

Chapter Three

Seymour called to the children over his shoulder as he strode up the steep incline.

‘Come on you two. Anyone would think I’m the young ‘un and you’re the old crocks.’

Levi saw that his uncle had almost reached the top of the peak. Good weather and ample supplies of oatcakes had helped make what appeared from the farm to be an arduous trek an easy one, but this final stage of the climb had been tough. Earlier, Seymour had announced that he wished to reach the village before nightfall, though he hadn’t said why. All Levi knew was that something in his uncle’s tone made him uncomfortable.

Lunch had been another meagre affair, eaten on a grassy bank by a winding brook, shaded by a stand of oaks. Their dry oatcakes had been supplemented by cold trout fillets and wild strawberries. Although it wasn’t his idea of healthy eating he couldn’t ignore the fact that the Spartan meals and exercise had somehow improved his fitness. He seemed to have more stamina than before and his muscles were beginning to feel – well, tighter. That aside, the afternoon’s ascent had been gruelling.

Levi guessed that what they were on was little more than a hill, in the scheme of things, and not even a mountain. For him, though, it had felt like Everest – the hard way. On leaving their picnic site they’d gradually left behind the lush vegetation of the valley floor and now found themselves on a rugged, scree-covered slope. Levi glanced to where his uncle was taking the last few steps to the summit. The man had not broken into a sweat and showed no sign of tiring.

‘If only I had his energy,’ Levi said under his breath. His own knees felt squidgy and his legs wobbled with each step. Behind him, Poppy

dislodged some stones. They clattered loudly as they tumbled, ricocheting against the rock-strewn slope.

‘You okay?’ asked Levi, half turning.

‘Whacked,’ Poppy replied breathing heavily. ‘Wonder where we’ll sleep tonight.’

‘I wonder when we’ll eat, I’m famished.’

‘And what we’ll eat,’ added Poppy. ‘I wonder if they have pizza here.’

‘Or a Burger King.’

‘Made it at last,’ called Seymour from above. ‘Hello,’ he added, his voice suddenly taking on an edge. ‘What’s this?’

Levi glanced up sharply. Seymour had disappeared from view. Levi suddenly felt defenceless on the bare hillside and fear’s icy fingers began to probe his insides. With one last burst of effort he leaned forward pushing down on his tired knees as he climbed, powering himself swiftly to the top.

‘What is it?’ asked Poppy as she struggled to keep up.

‘Dunno. C’mon, I reckon we’ll find out soon enough.’

Levi reached the crown of the hill and breathed deeply. A chill breeze crested the ridge from the far side, cooling his flushed face and flicking damp hair from his forehead. Several yards ahead of him, Seymour was squatting, staring intently at something on the path. Levi stepped closer.

‘What is –’

‘Husht!’ Seymour batted down with his open hand, silencing him. Suddenly very afraid Levi quickly dropped to a crouch, wincing as pain flared in his tired knees. Poppy joined him.

‘What’s up?’ she whispered.

‘Don’t know.’ Levi saw that Seymour had crept forward several feet, and was now tracing something in the dirt with his fingers. ‘Reckon he’s found some tracks.’

‘Tracks?’ Poppy’s voice rose slightly. ‘Is that bad?’

‘It feels bad.’

While Seymour continued staring at the path Levi used the opportunity to look around. The hill sloped more gently on this, the eastern side, falling away into a wooded valley. He scanned eastward, beyond where his lengthening shadow stretched to the edge of the ridge. Shredded clouds, marbled with shades of pink, extended to the distant horizon. There they met a blue haze. Levi couldn't tell from this distance whether the haze was mist, cloud or even another mountain range.

About a mile from the foot of the hill, a dun coloured strip of road snaked north to south, winding its way around woods and hillocks, before disappearing into dense woodland.

He beckoned for Poppy to join him. 'Look,' he said, pointing. Where the road reappeared was a sprawling village.

'Do you think it's where we're headed?' Poppy asked, following her brothers gaze.

'I reckon it must be.' Levi regarded the settlement. It appeared to be an untidy affair, with dwellings scattered haphazardly either side of the road. Here and there wisps of smoke corkscrewed into the air. He followed the line of the road and saw that it sloped down to a river crossing. The dark ribbon of river coiled east-west, from beyond his line of vision to where it became lost from view behind the hill.

The crossing occupied the only straight stretch of river where, instead of a bridge, a scattering of stone slabs forded the surging flow. Every now and then the gusting updraft carried with it an occasional muffled shout from below. Poppy tugged Levi's sleeve, diverting his attention away from the village.

'If that's where we're headed,' she said, 'I think we ought to get a move on. It's getting dark already.'

Levi turned his gaze to where the sun was now sliding behind a distant line of hills, far to the west. Levi watched it for a few seconds, amazed at the speed at which it slipped from view. Did the sun set this fast back home, he wondered. He couldn't remember watching a sunset before. He heard a scuffle of stones and turned to see that Seymour had

risen and was walking back to them. He felt his stomach twist. Seymour's face appeared tight, his mouth pinched into a thin line. He was plainly troubled by what he'd seen.

'Kids,' Seymour began, 'I've something to tell you. I've been putting it off, but I can't delay it any longer.'

'Is it about the land?' asked Poppy.

For reasons he couldn't explain, Levi suddenly thought of the strange figures they'd seen on the ridge. He felt sure that whatever Seymour had to say, it would have something to do with them.

