

## CHAPTER ELEVEN

Outside Barkstripe's lodge, beyond the light from the door lantern and shadowed by the oak tree, Levi and Poppy shared a seat on the old sawhorse. They stared blankly at the confusion of handcarts littering the yard. Levi stroked the soft leather binding of his sword hilt as he struggled to make sense of the badger labourer's words. Yes, he did feel proud some of the villagers viewed him as a champion; regarded as someone of value, aiding their cause. But still reeling from the brutality of the skirmish on the marsh, and uncomfortable at taking another creature's life, their dependence upon him lay heavily on his troubled mind. Poppy interrupted his thoughts.

'Those poor people,' she said nodding towards the hall, where Barkstripe and his family were still caring for the refugees.

'Oh, they're being fed and such – they'll be okay,' replied Levi, miserably.

Poppy spun round, gawking in disbelief. 'Oh, Levi, you heartless creature – the things they've been through. And they've lost their homes, too.'

Levi sighed and turned to his sister, his eyes vacant. 'In case you've forgot, we're about to lose ours. And who's going to give us soup and stuff when we do? Who's going to dress *our* wounds and mop *our* brows? No one, that's who.' He kicked his legs and jumped down. 'Anyhow, what time's this damn meeting? Folk have been arriving all evening, it seems. It must be starting soon.'

Poppy was about to reply when Jilli Dunbar entered the yard from their right and stepped shyly towards the hall. Her pretty frock coat was the rich red of hawthorn berries. Slung over her back was a chestnut duffel bag almost as large as she was. Poppy slipped off the sawhorse and strolled over to greet her.

Jilli paused mid-step and inhaled sharply, sweeping a paw up to her mouth. 'Oh, it's you, Poppy. You gave me a start, so you did.' She unslung her pack, dropping it to the ground, where it landed with a dull thump. 'Can you fetch Miss Berry for me? I'll wait outside, if I may.'

Poppy gave the young maiden a polite smile, nodded and went inside.

Left behind with Jilli, Levi hummed tunelessly for a moment, scuffing his boots in the dirt. Then, not feeling in the mood to engage in conversation with this stranger, he muttered an excuse and followed his sister into the dark and gloomy hall.

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It was several minutes before Berry stepped out into the half-light of the yard. She appeared to have aged, the overhead lantern casting dark rings under her eyes. She stared dully towards Jilli as she wearily swiped a blood-flecked paw across her brow. She blinked, a faint spark of recognition flickering in her eyes.

'Jilli,' she said, trying to instil a cheeriness to her voice. 'Poppy said I had a visitor but didn't say who.' Berry embraced the young polecat fondly. As she did so she spotted Jilli's duffel bag. She stepped back, confusion creasing her features. 'You're packed, but I thought –'

'I heard, about ... things,' Jilli said sadly, her hurt and sense of betrayal preventing her from even mentioning Rasse's name. 'You were right, so you

were. I was no more than his captive slave, I just didn't see it.'

Berrysap held Jilli at paw's length and her eyes dropped to the polecat's bare throat. 'Your necklace ... that lovely golden torq –'

'Was a present from him,' interrupted Jilli. 'I realised – too late, I know – his gifts were no more than spoils of his wicked deeds. Sure and I want no part of it.'

'S-so, you're leaving us?' stammered Berry, her voice edged with disappointment.

It was Jilli's turn to be stumped and she blinked in bewilderment. 'I thought we all were. Why, I guessed perhaps you'd put a word in for me. So as I might tag along.'

Berry leaned over and hoisted Jilli's pack onto her own broad back before reaching for the polecat's paw once again. 'Nothing's decided yet, but you're welcome anyhow – and there's no need for good words. You're one of us.' She led the polecat maiden towards the lodge door. As she reached for the handle she let out a slight gasp and turned sharply. 'What about your chickens?' she asked.

'Oh them – set them free, so I have. They'll be just fine in yonder woods. B'sides, I thought it best – me knowing what it's like to live in a prison and all.'

Berry opened the door and stepped aside. The air from within was warm and welcoming. Flickering firelight cast dancing shadows around the walls as hushed murmurings resonated through the crowded room. 'Come on in – it seems the meeting's about to start.'

'And which way do you think it'll go, now?'

Berry chewed her lip as she considered her reply. 'No idea,' she said. 'But if we don't leave soon I reckon we'll all be getting a taste of life as slaves. Or worse.' She followed Jilli inside and closed the door slowly

behind her.

