**Blacwin and the Barghest**

**Chapter One**

 The ancient oak swayed from side to side. Like his brothers, he had stood on the edge of the woods for centuries. Now, men’s axes were chewing at their roots – *thud, thud, thud –* like a dying heartbeat. Wood chips flew like arrowheads, and the throat of every trunk was slashed open. In a matter of minutes, the oak and his brothers were no more.

 Sweating and laughing, the wiry Saxon men carried the fresh timber through the palisade and up the long slope of grass. At the top of the hill, the village huddled in a circle of huts, roofed with straw and wooden shingles. High over their heads stretched the church tower, built from long planks and nailed together with wooden pegs.

 When Blacwin entered the village much later, nobody noticed. He shuffled silently through the gates, dragging his aching feet through the long grass and hoping there would be food left. A last dollop of pottage or rabbit scram: anything would do.

 From the top of his balding head to the soles of his battered shoes, Blacwin looked like a man with poor fortune. What little hair he had left hung down the side of his thin face in matted, greying clumps.

 His two watery eyes looked in different directions for most of the day, which helped keep most people away, and his smile showed no more than five brown teeth. Blacwin much preferred to keep his thoughts (and his teeth) to himself.

 Even when he did speak, the old Saxon had a quiet voice which creaked like an old hinge. Nobody ever quite heard everything he said: most of it was merely grunts.

 On his way back to his hut, he passed the smithy.

 “Hello there, Blacwin!” called Ealric as he hammered the last of the day’s work and quenched it in the water-trough.

 Blacwin waved a single finger – he had no others left on his right hand – but hastily hurried on with his back stooped and his head hunched in the hood of his cloak.

 “Good day, Blacwin?” asked Turbert the Thatcher, coming down his ladder with his hair full of straw.

 Blacwin’s lonely finger gave another feeble wave, but he said nothing to Turbert and made his way instead into the welcome gloom of his hut. He scraped together a fire, pulled his tatty woollen tunic over his head and hung it up to dry. Weary to his bones, he unstrapped the bindings around his shins and flicked the mud outside. Taking off his scabbard, he drew out the seax and sat down, ready to sharpen it.

 “How do, Blacwin?” shouted Cuthburga as she passed his door with a pail of goat’s milk.

 She was gone before he had chance to tell her: not that he especially wanted to. He’d lived in the village for over thirty years now. He knew every soul for miles around.

 And tonight, he was going to watch every last one of them die.

**Chapter Two**

 Blacwin was missing three fingers from his right hand: in their place were three short, scarred stumps, like burned-out candles. He’d lost them to the Barghest – the giant goblin-dog who prowled the woods. Of course, he hadn’t known it was the Barghest at the time, or he would never have stroked it.

 It was the three children who were to blame.

 Blacwin had been hunting rabbit when he came across them: two boys and a girl, giggling in the clearing, none of them older than five or six. Blacwin himself had only been around sixteen. The children’s laughter still sounded sweet to him back then.

 What alarmed him was the dog.

 Growling low in the back of its throat, a gigantic black hound stood in the middle of the children. Drool dribbled in thick, white ropes from either side of its cruel jaws and its eyes burned red in the gloom of the forest.

 Since the children were unafraid, Blacwin decided to be brave too. “Hey!” he called them, “Does your dog bite?”

 Their laughter stopped. The three little figures turned as one to face him, their thin faces suspicious and hostile.

 “No,” grunted the bigger boy, a blond, flat-nosed lad. So, Blacwin reached out to stroke the dog.

 The next instant, he was battling to pull his hand from the crushing vice of its teeth.

 He felt his skin rip and his knuckles popping from their sockets. With a wrench, he got his hand back – minus three fingers. The huge dog chewed and swallowed.

 Nursing his bleeding hand, Blacwin protested to the three children. “You said your dog doesn’t bite!”

 The blond boy shrugged. “He’s not our dog.”

 Then, the three of them had scampered into the trees, cackling like witches, leaving Blacwin alone with the hound. He felt sick and dizzy. Giving him a wide grin, the hideous animal lurched closer… and slunk off in the other direction.

 In time, Blacwin learned what the dreadful black dog really was: the Barghest called Moody Duig.

 If only he’d known back then, everything might have turned out differently. Instead, he had to live the rest of his life making do with one finger and a thumb. Every night, he was haunted by the ghosts of his missing fingers, still itching.

