

CHAPTER TEN

‘I will NOT leave this village!’ Barkstripe angrily struck the lodge floor with his quarterstaff, silencing those present. The paw holding the long ash staff trembled with emotion. Behind him, the badger chief’s family looked on helplessly as the old badger struggled to deal with Deepdale’s news.

The fox ranger, Seymour and Levi stood together, their expressions grim. Beside them, Nipper and Lapblud rested at the table, listening to the discussion. A dense cloud of chalky white smoke billowed from Nipper’s pipe and drifted slowly towards the rafters.

‘But Chief,’ began Seymour, ‘to keep your people safe, we must leave. Go north. Regroup – and then tackle the invaders when we’re strong enough.’

Barkstripe shook his grizzled head. ‘Nay. If we lose this land, we’ll ne’er be able to recover it.’ He turned towards Deepdale. ‘What exactly did you hear?’

‘Hear? I heard nothin’, as I’ve told you.’ Barkstripe began to turn away. ‘But you don’t understand, Chief’ continued Deepdale quickly, ‘what we saw were enough t’ damn the connivin’ critters.’

Barkstripe looked to his wife for support but she, too, was clearly shocked by the news and stood by the glowing embers of the fire-pit, wringing her paws with worry. The yeasty smell of freshly baked bread permeated the air but, for the time being all thoughts of food were forgotten. Barkstripe sighed wearily before turning back to the ranger.

‘There could’ve been a dozen or more reasons for yon meeting. You’re pluckin’ at straws, Deepdale, and I won’t have my folk leave their hearths

and homes because of your wild notions. Aye, Rasse is a bitter chap, for reasons best known to him, and aye he's gettin' a bit big for his boots but I don't think he'd stoop this low.'

Nipper roused himself slightly and quietly plucked his pipe from his mouth, aiming the stem up at the badger chief.

'Aye, lad – but think on this. If yon meetin' were innocent, why try to kill us, eh?'

An ominous quiet descended over the group. Over by her mother, Berrysap chewed her lip anxiously. Her own information concerning Rasse's suspicious promise to Jillie had failed to convince her father of Rasse's possible plans, but surely now he could see the militia leader's betrayal?

Poppy spotted Berry's unease and wandered over to her. She grasped one of the badger maiden's paws and gave it a comforting squeeze. Meanwhile, Barkstripe glanced again at his wife for encouragement, his old eyes glazing. Cob shrugged and shook her head sadly.

The chief turned back to the others, his shoulders sagging. His natural badger-strength seemed to have abandoned him. Clearly, this was one crisis too many for the careworn chief; he appeared beaten. 'Surely,' he said, more quietly now. 'Rasse can be questioned upon his return.'

'When Rasse returns,' replied Deepdale slowly, unable to keep the frustration from his voice, 'it'll be at the head of a mink army.' He swept his paw wide. 'Then all this'll be lost. And your people – them as ain't killed – they'll be took as slaves.' He slumped onto the bench next to Nipper. 'Can't yer see it?' he added, softly.

They waited for the badger chief's response, but there was none. The door to the lodge remained open following the adventurers' hurried entrance, and the room's lanterns guttered as a cool breeze swept in. Barkstripe continued to lean heavily on his staff, staring at the floor, rocked

by the magnitude of Rasse's treason. Seymour stepped forward.

'With your leave, Barkstripe – I suggest we gather up those remaining militia-'cats. Those that swear loyalty to you can stay, and them as don't are banished from the village. They'll know where to find their leader, of that I have no doubt.'

Deepdale nodded his agreement. 'Aye, and we assemble our own band of loyal volunteers to man the watch towers. They can send scouts back to provide warnin' should ... when an attack comes.'

Levi, who'd remained silent since returning to the village inhaled sharply, galvanised by the ranger's words.

'Signal fires!'

The assembly spun round, surprised at his sudden outburst.

