His people demanded action.

“The cursed wood shall be consumed by fire,” the mayor[[6]](#footnote-6) announced.

The little spotted pardalote was flying high, soaring on the wind. It took longer than he’d remembered to find the edge of town, or perhaps he’d been dragging his wings. As eager as he was to observe the NachtKrapp, the thought of getting this close to town again unsettled him, and the idea of tailing such an ancient being did nothing to ease his discomfort.

Just as he found a good branch to rest on, discovering a vantage point that could serve as a lookout, an eerie feeling crept over the pardalote. As if by premonition, the NachtKrapp landed beside him.

Frozen by fear, our little pardalote dared not look to his side, for what horrors his vision might reveal. The little bird could only let out a small shaking puff, “NachtKrapp.”

The answer that came was unexpected. “That is the name I’ve been given, but it is not what I’ve always gone by. In the beginning, I was Corvo. Did you really think I wouldn’t recognize you following me?” The NachtKrapp spoke, his voice surprisingly calming.

The pardalote realized he had never heard the NachtKrapp speak before, and his voice had not sounded as terrifying as he’d imagined it.

“Corvo?”

At that name, memory struck the spotted pardalote.

“I’ve heard of this name before, a name given to the gods’ raven.”

Uncovering this detail, the little spotted pardalote dared open his eyes and sneak a glance at the being to his side. Corvo was staring ahead into the darkness of the sleeping town. Up close, he had a look to him, not of death, but of calm wisdom. His eyes had not been the hollow carcasses the stories described but radiated warm brown. Perched there beside him, the giant being didn’t seem a monster at all.

“You know you’re not as scary as I’d imagined,” the little spotted pardalote announced with courage. This seemed to amuse Corvo as the pardalote noted the slightest nod of approval. Emboldened, he continued, “In fact, you are not much like the infamous stories of the NachtKrapp have described you at all. So, who are you, really?”

Corvo spoke to himself as if walking through a faded memory.

“It’s been ages, once I functioned as a spectral messenger, but to bear the weight of untold visions and prophetic whispers is a task that falls heavy. There was a time when there were many of us, my flock, who would carry the hidden truths between souls open to receive our word. Less and less of those souls remain, and with the disappearance of the old, few of us have chosen to endure.” Sadness washed over him. “Now that there are but a few of us left, navigating the labyrinth of the subconscious has become treacherous.”

The pardalote registered the loneliness in his voice, and considered, “So why stay?”

“To protect what remains. The secrets kept in the eldest part of forests far and wide, embraced in its mystical depths…” Suddenly, his neck snapped up.

 “Fire.”

With a loud growing rumble of shouts, the villagers approached, torches at the ready, their sound a warning signal before sight could reveal the danger that was encroaching on the bird’s sacred kingdom.

“Go. Warn the others. I’ll keep the fire at bay.”

“But…” sputtered the little spotted pardalote.

“Hush, now. Trust me!”

As the pardalote flew high again, villagers appeared from the line of buildings into the meadow approaching the woods. The menacing sounds of the rallied uprising carried in the air all around. He worked his wings harder and faster, hoping to be strong enough to deliver the message in time.

The horde reached the tree line. Confidence and anger domineered the crowd’s unified emotion as dozens of lit torches passed to the front of the group, the town’s mayor leading the charge.

“TO ASHES!”

Coming to a halt, he flexed his torch-bearing arm backward with a far stretch to gain momentum. With a braced fling, his torch flew forward through the air, hitting its target: the crisp leaves of the forest floor. Flame whipped and wrinkled around itself–at least, for a moment. The wind howled, and as quickly as the ground had caught fire, so it was extinguished.

“Again,” Aurelia’s panicked voice peeped towards the mayor. Another torch, this one swung with more power, further into the woods, had wild cheers erupting from the mass of villagers as the ground and a nearby tree caught fire instantaneously. Only to be fizzled out by an unnatural mist-filled gust within seconds. What followed was an uncanny quiet.

The villagers exchanged darting looks, triggering a nervous energy that crackled through the crowd like the static flow of electric build-up before a lightning storm. With the shouts of new directions, they hauled oil-filled barrels to the tree line, the townspeople's anticipation rising with each second it took to position their weapon.

