

Chapter Two

It was grass. Levi shook his head to try and clear his cartwheeling mind. He found he was crouched on hands and knees on a lush, green bank. His hands, he saw, were dew-splashed from his tumble into the field. He wriggled his fingers, freeing blades of grass that flicked up, searching out daylight once again. Levi watched fascinated as iridescent pearls of dew dribbled down the blades, reflecting bright blue from the sky above.

Green grass, blue sky – he was alive! No one would find his body pulped over an abbey courtyard after all. There was wind on his face and dew soaking into the knees of his jeans. Even the air carried a fresh citrus scent mixed with the smell of pine, herbs and new mown hay, as though nature herself was rejoicing at his survival. He was about to pluck the courage to look around him when there was the unmistakable crunch of boots on grass and a shadow fell over him. Suddenly he was gripped by an overwhelming despair and his vision clouded. The final thing he saw before his vision blacked out was the grass sweeping up towards him as his lifeless body plunged forward on to the dew-soaked bank.

Seymour stood, wiped his hands down his corduroy jeans and straightened his pack. Not such a bad crossing, he thought. This time. He looked around. The familiar stone circle stood steadfast as it had done for centuries, crowning the tranquil, grassy mound on which he stood. He was relieved to have arrived in daylight, though the lengthening shadows cast by the stones suggested there were only a few hours to go before the sun would be setting behind the hills far to the

west.

He looked skywards, tensing as he shaded his eyes from the sun. Something wasn't quite right. He frowned, an inverted 'V' creasing the bridge of his nose, as he looked first one way, then another. Despite the bright skies, clear but for the occasional fluffy white clouds arcing slowly overhead he knew something was amiss. The land was telling him so. He didn't have time to dwell on what troubled him as a groan behind him made him turn.

Lower down the bankside Levi was crouching on all fours, peering round in complete bewilderment. Seymour smiled, recognising the confusion he'd also felt on his first journey here. He quickly stepped forward to help and, as he did, Levi's body shuddered, stiffened and slumped forward, pitching face first onto the grass.

Seymour groaned. Clearly the passage had been more than the lad could bear. He knew the crossing was traumatic and, seeing Levi hunched before him, he began to wish that he'd explained the nature of the gateway and its effect on those using it. So much for wanting to surprise the boy. He squatted and gently rolled Levi over, cradling his head in the crook of his arm.

'Levi, can you hear me lad?' He carefully brushed a knot of hair from Levi's forehead and gently rocked him, coaxing him to waken. The actions worked and Levi opened his eyes. At first he stared into space. Then, focusing quickly, he gasped in alarm, kicking his legs in a feint effort to be free.

'Whoa there,' said Seymour, tightening his hold. 'You're alright now. Sorry to give you a fright.' He repositioned himself to give Levi a view of his surroundings, and swept his free hand wide. 'An arduous journey my boy, but you've made it. Welcome to Caellfyon.'

Levi turned to look around him, his mouth gaping in astonishment. He

had left behind a late autumn landscape in which a succession of sharp frosts had brought down all but the most persistent leaves from the trees; hedgerows were bare and fields had been ploughed ready for the oncoming winter. Here, he was surrounded by rippling acres of lush, lime-green grassland, the vigorous colour characteristic of spring. All along the slopes, patches of gilded yellow gorse bushes glowed in the setting sun.

Setting sun?

He spun to face his uncle. 'It's evening already.'

His uncle nodded, sagely.

'And it's spring, too,' continued Levi, anxiety injecting a tremor to his voice. This brought another nod. 'But –' Levi stopped there. He had no idea how to continue. The peculiarities were just too extreme. Seymour stepped up and dropped a hand onto Levi's shoulder.

'C'mon. By the look of that sun, we've only about an hour and a half of daylight left and the farm I'm aiming for is a fair walk from here. I can tell you some of what you need to know on the way.'

Levi stood his ground, his arms thrust down by his sides. 'What farm, you never mentioned anything about a farm. And what happened to being home for tea?'

Seymour subjected Levi to a steady gaze as he took a deep breath. His mouth had drawn into a thin, tight line.

'Things have changed a bit, Levi. Something's wrong, can't you feel it?'

'Feel wha –? Levi paused as he took a few seconds to consider his uncle's words. Something wasn't right. Aside from the sudden change in – *everything*. He sensed a tension in the air, like before a lightning storm, yet all was clear and fine. No, the source of the unease was all about him. He could almost feel it, like the roughness of a harsh blanket on his arms.

'I have friends here, Levi, I have to make sure they're alright. Something seems to be so very wrong and we must make haste.'

‘But what about the farm?’ Levi wanted answers before he went anywhere and he was prepared to stand his ground until he got them.

‘The farm is mine,’ began Seymour, holding up a hand to stop Levi’s next question in its tracks. ‘I was given it during my previous stay here.’

Levi felt that his uncle wasn’t being totally open with him, and was holding back on something. ‘And where is ‘here’,’ he said.

‘I told you, Caellfyon,’ Seymour replied abruptly, unable to keep his own frustration hidden any longer. He shouldered his pack, eager to move on.