'Yes it is,' Seymour replied. 'It'll have to be quick, though. The light's failing fast and we need to get down there before dark.'

A gust of wind blew over the hill, tugging at their cloaks. Poppy shivered involuntarily. Seymour saw this and beckoned them over to a low, sickly looking thorn bush to the right of the track a few yards ahead.

'We'll sit down there out of this wind. In five minutes we'll be on our way. In an hour you'll be tucking into a hot meal like you've never tasted. I promise.'

Seymour led them to the ragged bush. Exposed on the ridge, its branches jutted out in a gnarled, lopsided manner. Half way along it a sizeable gap opened into a thorny cave. Seymour stooped inside, signalling them to follow. Inside, the ground dropped away, forming a shallow bowl. Here, the three of them hunkered down, like Red Indians around a campfire. It was no warmer than outside, but at least they were out of the teeth of the wind.

Poppy wrapped her cloak around her knees. Levi copied her. He glanced across to his uncle and blinked in surprise. Seymour's threadbare robe had risen to reveal the toughened leather tip of his scabbard – the same one Levi had glimpsed during their first night at the farm.

'I know this isn't comfortable,' said Seymour. 'But I just thought it wise we get under cover while I tell you what to expect down there.'

'Do you mean get under cover or hide?' Said Levi, sourly. Seymour

paused before replying.

‘Both,’ he said softly.

From the corner of his eye Levi saw Poppy twist sharply to look at him. He resisted the temptation to meet her eyes, afraid she might appear as scared as he now felt. Seymour went on.

‘Look, kids, I told you there are some here who’ve never seen eye-to-eye with me. Although the majority accepted me, to some I was always an outsider – an enemy, even. I believe it’s their tracks I’ve just seen on the trail outside.’

‘They would’ve harmed you given the chance ... that’s what you told us,’ said Levi, his voice an octave higher than normal, ‘so surely they’ll want to harm us, t –’

‘I don’t understand,’ interrupted Poppy, frowning. ‘How can you be so sure the footprints belong to your enemies? What makes them so different to your friends?’

‘I’ll come to that,’ said Seymour impatiently as he stole a glance out at the darkening skies.

A faint clatter outside made Levi flinch and he glanced sharply at the others. Surprisingly, they didn’t appear to have heard anything. He played the sound back inside his head, sure now that it sounded like rocks tumbling – dislodged, as Poppy had done a few moments ago. He opened his mouth to speak when his uncle began again.

‘I said this was like another dimension, far from our own world. Well, in the same way that the laws governing this dimension differ to our own, so too do the inhabita –’

This time they all recoiled in surprise as a further sound, far louder than the first, told them they were no longer alone. Before the children had time to think, Seymour leapt from his crouching position, whipping his cloak back in one fluid motion, exposing his sword. He immediately propelled himself out onto the path and, with a harsh *WHEESK* that chilled the children’s blood, he drew the weapon.

There was now a rapid drumming on the path outside, reminding Levi

of heavy rain hitting the porch roof back home. Poppy seized his arm and he gasped as she squeezed in horror. If Poppy was scared, things must be grave. Levi wished he could remain hidden in the confines of the bush. He wanted to draw his knees up tight, curl into a ball and be safe. But he knew that if he did that he would not be safe. Not at all. Realising there was no place to hide, and that to remain in the confines of the bush was dangerous, he began to crawl towards the narrow opening.

Poppy's fingers dug deeper, dragging him back.

'No, Levi, no,' she pleaded, her words raw with terror.

Levi turned swiftly. Her fear-filled eyes were glassy and wide.

'I must see what's happening.' Levi couldn't remember ever feeling so scared. He felt hollow, as if a giant spoon was scraping out his insides. By the time he'd turned back to peer out onto the path, his frightened brain had analysed the drubbing noise. It wasn't rain on any roof, it was running feet. He glanced right, towards the source of the noise. What he saw sent a warm wetness jetting into his pants.

His uncle had tossed his brown robe aside onto the path, revealing a leather kilt and hard, leather breastplate. Two empty scabbards hung from a broad belt, the weapons flashing in Seymour's hands as they caught the last dying rays of the sun. One was the sword Levi had seen previously, the other a long, broad bladed dagger. But it wasn't his uncle's appearance that horrified him, though that indeed was shocking enough. What turned his stomach to ice was the animal charging madly towards them.

The creature appeared to be some kind of ferret, except this ferret, dressed like a bizarre Celtic warrior, was almost *FOUR FEET TALL*, running on its hind legs as it brandished a fierce looking sword. Dirty brown fur rippled along its willowy body. Clawed feet kicked up spurts of dust from the path as it charged. With ears flattened close to its head, and with its mouth drawn tightly across a row of small, razor-sharp teeth, the ferret-creature shrieked its fury, the harsh cry lifting goose-bumps on Levi's arms.

Time seemed to slow. Levi no longer felt his sister's nails digging into his arm, though he knew she remained by his side. He stared as Seymour stood squarely on the path, the creature quickly closing on him. Like an experienced gladiator, Seymour braced himself, feet apart, his weapons hung loosely by his sides. As the attacking creature closed in, its sword – held aloft during its approach – flashed down like a lightning bolt. At the last possible moment Seymour tensed, then leapt to one side, his own blades flashing up to meet the attack.