'When the enemy are spotted,' continued Levi, 'the guards light fires at the watchtowers, signalling an attack. It worked for England when the Spanish armada were approaching. Even gave time for Drake to finish his game first.'

Seymour patted Levi's back as he took up the youngster's idea. 'Of course, that's right. That way we're warned within minutes of foes leaving the marsh. Well done, Levi.'

Barkstripe exchanged lingering looks with each of his friends before nodding slowly. 'Very well. But I say again, we're not leavin' this village. We've fled our homes once. This time we fight to the end if we 'ave to.'

Despite suffering the shadow of impending war Cob and Berry, aided by Poppy, produced an excellent supper for the warriors and the assembly struggled to consign thoughts of Rasse's treason to the backs of their minds, at least for the duration of their meal.

Deepdale had chosen a seat between his two stoat friends. The ranger scooped up his final morsel of wild-berry pie. Then, blowing hard, he tossed his wooden spoon into his bowl. Lapblud had already finished and was staring into the fire thoughtfully as he scraped his teeth clean with the narrow blade of his dagger. Meanwhile, Nipper leaned back contentedly, his unlit clay pipe clamped between his jaws once more. Deepdale pushed himself away from the table and laid his paws on the two stoats' shoulders.

'Well, then lads – 'ave you decided?'

'Aye, love,' announced Lapblud after a pause. 'I've nowt spoilin' at home, so figured I'd stay an' lend a paw.' He leaned out and nodded towards Nipper. 'Owd Nipps 'ere – he's goin' home to his missus. That right, Nipper?'

Nipper plucked the pipe from his mouth. 'Aye,' he said simply.

Deepdale slapped his two friends on the back and stood up. 'Take care then, Nipper lad. My respects to Missus Bodkin. I'm sure our paths'll cross again soon.' Then, seeing Seymour had already left the table and was standing waiting for him by the door, the ranger nodded his thanks to Cobb before striding over to join him.

Seymour opened the door for the ranger. 'Right, we'll round up some polecats, shall we?' It was already dark outside, with pinprick stars glinting in the clear sky. Seymour leaned inside and beckoned to Levi and Poppy. Once the four were together he gently pulled the door shut and leaned over to the two children. 'Right you two,' he said lowering his voice, 'make ready your things for a swift departure. And Poppy, suggest to Whitespike and his sister to do likewise. They'll listen to you.'

He stood and looked towards the door, a dark brooding expression clouding his features. 'Things have become desperate,' he said as he pictured the broken badger chief staring blankly at the table top, his meal left untouched. 'It's all down to us now.'

Squatting low on the grassy riverbank Levi launched a flat stone over the water, sending it skimming towards the far side. Behind him Poppy slowly trod the riverside path, deep in thought. Levi sprang up excitedly. 'Fourteen! That's my best ever,' he called, his eyes still on the widening row of ripples spanning the river.

Poppy didn't hear him.

'Fourteen bounces, Pop,' he repeated, somewhat crestfallen that Poppy's attention had been elsewhere. 'Don't tell me you never saw it, I'll never manage that again.'

Poppy glanced up, a distant look in her eyes. 'Do you really think they'll come – the mink, I mean.'

Whitespike stepped out from the cover of nearby trees where he'd been standing with his sister. Having taken Poppy's advice, both badger cubs were in a state of readiness for immediate departure and had exchanged their loose fitting smocks for warm over-shirts and woollen breeches cross-gartered to the knee with linen strips. A leather breastplate distinguished the young male from his sister.

'Oh, they'll come,' he said. His voice was a low grumble, rather like that of his father.

Berrysap stepped onto the path and kicked a clump of grass in frustration. 'Why doesn't father see it?' she said. 'Course they'll come. We should be leaving now – not waiting 'til it's too late.'

Levi joined them, straightening his sword belt. He wasn't sure about the mink but he knew that one day he would be facing Rasse again. Something told him their paths would collide – he only hoped he'd be ready when the time came. His thoughts were suddenly interrupted when

Whitespike stiffened, his paw darting down to his dagger hilt.