‘No, I mean *where*? Not what it’s called.’ Levi waited for an answer, but Seymour remained silent, his expression unreadable. Levi cast another sidelong glance at the landscape. All the colours seemed far more vivid here. The grass was greener, the sky bluer and flowers more radiant. Everything seemed fresh and clean as though the land were new and unsoiled, or as though everything he’d seen prior to this had been through dirty lenses. ‘I’m a long way from home, aren’t I?’

Seymour turned his back to the sun and began to walk down the hillside.

‘Son, I reckon you’re about as far from home as it’s possible to be.’ He continued his descent of the grassy slope as Levi remained rooted, his mouth hung open. It took several seconds for Seymour’s words to sink in.

As far from home as it’s possible to be.

Levi felt a sinking feeling as a bunch of regrets crowded in on him. But he didn’t have time to dwell on mistakes, Seymour was already several yards away and rapidly increasing the gap on long, loping strides. Levi launched himself after his uncle.

‘Wait, wait for me!’

Wait. Wa-ait!

At first Levi thought his own call was echoing back to him, his voice distorted by the hills until ...

‘Wait, Levi. Wait.’

... it was coming from behind him.

The voice was Poppy's!

Levi spun round so rapidly that he almost fell back down again. Poppy was galloping towards him from the far side of the hill. Dressed in dark tracksuit bottoms and a red, white and blue England cricket shirt, her ponytail switched left to right as she ran. Levi swallowed hard, confused at the joy he felt at seeing her. He received a greater surprise when she ran to him and embraced him, giggling joyfully. She held him briefly, stepped back, and then they both spoke at once.

'Thought I'd never see –' began Levi.

'Saw you on the ledge,' said Poppy, her own excited tones halting him mid-sentence. 'Thought you'd spotted me.'

'I saw something last moment,' Levi said, 'but was too busy stopping myself from falling to think about what it was. Had no idea that –'

Seymour had reached them and, throwing his arms wide, hugged them both. 'Well, here we all are,' he said, 'isn't this wonderful? No one's been left behind after all.'

Poppy extracted herself from his embrace. 'That's all well and good Uncle Seymour, but where are we?'

'He won't say,' interrupted Levi, grumpily. 'And we're to call him 'Seymour' now, by the way. Drop the uncle.'

'I didn't say I wouldn't tell you,' began Seymour, unable to keep the exasperation from his tone. 'But not now, we don't have time.' He unslung his pack, opened it and removed an apple.

Levi leaned towards Poppy and explained their uncle's concern for his friends.

'But you will tell us ... Seymour,' said Poppy after her brother had finished.

'Yes,' sighed Seymour, removing a knife from his pocket and slicing

the apple in half. He handed the children a piece each. 'Now, come on. It'll be dark before we know it and we've a camp to set up yet. Besides, I want to get off this open hillside as soon as I can.'

Levi and Poppy quickly exchanged worried frowns. Seymour saw this and quickly raised a hand to pacify them.

'Don't worry, kids. Everything's fine.'

'It's obviously not,' snapped Poppy, emboldened by her concern.

'Why must we be quick? Who're we hiding from?'

Seymour made a show of cleaning the apple juice from his knife-blade before folding it closed and replacing it in his pocket. Then, with a sidelong glance at them both, he turned his back on the children and began to retrace his steps down the hill.

'No one in particular, Levi, he called over his shoulder. 'I'd just like us to get under way, that's all.'

Levi glanced first at his sister, then out at the vastness around him. The distant hills were now partially obscured by mist and appeared to stand within a remote, white sea. Standing on the barren hillock, surrounded by what appeared to be an immense wilderness, Levi felt as though a thousand hostile eyes were watching him.

The rolling hills seemed to go on forever. No sooner had the children crested one than they faced dozens more, queuing before them to the mist-shrouded horizon. Luckily, the landscape was perfect for trekking. It wasn't too flat to be tedious and not too demanding either. So why, Levi wondered, did he feel so tired after only an hour or so of walking? Okay, Seymour had set a blistering pace with his long strides but that alone couldn't explain the overwhelming fatigue he now felt.

Levi glanced at Poppy. For all her boundless energy she, too, was beginning to appear jaded. She'd stumbled once or twice during the last quarter of an hour and Levi guessed that she was now feeling as

exhausted as he was. Striding several yards ahead of them, Seymour seemed to read his mind.

‘You pair okay?’ he said, turning slightly but not breaking step.

Levi desperately wanted a break but decided to put on a brave face. ‘Not too bad,’ he lied. He instantly saw Poppy gawk at him. ‘But I wouldn’t mind a rest soon,’ he added quickly.

Seymour stopped and waited for the children to catch him up. ‘See that hollow down there?’ he said, pointing across to where the hill opposite began to rise from the valley floor. Levi and Poppy followed his gaze to where the low sun now cast a bowl-shaped shadow onto the ground. Gorse bushes formed a natural barrier around much of the perimeter.

‘I see it,’ said Poppy, unable to keep the relief from her voice.

‘We’ll make for there,’ said Seymour. ‘I’ll get us a fire going and you’ll soon be right as ninepence. I know I’ve pushed you hard, but I want to make it to the farm tomorrow. There we’ll have shelter, a real bed – or the nearest thing you’ll find to one here in Caellfyon – and good food. I promise it.’

The final downward slope of the march seemed the most arduous of all. As he neared the bottom Levi felt as though porridge had replaced his knee bones. The sun had already slipped behind the hills when they finally reached the gloom of the valley floor. Tussocks of coarse marsh grass grew here and there in untidy patches, and countless white moths flickered close to the ground, their tiny wings catching the last of the daylight.

