

Boddaert's Magic Fire Rock

Peter Barns

Published by Boddaert Books at Smashwords

Copyright 2011 Peter Barns

Smashwords Edition, License Notes.

This ebook is licensed for your personal enjoyment only. This ebook may not be re-sold or given away to other people. If you would like to share this book with another person, please purchase an additional copy for each recipient. If you're reading this book and did not purchase it, or it was not purchased for your use only, then please return to Smashwords.com and purchase your own copy. Thank you for respecting the hard work of this author.

This novel is a work of fiction. The names, characters and events portrayed are the work of the author's imagination. Any resemblance to actual persons, living or dead, is coincidental.

to Sheree
-for her help and inspiration-

Carol, Colin, Donna, Eric
-because there's a little bit of each inside-

and Simone
-for the endless cups of coffee-

Chapter 1

Brock stumbled to a halt beneath the full moon, staring at the view. His breath faltered and his heart raced, but whether from the exertion of his hard climb through the Brockenhurst Mountains, or the result of the scene spread out in the valley below, he was not sure. Brockenhurst Forest at last; the place of magical promises, and source of all knowledge and wisdom. And nestled within its protective environment, Brockenhurst Sett; birthplace of Boddaert, the greatest Teller of all time and Father of the race.

As Brock's eyes ranged across the forest below, his excitement mounted and he sang a sonnet to calm himself. Letting the tensions flow from his body, his heart slowed, keeping pace with the simple rhythms of the song. His thoughts turned to the teachings of The Way and he allowed its perfection to refresh his tired muscles.

Brock was the latest in a line of Tellers that stretched back into the mists of time, his lineage boasting such names as Evaert and Char, both still talked about on hot summer-cycles, when the crickets sang their songs of lust. He studied the rocky mountain slope for the easiest descent into the valley. To the north, a tall escarpment brought the steady march of the trees to an abrupt halt, and here the only relief from the stark granite wall was a gigantic, flat-topped rock, thrusting its way up out of the canopy. Regular in shape, sides strangely smooth, with little evidence of weathering, its top as flat as a pool of water reflecting the moonlight in dazzling sparkles of brightness. Reaching into his memory, Brock summoned its name— Fire Rock. Laughing aloud, pleased that he had reached the end of his journey at last, he set out on the descent into Brockenhurst Valley.

*

The stuttering cry of a magpie carried on the gentle breeze blowing in from the south. The trek down from the mountains had been hard, at times dangerous, but Brock stood now on a wide path amongst the hoary trees of the old forest, his eyes widening as he took in the scene. A vole flicked across the damp forest floor, almost indistinguishable from the dead brown leaves, stirring Brock into motion. He had rested long enough; inactivity was allowing unpleasant memories to stir. He rubbed the wound on his leg, trying to suppress the echoes of his dying sister's screams, but no matter how hard he tried, he couldn't stop the memories flooding his mind.

*

The fire had been swift and savage, burning everything in its path, the flames jumping from grass to bush, from bush to tree, too fast to outrun. And with the crackling and roaring came another unforgettable sound: the screams of the dying. The thick acrid smoke had coiled its oily tentacles into the deepest sleeping chambers, suffocating those not already overwhelmed by the flames, and only Brock's knowledge of The Way had saved him. He was the sole survivor, and that had left him with a feeling of deep shame.

Since starting out on his journey, Brock had reproached himself many times. After all, he was a Teller of The Way, the Keeper of the History; trained to predict the future and read the past, and yet the fire had come as a complete surprise to him. Standing in the moon-dappled clearing, fighting his feelings of shame, Brock tried to push his tortured thoughts aside, while overhead, two starlings watched him warily from their nest, wondering what threat he might pose.

Brock shook his head irritably, muttering, "Enough of this. I must find the Custodians."

*

Starting out along the path once more, Brock had only taken a few steps when a loud voice hailed him.

"And who is this dreamer? Certainly an ill-mannered landloper to ignore me so diligently!"

Brock turned, studying the old badger standing fore-square on the path behind him. The boar nodded a greeting, settling his plump body into a more comfortable position, causing the moonlight to sparkle from the silver hairs sprinkled liberally throughout his coat.

Lowering his snout in respect, Brock hailed the stranger. "Greetings friend. Forgive me, I was lost in my thoughts and didn't see you there. I'm looking for Brockenhurst Sett. Can you tell me if this is the right path?"