 “All together now.” All remaining torches flew, finding their barrel targets in a swirling mass of red-blue heat, erupting with a terrifying speed that sent flames upward to the sky.

A fire unlike any other broke out, its all-consuming flames beating around themselves uncontrollably. The villagers started to celebrate, unaware of the low-hanging smoke creeping forward, wrapping around their feet, moving towards them, while in the gray muted sky, a giant, looming dark figure appeared.

Gasps swept through the crowd and Corvo flapped his leathered wings, wisps of smoke parting in front of them, giving a free view of his horrifying demeanor. Then, with another flap of his wings, sounding a huge boom, the fire seemed to turn.

One by one, birds appeared from behind the screen of smoke. The little spotted pardalote had delivered his message successfully. More birds turned up from all angles, casting their long feathered shadows, humming their unearthly tune, singing the heat away.

As the crowd fell silent in defeat, the mayor was the first to stagger backward, shock on his face as he noticed that for all the wildness of their unnatural fire, the trees did not catch flame, laced with too much moisture they’d created only a thicker blanket of smoke. And now, instead of consuming the forest, the flames were heading towards the meadow. Towards town.

“What have we done…”

The villagers moved backwards, exchanging frantic looks, and their retreat picked up pace, faster and faster, into a running stride. Within seconds, flame had devoured the distance between the fields of green and the edge of town, as the villagers helplessly watched the haunting sight of reddish blue touch the first buildings.

There was panic all around by the time the pardalote arrived back on the scene with the larger crow. Together, they hovered above, absorbing the mayhem that was unfolding beneath. They watched as small groups of villagers desperately tried to quench the growing flames while others stared with tear-stained faces. Bird hummed furiously. And the Corvo, the NachtKrapp, flapped its leathery wings in kindling havoc. To his own surprise, the little spotted pardalote derived no pleasure from the sight of it all. Surely, this was what the villagers had deserved… and yet, that feeling, it didn’t sit right with our small-winged friend. There was a wrongness to it, unsuited to bird nature[[7]](#footnote-7). Detecting Corvo, the little spotted pardalote—bone-tired—strained his wings for one more flight and found himself hovering in front of the fearsome NachtKrapp.

“It’s not right,” the depleted pardalote twittered.

Flames continued to rise like a storm and Corvo did not seem to hear the pardalote.

The pardalote glowered up at the NachtKrapp. “We have to stop!” But it was to no avail, he couldn’t reach through. Then in a clumsy gesture, the little bird threw his weight forward, gaining momentum, and bumped straight into the NachtKrapp’s hollow chest. Warmth flooded back into Corvo’s eyes as he watched the little bird thump into him, again and again, twittering wildly, convincing him to stop. Their eyes met for a puzzled second. Then, in one last sweep of its wings—a sound like thunder—Corvo turned away, and the flames died out with him as he returned to the woods.

The others followed suit. And while the towns folk cleaned up the wreckage, the exhausted pardalote settled down on the forest floor, on a soft patch of moss and crisp leaves, where he fell into a deep slumber.

The next morning, with the rise of the sun, the town rose in utter defeat and greeted the day in hopelessness. But there was one who’d observed what no one else had, a small boy named Isaiah—about the size of a hefty pork pie stacked on top of another pork pie, resting on the back of a small dog[[8]](#footnote-8). He had stood away from the crowd during the night’s terror, guarded by the comforting hold of his grandma’s hand, as they had watched from the edge of town, safely away from the danger of the flames. And so, he had noticed what the others had been oblivious to—a little bird hovering in front of the terrifying NachtKrapp, right before the flames mysteriously extinguished and the birds began their retreat.

That same hopeless morning, with the vivid image of the small bird lingering in his mind, Isaiah slipped away and ventured out of town, into the wood, carrying but a sticky pear puff to make his plea. After wandering around for, what to small legs must have been an eternity, as though it were fated, he stumbled upon a sunny clearing, and there on a soft patch of moss and crisp golden leaves, the small spotted pardalote from last night’s memory.