‘Careful here, kids,’ said Seymour. ‘The ground here can be quite perilous in places. I lost a shoe here once – sucked clean off by the bog. Follow me and you’ll be fine.’

Seymour carefully proceeded to negotiate the marsh, using the grass tufts as stepping-stones. A short way in, he balanced precariously on one of these and turned to the children.

‘You okay?’

Levi and Poppy stumbled from clump to clump, trying desperately to keep their feet from the mire. Both children were exhausted, their worn-out leg muscles threatening to fail them at every step. Poppy halted on one of the larger, grassy islands.

‘We’re fine. Let’s get this torment over with.’

Five minutes later the three were clambering up the hill, and away from the dark and forbidding marsh. Compared to bog-hopping, they achieved the final climb up to the shallow depression with ease. Once there, Levi unslung his pack and tossed it onto the ground.

‘No more,’ he said. ‘I’m not doing any more today. I’m beat.’

‘Me too,’ said Poppy, flopping down to the turf by Levi’s pack.

Seymour laid his own rucksack onto the ground and stepped over to the travel-weary children. ‘You’ll have to call on your energy reserves, I’m afraid. We’re not quite done.’ He raised a hand to halt the children’s objections. ‘Don’t worry, there’s no more walking – well, not much anyway. We’ve another tough day tomorrow, so we have to eat before we rest.’

Poppy laid back, resting her head on Levi’s pack. ‘Can’t we rest before we eat?’

Seymour shook his head. ‘No we can’t, young lady. That’d be no good at all.’ He glanced up at the dimming skies. One bright star was already glinting, just above the western horizon. ‘We must use what little light remains to prepare a meal. We do that and we’ll sleep better and wake refreshed.’ He opened his pack and withdrew a billy-can. ‘So, first we’ll need water,’ he said, holding the can out to Poppy. ‘You’ll find a small stream just the other side of those gorse bushes,’ he said, pointing. ‘I spotted it from the hill as we came down.’

Poppy pushed herself to her feet and groaned as she reluctantly took the can from her uncle. As she began to trudge out of the hollow, Levi stood to wait for his own orders. Sure enough, Seymour had plans for him, too.

‘As for you, Levi, I’d like you to –’

‘Fetch some firewood,’ guessed Levi. Seymour nodded, smiling.

‘Aye. We’re restricted to windfalls from gorse shrubs, I’m afraid. Good firewood is scarce until we reach the tree-line, which won’t be until tomorrow. Gorse burns like fury so you’ll have to collect rather a lot.’ Seymour shucked off his jacket and handed it to Levi. ‘Here, use this as a bag, you’ll be able to carry more.’

A half hour later the three were sitting around a crackling, spitting fire. From the flickering flames, glowing pinprick sparks rose high into the chill air. Within the fire Seymour’s billy-can sat atop a flat stone, its contents steaming. Seymour leaned forward and stirred the thickening stew within.

‘Here we are,’ he said. ‘Good job I packed extra kit, let’s have your plates.’

Later still, warmed by the stew in their bellies and hugging their knees close to their chests, the two children sat and stared into the fire, shadows dancing across their faces. Seymour stood and stretched.

‘Right you two, I’ll just nip and scavenge for more firewood, you just relax where you are.’ With that he stepped away from the firelight and strode off into the night.

For the first time since their arrival, the children were alone. Levi leaned back and scanned the star-flecked heavens.

‘Would you look at that.’ From horizon to horizon, shimmering stars dusted the entire sky producing a magnificent celestial curtain. ‘Beautiful – there’s no streetlamps to spoil the view.’

Poppy searched the sky, trying to remember some of the constellations she’d seen in one of Seymour’s books. ‘That’s strange, shouldn’t Orion be over there?’ she said, pointing upward. She twisted around slightly. ‘And the Great Bear over there?’

‘Oh I shouldn’t worry about that,’ said Levi. ‘Seymour said this is a long way from home.’

Poppy stared at her brother, her eyes wide in alarm. *How far from home must they be for the solar system to be different?* Too weary to

consider the possibilities she leaned forward, her shoulders hunched. The question occupied her thoughts only briefly as, lulled by the persistent chirping of nocturnal insects, her mind began to drift. Soon, comforted by the fragrant warmth of the fire, the pair huddled down onto the soft turf, too tired to talk. It was fortunate that they could not foresee what this extraordinary land had in store for them. Had they done so, they would not have found sleep quite so easily.

The sun was high above the eastern horizon by the time Levi and Poppy woke. Seymour had already rekindled the fire and a pan of water steamed in its midst. He tossed a handful of gorse twigs onto the flames.

‘Ah, there you are,’ he said. ‘I was about to wake you, we must soon be on the move – tea?’

The children stretched and rubbed life into their chilled bodies while Seymour busied himself making their hot drink. The cloud cover had thickened overnight and a thin film of rain blurred the mountains far to the west. Seymour observed Levi’s gaze.

‘Hopefully we’ll be at the farm before that so-and-so catches up with us,’ he said. Levi mumbled a vague reply and stared miserably towards the advancing clouds.