The old badger raised his head and with half-closed eyes nodded, as though reluctant to share such information.

"Indeed it is. But tell me, what business takes you there?"

Brock narrowed his eyes and the boar dipped his head.

"Ah, I see I might have offended you with my curiosity, but if you intend spending any time in Brockenhurst Sett you'll get used to that." The old badger's chest expanded proudly. "I'm a Custodian you see, so it's my duty to be nosy." Winking at Brock, his grin widened even further.

Brock's heart beat a little faster. Could it really be just a coincidence that the first badger he should meet in Brockenhurst turned out to be a Custodian?

"So, who are you stranger and where from?" The Custodian's deep set eyes glinted in the moonlight, loaning him an impish look, despite his obvious age.

"I'm Brock, out of High Green. Twenty moons hard walk beyond the Brockenhurst Mountains."

"By Homer!" The Custodian nodded his large head, obviously impressed. "Twenty moons you say?" Giving this information some thought, he moved closer, scrutinising Brock closely. "And what brings you on such an arduous journey?"

"I've come to speak to the Council. I bring important news. My sett has been destroyed, and—"

"Destroyed!" interrupted the Custodian, the shock of Brock's words reflected in his face. "But how?"

"There was a dreadful fire." Brock answered, lowering his gaze as he continued in subdued tones. "A fire so swift and fierce that none but myself survived it."

There could be no mistaking the bitterness clouding the young badger's eyes and the old Custodian fidgeted uncomfortably.

*

Yet again Brock's mind flooded with images of that dreadful time and he was back in the sett digging furiously into the packed earthen floor of his sleeping chamber, struggling to bury himself deeply enough so that the heat of the fire wouldn't harm him. While he dug Brock thought furiously, planning the size and shape of his bolt hole, and then, using the power of The Way, he slowed his breathing, a technique taught to neophyte Tellers during their training. It enabled him to survive with little air.

Brock had blanked out the shrieks of his dying friends, concentrating all his energy on surviving, closing his eyes, hoping the flames wouldn't find him.

Buried safely in his hiding place, Brock had survived the intense heat as the fire passed harmlessly overhead.

Much later, after digging himself out, he emerged to a scene of complete devastation and had spent what was left of that moon wandering through the blackened tunnels, calling in vain, because there had been no response.

Brock was the only survivor.

*

Brock suddenly realised that the Custodian had spoken to him.

"Sorry, what was that? What did you say?"

"My name is Grey," the old badger repeated patiently, favouring Brock with a quizzical look. "Are you alright? You seem—"

He left the question hanging.

"I'm tired and I hurt my leg in the fire." Brock answered with a shrug. "But tell me, is this the path to Brockenhurst Sett? I must see the Council at once."

Grey nodded slowly, looking along the path. "Yes friend, this is the path, but there's no point in rushing. If you want to see the Council, you'll need to seek permission first."

Brock sighed impatiently, touching the wound on his leg. "But there's no time," he complained. "When the fire destroyed High Green, I used the powers of The Way to escape." He paused, looking uncomfortable for a moment. "You see, during the fire I had a vision."

The Custodian's nose twitched and his eyes widened slightly.

"Then you're a Teller of The Way?" the old badger queried.

Brock nodded, his eyes glazing as he stared across the wide path into the trees.

"Yes, but that's not the point," he answered, swaying back and forth, as though he was having trouble standing. "What I saw in the vision—"

Brock stopped, not sure how best to continue. He tried again. "It's . . . you see—"

He faltered once more, his eyes rolling in their sockets, and then suddenly collapsed onto the forest floor.

Grey looked startled. "By Homer, badger!" he exclaimed, bending over Brock's prostrate figure and shaking him. "Come on," he said, "let's get you back to the sett, we've a Healer there who'll know what to do with you."

Grey helped Brock to his feet and they staggered along in silence through the moon-washed trees, the older supporting the younger, their progress a series of disjointed stumbles. Grey quickly realised that he did not have the strength to drag the young badger all the way back to Brockenhurst Sett by himself, so he gently lowered the half-conscious boar onto the dark soil, looking down at him, concern puckering his snout.

Brock's eyes unexpectedly opened in a wild stare. "Run Dana, run!" he shouted. "There's smoke in the tunnels."

With wildly jerking feet, Brock let out a long, woeful groan, and then passed out again.