 All that had happened years ago: he was an old man now. The three children had grown up to have children of their own. Not one of them ever spoke any word of remorse.

 Ealric made good money, working iron at the smithy; Turbert had a regular trade, thatching roofs or weaving baskets; Cuthburga milked her small herd of goats, morning and night. Of course, each of them still enjoyed their full complement of fingers and thumbs: they had happily forgotten the Barghest, crunching Blacwin’s fingers between his teeth.

 As he sharpened the seax, Blacwin stared into the flames of his tiny fire. He had never forgotten. He had waited patiently, all these years… and tonight, he would have his revenge.

**Chapter Three**

 Killing them could have been a simple matter. Many times in the past, Blacwin had considered taking his seax to the three cruel children. Whenever one of them passed him in the village, his damaged hand would instinctively reach for the handle. Yet each time, he left the blade in its sheath.

 So he had let each one live, but watched them growing a little taller every day. The years went by in a succession of cold, harsh winters and hot, sweaty summers. Each year, there were fewer hairs on Blacwin’s head and more wrinkles under his weary eyes.

 There was no compensation, no *weregild* paid to him by any of the children’s wealthy parents. Instead of punishing them, their parents seemed highly amused.

 “But you can’t blame children for this!” they argued, when Blacwin appealed to the village elders, “You were the one stupid enough to let a wild dog take your hand!”

 The elders had agreed, so no money was paid.

 Worse, when Blacwin stepped forward to protest, he heard a nasty growl behind him which nearly made him jump out of his skin. Looking round, he found the three children laughing at him. Soon, the entire village was joining in.

 “If you want *weregild*,” the parents chuckled as they strode away, “you’ll have to ask the Barghest.”

 So the sniggering children and their families stayed rich… and Blacwin stayed poor.

 Without fingers, he could no longer draw a bow or set a snare. He had trouble even patching up the daub on his walls. Every day, he discovered something else that had suddenly become maddeningly difficult.

 Moreover, each time he tried to find a quiet, private spot in which to train his remaining fingers, the three children were always watching over his shoulder, giggling at his clumsiness.

He tried throwing stones at them but missed hopelessly.

 The worst of it was that they began to wave at him with only a single finger, mocking his crippled hand. Before long, others in the village were also using the gesture, opening their finger and thumb to wave at him, like a tiny bird’s beak. When he complained, they told him to take it up with the Barghest. When he turned his back, they just did it again.

 Blacwin became more and more withdrawn and reclusive. Soon, he hadn’t a single friend in the village (admittedly, he’d never had many to begin with). Alone by his pitiful fire, he sharpened his seax to a vicious edge.

 Then, one day, he suddenly decided to follow the villagers’ suggestion: he would go back to the woods and find the Barghest… and he would ask it for *weregild*.

 Early one misty morning, he packed a bag and set off up the hill, heading into the dark heart of the woods. Trout were twitching in the river and Blacwin spotted a very sleepy hedgehog stumbling homewards through the long, wet grass.

 Before long, he reached the clearing where he’d first met the Barghest. Sure enough, there it was: Moody Duig, a huge, shaggy, black rug-on-legs, watching Blacwin with bloodshot eyes and grinning from ear to tatty ear.

 It seemed to know what he had come for. Licking its lips, the giant goblin-dog led Blacwin into its lair.

**Chapter Four**

It took a while for Blacwin’s eyes to adjust to the gloom inside the Barghest’s lair. A canopy of pine branches hung low over them, blocking most of the weak sunlight. The black coat of the Barghest melted into the shadows, leaving just the two mischievous eyes glowing like rubies.

 “Come in,” growled the Barghest, “I won’t bite.”

 Blacwin was startled by a sudden movement between his feet. Looking down, he saw a pudgy little puppy wriggling and rolling on the carpet of pine needles. As he grew used to the dark, he began to make out more tiny shapes tumbling over each other. Six tiny tongues began to lick his good hand.

 He looked up at the Barghest in surprise.

 “You’re a bitch!”

 The huge goblin-dog stiffened and Blacwin quickly added, “I mean… you’re a lady dog.”

 Moody Duig sniffed, as though it were obvious. Gradually, though, Blacwin started to feel more welcome in the cramped tangle of branches.

 She had no money, she explained, so no way of paying him *weregild* for his hand. Blacwin noticed that she didn’t exactly apologise for eating it.