After a meagre breakfast of oatcakes and tea they began to repack their things and make ready to break camp. Poppy noticed Levi’s sour expression.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said. ‘We may have a bit of discomfort but just think, we’ll soon be at Seymour’s farm. Besides, this place is beautiful, don’t you think?’

Levi cast a glance at the rolling hills and grunted.

‘Well, I do,’ said Poppy. ‘Reminds me of the Yorkshire Dales, only without the old barns and dry-stone walls. And look,’ she added, pointing to a nearby elongated, flat-topped hill, ‘there’s even a hill like the one we

camped next to in Wensleydale.'

Levi turned to look at the hill. As he did so, the silhouette of a small group of travellers crested the ridge. He inhaled sharply. Seymour heard his gasp, turned to follow his gaze then spun round quickly.

'GET DOWN – NOW!'

Shocked by their uncle's sudden urgent tone, the children dropped instantly to the ground as Seymour kicked loose soil onto the fire, instantly killing the flames, then he, too, flung himself down.

'Stay still,' he hissed, 'we mustn't be seen.'

Levi glanced across at his sister, his heart thudding against the heath. She lay where she fell, her eyes wide with fear. Slowly he turned his head and stole a glance towards the hill, to where the shadowy forms were slowly disappearing over the ridge into what was probably another valley beyond. Distance prevented Levi from making out any detail, but something about the furtive, hunched outlines sent chills up his back, the outlandish profiles filling him with a deep sense of dread.

Once the strange wanderers had disappeared from the rim Levi sighed in relief and rested his face on his arm. In the sudden darkness afforded by his sleeve a vision of the mysterious characters played across his mind, only this time they reminded him of something else. They prompted him to recall images seen only yesterday.

Bizarre likenesses carved in stone over the door to Caellfyon.

'Who were those people, Uncle?' asked Poppy. The strange land and Seymour's sudden panic had clearly left her insides all jittery and her voice trembled with emotion.

Seymour walked over to her and draped a comforting arm across her shoulders. 'I've really no idea,' he said. Levi kicked a rock, angrily.

'I knew he wouldn't say anything, Pop,' he said. 'I've tried to get answers from him for ages and all I get is ... is more questions.' Seymour

turned and stared icily at him.

‘All we want to know is are we in danger,’ added Levi. ‘That’s all.’ His voice sounded tiny in the shallow basin.

Seymour sighed and squatted, mumbling what may have been an apology. ‘Gather round kids,’ he said, beckoning Levi and Poppy to join him. ‘I will do anything,’ he said, placing heavy emphasis on the last word. ‘Anything to keep you from harm – lay down my life to protect you if I have to.’

Levi shot a glance at Poppy who was already looking at him, her eyebrows raised. His own throat suddenly felt tight. Seymour went on.

‘I have ... we have friends here – influential friends – and it’s those I’m now headed for. But I have to tell you that not everyone here warmed to me during my previous stay. In fact some would have harmed me given the chance. But hey, is that so different from the place we’ve just left?’ He turned to Levi. ‘Is it?’

Levi looked down, reflecting on Barry Clark and his bullying cronies back at school; a tormenting threesome who’s only aim seemed to be to make each of Levi’s days a misery. He shook his head slowly.

‘For that reason,’ continued Seymour, ‘I wish us to remain anonymous – until we make it to my friend’s village and find out what’s going on here. Because, make no mistake, something doesn’t seem quite right.’

Levi remained confused. ‘You’ve only been away from here a few weeks. Surely things haven’t changed that much since.’ Seymour turned to face the encircling gorse bushes as he prepared his reply.

‘It’s not that straightforward,’ he said simply, turning back in time to see the two children exchange puzzled glances.

‘Look, if I try to tell you everything now it’ll scare you half to death,’ he said before adding quickly, ‘not that I think it should, mind – but let’s just say things are different here.’

‘How different?’ pushed Poppy.

‘About as different as it gets.’

Seymour saw Poppy's eyebrows suddenly shoot up in surprise. 'Let's just say the laws are different here, he went on. 'There's much I can't say because I don't know, myself, yet. But what I can tell you will take too long to explain – I'll reveal more once we get to the farm.' He looked to where the sun was rapidly climbing towards the clouds. 'Now, if you two really don't mind we need to move on if we're to beat that rain.'

The few pale strips of blue sky gradually disappeared as the small party moved out. During their hike eastward the temperature rose as the vast, rolling moorland gradually gave way to a level heath of rough scrub, strewn with wicked thorny thickets and isolated groves of trees. Although relieved to have left the gruelling hills behind, Levi soon realised this landscape presented a different kind of torture, for here the unchanging scene grew wearisome. Even the scattered scrubby patches began to look the same to him. They had been trudging along without saying a word for what seemed like hours when Poppy broke the silence.

'Is it my imagination or are they buildings over there?' She pointed ahead to where three obscure brown shapes shimmered behind a curtain of heat-haze. Beyond these rose a splendid backdrop of blue-grey peaks.

'That's right,' said Seymour. 'Not far now.'

Despite the stiffness that had begun to creep into their limbs the children increased their pace for the final few miles, covering the distance within an hour of sighting the farm. Once there they stepped onto cultivated ground for the first time since their arrival.