Levi scrunched his eyes tight shut, unable to watch the carnage he knew would follow. Instead, he struggled blindly to interpret the sounds of battle. He never saw his uncle spin lightly on the balls of his feet, drawing his sword across the animal's exposed body, but he did hear the weapon's hiss as it sliced through the air, followed by the grisly sound of impact. In a peculiar moment of recall, like a second signal flashing across his terrified brain, Levi's mind flashed back to Halloween, when he and Poppy had lopped the top off their pumpkin with a carving knife.

The creature screamed in agony, its piercing cry merging with the rising wind that swept over the plateau. Seymour's spin had placed him directly behind his attacker. Levi heard a grunt of exertion as Seymour thrust forward with his shorter, leaf-shaped blade, striking the fatal blow in the small of the animal's back. With a loud, rasping sigh, the creature slumped to the path. Poppy tugged frantically at Levi's arm. The battle was not over.

'Oh no – look!'

Levi cracked open his eyes to see a second creature, this time to the left, rushing his uncle at a frightening pace. It, too, wielded a cruel-looking sword and, like the first, screamed a harsh, garbled battle cry as it ran. Beads of spit flew from its mouth and, again, Seymour stood ready. The creature charged, its stubby brown tail flicking. As it closed on Seymour it jabbed forward with its blade but Seymour's reactions were swift, his own sword flashing up to meet it. The weapons clashed, sending sparks into the air. The collision threw the enraged animal off

balance. Seymour immediately took advantage, driving his own dagger down one more time. The creature grunted, then it, too, flopped lifeless onto the dusty path.

Poppy turned to Levi, flung her arms about his neck and began to sob uncontrollably. He wanted to cry, too, but a pressure in his throat prevented him. Besides, he knew he would make Poppy feel worse if he did; he had to remain brave for her, even though he didn't feel it. The back of his eyes were hot, his heart thudding like a drum. The strange land had seemed fine until now – tough and mysterious, maybe – but not terrifying. This was different. He wished he could just open his eyes and be in his own bed, just like in the stories.

Levi began to feel Poppy's tears through his shirt. He lifted his hand to stroke her hair, paused, and then went ahead anyway. Her hair felt sweaty and caked with dust. Just like his.

Exhaustion suddenly overwhelmed him, its effect almost suffocating in its intensity. They had made a nauseating crossing through time, space or wherever to get here, trekked for days with only a brief stopover at the farm – only to find that Seymour had brought them to a land populated by giant, murderous animals, bent on their destruction.

He didn't know how much more he could stand.

Tranquillity returned to the hillside, more discernible following the sudden and shocking ferocity of the assault. Levi could hold back his emotions no longer. Hot tears clouded his vision, shattering the gloomy surroundings into fragments, like images viewed through broken glass.

He couldn't feel the tears flowing down his cheeks, for he felt nothing. The savagery of the attack had left him hollow and cold. But it wasn't simply the savage brutality that troubled him. Nothing had prepared them for the strangeness of the events, and it now seemed that here in Caellfyon anything could happen – at any time.

Levi swallowed hard at the thought – then winced suddenly as Seymour snatched at his arm and began to haul him to his feet.

‘C’mon, we have to go,’ said Seymour, his voice strained.

Poppy, whose eyes had taken on a hunted look, tightened her grip around Levi’s shoulders, preventing him from rising. Seymour held on as he urged them to move, his voice rising.

‘Now,’ he screamed. ‘There may be more on the hill, so unless you want to end up like them ...’ He nodded to where the last of the attackers lay crumpled only a few feet away, its features twisted into a silent snarl, its blood snaking towards the path’s edge. Levi shuddered.

‘Let’s go, Pop,’ he said, pulling his legs under him. ‘Here, I’ll help you.’ He rose from his position within the tangled shrubbery and gently pulled his sister to her feet. Her face was ashen, her body still trembling with the horror of the butchery she had just witnessed.

Their uncle peered about wildly, searching the deepening gloom, before continuing to goad them into action. ‘Hurry, we MUST get off this hill!’ He bounded to the edge of the path. There he spent several seconds scanning the hillside before staring intently at the darkening village far below. He beckoned the children to follow. ‘This way,’ he said, wading into the long grass of the hillside. ‘It seems my visit may have been expected.’

‘The travellers on the ridge, the other day?’ offered Levi as he followed his uncle onto the slope.

‘Maybe. But maybe the farm was being watched.’

Levi glanced at Poppy and gave her hand a squeeze. She returned a crooked ‘I’m okay’ half smile and together they began their long descent towards the valley floor. Seymour called to them over his shoulder.

‘The ford’s being watched,’ he said, ‘so we’ll enter the village from the north – but we must hurry.’ So saying, he increased his speed, leaping like a deer through the grass.

What followed was a frenzied dash down the hill, their limbs thrashing wildly through a snarl of shrubs that snagged clothes and skin

alike. Long, clutching grasses flayed their legs as they ran and only blind panic prevented them feeling the pain caused by whipping stalks.

Seymour called to them, his voice carrying easily on the up-rush of air from below.

‘Watch out for rocks and holes!’

‘Now he tells us,’ panted Poppy, ‘when we’re nearly there.’

As he ran, Levi squinted into the gloom, expecting every shadow to suddenly reveal more vicious, deadly polecats. They’d almost reached the bottom and before them loomed the shadowy woodland he’d spied from above. Seymour was the first to reach the valley floor. Once there, he half twisted and waved for the children to follow him, before running low and silent to the woodland edge, where he hunkered down and waited for the children to join him.

Levi and Poppy were relieved of the chance to get their breath back. Although they tried to control their breathing to limit the noise their breath came in painful, ragged gasps. Poppy grimaced, clutching her side to ease a stitch.