‘Shush,’ hissed the badger urgently as he backed away from the path and squatted in the tree cover. The others followed him, looking over their shoulders towards the ford. Levi reached for his sword hilt, his palms suddenly clammy against the soft leather wrapping.

‘What? What did you hear?’

Whitespike shook his head slowly but remained silent, staring towards the rutted trail that led west from the narrow river crossing. Levi was about to ask again when he too heard something. As his mind tried to interpret the sound his eyes darted to a line of trees behind which the trail wound westward. At the ford, two polecat sentries loyal to Barkstripe raised their spears ready.

‘Wheels,’ declared Levi, finally understanding the cause of the noise.

‘Yes, added Poppy, ‘and footsteps – lots of them.’

As Whitespike drew his dagger Berrysap shrunk back into the trees. ‘Surely they wouldn’t raid in daylight,’ she said, her voice quivering. Whitespike tensed, his powerful shoulders bunching. Levi drew his sword. From her position closest to the river path Poppy was the first to see the newcomers.

‘Badgers!’ she cried, stepping out of the undergrowth. ‘And – and stoats, too.’

Berrysap joined her.

‘And weasels and –’ the badger maiden’s breath snagged in her throat. ‘Oh for – oh, just look at them, we must help.’ She launched herself towards the ford as the others stepped onto the path behind her, each staring open-mouthed as a meandering sprawl of travellers shuffled into view.

The sentries lowered their spears and ran forward to help the exhausted animals over the ford, and one by one they splashed wearily through the shallows, stumbling on the slick stones. Some pushed rickety handcarts that

clattered and lurched over the ford, their lofty cargoes of meagre possessions teetering dangerously.

Eager to help, the children hurried towards the strangers who were by then entering the village, guided by the sympathetic sentries. The stooping travellers all bore signs of violence. For some this meant simply torn clothing or clawed fur. Others possessed dreadful, seeping wounds, hastily dressed with strips of cloth torn from their garments. Poppy slowed as she neared the wretched line, raising a hand to her mouth to stifle a sob.

‘You help Whitespike,’ she said, recovering quickly and turning towards the path leading to the Rasse’s lodge. ‘I’ll go to Jilli’s. We’re going to need some medicines. And lots, I’m guessing.’

‘Need any help?’ called Levi, his gaze still on the sorry line of creatures.

‘Prob’ly.’ Poppy was jogging now, glancing over her shoulder as she ran. ‘Meet me there in a few minutes.’

A large badger at the head of the column watched sidelong as Levi, Berry and Whitespike approached. Dried blood matted the fur on top of his head, but unlike most of the other creatures his eyes were not vacant but lit with a dogged determination. ‘Ayup! Young cub,’ he said, signalling Whitespike. ‘It’s Chief Aldersides I seek.’

Whitespike looked up wide-eyed at the powerfully built badger. He was almost as broad as he was tall, heavily built with burly forelegs. A soiled leather apron covered his simple woollen clothing. The badger cub turned to one of the polecat sentries. ‘We’ll take them from here if you wish.’ The polecat sentry nodded in deference, then he and his comrade turned to resume their duty at the ford.

Whitespike quickly introduced the others. Then, shyly reaching for the badger’s paw, he nodded towards Barkstripe’s lodge, the roof of which was just visible through the trees.

‘I’ll take you to him – I’m his son.’

The stocky badger bowed gratefully. 'I'm Bion Lathe, blacksmith of Wormwich – or I were. Evil mink raiders swept in three nights ago – terrible it were, folk didn't stand a chance. Some fled north hoping to reach Monkgate.' He gestured towards the wretched column behind him. 'And we're what's left.'

No further words were exchanged as Whitespike led Bion and the others to the lodge. Hearing their approach, Barkstripe and Seymour appeared at the door, and together they watched in stunned silence as the refugees parked their pathetic handcarts in the yard. Quickly recovering his wits, the badger chief called to his wife.