As the small bird stirred, Isaiah fell to his knees to the ground with immediacy. Closing his eyes, bringing his arms forward, he produced from his pocket the smushed somewhat crumbed pastry and patiently waited for the pardalote’s reaction.

The spotted pardalote woke by the smell of something familiar, *sweet*, *deliciousness*. Gods, he was hungry. *Where was that smell coming from*, he drowsily thought to himself before spotting the boy child. A little startled, the pardalote hopped backward. But then it noticed the boy’s still posture–how he had remained seated, eyes closed, waiting for the bird to wake up. If the human child had meant any harm, surely it would have been easier to have done so while the spotted pardalote slept? Intrigued, the little bird decided to investigate, and slowly but surely, crept closer to the boy.

Isaiah, upon hearing the shifting of leaves, had briefly opened one eye, only to immediately close it again as the small pardalote cautiously hopped closer. It wasn’t till he noticed the soft pecking at his baked offering that Isaiah felt confident enough to slowly open his eyes, a kind-hearted smile forming in them as he met the pardalote’s gaze.

The little spotted pardalote had about half finished the pastry when a chilled gust of air interrupted the duo, and a giant shadow loomed behind them. As the sudden darkness filled his vision, the boy staggered back, dropping the pastry. The pardalote remained. Eyes filled with terror, and Isaiah drew himself upward. Trying to move, he stumbled over his own planted feet—it was as though they had not yet received the message the rest of his body had instinctively understood: ‘run’.

It wasn’t till he had regained his footing and ran to the nearest tree for coverage he realized the creature wasn’t chasing after him. In fact, it appeared unbothered by the boy’s presence. And that, instead of hunting him down, it had approached the pardalote by the sticky pear puff.

The small bird and the horrific being were deep in some kind of exchange. Gathering the nerve, Isaiah peeked out from behind his branched hiding place, and beheld, contrary to his expectation, the so-called NachtKrapp calmly nibble away on the sticky pear puff, its warm brown eyes meeting Isaiah’s in acknowledgment. Was this the same creature that had struck fear into the entire village? Here in the clearing, it seemed no more fearsome than a dormouse, a figure from a half-forgotten dream. It carried a gentleness over itself and conveyed a curious intelligence. As this dawned on him, a giggle danced across Isaiah’s face, and the last bits of nervous energy between them ebbed away.

Just like that, the boy knew it was time to go home—the thought[[9]](#footnote-9) had entered his mind seamlessly in a sudden moment of clarity. He cast one more look from the small bird to the creature that was once the fearsome NachtKrapp, a sparkle catching in its warm brown glance. Free of fear, strength returned to the boy’s legs, and armed with newfound understanding, the little boy returned home to tell his grandma about his adventure.

Dawn turned to dusk, then dawn again, and the next day, two sticky pear puffs and a soft hay wreath of grandma’s design, were laid in the forest clearing, nestled among the soft moss and crisp leaves, as the little spotted pardalote, Corvo and the larger crow watched Isaiah and his grandma with fascination.

“…and you’re sure we had the right spot, dear?” Grandma inquired without judgment on their way back to town.

“Quite sure,” the boy answered.

When they reached the meadow, a rustling sound cut short their conversation hypothesizing the use of pie in assembling an edible bird’s nest. Following the sound, they turned and discovered a child had come wandering out of the forest behind them—a child who had previously been lost.

“Cassian!” Isaiah ran toward the boy a few years older than himself while his grandma followed behind at a slower pace, the soft wonder of surprise written across her face.

“You’re back!” Isaiah proclaimed with amazement.

“Uhh… right.” Cassian had no time to respond before the next question was flung at the disoriented child.

“How’d you do it?”

“How did you find your way out?”

“What was it like?”

“Way out?” the flustered child uttered in a confused tone.

“I… uhm… I don’t know what you’re on about, but…” Cassian looked around himself as if he was only just beginning to take in his surroundings, a little startled at the woods a back of him.

To this, Grandma and Isaiah exchanged a meaningful look. Before the stunned child could continue, Grandma took both boys by the hand.

“Never mind that now—let’s go home.”

Together, the three of them walked into town holding hands, navigating through the bewildered stares of the townspeople as they caught sight of the previously missing child, until they reached Aurelia.