High above the hall, the moon glimmered coldly. A thin curved blade in the night sky.

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Wanbib lay shivering within the woodpile, his ears straining to detect any noise. The plucky stoat had buried himself within the stack, using the din of battle to mask the sound of sliding timber as he'd slowly dragged planks over his body. Nearby, although now little more than glimmering embers, the nearby fire continued to throw out a warm glow. Wanbib's trembling was nothing to do with the night temperature, but the trauma at what he'd seen and heard – and a lingering fear the enemy may have left scouts posted at the watchtower.

The stoat's ears twitched fitfully, but the clearing remained quiet, with only the occasional sound of spent wood settling in the fire to disturb the silence. A jagged spar pressed painfully into his side and he was sure that if he didn't move now he'd surely be scarred for life. He reached up slowly for one of the planks, cautiously curling his paw around it to get a firm hold. As he was about to slide the piece away a loud shriek echoed out over the marsh. Wanbib yanked back his paw, dislodging the timber, which clattered noisily down the pile. He clamped his paws over his mouth to stifle a sob and waited, his eyes scrunched shut, as a shroud of silence descended over the clearing once more.

He slowly opened his eyes. The displaced wood had opened a large gap, and the thin shard of moon shone down, silvering the edges of the timber and bleaching colour from the surroundings. 'Well if they didn't 'ear that, they won't 'ear nowt,' he muttered to himself. Then, bracing himself,

he kicked the remaining planks away. He poked his snout into the air and sniffed. The scent of cut pine hung sweetly over the woodpile. Finally satisfied he was alone, Wanbib extracted himself from the timber and arched his sore back, a pained expression twisting his features. He looked towards the tower.

What appeared to be two piles of rags lay untidily on the ground, one sprawled at the foot of the ladder, the other several feet away. He approached the nearest mound, and his throat constricted as he saw among the mass of slashed, blood-soaked rags the familiar grey hairs of his friend, Diggle. He recoiled in revulsion, blinking rapidly, as he tried to prevent his mind taking in the gruesome details of what lay before him. 'Oh, no-o!' he cried, his shrill cry piercing the night.

He peered around him, fear coiling his insides. Then, breathing deeply, he glanced down at his friend once more. Diggle's lifeless eyes stared back at him, their spark of vitality gone, leaving them dull like stones on a riverbed. Wanbib turned away. Diggle's torch lay nearby, smouldering still, its flame extinguished by its impact with the ground. He turned his gaze upward. The beacon remained unlit. A low growl issued from his throat as he gritted his jaw – a steely determination tightening his features. He knew what he must do.

'Big mistake, Mister Mink – leavin' yon stack like that.'

Snatching up the smouldering brand he rushed it to the fire and thrust it into the embers. His heart fluttered as the remnants glowed, then flickered and sparked.

'Take hold, TAKE HOLD!' he urged, his whole body trembling once more, this time not through fear but determination. After what seemed an age, the remains of the torch flared.

'YES!'

He twisted around and dashed for the ladder, his mouth set in a grim line. He carefully negotiated the crumpled bodies around the ladder's base before clambering upward, his wide eyes fixed on the guttering flames. Breathing heavily, he climbed onto the parapet. Once there he scampered across the roof and stabbed the torch into the waiting stack.

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Levi had never seen Barkstripe's hall so crowded. Dusty spars of lamplight slanted across the smoky room, scattering shadows that flowed and surged over the rush-covered floor. The long table, occupied by the Wormwich refugees, had been moved to the foot of the dais. Behind it, like grim statues, Barkstripe, Seymour and Deepdale stood on the platform surveying the proceedings. The villagers of Skenmarris packed into the remaining area, some seated by the fire, others finding what space they could.

Levi shuffled back to join Poppy by one of the pillars. As he neared the pillar the gossamer threads of a spider's web drifted across his face, like the caress of a cat's whiskers. He brushed it away with the back of his hand. 'Guess here's where we discover our fate, eh Pop?'

Poppy shrugged. 'I shouldn't worry too much. Barkstripe isn't keen on leaving, but to stay would be suicide. There's plenty here as can persuade him that leaving's the only real option. That blacksmith from Wormwich, for instance – he should put forward a reasonable argument.' She nodded to where Bion Lathe was rising from his position at the head of the long table. The burly badger clattered his empty beaker onto the table, silencing the nervous murmurings that resonated around the hall.