‘You okay, Pop?’ Levi asked in between wheezes. Poppy nodded then turned sharply to her uncle.

‘You ... you never told us,’ she spat, accusingly. The mind-numbing fear she’d felt immediately after the attack had been replaced by white-hot anger. ‘About them, I mean.’ She jerked a thumb back towards the hilltop. ‘How could you, Uncle Seymour? What were you thinking?’

Levi peered at his uncle from the corner of his eye, waiting for the man’s reply. Seymour was squatting, head down as though in thought. Or was it shame? Levi couldn’t tell. Why had Seymour kept such vital information from them? Surely he expected that such a conflict would take place eventually. After all, he’d dressed in war gear and armed himself in readiness. How could he not tell them? The reedy call of an owl echoed through the trees, shattering the silence.

‘How could I tell you?’ Seymour replied, turning to Poppy. His voice was little more than a whisper. ‘What could I have said?’

‘But surely,’ began Poppy, but she stopped. He was right. What could he have said? It was all too fantastic. She noticed the lifeless droop to her uncle’s shoulders and her anger drained away. She reached for his arm. ‘You’re right, Uncle Seymour – we’d never have believed you anyhow. Well, at least we know now.’ She had no wish to hurt him and forced a smile for his benefit.

Although sheltered from the wind, dusk had pulled a damp chill from the earth, casting icy cold dew onto the grass beneath them. Levi’s limbs began to tremble.

‘Right, now that’s settled,’ he said, ‘can we move on? I’m dying to get into the warm.’

‘You’re absolutely right, Levi,’ said Seymour, clapping him on the shoulder. ‘Word of the failed hit on the ridge may have already reached others waiting at the ford. We must be careful.’

‘Where’re we headed?’ asked Poppy.

‘Good question, my love. Clearly, this is the village I’ve been aiming for. We’re now going to call on my old friend – who happens to be the chief of this ... ah, clan. So kids, despite what’s happened back there, I do have friends in high places – we just need to be cautious in the meantime.’

The children nodded their understanding.

‘Barkstripe’s lodge is just through those trees,’ continued Seymour tilting his head in the rough direction of the village. ‘Skenmarris has occupied this site for many years and the woods are now laced with pathways – but we won’t be using them. We’ll stay in the shadows of the undergrowth. Stay low, and watch your footing – the slightest twig snapping may betray us. Follow me.’ With that, Seymour slowly and silently withdrew his sword from its scabbard. In the twilight, Levi saw the blade still bore a dark smear. He looked away, his stomach heaving once more. Seymour half rose from his squatting position and, bent double, crept cautiously into the woods. Poppy copied him, beckoning Levi to follow.

The air was heavy in the confines of dense shrubbery. Here and there, shreds of mist drifted between the trees amplifying every sound they made. Each footfall, no matter how carefully placed, seemed to echo around them and Levi was sure they'd soon be heard. His body tensed, afraid of being the first to snap a twig. As it happened, it was his sister who did.

They'd travelled maybe a hundred yards or so – it was difficult to tell creeping doubled up in that manner – when Poppy failed to spot an old, dry twig hidden among the decaying leaf litter. The three of them inhaled sharply as the loud crack resonated through the woods like a gunshot. Seymour immediately dropped into the shadow, signalling for them to do the same. There they waited. Levi held his breath, his tattered nerves as taut as bowstrings.

The woods remained silent for what seemed an eternity, before voices called out to their left, shockingly close. For the second time that day Seymour sprang into action. Staying low, he leapt up and quickly set off, at right-angles to their original course.

‘This way – we’ll have to use the path for speed!’

The children needed no further prompting and cut right to follow him, leaping through knee-high ferns and clawing brambles. Behind them, the voices grew louder, shouts echoing loudly among the trees. There was no doubt. They’d been discovered by hostiles. Levi allowed himself a swift glance over his shoulder. Several bright lights danced among the trees, flickering like cruel, yellow eyes.

‘They’re gaining on us,’ he screamed, pushing Poppy in the back.

‘I’m goin’ – fast as I can,’ she replied, snatching gasps of air as she ran.

Levi’s throat constricted as he realised they both lacked the energy to continue much longer. An image of the polecats’ vicious-looking swords flashed across his mind and the hairs on his neck rose in horror. He looked up, about to call for Seymour’s aid, and his heart quickened at what he saw.

The trees had thinned out and opened onto a broad trail only a few yards ahead. Beyond that was the dark grey silhouette of a building. Was this the chief's house? With hope rekindled, Levi drew on his reserve energy and increased his pace. Seconds later they all burst out of the undergrowth onto a woodland path. Sure enough, opposite them was a long, low building similar to Seymour's farmhouse. Wisps of woodsmoke drifted down to them on the night air, mingled with the loamy scent of freshly tilled soil. Levi didn't get the chance to ask whether they'd reached their destination.

'Not far now,' said Seymour, nodding towards the structure. 'I recognise this – it's Bullyrag's place, Barkstripe's lodge is just down there.' He pointed down the path. A larger clearing lay fifty yards or so ahead, the ground bathed in yellow from unseen lights.

Despite the immediate danger still behind them, Levi felt a thrill at the sight. 'We can make it.'

Seymour allowed himself a slight nod, while glancing back towards the waving torches. The enemy were closing fast. 'Sure, but we must hurry.' It was then they both noticed Poppy's distress. Bent double with her hands resting on her knees she fought for air, each laboured breath rasping drily in the back of her throat.