 “Instead of gold, why not take a puppy?” she suggested.

 Blacwin’s grey eyebrows shot into the air: “Really?”

 The Barghest pushed three of the puppies off her back and removed another that was chewing on her tail.

 “Believe me,” she muttered, “You’d be doing me a favour.”

 So, it was agreed. Blacwin picked out one of the puppies – the one that seemed to be loneliest – and trotted home with the small black bundle of fur tucked under his arm.

 Back at the village, people were quick to notice his new companion. “What will you call him?” they asked.

 Blacwin thought for a moment. “Crunch,” he said finally.

 A small crowd had gathered around, reaching with greedy hands towards the goblin-pup, but Blacwin covered it with his woollen cloak and warned them off.

 “Careful – he bites,” he told them, “hopefully.”

 He took the puppy back to his hut and introduced it to its new home. By the end of the week, man and dog were firm friends: everywhere they went, they went together.

 However, it wasn’t long before the three children heard about Blacwin’s new pet. One afternoon, he came back from the river and found them waiting outside his hut. Blacwin got the distinct impression they’d been waiting inside his hut, too, until they heard him coming.

 “We want to see the puppy!” they blurted out, rudely.

 Blacwin frowned, feeling uneasy. He held onto Crunch’s little warm shape under his cloak.

 “And I want my fingers to grow back,” he growled at them, “but that ain’t happening, either.”

 Pushing past, he made to enter his hut. Before he could stop them, the children grabbed at his cloak and tugged it away, and flat-nosed Ealric had snatched the puppy in his grubby hands.

 “He’s even uglier than you!” laughed the boy, gazing at Crunch’s squashed and wrinkled features.

 Blacwin tried to grab Crunch back again but Ealric dodged easily and threw the terrified puppy to Turbert. Sniggering, the children chucked the little furry package back and forth between them, like a cruel game of pass-the-parcel.

Cuthburga missed her catch. Crunch went *crunch*.

 There was a long, awkward silence.

 Then, all three children burst out laughing and ran away, leaving Blacwin to pick up the pieces. He rubbed the puppy’s black fur and tried to nuzzle its face. He blew air up its nostrils and patted it gently on the back, but the tiny pair of red eyes remained closed and the little furry body hung limp in his hands.

 When it was dark, Blacwin trudged back to the woods and dug a little shallow grave. Returning to his hut, he dried his watery eyes and resumed work with the whetstone.

 Just before midnight, the Barghest came slinking through the door. Glumly, Blacwin wondered how many fingers she would leave him with. With a low snarl and a flash of her yellow fangs, Moody Duig sat down.

 They talked until dawn, plotting and planning. In the end, when the huge hound padded off into the grey light, Blacwin found he still had every one of his remaining fingers.

 Thanks to the Barghest, he also had a cunning plan.

 He just needed to wait a few years.

**Chapter Five**

 Everyone knew that the Barghest brought death: if anyone ever saw it, either walking ahead of them in the woods or crossing their path, they hurried back home and leapt into bed, and were usually dead of shock by the following day. It was an omen of doom. Everyone knew that.

 Many, many years later – long after Blacwin’s fingers went missing and his new puppy went crunch – Moody Duig returned. It was a bright, hot day in summer, when most of the village was busy with the harvest.

 The first indication of anything wrong came when, all of a sudden, every dog in the village began to whine. The air filled with pitiful whimpers and, one by one, each dog left.

 Shortly afterwards, the Barghest came strolling through the gates, glancing moodily from side to side. She was followed by a long procession of village dogs, each one with its tail curled under its belly and its eyes to the ground.

 Blacwin remembered how intimidating the huge hound had looked, looming in the dark of the woods: now, in the bright daylight of the village, Moody Duig looked even more terrifying. Gigantic, triangular ears sprouted on either side of its head, pointing at the sky like a bat’s. The snout was short and flat, with two flaring nostrils, and its sabre-teeth curled up over its top lip. Coarse, black fur covered the creature in matted clumps and seemed to suck in all the sunlight.

 The whole village had frozen. Every eye had widened in horror, every voice had fallen silent. Everyone watched with their heart in their mouth, as the Barghest lumbered past.