'I say you get out while you've the chance.' He waved his ham-like paws to curb the many attempts to interrupt his speech. 'Aye, aye – I know

you don't want t' leave your homes but you're forgetting, good people, we've seen what them loathsome mink can do.' He gestured to his friends seated by him. 'And right terrible it is, too.' Around the table grizzled heads bobbed gravely.

On the platform, Barkstripe thudded his staff down. 'And thar's forgetting, Mester Lathe, there be some here as can remember all too well being turfed from our homes once before.' Prompted by Barkstripe's comment, Bullyrag Hoarhide stepped forward into the lamplight. Levi felt sure the old badger's hair had greyed since their meeting in his garden three weeks ago.

'I'm with Chief Aldersides,' began Bullyrag. 'I were at wuh-Withy Lea, too, an' I say this time we meck a stand.' At this, more grumblings flared around the hall, some quite heated as villagers began to face off, arguing among themselves. The blacksmith swung his beaker once more, clattering it onto the table.

'Aye, and it were tough, no doubt – but you were lads then, both of you – it's different now.' Bion jabbed a paw towards the side of the hall where several sick refugees lay, wrapped in blankets. Some, their fur scuffed and matted, shivered feverishly while others stared silently at the roof beams. 'Now you can prevent that sort of torment being wreaked on your own people.'

The room fell silent. Poppy turned to Levi. 'That should do it,' she whispered.

'Dunno so much.' Levi's eyes were on Bullyrag. Despite the poor light, Levi saw the old badger tremble with passion.

'Now listen, young fuff-feller,' said Bullyrag, addressing the brawny blacksmith. 'First thing I did here were buh-bury me old mum – even afore I huh-had a roof o'er my head. And I'm not leavin' her.'

Poppy had heard enough. She stepped determinedly into the hall.

‘Leave it, Pop,’ said Levi as he made a vain grab for her arm. Undeterred, Poppy sauntered over to Bullyrag, her ponytail switching. The old badger’s eyes were frosted with tears as Poppy gently laid a hand on Bullyrag’s chest. An expectant hush filled the hall.

‘This is where your mum is,’ she said. ‘In your heart. Not some cold old grave in a garden.’ She lifted her free hand to her own chest. ‘My mum’s in here, too,’ she added, with a wobble in her voice.

Levi swallowed, trying to free the lump that had suddenly risen to his throat. He stepped away from the pillar into the light. ‘Poppy’s right,’ he said, joining his sister. ‘A village isn’t the buildings – they’re just timber and clay.’ He swept his arm round the room. ‘*You* are the village, all of you.’ He looked up to the platform, his eyes meeting the badger chief’s. ‘And home is where your family and friends are. It’s where you find happiness.’

A soft clapping split the silence that followed, and Berry stepped between the children, wrapping her paws about their waists. ‘They’re right,’ she said. ‘And besides – if we don’t leave now, we may as well all dig our graves.’

At the main table, Barkstripe glanced over to the stooping figure of his wife, where she remained among the poorly refugees, ready to administer to their needs. They exchanged neither words nor signs but, after a moment, Barkstripe nodded in understanding.

‘Aye, aye,’ he said, softly.

Before the badger chief could continue, a commotion in the yard outside drew everyone’s attention, and a multitude of frightened faces turned towards the door. From his seat by the entrance Whip Fointiw blinked nervously towards the platform. Barkstripe signalled with the tip of his staff towards the door and Whitespike darted across the hall to join Whip, one



paw wrapped around his dagger hilt. 'It's alright, Whip,' he said, trying to reassure the trembling weasel. 'Let's see what's causin' the hullabaloo, shall we?'

No sooner had the badger cub pulled open the door than a willowy polecat with honey coloured face-band stumbled down into the hall, fighting for breath.

The assembled villagers gaped wide-eyed as the exhausted creature picked himself up from the floor, brushing grubby paws down his leather leggings, which he wore cross-gartered with red linen stuffed into fur boots. Panting furiously, he reached up and removed his iron helm, upon which hung a spectacle type face guard. The creature blinked as its dark, feline eyes adjusted to the lamplight.

A voice called out from the back of the hall. 'Ayup, it be Foulsum Fleck.'

'Weren't he on watchtower duty?' cried another.