Grey stood for a few moments, wondering what to do, then came to a decision. Gathering a mound of leaves, he carefully covered Brock, making sure that the young badger's mouth was free to breathe the cool air.

Standing back, the old Custodian nodded. It was the best he could do. Turning back to the path, he headed off in the direction of Brockenhurst Sett.

If anyone could help this unfortunate badger it was the Healer, Soffen.

*

Deep beneath Fire Rock, in chambers known only to himself, a deformed and twisted old badger sighed deeply. At last The Messenger had come. Now his plans could progress. Then, as the boar reached out with his mind to lightly touch the stranger's thoughts, he froze for a moment, uncertainty sending a shiver through his body. But no, shaking his head, the old badger's twisted features broke into a smile. He was secure in his own power. No badger could threaten him, not while he had the power of the Dark Healing to help him.

Chapter 2

Soffen glanced up at the sky, wrinkling her snout at the glow on the horizon. The sun was rising, they would need to stop collecting herbs and get back to the sett. She smiled affectionately, watching Raffén sniff at a plant, giggling when the pollen caused her friend to sneeze.

"Is this Baneberry, Soffen?" Raffén asked, shaking her head to dislodge the pollen from the end of her snout.

"No Raffén, that's Ground Elder. Look, there's some Baneberry over there, by that rotting stump."

They had been collecting herbs for most of the moon: Hemlock, Wormwood, Hyssop, and the many other plants Soffen needed to restock her dwindling herbaria. Raffén brought the Baneberry across, studying Soffen, noting how the growing light reflected from the guard hairs in her tail. Soffen's coat and eyes were much lighter than other badgers, which was rare, evoking memories of cubhood tales.

Soffen looked back over her shoulder at Raffén, a feeling of warmth suffusing her body. She felt lucky to have such a loyal friend. Most of the other badgers tended to avoid her, pretending to be busy when she appeared. Soffen knew it was because they were frightened and distrustful of her powers, but that made little difference to the pain and rejection she felt. They seemed to think that because she was a Healer, she had no feelings. But she did of course, and their reactions hurt her deeply.

Soffen realised better than most, that this distrust was fostered by the Council, but she could do little to change it. When her father had trained her in the secrets of The Healing, he had not explained how lonely her life would be—how her peers would shun her, how even the older badgers would mistrust her. Had he made it plain just what she would have to endure at the start of her training, she might well have chosen a different path.

Soffen sighed, trying to shake off the feeling of foreboding that suddenly overshadowed her spirit. Being a Healer had its compensations of course, she could hardly deny that, but having close companions was certainly not one of them.

She smiled at Raffén again, a tightness closing her throat. Apart from this one sow, the only other badgers that she had contact with were those seeking help for some illness or injury, and they quickly disappeared once she had treated them.

"Soffen?" Raffén's voice was thick with concern. "You seem so serious. Is something wrong?"

"Sorry, did you say something?" Soffen, still distracted by her inner turmoil, had missed her friend's words entirely. Raffén repeated the question and Soffen shrugged, trying to appear indifferent. "Oh it's nothing really. I was just thinking, that's all."

"But you looked so preoccupied and sad. Are you worried about leaving your cubs on their own? Is that it?"

Soffen inhaled sharply, her heart fluttering. Raffén knew about the cubs! But how was that possible? No badger knew.

A tingling sensation ran along the length of her spine. "How do you know about my cubs, Raffén? I've told no one."

Raffén tossed her head. "I know that, silly." She smiled mischievously. "You didn't have to tell me. It's been so obvious. I've got eyes you know. I'm not stupid. Did you really think you could hide being in-cub from me? I spotted it ages ago, before you moved out of the main sett. And look at you now, so slim, so sleek, your coat and eyes all shiny." Making a mock-serious face, Raffén wrinkled her snout, smiling broadly. "You may be a Healer, Soffen but I really do wonder about you sometimes." Placing a gentle paw on her friend's flank, she giggled. "You've been the talk of the sett for ages."

Soffen turned away, scrutinising a distant point high in the trees, a sad, almost lost expression clouding her eyes. Raffén moved closer, rustling the leaves beneath her paws, her playful mood dispersing.

"I'm sorry Soffen, I didn't mean to upset you. Come on, tell me what's troubling you."

Soffen turned back, a half-smile on her lips, torn between wanting to share her secret and the realisation that doing so may place her cubs in mortal danger. Struggling with her conflict, Soffen stared down at the ground.