 Ealric’s hammer ceased its clanging in the forge. Turbert came to an uneasy halt, halfway up his ladder. The *squirt-squirt-squirt* of milk in Cuthburga’s bucket dribbled into silence. Just like the rest of the villagers, each of them forgot whatever they were doing and simply stood, dumbfounded, waiting to see what the goblin-dog would do next.

 The Barghest ambled lazily towards Ealric’s hut and laid herself down across the threshold. A low gasp spread through the village, and all eyes turned to the Blacksmith who was rapidly turning white.

 Everyone knew the omen – if the Barghest lay down in your doorway, you’d be dead before dusk.

 Before anyone could say anything, however, Moody Duig had stood up again, heading in another direction with the line of dogs trailing behind like a funeral march. The huge beast settled down once more: this time, in the doorway of Turbert’s house. The thatcher nearly slipped off his ladder.

 With a weary sigh, the Barghest struggled back onto her feet and plodded towards Cuthburga’s hut. There too, she lay down, blocking the doorway with her fluffy bulk. Cuthburga’s bucket of goat’s milk tipped over with a clunk and glugged its contents onto the grass: nobody noticed.

 Finally, just as tittle-tattle was beginning to break out amongst the villagers, the dreadful creature rose again and padded its way through the gates of the palisade. Only when the last flick of its tail had been swallowed by the woods, did anyone dare say anything.

 Nobody spoke to Ealric, Turbert or Cuthburga: nobody even went near them. Blacwin felt a grim satisfaction.

**Chapter Six**

 For the rest of the day, the villagers avoided their three doomed neighbours like the plague. Whenever Ealric or Turbert or Cuthburga made their way through the narrow lanes, people turned their backs and whispered, or headed quickly in the opposite direction, pulling their cloaks tight around them.

 Nobody was surprised when, over the course of the next few hours, there followed a series of unfortunate accidents.

 First, while shoeing a particularly bad-tempered horse, Ealric lost his patience and struck at the poor animal’s flank with his hammer. The whole village heard the horse scream. Deeply unimpressed, the horse retaliated by stamping on the blacksmith’s hand. When it galloped away, he realised three of his fingers were still stuck to its hoof.

 Turbert, meanwhile, had been picking a nest out of his roof when a flock of indignant crows flapped suddenly out of the straw: the thatcher lost his balance and his ladder tipped sharply. When he tried to grab the edge of the roof, Turbert seized his trimming-knife by mistake. Three fingers were sliced from his hand. Each crow cackled happily and clattered off with a fat, pink caterpillar in her beak.

 Cuthburga, who had been viciously squeezing her goats’ udders for the last drop of milk, spotted something lurking at the bottom of her bucket. Reaching in, she found something bright and shiny and held it up to the light for a better look. She never learned what it was: the sparkle caught the eye of her biggest, most cantankerous goat.

 Quicker than a blink, the goat snatched the glittering object in its teeth, taking three of Cuthburga’s fingers with it.

 The three casualties gathered at Ealric’s smithy to bandage their wounds. They shivered and snivelled and dripped blood across the floor, taking what little comfort they could from the warmth of the forge. It didn’t take very long for them to decide that everything was Blacwin’s fault.

 “He’s set the Barghest on us!” Ealric complained.

 “What did we ever do to him?” wailed Turbert.

 “I’ll make him sorry he ever met us!” vowed Cuthburga.

 Not one of them thought to mention anything about Blacwin’s missing fingers, or his goblin-puppy: if they had, perhaps they might have realised that Blacwin was already heartily sorry to have met them.

 “What are we going to do?” whined Turbert.

 “I’m too young to die!” screeched Cuthburga, which was stretching the truth more than a little. She was well over forty.

 “We’ll just get him to call the dog off,” grunted Ealric.

 The other two gawped at him: “How?”

 The blacksmith picked up his hammer in his good hand and clanged it against the anvil. His piggy eyes gleamed.

 “We’ll have to *persuade* him,” he said darkly.

 As night fell, the sky purpled like a bruise, and the wind began to hiss through the leaves.

**Chapter Seven**

 For a while, Ealric, Turbert and Cuthburga squabbled in the smithy, their scowling faces glowing devil-red from the coals of the forge. The blacksmith insisted that the only way out of their predicament was to bully Blacwin into submission. However, neither of his companions was prepared to brave the darkness with him.

 Eventually, Ealric stormed out alone, promising to drag Blacwin back with him. Huddled by the forge’s dying glow, Turbert and Cuthburga waited…

 …and waited.