At that, everyone began talking at once. Murmurings became mutterings, which in turn became shouts as everyone tried to talk over their neighbour and the hall trembled from the din. Ignoring the rumpus, Deepdale stepped lightly off the platform and hurried to the door, weaving his way between the jabbering villagers.

'It's not Foulsum,' he called, silencing the gathering. 'It's his brother. What news, Hopsack?' Hopsack leaned heavily on the ranger as he struggled to speak between ragged gasps for air.

'Ah, beggin' pardon – heesh ... Mester Deepdale, but the beacon's – heesh ... alight.'

Deepdale glanced quickly to the platform, where Barkstripe and Seymour stared in mute disbelief towards the struggling polecat.

'Ran ... all the way from yon ridge ... I have.'

Deepdale turned back to Hopsack and placed a paw urgently on the

creature's heaving shoulder. 'Aye, lad, good job – but tell me now, which one's alight – could you tell?'

Hopsack blinked in surprise at the ranger, his jaw dropping slightly.

'All of 'em – they're all lit.'

The sound of the fire suddenly seemed loud in the crowded hall as those assembled stared in dumbstruck horror, their faces glazed with shock. Deepdale reached for his sword and spun round to face the others.

'Seymour, Levi, to me, quickly!'

Already, Lapblud Slimfitch had dashed to the ranger's side, his own weapon drawn. One of the villagers shrieked hysterically.

'THEY'RE COMING!'

The frantic cry panicked the assembly, triggering pandemonium. In the space of a few seconds the orderly gathering became an uncontrollable mob as frightened creatures rushed this way and that, wailing in terror.

Barkstripe beat a loud tattoo on the floor with his staff. 'ENOUGH!'

The effect was immediate, silencing the crowd. Scores of heads turned towards the dais, nostrils quivering, ears twitching. Satisfied he'd gained everyone's attention, Barkstripe continued. 'Good folk of Skenmarris,' he said, his shoulders sagging as he leaned heavily on his staff. 'I want you all to return to your lodges.'

Poppy shook her head slowly. 'But surely ...' She began softly as she stared open-mouthed towards the badger chief. But Barkstripe hadn't finished.

'Gather your effects – essentials only, mind.' The old badger's voice cracked as he struggled to continue. 'Them as have handcarts, share space with thy neighbours. We meet in the clearing – at dawn, no later. Dress warmly, for we may have a long ways to go.'

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Rasse Rankwolf stepped aside from the path and skipped up onto a grass tussock. From there he watched in disgust as a raggedy line of his militia-cats lumbered by, headed towards the dawn, their chests heaving like bellows. To the west, orange-streaked clouds reflected the distant signal fires.

‘C’mon, ladies! Pick them feet up – unless you want a welcoming party waiting for you.’

Vare Mittgild peeled out from the line and sloped back to join the militia leader. ‘S’no good, boss – lads’re about pooped. They need a rest.’ He painfully eased his armour away from his neck where it had chafed his skin. Rasse glared at his number two. Then, without blinking, he seized Vare by the throat and squeezed. Vare’s eyes looked ready to pop from his head as the sorry creature gagged for air.

‘Now look here, jelly-head, let me tell you what pooped is,’ snarled Rasse, snout-to-snout with his second in command. ‘Pooped is what they’re gonna be if them blinkin’ badgers have time to prepare themselves. When our boys get a foot of cold steel in their bellies – that’s when they’ll be pooped.’ Rasse released his grip and angrily flung Vare from him. ‘Now, get the lazy slobs moving. On the double.’

As Vare staggered back to his place a large mink troop brought up the rear of the column, jogging two abreast. Many had stiffened their head-fur with mud, wearing it spiked and laced with feathers. Each warrior also sported war paint – stripes, swirls and rings – daubed onto their faces. The effect was chilling. As they neared Rasse, a harsh call rang out from the rear, halting them.

‘Oh, what now?’ muttered Rasse under his breath when he saw Sable

Denbrok striding towards him. The mink leader had also painted his face, and two white stripes ran from his black nose tip to his ears, giving him a badger-like appearance. Rasse snorted in contempt.

‘Careful there mate,’ he said, sneering at the mink leader’s face. ‘I might mistake you for one o’ them – end up stickin’ you.’ In a flash, Sable’s curved sword was out of its sheath, its razor-sharp tip pricking Rasse’s twitching belly.