'Can't – go – on.'

Levi panicked. 'YOU MUST, COME ON!' He shook his sister roughly by the arm, urging her to continue as their pursuer's lights cast flickering shapes onto the nearby tree-trunks. Indistinct voices – coarse, spiteful and mixed with harsh laughter – resounded through the woods.

Seymour grabbed Poppy's arm. 'Quick, Levi – we have to help her.'

He lifted Poppy's arm onto his shoulder. Levi immediately realised what he must do and reached for his sister's free arm. Together, the pair hurried towards the clearing with Poppy hung between them like a limp doll, her shoes dragging furrows in the path's soft earth. The three had almost reached the clearing by the time their pursuers surged out onto the path behind them.

“THERE THEY ARE!” The cry went up, like the baying of a pack of hungry hounds. Once again, jagged-edged blades and small razor-sharp teeth flashed in Levi’s mind, sending shivers down his spine. The chilling cry injected life into Poppy and she struggled to be free, to run under her own power.

She didn’t have far to go. Seconds later they reached the large clearing, where two further paths entered, one from the left and one to the right. Seymour spun onto the right hand path.

“This way,” he cried, ‘we’ve made it.’

Ahead of them loomed a large blockhouse roofed with thatch standing within a wattle-fenced enclosure. A wide gateway opened onto the path. Either side of the open gate, stuttering bulls-eye lanterns hung on tall posts, bathing the clearing with light. Without breaking stride Seymour rushed through the opening and up to the house, to where a further wall-mounted lantern cast a half-circle of light onto a small yard and illuminated a large solid looking door.

Levi helped Poppy through the gate. Together, they shuffled to the house as Seymour hoisted the heavy doorknocker and hammered loudly. As the noise reverberated in the night air, the sounds of pursuit ceased abruptly, as though their hunters had suddenly lost heart in the chase.

“Hear that, Pop?” said Levi, grinning. ‘The chickens have given up.’ But Poppy, still struggling for breath, shook her head.

‘I don’t like it,’ she said, wearily. Levi’s smile twisted and began to slide from his face.

‘Like what?’

‘Think about it,’ she said between ragged breaths. ‘Seymour said – that time runs different – between here and home. That a great deal of time may have passed – since he was last in this land.’

Levi glanced over to where Seymour waited on the doorstep, and a cold fist began to tighten around his heart.

‘So-o?’ he said.

‘So, in that time – anything could’ve happened here. Who’s to say –

this is still what's-is-name's place? It could be anybody's.'

With rising dismay, Levi realised Poppy may be right and he twisted sharply to shout warning to Seymour – but it was already too late. The door squealed open casting a bright halo around their uncle. The sudden glare cloaked a short, stocky figure emerging from the doorway and, before the children's eyes could adjust to the light, the approaching figure bellowed loudly and leapt towards their uncle, grasping him in a powerful bear hug. As the assailant spun Seymour into the yard, Levi glared in horror at its strong jaws and black eye stripe.

'Oh no, no, no-o!' Poppy's voice was a hoarse whisper. Levi's chest sagged as the urge to dash back to the safety of the trees threatened to overwhelm him. He was even prepared to run the gauntlet of snarling hunters rather than face this new menace. But he couldn't move. Not for the first time since arriving in this unsettling land he was rooted to the spot, his fear creating a blood-rush of noise inside his head, like waves crashing ashore. Poppy's voice broke through.

'They're laughing, Levi. Seymour's laughing.' He felt her tug urgently at his sleeve. She was pointing to where their uncle and the stranger were excitedly backslapping one another in fond greeting. And Poppy was right. There was Seymour's childish laugh, accompanied by the other's throaty chuckle, sounding rather like gravel shaken in a box.

The stocky creature gently pushed Seymour away, holding him at arm's length. Levi saw now that the stranger was no polecat. It was taller and more powerfully built than their attackers. Its thickset head, with small erect ear tufts, sat low on its shoulders as though the creature lacked a neck. A rustic, full-length overshirt secured at the waist by a broad leather belt exaggerated its stooping posture. It turned towards them revealing a broad, white face. Two distinct black stripes ran from its snout to ear tips. Poppy inhaled sharply.

'It's a badger!'

Levi was amazed to hear she actually sounded relieved. He was far from reassured as, for him, events were simply becoming even more surreal. He stole a glance behind him. Beyond the enclosure fence the clearing was empty, the woods silent once more.

Seymour approached them smiling. He took Levi's arm. 'I said we'd be okay. Now I'd like you to meet my good friend.' Prompted by his uncle, Levi tottered woodenly towards the badger. Seymour introduced them. 'Levi, this here is Barkstripe, chieftain of Skenmarris.'

His heart hammering, Levi lifted his gaze to the animal's face. For one fleeting moment he felt that he was himself a captive animal under observation; such was the intelligence in those deep, sad eyes.

Seymour reached for Poppy. 'And this is my niece Pop -'

'Hold it!' Levi's voice was loud in the mist-wrapped clearing. 'This is crazy. First we're attacked by crazed ferrets, polecats, whatever – and now you expect us to have tea with a flamin' badger? Where will all this end? I'm goin' crazy here, honestly.' In a smaller, faltering voice he added, 'I really have had enough, I just want to go home.' He backed off towards the gate, bumping into his sister. Poppy grasped his hand. Her own was icy cold.

'Levi's right, Uncle Seymour. I mean, what is this place? Where are the people?'