'Cob – put water on to boil, lots of it – we're goin' t' need it.'

Then, gesturing kindly, he stepped aside allowing the ragged creatures to file into the hall.

Diggle Bristlesides, one of the Skenmarris badgers, looked up and nodded approvingly as his two comrades – one a polecat and the other a stoat – added final touches to the warning beacon.

'Well done, boys,' he called, his gruff voice disturbing a sooty black moorhen. The bird erupted noisily from cover and, with a raucous *chuck, chuck, chuck*, sped over the nearby reeds before dropping into the marsh.

'Don't forget, stack them faggots upright – it's flames we want, not smoke.'

A blunt, buff coloured snout peered over the tower's parapet, whiskers twitching.

'An' what if them mink come's in daylight, Mester Bristlesides?'

'Good question, young Wanbib. Foulson, how's about you tell our young stoat friend 'ere what we do t' make smoke.'

Up in the tower a wiry looking polecat with a fawn coloured eye stripe leaned over the stoat and cuffed him lightly.

‘You daft ape’orth – what you reckon all that green wood we been carryin’ up here were for? Meckin’ withies?’

‘That’s right,’ called the badger. ‘Just toss that on the flames and folk’ll see the smoke for miles. Anyroad, watching you graft has made me famished so you can be coming down now, and we’ll have us some snap.’

The badger turned to face the campfire. A stack of broken planks by the fire was all that was left of the tower’s roof, removed earlier that day to allow construction of the beacon.

Diggle squatted down and prodded the flames thoughtfully as his two comrades clattered down the tower’s ladder to join him.

He’d been more than willing to volunteer for Barkstripe’s hastily formed militia once the chief had explained the problems facing the village. But leading sentry duty at the Wormwich watchtower? Everyone at the muster knew the risks involved with that mission. When the one called Hawkeye had asked for volunteers, Diggle had waited, watching as the unwilling assembly grunted nervously and shuffled their feet. Now, sitting by the fire, the badger’s cheeks flushed with shame as he recalled wishing someone else would step forward. When none did, he knew it was he who must do his duty.

Behind Diggle, the hushed sound of breathing filled the evening air as the reeds swayed in the breeze. He turned to the marsh, his snout twitching at the heavy scent of decay, and wondered if he would ever see his home again.

Sickened by the sight of so much suffering and misery, Levi and Poppy left

the refugees in the care of Seymour and the badgers to get some fresh air outside the hall.

‘Come on, Pop,’ said Levi once they were in the open, ‘let’s have a walk.’ Poppy nodded and together they strolled across the lodge’s yard, through the open gateway and down one of the woodland paths. Side by side and dwarfed by towering fir trees, the pair trudged along silently, their long faces etched with sorrow. After they’d been walking a few minutes they reached a clearing near the edge of the woods. Here, sunbeams streaked down through the overhanging canopy and the citrus tang of pine filled the air. Levi stopped and turned to his sister.

‘I suppose Deepdale told you I killed someone – back in the marsh.’ Poppy shook her head slowly. She was about to reply when Levi continued. ‘It was horrible. Didn’t have time to think on it then – but it’s bugged me since.’

‘You probably had good cause,’ Poppy replied lamely, unable to think of the right words that would console her brother.

Levi stared out at the small field adjoining the woods. Several yards away, in the midst of the field, four badgers hunched over their hoes, singing as they weeded between neat rows of bright green shoots. The words of their song were indistinct, snatched away by the breeze.

‘Remember last time we visited Aunt Eve up in Northumberland?’ said Levi, turning back to his sister. ‘Well, I’ve never told you this before. You and Dad stayed inside while I went out into the yard. A cat had caught a robin – it was playing with it, the hateful creature. Tossing it and bowling the poor thing over and over. I chased the stinkin’ cat away. But the robin lay there, its feathers all ragged like. One wing was broken. A tiny drop of blood oozed from one of its nostrils – I’d never noticed birds’ nostrils ‘til then.’

