

SARA LEWIS HOLMES

THE
WOLF
HOUR



ARTHUR A. LEVINE BOOKS

An Imprint of Scholastic Inc.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Holmes, Sara, author.

Title: The wolf hour / by Sara Lewis Holmes.

Description: First edition. | New York : Arthur A. Levine Books, an imprint of Scholastic Inc., 2017. | Summary: Magia and her family live in the shadow of the Puszcza, an ancient and magical forest rich in stories and mysteries, where wolves can talk and read and unwary humans who enter its boundaries never come back—but despite her beautiful voice Magia longs to be a woodcutter like her father and learn the secrets of the Puszcza.

Identifiers: LCCN 2017016626 | ISBN 9780545107976 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 0545107970 (hardcover : alk. paper) | ISBN 9780545107983 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 0545107989 (pbk. : alk. paper) | ISBN 9781338185805 (audio) | ISBN 1338185802 (audio)

Subjects: LCSH: Magic—Juvenile fiction. | Forests and forestry—Juvenile fiction. | Wolves—Juvenile fiction. | Fathers and daughters—Juvenile fiction. | CYAC: Fairy tales. | Magic—Fiction. | Forests and forestry—Fiction. | Wolves—Fiction. | Fathers and daughters—Fiction.

Classification: LCC PZ8.H735 Wo 2017 | DDC [Fic]—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2017016626>

ISBN 978-0-545-10797-6

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 17 18 19 20 21

Printed in the U.S.A. 23

First edition, October 2017

Book design by Carol Ly

♦ PART ONE ♦



The thick-needed branches of the Puszcza were clotted with late November snow. Magia stood at the forest's edge, a small axe warm in her palm. Nearby, her father crouched over a felled tree, a woodcutter's red stocking cap pulled to his brow.

The *dąb* had made a thunderous noise as it plummeted to the earth, kicking snow into the air and coating Magia from her unbound hair down to her scuffed and patched boots. Snow flecked their wood cart, too, and the canteen of *kwas chlebowy* slung over one of its curved handles. Magia craved a sip of the deeply hued liquid, which smelled of raisins and rye. But not yet. Not until the cart was filled with wood. And not until she'd asked Tata for what she wanted most.

For now, she brushed herself off and bent next to her father. Together, they stripped the tree of its straggly branches. Swing, *chop*. Swing, *chop*.

Magia didn't have to look at Tata to know she was

wielding her axe correctly. She could tell by the easy way the *dąb* branches fell to the earth, with clean breaks at the tree joints. And by the rhythmic sound of their two blades, which they swung in time to the song they sent up as they worked.

My wood feeds the fire,

sang Tata, his voice as strong and rough as bark.

The fire feeds the pot,

answered Magia, her voice as vigorous and sweet as rising sap.

Then the two of them finished together:

The pot feeds my family

And my family's all I've got.

Soon, between their singing and their chopping, the downed tree was nothing but a thick, branchless trunk.

“Hades!” said Tata as they stood up, their faces flushed. “An old man must’ve moved into my body while I slept last night!” His bones cracked as he stretched.

Magia hid her smile. Tata didn’t use words like *Hades* inside the house. “Tell that old man to stay home tomorrow,” she said teasingly. “He could snore by the fire while I wear his red hat and cut wood all day.”

Tata laughed, as she’d hoped he would, but what he said next made her heart sink. “And after the wood was cut, who would check the traps in the Puszcza, my little sprout?” He gestured to their wood cart. Three black-furred rabbits hung limply from its iron-ribbed sides.

Magia looked away from the cart. She didn’t like seeing the blood congealing at the rabbits’ snapped necks.

Tata continued, “And what would Mama say if you missed your first singing lesson? You’ve been practicing so hard together!”

It wasn’t that Magia minded practicing with Mama. Or singing so that Mama could ease into sleep when the baby squeezed inside her. It was too soon—weeks and weeks yet—for the baby to come, and Mama had to be still so it didn’t. But Mama wanted more. Mama wanted—

Tata had begun the cold, deliberate task of dividing the tree into larger logs. Magia took the stripped branches, broke them down, and bundled them into neat stacks of kindling. Of course, no wood from the Puszcza’s edge was going to burn as long as what Tata normally brought from its mysterious depths.

Magia paused in her bundling and gazed into the dark reaches of the forest. Tata might call her a little sprout, but she knew where she wanted to be. The chill breeze swirling from the forest’s borders made brambles in her unbound black curls and filled her nose with the wild smell of heavy-limbed *świerk* trees. She drank in the sight of *dąb* after *dąb* after *dąb*, tall and snow-coated, until her eyes could follow them into the depths no more. And then she listened to how, with each windy gust, the branches of the Puszcza clasped one another in a chattering embrace, then sighed apart, drowning out all other noises.

“Tata,” she ventured, “you know how Dorota wants to be a healer?”

“God make her brave,” said Tata.

“And Jan wants to be a soldier?”