Seymour placed his hands on their shoulders. 'This is a very special place, Poppy. I love it dearly. I hope that, in time, you will too. As for the people – we are the people. The only people.' He swept a hand towards Barkstripe. 'You see, Caellfyon is their land.'

Behind the badger, other figures crowded the doorway. Barkstripe stepped forward holding out a paw.

'Come, come,' he said with a mellow, north country tone that Levi thought sounded a bit like his history teacher who, he knew, came from Preston. 'They're jiggered, Hawkeye,' continued the strange badger. 'Tired, hungry and scared. And who can blame them by the sound of

things?’

Suddenly calmed by the animal’s friendly tone, Poppy gingerly took hold of the offered paw. Barkstripe turned and led them towards the house. ‘Tiredness and hunger we can remedy soon enough, and then sleep and full bellies’ll cure their anxiety, too, no doubt.’

Levi could now see the figures in the doorway were badgers, too. One was clearly a female, dressed in a patterned smock over which she wore a tan coloured apron. Like their host, she also appeared to bear the weight of many years. Flanking her were two youngsters, dressed simply in homespun smocks. One of the smaller badgers, Levi noted, wore a short dagger slung from a brightly patterned belt. Barkstripe waved a paw, ushering the youngsters inside.

‘Come on then you young cubs, we’ve got guests – let’s show some Caellfyon hospitality. Whitespike, fetch the cordial – best cups, mind. And you, Berrysap, some cake.’ The two youngsters turned and scuttled out of sight. Barkstripe stood by the open door and, with a graceful sweep of a paw, bid Seymour and the children to enter. The old female stood aside. She bowed as Seymour stepped down into the room.

‘You are most welcome, Hawkeye. Our home is also yours. May you find rest here, once again.’

Levi and Poppy exchanged glances and stepped down onto wide, roughly hewn floorboards. Their treads rang hollow in the large hall, as they found themselves within a lofty manor, so large the rear of the hall lay hidden in shadow. Part of the room’s right side had been divided off from the main hall, hidden behind willow screens. Several stout timber pillars reached high into the gloomy roof space, supporting an intricate network of smoke-blackened beams. The door thudded shut behind them. Poppy nudged her brother. Seymour was about to speak.

‘Now we’re safely inside I’ll introduce us properly – and without interruptions,’ he said, glaring at Levi before offering him a faint smile. ‘Poppy, Levi, this here is Barkstripe Aldersides, and Cob, his wife.’ The old badgers bowed low once again. Then, as if on cue, the two young cubs

re-entered the room from behind the willow screen, each holding aloft a wide tray. ‘Ah, and here,’ continued Seymour, ‘is their son, Whitespike.’ The dagger-bearing youngster nodded slightly. ‘And Berrysap, their daughter.’

The young male’s tray contained a large, gaily coloured pitcher and matching cups, the other a wooden platter loaded with delicious looking tarts. Levi had forgotten his hunger, what with the chase through the woods, not to mention the scare outside. But the appearance of the cakes reminded him at once and he stared longingly, his mouth watering. The prospect of food failed to ease his fears, however, and as the two young badgers approached he backed off.

Seymour gripped his collar, stopping his retreat. ‘Come now, Levi, these are good folk,’ he said, kindly. ‘There’s nothing to be afraid of. You’re safe now.’

Barkstripe hastily grabbed the pitcher and one of the cups. ‘Aye, tha’s amongst friends here. And we’ve much to discuss by the sounds of it.’ He poured a dark coloured cordial into one of the cups, handing it to Seymour. ‘I serve thee with my own hand, Hawkeye, as a sign of my respect and friendship.’

Seymour took the offered cup, bowing humbly. Barkstripe then repeated the little ceremony for Levi and Poppy, after which the old female, Cob, gathered the plate from her daughter’s tray before, with equal reverence, offering cakes to the three. Levi gaped at the fare in his hands. A warm, fruity aroma rose from the cordial, tantalising his taste buds. Unable to resist any longer he drank deeply, taking pleasure in the drink’s warming sensation. As if it were a signal, Poppy bit into her cake, nodding her approval to Cob as a mix of sweet summer fruits and warm spices flooded her mouth.

The children’s hungry acceptance of the offered food eased tensions and the atmosphere in the hall relaxed immediately. Cob offered another cake to Poppy.

‘Them’s me elderberry and filbert tarts, dear. Recipes’ been in the

family ever since the man in the moon was naught but a lad.'

Barkstripe took Seymour by the elbow, as Cob gathered the trays and withdrew behind the willow screen. 'Come, Hawkeye, we must talk.' He glanced towards Levi, his tone becoming grim. 'Your young cub's words have troubled me deeply.'

'I understand,' replied Seymour, gravely. 'I've a lot to tell you, and have several questions, too.'

The old badger nodded before turning to the others. 'Children,' he said addressing the two young badgers, 'I wish to have urgent words with Hawkeye here. I leave the guests in thy care.' With that he snatched a rush lamp from a bracket and led Seymour towards the rear of the manor.

Levi stared after them as Barkstripe's flickering lamplight forced back the shadows revealing more of the hall. A long trestle table flanked by low benches occupied the centre of the room. To its right lay a large open fireplace, identical to the one in Seymour's farm. Seymour and the old badger ascended a raised platform at the rear of the hall to sit at another, smaller table. Lit by the guttering rush light, they huddled together like a mini council of war.