Poppy watched sadly as tears pooled in the bottom of her brother’s

eyes. But she knew she couldn't interrupt him – she realised this was something he had to say.

'The bird was done for – I could tell that,' continued Levi. 'But I couldn't leave it, see? So I fetched a brick. A big house brick, the ones with three holes in. And as I brought it down as hard as I could onto the robin, it squeaked – really loud. Louder than any noise you'd expect a little bird to make.'

'But you had to do it,' said Poppy, quickly. "'Cruel to be kind," some might say.'

'But I can still hear that squeak. I heard it when I killed the mink – oh, he died without a sound, but as he slid into the swamp it was the poor robin's cry that filled my whole head.'

There was nothing Poppy could say that might cheer her brother. She wanted to tell him that he had no choice – with either the robin or the mink. One had been an act of kindness, while the other was self-defence. Although the statement would be true she knew it wouldn't serve to pull Levi from his anguish. Instead, she plucked a handkerchief from her smock pocket and handed it to him.

In the field beyond, the badger labourers had completed their task. With shouldered hoes, they trudged towards an open gate. As they neared the entrance, one of the animals glanced towards the clearing. Maybe he'd seen Poppy's handkerchief flutter brightly in the sunlight. He waved to the others, before turning to head towards the children.

Levi returned the handkerchief to his sister. 'Thanks, Pop – sorry 'bout the blubbing.'

As Poppy took the cloth from him the badger squeezed noisily between two young conifers into the clearing. 'Sorry, I doesn't mean to scare you,' he said, laying his hoe on the ground. A ratty old hat flopped comically over his ears, its wide brim shadowing his features leaving only a black-tipped

snout protruding. He wiped his paws down the front of his grubby smock and reached out for Levi's hand. Levi blinked in bewilderment as the badger gripped it firmly between his paws and pumped it enthusiastically.

'Fiddlewood Beam's the name, and I'm right glad to make your acquaintance.' Fiddlewood ceased his pumping but continued to hold Levi's hand warmly. 'These be dark days, aye, but you've come to help and I do thank you, young sir.' He dropped Levi's hand and turned to Poppy. 'You must be right proud of him, missy.' So saying, he nodded respectfully at Levi before bending to scoop up his hoe. Then, with a spring in his step he headed down the path towards the village.

Levi stared open-mouthed at the departing animal as Poppy peered sidelong at him, a half smile lifting one corner of her mouth. Eventually, Levi shook his head slowly. All memories of the Robin's plight had vanished, so too had his melancholy. He turned to face his sister as he fought to think of what to say. He opened his mouth to speak but closed it again, not wishing to voice the only thought that came to his mind, for if he was such a hero why did he feel so afraid?

Diggle reached over to the wood pile and carefully selected a narrow piece about three feet long. Resuming his cross-legged pose by the fire he began to whittle the end using a broad bladed dagger.

'Whatcha doin'?' asked Wanbib as the young stoat adopted a similar position by the badger's side.

'Well, if you be wanting toasted cornbread, lad, you'll be wanting something to toast it with – unless you're offering to dangle your snowy-white mitts over yon flames and do it yourself.'

Behind them, Foolsom dug deeply into a kit-bag propped against the

watchtower wall. 'Ayup,' he began as he rummaged in the bag, 'did you pack the – ah, wait a mo – I found it.' The young polecat stood and bounced a small cloth-bound bundle in his paw. 'That's a relief, I thought we'd have to eat old Wanbib here,' he said tossing the bundle into Diggle's lap.