 A loud scuffle in the doorway brought them scrabbling to their feet. Something stood there, panting, its eyes white and wild. When it stumbled closer, they realised it was Ealric.

 “What did Blacwin say?” they asked keenly.

 Ealric shook his head, still catching his breath. “I ain’t seen him.”

 Cuthburga rolled her eyes. “You were s’posed to be dragging him here!”

 The blacksmith’s hammer came down on his anvil with an angry clank, and the other two jumped in their skins.

 “It’s lying across his doorway, too,” whispered Ealric.

 “What is?” they asked, though both knew well enough.

 Ealric’s porky cheeks were damp with sweat and his voice was hoarse. “Moody Duig! It’s just lying there, blocking up his doorway.”

 Turbert frowned. “But that’s good, surely? It must be after him too!”

 “What’s it doing?” demanded Cuthburga.

 Ealric scratched his chin. “Snoring.”

 None of them knew what to make of this. Each of them clutched their injured hand to their chest and longed for the throbbing pain to stop.

 It was a long time before anyone realised they were not alone. A fourth shadow now spread across the smithy wall.

 Blacwin coughed and waved his remaining finger.

 They couldn’t tell if he was mocking them or not. It no longer seemed important. They were oddly grateful to see him. Weakly, Ealric, Turbert and Cuthburga all waved back with their own ruined hands.

 “Happy now?” asked Turbert bitterly.

 “Ain’t you had enough vengeance for one night?” spat Cuthburga.

 “No,” said Ealric in a strange, hollow tone, “If he had, he wouldn’t be here.”

 Cuthburga narrowed her eyes at Blacwin. “Is that right? Is your devil dog going to kill us?”

 The old Saxon shook his woolly head: in the shadows of the smithy, his hair seemed thicker. “No,” he said flatly.

 Turbert sneered. “You give your word?”

 Blacwin nodded, his eyes looking either side of the thatcher. “You have my word.”

 Cuthburga held forward a wooden cross hung around her neck. “You’ll swear by the Lord Almighty?”

 Blacwin’s pale blue eyes drifted past her. “I’ll swear by whatever you want.”

 “Your dog won’t kill us?” Ealric wanted it confirmed.

 The watery eyes swam back into focus and froze a line of icicles down the blacksmith’s spine. “I told you – no.”

 Turbert and Cuthburga let out a long sigh and slumped back against the anvil. A second later, the smithy was swarming with black fur and yellow fangs.

 Moody Duig was not alone: over the long years, her litter of puppies had grown strong and healthy. With the Barghest’s blessing, Blacwin had taught them how to grow even stronger. They had watched him practising his finger-skills, never once sniggering at his clumsy mistakes. Instead, they learned to copy his human ways.

 Tonight, they were here to avenge their brother.

 Cuthburga found herself flying through the air, caught and thrown, caught and thrown from one giant set of slobbering jaws to another. Flashing past, she caught glimpses of Ealric and Turbert tumbling like straw-dolls, shuttling back and forth between the barghests.

 “You said your dog wouldn’t kill us!” the goat-herd shrieked at Blacwin.

 Blacwin shrugged. “She’s not my dog. She’s a bitch.”

 The barghests began a game of Pass-the-Parcel, but soon invented a slightly different game which they called Pounce-on-the-Parcel. By the end, the game had descended into something best called Pull-the-Parcel-to-Pieces.

 Only a few shreds remained of the three villagers. They fitted easily into the shallow grave Blacwin had dug in the woods.

 With his good hand, he reached down and patted Crunch.

 His barghest friend wagged his tail and panted happily. When he walked, he still limped a little to the left and his face was even flatter than his brothers… but Blacwin thought they made a good pair.

 Blacwin and the barghests made their way back to the village to play more games.

 By the following morning, the last smouldering beam had crashed to the ground and the village was no more. A grey drizzle wept over the charred embers and smoking ash, washing the last traces into the earth.

 Blacwin taught the barghests how to plant acorns in the sooty dirt: soon, the blackened clearing was green with new shoots. The old Saxon followed the huge hounds into the forest and never looked back once.

 Nobody ever saw him again…

 … except that, years later, two lads from a village to the North were checking their traps when they came across a giant black hound.

 The sinister animal seemed to grin at them and wave.

 One front paw was missing three toes.