“Oh, my baby,” the woman sobbed as she took the child and nearly suffocated him in a tight hug and kisses.

“Mom… you’re… embarrassing me…” Cassian uttered in confused smothered annoyance while trying to escape his mom’s firm embrace[[10]](#footnote-10).

The display attracted so many of the town’s inhabitants that even the mayor made his way over to the crowd–if only to position himself centrally in such a substantial turnout. The entire town had gathered around the child, Isaiah, and his grandmother while they shared their story. Listening attentively as they spoke of how the birds had accepted Isaiah’s first offering of the edible kind, and how both the winged creature and the little bird had shown their gratitude for this gesture. How, together, they presented a new offering of mostly edible goods, and Cassian, one of the lost, had wandered out from the woods behind them.

As soon as the boy and his grandma finished their tale, the town had worked up a productive frenzy; ideas were already spreading of new baked goods lined with sunflower seeds and the gathering of soft twigs ideal for nesting material. The mayor, in an attempt to try and ride the wave of hope, wanting to regain some authority over the situation, felt compelled to loudly announce, “Just as I predicted, we must bring an official peace offering to tame this winged beast and regain our children.”

Thus, the town prepared, quickly others joined in the display of respect, making their daily offerings of tasty treats, useful tools, and other items the villagers assumed might interest their feathered neighbors. Under a pleased twittering of approval, their offers were accepted.

To the song of kindred hearts, and over time, all the children were safely returned[[11]](#footnote-11). Unharmed by their disappearance but with a newly gained sense of appreciation for the natural world, though none quite seemed to remember why, and none of them seemed to be able recollect of what precisely had happened in the Welch wood. To the lost children, the time away from home had been but a fleeting minute, rather than a weeks-long disappearance. Their present had skipped from a heartbeat of the past into the here and now.

And so, peace returned. Tale turned into legend, and legend sparked tradition—that of a yearly offering at that same forest clearing in a show of respect to ‘The Feathered Kingdom’. To this day, the birds of the Welch wood are both feared and respected, their lore, though often untold, coinciding with that of Corvo, the NachtKrapp.

1. The term ‘words’ is used here as the author of this story is not well-versed in bird linguistics. I am unsure whether ‘words’ is the technically appropriate or correct term, but it is what’s available to me. I digress. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Now, you might be thinking to yourself, “How is a small bird supposed to outfly its flock of larger, faster, and stronger comrades?” You’d be surprised. Consider here the classic proverbial tale of “The Wren and the Eagle” vying for the title “King of the Birds.” For those unfamiliar with this legendary tall—in the aerial sense—tale, I will refrain myself from giving you a condensed version of the story. My point is the following: mere strength does not typically combat well against cleverness. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. If you’ve ever observed swallows diving through the mid-summer air, you’d know that type of flare. A type of flight the way only swallows can–hence, it is not called an annual swallow race for nothing. If you haven’t had the chance to witness this phenomenon, I’d highly recommend you do. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. A bitter old hag who despised children. Her story was dismissed as utter nonsense with earnest immediacy. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. That is unless you could come to terms with a one-way path that granted you no guarantee of ever returning home. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. He had always been the kind of man who acted not on facts or logic, but on a system of near-misses in accuracy—a bold inexactitude that carried a nice conversational ring to it. It’s how he had won his position as mayor—through a campaign of daring yet persuasive-sounding actions, which, in hindsight, had about a 1-in-8 success rate upon execution. But the town hadn’t really caught on. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. You see animals—pure in their existence—are far better off as animals. It’s human beings who suffer from a delusion of superiority that rarely does the natural world any good, forgetting that we, too, are part of the natural order. We fool ourselves into thinking we’re above others, when, if anything, a clear summer’s day reveals that us humans are basically just complicated plants. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Reaching about doorknob height. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Or perhaps, message. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
10. A type of (loving) chokehold that would put professional wrestlers to shame. [↑](#footnote-ref-10)
11. Except for one, though she’d technically been returned. Upon reaching the meadow, there where the edge of town begins, she decided the forest was where she truly belonged. Rumor has it she went on to live her life in the Welch wood but who knows what the real story is… [↑](#footnote-ref-11)