The badger held up his makeshift toasting fork, squinting as he assessed his handiwork. Satisfied, he plucked a chunk of cornbread from Foulson's bundle, impaled it onto the stick and thrust it out over the flames. Wanbib rubbed his paws together eagerly, a spot of drool silvering the corner of the young stoat's mouth. Behind him, Foulson stared out over the darkening marsh. He raised his snout and sniffed the air. A broad necklace decorated with dyed goose quills adorned his long neck. A family heirloom, he hoped it would bring him luck.

'I don't like it,' he said as his swishing tail swept a crescent pattern in the dry earth. 'It's all too quiet out there. Marsh's ain't silent places – it ain't natural.'

Diggle plucked the hot cornbread from the stake and handed it to Wanbib, whose drool was by then threading down onto his jerkin. 'Come and sit you down, my lad. We'll get ample warning before owt comes outta there. Have yourself some of Diggle Bristleside's famous cornbread.'

With a further look towards the swaying reeds, Foulson took his place by Wanbib as Diggle speared another chunk of bread. The polecat remained wary and glanced repeatedly behind him. He slid his tomahawk from his belt and laid the weapon by his side. As the three friends ate their supper night closed in around them. A thin slice of moon gradually climbed into the darkening sky to squint over the distant hills, casting an eerie glow onto the clearing.

Once the meal was over, Diggle tossed his toasting fork into the fire. 'Right lads. Reckon we should be sorting out who's on duty and when. So I'll take first watch, unless you have any – what-the-bloomin'-eck-was-

that?’

All three spun round as a heron hoisted itself noisily from the reed-bed, ghostly pale in the moonlight, its laboured wing beats thrashing the air as the bird slogged to gain altitude. Foulson snatched up his tomahawk and waited, his keen ears twitching. The silence that followed seemed more intense after the unexpected din and, with nerves stretched tight, the three guards peered wild-eyed towards the marsh as they probed the darkness.

Wanbib tugged at the badger’s tunic. ‘Reckon that’s all it were, Diggs? Just a daft heron?’ Diggle nodded slowly. But he continued to peer into the night. Foulson craned his neck towards the marsh.

‘Somethin’s disturbin’ yon reeds.’

‘It’s the breeze,’ Diggle replied, feeling a sudden chill on his neck.

Foulson panted anxiously, his eyes scanning the reed-bed. ‘No boss, breeze’s blowin’ yon way – the reeds are moving this. Besides, they ain’t swayin’ – they’re twitchin’.’

No sooner had Foulson spoken when a moorhen darted upwards, splitting the night with its shrill warning call. This was followed immediately by another.

Diggle burst into action. ‘LIGHT THE BEACON – THEY’RE COMING.’ He spun round, snatched up an unlit torch and plunged it into the flames as a multitude of angry cries rang out over the marsh. The torch flared. Diggle plucked it from the fire and rushed past the whimpering Wanbib towards the tower, thick black smoke swirling behind him.

‘Wanbib, stay wi’ me – Foulson, try an’ hold ‘em off.’

Diggle had not quite reached the tower steps when the flimsy reed grass billowed out like drapes in a storm and a snarling mink and polecat horde surged into the clearing. Wanbib gasped in disbelief. Mesmerised by the charging pack, he staggered backwards, his heels snagging on a plank jutting from the woodpile. His paws windmilled frantically as he tried to

keep his balance but he toppled backwards, landing in an untidy heap behind the pile.

With moonlight flashing coldly on their upraised blades the attackers raced towards the tower on a wide front, howling with blood lust. From his position behind the pack Sable Denbrok, conspicuous in his fur kilt, snarled in fury as he saw Diggle begin to climb the ladder. His eyes darted to the beacon at the top of the watchtower and widened in alarm as he realised the badger's goal.

'Stop the badger!'

By the tower, Foulson dashed to the foot of the ladder and braced himself to meet the advancing onslaught knowing he had to buy Diggle time to light the beacon. Two mink warriors led the pack having covered the distance from the marsh ahead of the others. As they closed on him Foulson drew his lips back revealing razor-sharp teeth, and snarled his defiance. He readied his tomahawk as one of the mink warriors leapt at him, its sword hissing down.