Because she was a Healer, Soffen knew better than most how the collective mores of the sett far outweighed any individual rights, but that did not change the turmoil in her mind.

Seeing the strain on her friend's face, Raffén nuzzled the soft fur just behind her ear—a gesture of friendship and comfort that all badgers recognised from cubhood. "Whatever it is, you can tell me Soffen, I'm your friend. I love you, nothing can change that."

Soffen stared deeply into her friend's eyes, suddenly overpowered by the need to share, to lighten the burden she was carrying. She came to a decision.

"You must promise me that you won't repeat this to any other badger Raffén."

"Well if it means that much to you, of course I won't. I promise not to say anything to any badger."

"Even the Custodians?" Soffen stared hard at her friend, then abruptly turned away, her words carrying an inflection that was half anger, half regret. "No, it's not fair of me to ask that. I'm sorry, just forget what I've said."

Raffen wrinkled her snout, smiling as she tried to coax Soffen back into a better mood. "Oh tush to the Custodians and their silly ways," she giggled mischievously. "Just tell me. I won't repeat anything you say to those fools."

Relieved by her friend's words, Soffen responded with a smile. "Really Raffen, you shouldn't talk that way about the Custodians. If they overheard you—"

Raffen laughed loudly, shrugging expansively. "Well, what good are they anyway, sitting up there full of their own self-importance. A fine bunch they make, debating what tunnel should go to which badger. Just who do they think they are, that's what I'd like to know? I mean, what use are they if you cut your paw, or need help cubbing? None, that's what. All right when giving orders, but ask them to do anything else." Raffen tutted and winked. "Now you—well badgers come from far and wide to be healed by you, don't they? You're worth more than any ten Custodians put together. Oh, I feel so angry about the way they treat you sometimes."

"They're just a little frightened of The Healing," Soffen replied through a grin. But her next words were tinged with bitterness. "You know, sometimes I really do think they see me as a threat and wish I wasn't here."

"Well if that's true, then they're more stupid than I thought!" Raffen retorted. "What possible threat could you be to anyone? And who would heal us all if you weren't here? Why, we'd be in the most terrible trouble, wouldn't we?"

Soffen lowered her gaze, not wanting her friend to read her expression. She knew that Raffen, like most badgers in Brockenhurst Sett, failed to see the significance of the Council in the hierarchy of things.

Soffen patted the ground. "Come and sit next to me. I've got something I want to tell you."

Raffen was troubled by her friend's serious tone. Usually she could dispel the moods Soffen fell into but this seemed different. Clearing a space amongst the dead leaves, Raffen settled down next to Soffen, looking at her expectantly.

Soffen poked at an old half-buried pine cone, searching for the right place to begin. "It's true," she acknowledged, picking up the cone in her claws before tossing it at nothing in particular, "that I did whelp some time ago. Two cubs in fact." Another cone followed the first. "I've dug a temporary burrow for myself in Low Meadow, by the edge of the big mud pit. That's where my cubs are now."

"But it's so cold and wet in Low Meadow." Raffen shivered. "Why didn't you stay in your nice warm sleeping chambers in the main sett?"

Soffen shook her head. "No I couldn't do that Raffen. You see . . . well I just couldn't." Taking a deep breath, she stared earnestly at her friend. "I—"

Pausing again, Soffen licked her lips, trying to ease the sticky dryness that suddenly filled her mouth. "Well, you see, one of my cubs is—"

Stumbling over her words, she allowed the sentence to hang on a long silence.

Concern lit Raffen's eyes. "Soffen, what's the matter? Is one of your cubs ill?"

"Well it's more than an illness really." Again a long pause, then quickly, urgently, "It has pink eyes," Soffen blinked her own heavily, before continuing, "and a pink nose." Her next words were a whispered undertone. "Its fur is white, not the silver-grey that it should be."

Raffen looked startled. "Your cub is disfigured?" she squealed in a rising voice, shaking her head, eyes wide with fright.

A sob caught in Soffen's throat. "Yes." Looking away, she hid her face. "I know that I should have killed it at birth but I just couldn't bring myself to do that." Sniffing back her tears, Soffen searched her friend's eyes for a sign of understanding. "I'm a Healer, I couldn't kill my own cub. They can't expect that of me."