‘Ach, you too slow – you need to be quick to stick Sable Denbrok. Maybe Sable he stick the ‘cat, ya?’ He re-sheathed his sword. The mink’s freshly plaited whiskers flicked as he sniggered wickedly. ‘What the problem, anyhow?’

‘No problem,’ growled Rasse, stony-faced. Sable stared at him, his lip curling menacingly as he waited for an explanation. Rasse sighed and jabbed a paw towards his hobbling militia. ‘Lads want a stop is all. I said no, of course.’

‘Why?’

‘Why what? Why do they want to stop, or why did I say “no”?’ Sable remained impassive, his eyes narrowing at Rasse’s insolence. Rasse blinked stupidly at the mink, then rolled his eyes. ‘Why? ‘Cause we need to get there sharpish, that’s why?’ he said, adopting a superior tone.

The jay feathers, stitched into Sable’s coat, fluttered in the breeze as the mink leader continued to hold Rasse’s gaze a moment. ‘Ah, think I see now,’ he said, adopting a sarcastic tone. ‘You want them so whacked they can’t use their weapons when they get there, ya?’

‘Wha –?’

Sable’s eyes narrowed. ‘You halt them, now,’ he said, grinding the words out between his teeth. Rasse stared open-mouthed at him, aware that a reversal of his earlier order would humiliate him.

‘No.’

Rasse’s reply was still in the air between them when Sable demonstrated his speed once again, batting Rasse’s face with one cobra-swift paw, his claws etching bloody lines down the militia leader’s raw – and still painfully sore – scar.

‘Ya, you will I think,’ spat Sable dangerously, keeping his cold eyes on Rasse’s own, before nodding to where a thin, grey line lay on the eastern horizon. ‘Rest your troops – we attack at dawn.’

Massaging his snout with one grubby paw, Rasse shook his head, bemused by Sable’s apparent change of strategy. ‘Alright mate, don’t get a strop on. But the element of surprise –’

‘Is gone, stupid – you saw der fires. Now we use fear. Let badgers sweat, I think – then we attack.’

Rasse’s mouth slowly curled in a crooked smile, like paper charring in a fire. He called the change of order to an amazed Vare, then turned back to Sable, chuckling gleefully.

‘By, you’re a right evil tyke, Mister Denbrok, and no mistake,’ he said, almost sounding respectful. He peered wistfully over his left shoulder, eastward towards a dark line of trees in the distance. ‘Aye, there they’ll be – I can just imagine ‘em, belting around like bloomin’ headless chickens.’

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A score of blackbirds heralded the new day, their warbling songs resonating through the woodland as dawn’s pale light filtered through the trees, chasing away shadows and diluting lodge-gate lanterns’ glow. The clearing outside Barkstripe’s hall was a jumble of overloaded handcarts, around which stood a crowd of poker-faced villagers, waiting for the order to leave.

Badgers, polecats, weasels and stoats gathered in near silence. A distraught mother, her own eyes bloodshot with grief, quickly shushed her snuffling nipper, while others stood impassively around her, staring blankly into the distance. The time for talking was over. Tears had been shed. It was time to move on.

In the yard outside the hall, Levi proudly watched as the few remaining Wormwich invalids were gently laid onto what appeared to be long, triangular stretchers. Bullyrag wandered over to him, his overshirt billowing in the stiffening breeze. The old badger's sorrow at leaving his home appeared to have been replaced with a steely acceptance.

'Well done, young fuff-feller,' he said, fondly slapping a hefty paw on Levi's back. He nodded towards one of the stretchers. 'Watcha say that contraption's cuh-called again?'

'A travois,' Levi replied. His blonde hair, grown long during his time in Caellfyon, was now tied back in a ponytail secured by a leather strip. Into this he'd now strung a pair of kestrel feathers. They hung down his back, their mottled brown colouring matching perfectly his warm, woollen overshirt.

'Back where I come from,' continued Levi, 'people known as Red Indians used them for carrying their homes when moving from one area to another.'

Bullyrag pursed his lips and nodded thoughtfully. 'Used? Yer mean they duh-don't now?'

'No, they were robbed of their lands and driven onto something called reservations. Camps.'

'Why, that's tuh-terrible. Such inventive folk an' all. What drove 'em out? Cruel invaders, like the mink?'