Foulson deftly stepped aside, snatched at the attacker's jerkin and, using the mink's own momentum, slammed the creature into the tower wall, snapping its neck like a piece of dry brushwood. With a flick of his wrist his tomahawk flashed down and the creature lay still. Immediately, the second mink was upon him. Foulson winced as his enemy's sword snagged his sleeve, the blade strangely hot against his skin. He twisted from his foe's deadly embrace, leapt aside and swung again. The tomahawk bit flesh with a sickening *thud*, and a second assailant lay dead.

Above him Diggle scrambled up the rough steps, climbing one handed, his other paw clenched around the sputtering torch. He heard the sounds of conflict below and an intense sadness pricked the back of his eyes for he knew that brave Foulson was trading his own life for the success of their mission. He blinked back tears and forged on, determined not to fail.

At the foot of the steps Foulson desperately plucked his tomahawk from a dead warrior as a swarm of screaming mink enveloped him. The press of snarling bodies forced him to the ground and the pack howled in triumph as they hacked down at the defenceless polecat, every blade finding its mark again and again.

‘LEAVE HIM, GET THE BADGER,’ yelled Sable frantically from the rear. He jabbed his paw furiously towards the top of the tower where Diggle was struggling to haul himself over the parapet, torch held ready to ignite the beacon.

Peltrake Paddledyke’s shaved upper body, tattooed with intricate blue whorls, gave the mink a menacing appearance. A keen warrior in an army in which competition was fierce, he’d long sought an opportunity to impress his leader and so rise through the ranks. He now saw his chance. Upon hearing Sable’s cry, he immediately clambered onto the creature before him and, screaming a grating battle cry, leapt over several others to the ladder. He snatched one of the rungs with one paw, held on tightly and paused fleetingly, glancing upwards as he placed a dagger between his teeth. Then, with the agility of a lizard, he scuttled nimbly upwards.

The stack of faggots loomed enticingly ahead of Diggle as he clawed his way onto the parapet. It had been a tough climb. His breath wheezed painfully in his throat and his weary body begged for rest, but he knew that a pause now would spell failure. Worse, the helpless villagers would have no warning of the assault. He’d heard the mink’s victorious shrieks below and choked in horror as he realised it meant the slaughter of his young friend.

Leaving his foot-paws dangling over the edge of the tower, Diggle selected a gap between the stick bundles and readied the torch. Before he could toss the flaming brand, white-hot pain flared in his right leg. He roared in agony. Unbearable pain ballooned over his entire lower body as

he felt razor-sharp claws gouging his other leg, hooking into his flesh and dragging him back. The only weapon he had was the torch and he lashed out with it, its flames painting a burning arc in the night sky as it flashed wide of his attacker, shielded by the lip of the parapet. He continued to claw frantically at the watchtower roof, desperate to close the distance between himself and the waiting firewood. All the while his attacker stabbed repeatedly from below, sapping what little strength remained in the badger's body.

Peltrake's blood-splashed muscles bunched as he slowly dragged Diggle from the unlit beacon. Then, with a vicious snarl, he snatched at the badger's jerkin and hauled backwards.

Diggle's insides heaved as he felt himself dragged from the roof, and he stared in horror as he tumbled away from his goal. He snatched blindly for the ladder, the torch sputtering in his other paw. Determined not to fail his friends he summoned what strength he had left and, with one final effort, he swept the torch upward – and released.

The spinning torch whooshed as it rose sluggishly above the parapet, casting flickering highlights onto the stacked bundles. It stalled in mid-air and seemed to hang there impossibly, before thudding onto the roof and bouncing uselessly in a shower of sparks over the edge.

Peltrake thumped the air in triumph as, below him, the mink and polecat horde danced and cheered wildly. It was the last sound poor Diggle Bristlesides heard as his bloodied and torn body crashed onto their upraised spears.