Levi swallowed drily as he thought of what the two friends might be discussing, until a cautious tug at his sleeve interrupted his racing mind causing him to flinch and pull away sharply. He glared down at the young female badger. His sudden movement had startled her and she shrunk away from him lowering her gaze.

'Oh, I doesn't mean t' give yer a fright,' she mumbled shyly into her paws. 'Just offering some more tarts, is all.' Her dark eyes were wide and glassy, like muddy pools. One grey-haired ear twitched uncontrollably.

Poppy stepped up quickly, poking a finger at Levi's face.

'What do you think you're doing?' she snapped. 'Can't you see that these poor young things are as scared as we are?'

Levi blinked in disbelief. How could they be afraid? This was their home after all – what was there for them to be afraid of? His own misery

deepened and he felt a wave of acid well up from his belly. As if things weren't bad enough in this hateful place. Seymour had left to confer with the odd badger chief and now Poppy was furious with him. The room seemed to close in on him, seeming to smother him like a cold, damp blanket.

'Don't be mad at me, Pop,' he said lamely. 'I'm really tired. All I want is to go home.'

'Go home?' Poppy's eyes widened. 'Levi, all you wanted was to leave home. And you've left. You simply can't run away forever – sooner or later you have to make a stand.'

Whitespike and Berrysap watched as Poppy continued to rail her brother. They exchanged glances. Berrysap nodded in silent understanding. Whitespike approached Levi, one hand on his dagger hilt.

'Would yer like to see me knife, Levi?' he asked, halting Poppy's protests.

Levi turned, open-mouthed. His name sounded weird coming from the young badger's lips. Without waiting for an answer Whitespike withdrew the knife and offered it, handle first. The blade flashed gold in the lamplight. Levi nodded slowly, holding the badger's gaze as he cautiously accepted the weapon. The creature's eyes were a deep amber, its expression warm and sincere. Levi relaxed slightly. Like Whitespike's belt, the knife hilt was brightly coloured, adorned with an intricate pattern of polished glass beads. Levi weighed the knife in his hand. The blade's edge glinted coldly, in stark contrast to the cheery decoration. It was a fine weapon.

Berrysap held her paw out for Poppy.

'Come, Poppy. Let me show you around. I'm sure you'd like to know where you'll be sleeping.'

Poppy was about to follow the badger-maid when the door was struck with several loud blows, the sudden noise resonating the length of the hall. The four youngsters stared towards the door as Cob appeared from

behind the willow screen wiping her paws on her apron. She glanced across to her husband who was already ambling towards them, followed closely by Seymour. Barkstripe held his hand up to his wife.

‘I’ll get this. Having heard Hawkeye’s account I’ve an idea who it’ll be.’

Seymour glowered towards the children, his expression dark. Levi’s heart lurched as he saw his uncle’s right hand poised just above his sword hilt. Immediately expecting more trouble Levi backed off until one of the pillars prevented him from retreating further. He stared wide-eyed as Barkstripe twisted the large metal ring and pulled open the door. Beyond the burly badger, the door lantern lit two figures. Part of their pale faces lie in shadow, but Levi could just make out each creatures’ well-defined eye stripe, worn like a highwayman’s mask. Polecats.

Seymour urgently batted for Levi and Poppy to remain in the shadows by the pillar. ‘Stay there,’ he hissed under his breath, ‘this one’s real trouble.’

Barkstripe stepped aside, allowing entry to the pair. Both animals were scruffy-looking, their fur matted and bedraggled; but this ragged appearance failed to hide the air of menace that both cast out like a cloud. Both wore simple leather caps. The taller of the two stood – Levi guessed – at a little over three feet tall. A multitude of bright studs in his cap, painted red, green and gold, gave him a gypsy look. Earflaps hung loosely from it framing the creature’s mean looking face. The shorter creature was dressed like their attackers. He was the paler of the two, with a buff coloured mark staining its snout. Menacing scowls disfigured both their faces.

‘Evenin’ Chief,’ began the leader of the pair, addressing Barkstripe. Its voice was thin and harsh, like a rip-saw dragging through ply-wood. ‘Vare ‘ere tells me there’s been some intruder trouble. Lost two of me best blokes up on the hill. Slaughtered they were. Hacked down in cold blood.’

The second polecat pointed excitedly towards Seymour. ‘There he is,’

it squealed in a reedy voice, 'I told you he was back.'

The large polecat swaggered boldly towards Seymour, its high leather boots thudding dully on the floorboards. Bright blue jodhpurs, and a scarlet waistcoat over a chain mail vest gave it a slightly dashing appearance. It curled its lip, revealing a row of yellow, needle-sharp teeth.

'So it is, Vare me old mate. Drifted in again, like a rotten stink.' The one called Vare snickered, his tousled head bobbing. Barkstripe slammed the door.

'I'll not be having that talk in this house, Rasse Rankwolf. You may lead the militia here but you do so under my leave. And I say Hawkeye and his family remain friends of this village.'

'Family?' Rasse Rankwolf spun round to face the old badger, his chain vest chinking. Levi shuddered at the sight of the longsword slung across Rasse's back. A line of mystic runes adorned the sheath. 'Family? Surely you ain't allowed more of them slick-faced outlanders in. And if we ain't enough problems wi' rotten invaders to the south, without more of these lily-skinned swines.' As he spat the last word the polecat turned to point accusingly towards Seymour.