The farm consisted of a long rectangular farmhouse, possessing a steeply raked roof of thatch set on low, wattle and daub walls. The structure showed obvious signs of neglect as woven staves were visible in places where the top layer of plaster had crumbled away. The roof had suffered, too. A thin green layer of moss covered the dense reed thatch and, here and there, clumps of weeds protruded; the result of seeds dropped by passing birds.

Behind the main structure were two smaller buildings. Built of similar materials and suffering an equal level of decay these were round,

unlike the house. Also unlike the main building these lacked doors, their shadowy interiors visible to the party as they approached.

To get to the farm, Seymour led the children across the collapsing furrows of a ploughed field. The once neat lines were now barely visible and, instead of producing a valuable crop of wheat, barley or beans, knee-high weeds now ran rampant.

‘You’re not much of a farmer,’ sniped Levi cheekily as he stepped cautiously aside to avoid some vicious-looking thistles.

‘I’ll help clear it,’ chipped in Poppy, brightly. ‘When we’ve had some rest that is.’

Seymour had reached the farmhouse and was standing at the doorway, one hand reaching under the thatched eaves. ‘Won’t be much time for that,’ he said. ‘Don’t forget we need to get to my friends’ village.’

‘Yes but that’s near here,’ said Levi scanning the surrounding landscape, ‘isn’t it?’

Seymour nodded towards the distant line of peaks. ‘Yon side those,’ he said, simply. Levi and Poppy were still staring dumbly at one another, their mouths agape, when Seymour withdrew a large iron key from within the thatch and, with a chipper ‘ah, here we are,’ he unlocked the stout wooden door and pushed his way inside.

‘Mind the step,’ warned Seymour as the children stood at the wooden threshold and peered into the farmhouse. The sight of the room before them distracted their shocked minds from their uncle’s latest bombshell.

‘Wow,’ said Levi, stepping down onto the rough-hewn floorboards. ‘Straight out of Beowulf is this.’

Poppy followed him in, her nose wrinkled in disgust. ‘Phew, stinks like a chip shop.’

Levi sniffed the air. He couldn’t immediately identify the dominant smell as the room was a blend of strong odours. There was musty damp

leather, wood-ash, spices and a loamy, earthen scent. Behind these was the citrus tang of planed wood. But yes, Poppy was right, there was also a rank, lard-like odour.

‘That’ll be these,’ said Seymour brightly, lifting down a bundle of dirty yellow candles from a rough-wood shelf. ‘Tallow – amazingly cheap but criminally smelly. I’m rather used to it now. Don’t know what I’d do without the stuff. Sit in the dark, I suppose.’

And that was the other main feature that struck the children on entering – the gloom. Even without the sharp contrast of bright sunshine outside, the room was extremely dark, the only illumination being the wide shaft of sunlight that streamed through the open doorway. As the children’s eyes adjusted to their new surroundings, more of the room’s features appeared out of the murk, though much remained in shadow.

Levi scanned the room before him, a dreamy smile lighting his face as he took in the details and weighed what he was seeing against his own knowledge of old Saxon dwellings. Within the wide oak boards that formed the floor was a trap-door. A stout iron ring lay at one edge. There must be a pit underneath here, thought Levi as he considered the need for storage. Earth, scooped out during the pit’s creation had been banked around the perimeter of the room to form a raised shelf, thickening and insulating the primitive walls. In the gloom towards the rear of the room a section of embankment appeared wider than the rest. Here were draped a scattering of multi-hued blankets and dense, comfy-looking fleeces.

‘A proper home from home,’ he said, clearly impressed by what he saw.

‘Aye,’ replied Seymour, nodding slightly in satisfaction. ‘It’s a bit rough, maybe, but it’s comfortable.’

‘I can’t wait to settle in,’ announced Poppy, her eyes wide in wonderment. ‘It seems really cosy.’

‘Dunno about cosy, my love, but I’ve done my best to make it home.’

To Seymour’s left a rustic-looking table and two benches stood while,

off to one side, was a stout armchair covered with a fleece rug. Seymour plucked two of the tallow candles from the bunch and pulled a box of matches from his shirt pocket.

‘Let’s shed some light on things, then we’ll set about getting a meal on the go. Levi, you can bring in a handful of kindling and some logs ... you’ll find both in the furthest roundhouse. I’ll leave you to light the fire.’

As Levi prepared to depart on his errand Seymour turned to Poppy.

‘You can help me bake some bread,’ he said, nodding to what appeared to be an odd looking wooden tray on legs in which lay a granite millstone, dusted with flour. A long pole ran from a hole in the stone to a similar hole on the overhead timber beam. As he led her to the strange contraption Seymour noticed her anxious expression.

‘It’s hard work,’ he said, ‘but at the end of it you’ll have bread like you’ve never tasted. Forget your wishy-washy supermarket pap, this’ll be the real thing.’

‘Good luck with that,’ laughed Levi as he left. ‘I can’t wait to try some.’

By the time Levi returned with his arms loaded with logs, the candles had been set in iron sconces attached to the building’s supporting posts and were now bathing the centre of the room in a warm glow, forcing dancing shadows to the room’s edge. Quivering spirals of dense black smoke curled up towards the gloomy thatch.

Seymour had clearly instructed Poppy in the use of the primeval millstone and she smiled smugly at Levi as she confidently worked the pole. The trap-door now lay open and, to the side of it, Seymour was bending over a half-full hessian sack scooping out corn.