Levi nodded as he considered the irony of it all. Here they were, fleeing

from thieving, land-hungry raiders in Caellfyon, adopting an idea from a native people who themselves were cruelly treated by settlers in his own world. 'Yeah, you could say,' he said.

The lodge door creaked open and Poppy stepped into the yard, her arm around Berry's shoulder. She fired a crooked smile at her brother, then looked away quickly. Levi guessed she had been crying. The polecat maiden, Jilli, and her little friend Whip followed them outside. All were now attired in warm woollen breeches and pastoral coloured over-shirts. Aside from Jilli, who continued to wear her red frock coat, they also wore plaid cloaks, secured at the shoulder by large clasps or brooches. Bullyrag took a deep breath.

'Oh well, fuff-feller, looks like we're off.'

Levi turned to him and, suddenly filled with compassion for the ageing creature, grasped his paw in both hands. 'Sorry about your mum, I really am.'

Bullyrag nodded gratefully. 'Aye.'

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Barkstripe Aldersides leaned heavily on his staff as he led Cob out of the hall. The old couple's paws were wrapped about one another's waists and it was difficult to see who was supporting who. Levi felt the colour rise to his cheeks at the sight of the tragedy unfolding. He stooped, angrily snatched up his bedroll and slung it over his shoulder. Then, with his sword slapping on his thigh, he stalked towards the clearing, where Deepdale stood alone, a halo of pipe smoke swirling about his head. The ranger gazed towards the ford as his thick, chestnut brush snaked in the air behind him. Levi joined him, looking quickly around the clearing.

‘Where’s Lapblud,’ he said.

‘Yonder.’

Levi followed Deepdale’s gaze. On the far side of the ford the stoat tracker stood tall on a grassy mound staring westwards. Deepdale plucked the pipe from his mouth and turned to the young boy. ‘I don’t like this delay. We ought t’ be well gone afore now.’

As if in response to Deepdale’s concern, Barkstripe and Cob shuffled into the clearing, their appearance triggering a rumble of expectant mutterings from the assembled villagers. Together, they slowly steered through the throng, giving a sympathetic nod here, or a hug there, until they were at the head of the untidy column. Levi strained to hear the old badgers’ words as they spoke softly to those around them.

‘What’re they saying?’

‘Dunno,’ snapped Deepdale. ‘I know what it ought to be, though – hello, what’s up?’

Levi spun round to see what had alarmed the ranger. Lapblud was no longer on the mound, but splashing towards them through the ford, his paws waving frantically. At that moment, Poppy, Berry and the others joined them, with Seymour and Whitespike close behind. Seymour’s eyes widened as he realised immediately that something was wrong.

‘What is it?’ he asked urgently as he approached the fox ranger.

Deepdale pursed his lips and shook his head. ‘Lapblud’s seen summat – my guess is we’ve got company.’ He turned as Lapblud trotted towards them, soaked to the waist and struggling for breath. ‘What’s up, mate? Trouble?’ He batted downwards with his paw. ‘But keep it low – we don’t wanna be spookin’ folks, do we now?’

Lapblud paused for breath as he glanced around the small group. ‘The swines’re comin’.’



Deepdale leaned over the stoat, placing his body between his friend and the crowd behind him. 'Many?' he asked, his voice a whisper.

'Scores of 'em.'

'How long, yer reckon?'

'About half a mark, if we're lucky.'

A nearby weasel family turned frightened faces towards them as Berry began to whimper. Poppy hugged the young cub close in an effort to calm her. Deepdale addressed Seymour.

'There's maybe time if we move now. If we don't we'll be slaughtered where we stand.'

Seymour nodded. He swept his cloak back behind his scabbard and strode across the clearing, picking his way around the handcarts. His urgency attracted several troubled stares and Levi watched closely as his uncle consulted with the badger chief. He didn't have time to witness Barkstripe's reaction as Deepdale grabbed his shoulder and steered him back towards the lodge.

'Come, Levi. We must help with the sick.'

Deepdale and Levi sprinted into the yard where the ranger sought out the Wormwich blacksmith, one of several badgers tasked with helping the sick onto stretchers. The ranger strode over to him. 'Going to have to hurry you. How many more?'

The blacksmith straightened slowly, rubbing his paws down his cloak. 'That's the last.'

Deepdale quickly surveyed the scene. Each of the triangular stretchers was now occupied. They'd been hastily built by Bullyrag during the night using long spars, hemp rope and woollen blankets. At the apex of each, lay a further coil of rope. Deepdale pointed to one of these.