It was then Rasse saw Levi and Poppy veiled by the pillar's gloom. He hissed menacingly and advanced on the pair. Levi's neck hairs curled and he shrank back against the cold pillar, one fist tightening around the handle of Whitespike's dagger.

'Tcha! Here they are,' spat the polecat. 'And one a young buck, too.' He glanced down to where Levi was fingering the dagger, nervously. 'That what yer used, eh? To kill Ruffshank and Wort up on the hill? Is it?'

Levi's mouth felt like he had been eating dry crackers. He peered wild-eyed towards his uncle as Seymour glared at the polecat's back, his hand grasping his sword hilt. Vare padded across the room and stepped up behind his leader. His boiled leather breastplate was flecked with mud, partially obscuring a roughly carved skull and crossed-bones image

beneath.

‘He’s one of them, boss – saw him with me own eyes, I did. “Twas the biggun did the killin’ though.’ He glared across at Seymour.

Rasse’s small, jet black eyes glinted coldly as he fixed Levi with a hard stare. Levi wanted to look away but couldn’t. Why wasn’t Seymour helping? The hostile polecat reached for Whitespike’s dagger, slowly prising it free. Levi shuddered at the rough feel of the animal’s filthy, matted paws.

‘No, Vare me old mate – don’t reckon this ‘uns got much fight in him.’

Whitespike, his own paws balled in fury, made to step forward but he halted abruptly as Seymour swiped the air, signalling a warning to the young badger. Rasse appraised the knife, slowly.

‘Nice,’ he said, nodding approvingly. He regarded Levi again, his eyes narrowing. ‘Let me warn you,’ he whispered through clenched teeth, ‘if you carry grown up weapons around here, you’re liable t’ get hurt.’

‘Okay, that will do!’ declared Seymour, rounding on the polecat. ‘I think you’ve outstayed your welcome.’

Before anyone knew what was happening, Rasse spun round and flicked his paw. The dagger spun through the air, the blade flashing, before drilling deep into the floorboards, right between Vare’s foot-paws. The shocked animal exhaled sharply.

‘Phew, careful there, boss. Nearly trimmed me flippin’ toe nails.’ The small polecat chuckled, gleefully. It was a wet, sticky sound.

Rasse adopted an aggressive stance, toe-to-toe with Seymour. ‘That right, Chief?’ he called over his shoulder to Barkstripe. ‘Am I to leave? Sorry for asking like but I thought you called the tune here – not this ragamuffin and his rag-tag brats.’

Cob had fetched a stout quarterstaff, which she offered to her husband. He grasped the shaft gratefully, leaning heavily on it for support.

‘That’s right, Rasse. I think you should go now,’ replied the old badger, wearily.

Rasse spun round, his long scabbard striking Seymour's thigh. Gesturing for Vare to follow, he made for the door.

'Very well, Chief. I'll do as you ask.' He jerked a thumb at Seymour. 'But I doesn't take orders from him.' He pulled the door open and the pair stepped up over the threshold. Once outside, Rasse turned and jabbed a warning finger towards Levi. 'And don't forget me words, buck.'

With that stark warning, he stepped into the night.

The badgers and their guests breathed an audible sigh of relief. Berrysap hurried to the door, slamming it closed.

'I hate him! I don't know why you put up with him, Daddy.'

Cob helped the shuffling Barkstripe to a bench, where he sat down heavily.

'I chose him as my lieutenant because he was strong and popular, my dear.'

Seymour sat down next to the chief. 'Qualities he now turns against you, it seems. He appears to have become too powerful, and far too confident. Why, he would never have acted this way when I was last here. He needs to be leashed.'

Whitespike leaned over and tugged his knife from the floorboard. He inspected it, wiped it on his smock and re-sheathed it. 'But how, Hawkeye?' he said as he approached the table. 'He commands the militia. It's a wonder father is still chief at all.'

'Now, now, lad,' said Barkstripe. 'Thing's aren't as bad as all that. Hawkeye's right – Rasse is just gettin' a bit big for them boots o' his.'

Cob understood the direction the conversation was heading. 'I doubt many of us feel like eating but eat we must,' she said, wiping her hands on her apron. She turned to her daughter. 'Come, Berry. I need help in the kitchen. You too if you'd like, Poppy. Leave the males to their confabulations.'

The three disappeared behind the screen.

Seymour glanced across to where Levi was standing rigidly by the pillar, as though in shock. 'Levi?' he said, rising from his seat and

stepping over to the boy. 'You alright?'

'You-didn't-help-me,' Levi replied, his voice quivering. He continued to stare towards the door. 'I needed you to, but you didn't.'

Seymour gestured towards the table where Barkstripe and Whitespike were watching them. He draped an arm around Levi's shoulders. 'Come, son. Come and sit down.' He gently led Levi to the table, where the boy slumped onto a bench opposite the two badgers. Barkstripe reached across and laid a paw on Levi's hand. This time Levi didn't flinch.

'Don't be hard on thy uncle, lad. Tha's got to realise, if he'd helped, Rasse'd see thee as weak. He'd come at thee again and again.'

'There'd be no let up,' added Whitespike. 'You did well, Levi, you really did. You stood up to him.'

Levi jerked his hand back and leapt up, fear and confusion twisting his features.

'Stood up to him?' he said, his voice breaking. 'But whose side is he on for heaven's sake?' None of the assembly seemed to have a response and Levi glared at each in turn as though searching for an answer. A peace descended on the hall, the only sound being that of the females preparing the evening meal behind the screen – until a further insistent rapping on the door shattered the calm.