Levi dumped the logs onto the hearth. The fireplace was nothing more than a raised, gravel dais, ringed with large stones. A long, rusting chain hung from a beam above, a large ‘S’ shaped hook at its end. The

blackened cauldron that would normally hang there lay on the cold hearth, its base flecked with ash. He glanced up as he arranged the kindling for the fire. No chimney. This is going to be smoky, he thought.

Once lit, Levi's fire gave out a comforting radiance, banishing the shadows further still and, instead of filling the room with smoke as he'd expected, clouds of it swirled high into the rafters before gradually dispersing through the thatch.

The three busied themselves for the next few hours. Seymour gave the orders and the children set about their tasks with animated enthusiasm, while he set about preparing the homestead for a comfortable, if brief, stay. He removed fleeces from the beds and took them outside where he shook them free of dust, windblown grit, stray spiders and mouse-droppings. He then returned inside to help Poppy make the loaves that they were to have for supper. Levi, meanwhile, returned to the roundhouse where he busied himself chopping more logs, ensuring there would be sufficient fuel for their stay.

Later, as darkness closed in around the isolated farm, with a full belly and a warm sense of contentment, Levi reflected on that day. Seymour had been correct in his view of the farmhouse. Primitive it may be but it certainly was homely. He had been right, too, about Poppy's bread, it was the best he'd ever tasted. 'Crikey, Pop,' he had enthused after their meal, 'I reckon you'll be a master baker when we get home.'

The three were lounging on Seymour's armchair, Seymour in the middle while the children flanked him on the chair's fleece-covered arms. All three stared into the fire, their faces animated by the flickering flames. They sat wordlessly like this for several minutes, each alone with their thoughts. Then Poppy broke the silence.

'Uncle Seymour,' she began hesitantly, 'you were going to tell us more ... about Caellfyon, I mean.'

With a grunt Seymour pushed himself off the chair and strode over to the open door. Outside, a single bright star glittered coldly high above the nearby peaks. He shut out the night, the iron latch rattling loudly in

the room's quiet.

'That's right, what do you need to know?' he said, returning to his seat between the pair.

'Where are we?' began Levi quickly, finally seeing an opportunity for some answers to the myriad of questions filling his head. 'What is this place?'

'Alright, I'll tell you what I can. I'll warn you now, what I have to say may seem fantastic, bizarre even, but stay with me.' He settled himself onto the fleecy cover. 'First of all, I need to explain what manner of place this is, but please save your questions until the end – I'm sure you'll have a few.'

Levi was suddenly not sure he would be able to ask questions even if he wanted to. He didn't like the sound of 'bizarre' and his mouth suddenly felt like the ash-covered cauldron. He risked a glance at Poppy. He couldn't be certain whether it was a trick of the light, but he thought her face seemed deathly white.

'I don't have all the answers, I'm afraid,' continued Seymour. 'Stepping through that door should have taken us through to the inside of the abbey gatehouse. Agreed?'

Both children nodded slowly as he went on.

'Instead, we found ourselves in another world entirely. That in itself is fantastic, but there's more.'

'But how did it happen?' asked Poppy.

'I don't know.' Seymour paused to collect his thoughts. 'Have either of you heard of other dimensions?'

Levi nodded. 'Yeah, there's loads on TV about that stuff.'

'Poppy?'

Poppy shook her head slightly. 'I've heard of them but I don't understand what they are.'

'Few people do. So let's see, then,' began Seymour. 'Imagine a sheet of paper right? Now picture a straight line drawn on it. If you placed your finger at one end and traced along the line, soon enough it'd reach

the other end, okay?’

‘Uh huh,’ nodded Poppy.

‘Well, that’s like our own life experience – we start at point ‘A’ and travel along to point ‘B’. Now, imagine putting a kink in the paper, maybe folding it diagonally a couple of times. Then, when your finger tries to travel the line it doesn’t get to where it expected. It’s taken somewhere else entirely.’

‘So, somewhere in that odd doorway there was a ... a kink, and we’ve gone to this other dimension?’ offered Poppy.

Seymour shrugged. ‘Maybe.’

Levi quickly grasped his uncle’s arm. ‘But we can get back, right?’

Poppy snorted. ‘Huh, not sure I want to.’

‘Of course we can. I did, didn’t I?’ Seymour paused as he tried to read the children’s expressions. His own face seemed tight with concern, as though there was more he was holding back, something the children would need to know eventually.

‘Righty oh, then,’ he added, trying to inject cheer into his voice. ‘Here we don’t live by the clock. Darkness outside means bedtime inside. It’ll be dawn soon enough ... and that’s when we get up.’

But Poppy was still not satisfied.

‘What about those laws?’ she said. ‘You said the laws were different here, what did you mean?’

Seymour grimaced and scratched his chin, framing his reply. ‘There are several – differences, Poppy,’ he said eventually. ‘But what I was referring to was the law of nature, specifically the law governing time. Think about it this way ... back home you may want to go to the shops, okay?’

‘To buy the latest England strip,’ said Poppy.

‘Okay, to the sports shop in the mall. It’s ten o’clock when you leave home, it takes you fifteen minutes to get there, fifteen browsing and checking out, and another fifteen to get home. What time is it?’

‘Ten forty-five,’ said Levi quickly, with a smug glance at his sister.