'The things're hauled using them, I take it?'

Bion pursed his lips and nodded. 'They are.'

'An' you have enough folk willing to do the hauling?'

'More'n enough.'

Deepdale followed Bion's glance to where a group of stocky badgers watched them from the lodge door. One of them was Fiddlewood Beam. Spotting Levi, he raised a paw to the limp brim of his hat. Levi nodded back, politely. Deepdale turned and reached out to shake paws with the blacksmith.

'Very well, Mister Lathe. Get 'em up then, quick as you can – and good luck.'

As Deepdale was leading Levi away, Bion called out instructions to the waiting stretcher-bearers. At this, Fiddlewood breathed a sigh of relief and nudged his neighbour. 'At last, the waitin's over, come on chaps.'

As one, the badgers stepped into the rope coils and draped them over their sturdy shoulders, lifting one end of the stretcher. Their burdens secure, the burly bearers leaned forward, their makeshift harnesses taking up the strain. Then, at a signal from Bion, they forged towards the clearing, the spars ploughing deep ruts into the soil.

On the move at last, Barkstripe and Cob headed the untidy sprawl of fleeing villagers as they wound their way westward along the woodland trails. Either side of them, stout, lime-green beeches muffled the sound of slowly tramping feet. The overloaded handcarts clattered and swayed over the uneven ground, their wheels wobbling and groaning under the strain.

When they reached the woodland edge, Barkstripe halted the line. Ahead lay a rolling plain of coarse-grass and heather, gilded with an occasional gorse bush. Here, the pungent woodland aroma gave way to the spicy scent of the open moor. The sun slowly peered over the horizon ahead casting a warm blush over the landscape while, either side of the path,

columns of midges danced in the slanting beams of a new day.

Some creatures craned their necks, curious as to why they'd halted. Most remained impassive, standing silently on the path, while above them flocking crows wheeled noisily, gathering in number before heading out to their feeding grounds.

'Why's he stopped?' asked Levi, peering ahead.

Levi and Poppy had grouped together with Berrysap, Jilli and Whip towards the rear of the file. Their position, behind the line of stretchers, was several yards ahead of Deepdale, who brought up the rear with Seymour and Lapblud.

'It's the village boundary,' offered Berry. 'Once we're on the moor, we'll have truly left home.'

Deepdale and the others joined them. 'Aye, and we ought to be getting a move on.'

Whip turned and blinked up at him. 'Will we be truly safe in yon fen, Mester Deepdale,' he said, nervously pawing the hem of his woollen cloak. Deepdale reached out and tousled the weasel's furry mop.

'In truth I ain't sure, lad. Depends on whether we're follered'

Lapblud stepped up and patted Whip's back. 'Doesn't thar worry, tyke. One thing thee can be sure on – thee'll be a darn sight safer theer as 'ere.'

'Hah! Well put,' said Deepdale, chuckling. 'You can always trust a stoat to tell it as it is – feel better now, Whip?'

Before the young weasel – whose expression remained as troubled as before – was able to reply, Seymour pointed towards the head of the column. 'Look lively, it appears we're off.'

The sorry line slowly filed out of the woodland edge and out onto the rugged moor. Here, the ground was littered with tussocks and peppered with potholes. The handcart wheels complained loudly.

‘Can’t see them holding out,’ said Levi, nodding to where the wheels of one cart pitched and swayed at crazy angles.

‘Oh, but they must,’ wailed Berry. ‘How’ll we carry our stuff, else?’

Poppy hugged the anxious badger cub close. ‘We’ll manage, sweetie – just you see.’

The party were less than half a mile from the woods, navigating their way between gorse bushes, when Jilli let out a wail. Instantly, Levi spun round in time to see the polecat maiden stumble sideways into one of the shrubs, her red frock coat flapping. He made a grab for her, snatching a flailing paw as she fell.

‘Here, you okay?’ he asked, as he carefully extracted the laughing Jilli from the gorse’s dagger-like barbs.

‘Sure, but I’m fine,’ she said, blinking her large brown eyes in thanks. ‘Though a little discomfited, maybe.’ She brushed herself down then trailed Levi as he rushed to catch the others.

In their haste to re-join the file they’d failed to see the torn piece of berry-red embroidered hem impaled on a thorn, where it flapped and fluttered like a signal pennant in the quickening breeze.