"But you must!" Raffen's voice cut across the space between them with a sharp, hard edge. "When the Custodians find out what you've done, they'll kill it anyway, and probably banish you from Brockenhurst Sett as well." Placing a paw on Soffen's flank, Raffen emphasised her next words with gentle shakes. "Please Soffen, you must go and tell the Custodians at once, for your own sake. They'll understand."

Soffen shook her head vehemently. "No, I can't do that." She stared into her friend's eyes. "And you Raffen?" she asked. "Can I trust you to say nothing?"

Raffen looked away, studying the ground, an expression of discomfort creasing her snout. "It's such a big thing to ask of me," she whispered.

Soffen's stomach lurched as she realised the terrible mistake she'd made. She should have kept her own counsel. Seeking the approval of her friend had been wrong, Raffen would eventually blurt the secret out.

"Soffen, what's happening?" Raffin's voice was edged with fear as she looked up at the rapidly darkening sky.

A deep, unnatural calmness had unexpectedly gripped the forest, and now nothing stirred, even the usually restless leaves hung silently from their branches. The atmosphere was loaded with a feeling of urgency; a heaviness that brought a shortness of breath, a tingle of expectation.

Soffen scented the air urgently. "Quickly Raffin, we have to find shelter. There's a storm coming and no ordinary one, unless I'm very much mistaken."

Discussion about the cub would have to wait until later.

As the two friends collected their plants, the storm grew in strength, its heavy energy swirling in and out of the boiling clouds.

Soffen, through her training as a Healer, was attuned to the forces of nature and able to feel the threat gathering overhead.

The unnatural stillness that had swiftly built around them was abruptly shattered as a wind howled in from nowhere. The whole forest shook with its rage and the branches of the trees began rattling insanely against each other. It became impossible to hear anything above the clacker-clacker-clacker rebounding at them from all directions. The sky darkened even further, its blackness shrouding the billowing clouds. Wind-whipped leaves swirled angrily about their heads, tossed high by the screaming blasts of air.

"Come on," Soffen shouted.

Deep within the forest a tree groaned as, torn from the ground, it slammed into a smaller neighbour, the lighter tree snapping, the earth trembling as the stricken giant smashed its way downwards, before thrusting mud covered roots at the angry sky—a last futile gesture of appeasement.

The terrified badgers hurried through the rapidly building tempest, battling against the wind, thrown first one way, then another. Soffen did her best to fend off the branches and small bushes that were hurled at them by the storm, urgently pulling her friend along the familiar pathways. Fighting the wind, she concentrated her mind on her training, gaining strength from the inner calmness that the Healing gave her.

The wind built to an undulating scream, so loud now, that it even managed to drown out the swelling rumbles of thunder shaking the ground. Bright bolts of lightning flickered and hissed overhead as the two badgers pushed their desperate way through the shaking undergrowth, the storm battering them so remorselessly that Soffen, fearing for their lives, was tempted to use her knowledge of the Dark Healing to protect them.

A large bush, torn free by the rampaging wind, buffeted into the pair, knocking Soffen from her feet. Raffin screamed, breaking away from the path, running headlong into the storm. Soffen scrambled upright, running after her friend, almost losing sight of her bobbing figure in the swirling leaves.

She finally managed to catch Raffin, grabbing onto her tail, pulling her into the shelter of a nearby tree. Holding her friend tightly, Soffen tried to calm her, stroking her mud-streaked fur as they lay amongst the tangled roots.

The old tree groaned and trembled above them, its rough bark trilling as the wind raged across its indentations. The tree shifted, as if taking its first tentative steps, the straining roots singing and vibrating as they tightened under the strain. Soffen, realising what was about to happen, shouted out a warning.

With mounting panic, Soffen hauled Raffin away from the thrumming roots and they lurched their way out into the full force of the storm. But before they had taken more than a dozen paces, a long dark shadow claimed them as the falling tree reached out, reluctant to let them go.

For the briefest of instants the tree hesitated, its long flailing branches writhing in the wind. Then screeching one last curse, it slammed downwards, burying the fleeing figures beneath its tremendous weight.

Chapter 3

Grey was worried.

After setting out to get help for the stranger Brock, he'd got caught up in the most ferocious storm. It sprang from nowhere, forcing him to shelter beneath a fallen tree, where he heartily cursed the wind as it tried to suck his breath away.

Curling into a tight ball, Grey did his best to shelter his sensitive snout from the harsh grittiness of the wind-whipped soil, covering his ears against the howling of the wind, trying to think.