‘That’s right,’ said Seymour. ‘Consider this then. ‘Three months ago, I left home to investigate the abbey door. I arrived here in Caellfyon, and stayed awhile before returning home.’

‘Three weeks later,’ interrupted Levi.

‘That’s right, so how long was I here for?’

‘Three weeks?’ said Poppy, hesitantly.

‘Wrong. I was here in Caellfyon for over three years. That’s what I meant by different laws.’

‘Oh,’ said Poppy, as she struggled to interpret her uncle’s reply and gauge how it may affect them now.

‘So-o,’ began Levi as he thought back to one of Seymour’s earlier comments, ‘when you said you need to find out how the land lies, it was because it may have been quite a while since you were last here?’

Seymour nodded gravely. ‘You don’t believe I left the farm in this condition, do you? When I shut that door to begin my journey home this place was all shipshape. And as for that field out there now covered in thistles and groundsel, I’d only just ploughed that, ready to take a crop of winter wheat.’ He saw their troubled expressions. ‘Look, I’m sure things are fine here, but I just need to find out, make sure my friends are okay, then we can return home. And there’s no harm in being cautious while we’re here.’ He paused, allowing his reassurances to register with the children, then he pushed himself to his feet.

‘Right then ... bed,’ he announced, clapping his hands briskly.

The children were to use the freshly aired beds on the sleeping platform. Seymour would sleep in the armchair.

‘It’s only for one night, kids,’ he said. ‘We’re hitting the trail again tomorrow.’

Levi grumbled half-heartedly as he climbed into his makeshift bed and tugged a fleecy blanket up to his chin. The coarse under-blanket felt rough and scratchy against his back.

Although smelly, the beds were surprisingly comfortable and both children quickly fell silent as each tried to make sense of Seymour’s

strange revelations. But they were too tired to worry about them for long, and swiftly fell asleep.

Levi had no idea what had awoken him when his eyes first snapped open. Nor what time it was for that matter – not that time seemed to be a concern here, there being no clocks at all. Although it was still dark a dull amber glimmer told him there was light in the room. He slowly turned towards the glow, careful not to make a sound.

Illuminated by the remaining embers in the hearth and one remaining candle, Seymour was stooping over the opening to the pit, slowly lowering the trap-door into place. In his free hand he held a long, hessian-wrapped bundle, about the length of a cricket bat. The trap dropped shut with a dull *WHUMP*, causing Seymour to glance sharply towards the bed. Levi snapped his eyes shut and lay still.

He lay listening awhile as his uncle moved about the room. It may have been his imagination but there seemed to be something furtive in the man's actions. When he finally opened his eyes again he saw Seymour was seated at the table, unwrapping the bundle. Levi stared, mesmerised as Seymour slowly unwound the cloth. Finally, the hessian fell away and Levi's heart lurched in his chest when he saw what was within. For there, glinting in the firelight as Seymour slowly rotated it, scrutinising its surface, was a longsword in its scabbard. Despite the poor light quality Levi could see it was a fine weapon.

SHEEEET.

The sound of steel against toughened leather pierced the stillness of the room as Seymour slowly extracted the sword from its sheath, raising it to his eye and turning it this way and that as he peered down the length of the blade. Despite the low light Levi could see that the blade appeared notched and the leather strapping on the handle smooth and worn. His stomach dropped. Clearly this weapon had seen a great deal

of action. A whole host of new, more troubling questions flared immediately to his mind.

He now knew that his uncle had left out some critical details from his earlier explanation, and he struggled to understand why. His troubled mind formed a number of possibilities. None of them were good. He settled back against his pillow. This time he did not fall asleep so easily.

By the time the children awoke, Seymour had disappeared. Levi's initial fear at finding his uncle gone quickly subsided when he saw the fire was well alight and the dining table bore three place settings. He pulled on his jeans and sweatshirt and wandered over to the table. A shiny fishhook lay in the centre of one of the three wooden plates. Levi understood immediately.

'He's gone fishing,' he said to Poppy who was by then standing by her own sleeping platform, brushing her hair. Levi carefully toyed with the hook as he wondered how to broach the subject of Seymour's sword. Before he had time to say anything Seymour appeared at the doorway, holding high a catch of small fish as though it were a trophy.

'Ta daa!' he declared cheerfully. 'Breakfast anyone?'

The children then learned more new skills as Levi tried his hand at grilling fish while Seymour showed Poppy how to make drop scones using a griddle. During breakfast Seymour made an announcement.

'Right, you two, I've been thinking,' he declared. Levi looked up expectantly as Seymour went on. 'I realise I may have pushed you rather hard yesterday so I've decided to stay here for one more night. We'll set off early for Skenmarris tomorrow – that's the village we're making for.'

Levi drubbed his fingers sullenly on the table top. Although welcome, this news was not what he wanted to hear. He had issues far more important, but how do you ask about something that you clearly

shouldn't have seen in the first place?

It was to be several hours before Levi had the chance to voice his fears to Poppy in private. Each time he found himself alone with her and was about to speak, Seymour arrived on the scene, or Poppy cut him off, declaring she had to be off on some errand or other. As the morning wore on Levi grew more and more frustrated. He needed to create his own opportunity.

'C'mon, Pop, I've to get more logs in from the store. Give us a hand will you?' He beckoned for Poppy to follow and she skipped into step behind him.

'It's good we can stay the extra day, isn't it,' said Poppy, brightly as they entered the small log-store. 'I love it here. I could stay for –'

'Enough about that,' interrupted Levi, his voice little more than a whisper. 'I've something to tell you.'

The pair were standing in the cramped gloom of the small store. An untidy pile of logs had been banked up against one side. Opposite this several half-empty sacks slouched in the murk. One had been chewed open at the bottom, spilling corn across the packed earth floor. Sunbeams speared the confined space through chinks in the roundhouse wall, illuminating clouds of dust motes that swirled and danced in the warm air.

Levi bundled his sister onto one of the sacks and stepped back, remaining close to the entrance, as he glanced furtively towards the farmhouse. Poppy 'tutted' and folded her arms.

'Oh for goodness sake, Levi, what is it now?'

Levi then explained to her how he'd woken suddenly the night before. Then, following a pause for dramatic effect, he told her about the sword. When he finished he stood back, waiting for Poppy's reaction. He was sure she would be as worried and concerned as he was.

‘So what?’ she said, shaking her head slightly. Levi blinked in surprise.

‘Don’t you see? This isn’t the ever-so-friendly place Uncle Seymour would have us believe. We must all be in terrible danger. Why else would he have a sword – a well-used one at that?’

Poppy shook her head again and, this time, sighed loudly.

‘All it explains is why you’ve been mooching round all morning with a face like a slapped mutt. What’s got into you, for heaven’s sake? You couldn’t wait to leave home and go on your grand adventure, and now you’re here you’ve done nothing but whine.’

Levi’s mouth dropped open, but Poppy hadn’t finished.

‘Why’s Seymour got a sword? Well, perhaps it’s the done-thing here – maybe everybody has one. Like six-guns in the wild-west. As for it looking worse for wear, maybe it’s all he could afford. Maybe he’d have preferred a new one but had to make do with second hand.

Levi was stunned. Surely he was not just being over sensitive? Had he simply misread Seymour’s caution? Poppy saw his confusion and stood up before wandering over to him and draping an arm across her brother’s shoulders.

‘Look, you may be right – but do you really think Uncle Seymour would put us in danger?’

‘He left me on that ledge.’

‘I guess he has more faith in you than you have in yourself – whatever the situation here ... dangers or otherwise, we’re in this together. Aren’t we?’

Levi nodded. He tried to smile but it felt crooked, as though some of his face muscles refused to work properly. He felt bewildered and not yet convinced by Poppy’s reasoning. But she was right about one thing, they *were* in this together. Poppy clapped him on the back.

‘C’mon, let’s get these logs.’

The extra day of rest was just what the children needed. On the morning of their departure for the village Levi woke at dawn, in time to see Seymour preparing for their journey.

‘Need any help?’ he asked softly, careful not to wake his sister. Seymour nodded and beckoned Levi to join him. Levi dressed quietly and walked over to the table, where his uncle was sorting what appeared to be a pile of dark brown sacks.

‘They for supplies?’

‘Nope, they’re for us.’ Seymour stood and dragged what seemed to be a monk’s habit from the pile. He pulled it on over his own clothes. ‘You’ll soon notice people here dress sort of differently,’ he said, tying the rope-belt around his waist. ‘So I sat up last night and knocked something up for you and your sister. As a temporary measure. So as you won’t look too out of place - can’t have you scaring folk with your polyester and nylon, can we?’

The sound of their voices stirred Poppy. She sleepily climbed off the bed and approached the table, rubbing her eyes. Levi snatched one of the smaller garments from the table top and tossed it at his sister.

‘Here you go, Pop,’ he said, laughing. ‘It’s what every best-dressed peasant’s wearing this season.’ Poppy caught it in one hand, grimacing at the rough feel of the fabric.

‘Oh, for heaven’s sake, must we?’ she said, turning to her uncle.

Seymour nodded, and then turned away, hiding a smile. ‘You two climb into those, there’s something I need to do in the roundhouse,’ he said, scooping up a stuffed sack and heading for the door. Once he’d gone, the children shrugged into their robes, laughing at each other’s strange appearance.

At breakfast it was clear that Seymour wanted to make their last meal at the farm a special one. By the time the three sat down to eat, three plates had been laid, piled high with boiled fish, mushrooms, a kind of savoury porridge and a lofty pile of oatcakes. Seymour took one

of the cakes and snapped it in half.

‘We’ll bag what’s left of these,’ he said, cramming a piece into his mouth. ‘They’ll be useful on the trek.’

With the meal complete it didn’t take them long to complete their preparations and, less than an hour later, the three were stepping out into the fresh air to begin the next leg of their journey. As Seymour locked the door and pushed the key into the thatch once more, the children stepped away from the farmhouse, pulling their robes close. The crisp, clean air felt damp on their faces, the light breeze carrying the herby scent of sage and wild garlic from nearby woodlands. A pale, ghostly mist veiled the fields, soaking the grass with dew.

‘Which way?’ asked Levi as Seymour joined them. Seymour pointed eastwards, towards the line of towering hills.

‘That-a-way.’

Seymour and Levi shouldered their packs and, together, the small party made off, striding through the swirling mist in the direction of the grey-clad peaks, and the village of Skenmarris that lay beyond.