What should he do? Carry on and fetch the Healer, or go back and stay with the stranger until the storm had blown itself out? But going back to the sick boar now would be of little use, what did he know about the art of Healing? Cursing his luck in running across the badger in the first place, Grey's mind whirled, trying to find a solution to his dilemma.

Finally the old boar decided that his only choice was to carry on, and hope that he would be able to reach Brockenhurst Sett quickly.

As Grey left the lee of the tree and the full rage of the storm hit him, he was tempted to scurry back into its shelter. It was only the thought of the young badger lying helpless under the mound of leaves that kept him going.

Bending his head low against the fury of the squall, the old boar thrust his way along the path, battling hard to make any progress against the strong wind. A gust caught him off-guard, buffeting him so violently, that he was plucked from his feet and tumbled along by its fury, until his flight was brought to an abrupt and painful halt by a thick bole.

Grey hit the tree with such force that he lay panting in a heap at its base, soil and small stones pounding his body. Gathering his strength the old badger finally managed to struggle to his feet, stumbling into a shallow depression, where he lay groaning amongst the sodden roots, trying to recover his breath.

Grey fought hard to bring his reeling senses back under control, trying to make sense of the whirling, shifting scene raging all round him. Shaking the stinging rain from his eyes, he peered out into the torrent, looking for a way forward through the downpour, his heart hammering in his chest.

The tree above Grey began trembling and vibrating, and all too quickly the trembling turned into wild gyrations that caused a root to snap. The flailing end caught Grey a stunning blow across his exposed flank, tossing him high into the air. He landed on his back with a mind-numbing thump.

Struggling back to his feet the old badger squinted into the lashing rain, trying to ignore the pain lancing his side, a hot anger seizing him. He would complete the task he had set himself, whatever this confounded storm threw at him. By Homer, he would beat this storm if it was the last thing he did!

The old badger pushed on, time ceasing to have any meaning as all around the wind shook the giant trees with as much ease as a foraging bird might shake a slender plant in its search for food. The branches were alive with terrifying noises— rattling claws stretching out for him, bringing life to dreams best forgotten .

It felt as though the whole forest was about to uproot itself and march against him, but the old boar persevered, pushing himself hard, slowly beginning to win out against the horrendous forces snapping at his heels.

The wind, maybe bored with its game, dropped for a moment, easing the lashing rain, allowing Grey a brief glimpse of two badgers on the pathway ahead. Then, as the rain renewed its fury, they disappeared from sight, but not before he spotted that one of them was Soffen, the Healer.

Not sparing his aching muscles, Grey forced his body forward, adopting a mind-numbing routine that took over his whole being. Struggle a few steps, pause for breath, struggle a few steps, pause for breath— over and over, until his actions had no meaning.

Grey's legs ached almost beyond endurance, his feet constantly slipping in the sticky mud, the muscles driving them weakening. His pace slowed to a crawl and he knew he would not be able to carry on much longer.

There was still no sign of the two badgers he had glimpsed earlier and with sinking spirits, he realised he might have passed right by them in the murky half-light. Tears of frustration filled his eyes.

Somewhere nearby, a tree groaned and Grey halted for a moment, ears cocked forward trying to detect which direction the sound had come from. The rain streamed from his sodden fur, making his skin itch. Suddenly, out of the gloom, branches loomed overhead, rattling loudly, like the limbs of a demented banshee. Grey moved from side to side, trying to guess which way the tree would fall.

As it fell, the tree pulled a smaller neighbour with it and the disjointed staccato noises made Grey wince. Breath faltering, the old badger shook his head, clearing water from his eyes, checking again that he really had

seen two badgers break from the base of the falling tree. Dodging through the undergrowth, they had made a mad dash for safety, Grey's warning shouts going unheard.

With a long splintering cry that drowned out even the storm, the dying giant split along the length of its trunk, crashing down through the undergrowth, showering Grey with broken branches. He jumped backwards as a thick branch thudded to the ground close beside him.

Grey's mind refused to work for a moment, then he ran forward, unmindful of the cuts and bruises he was inflicting on himself. Pushing his way into the heart of the fallen tree, he began a frantic search for the two badgers he'd seen.

Hearing a soft cry, Grey thrust himself forward underneath a large branch, his breath catching in his throat. Before him lay the young sow, Raffin, jerking in her death throes, mewling like a newborn cub, struggling weakly to free herself from the branch that pierced her body and pinned her to the ground. Blood oozed from her mouth, bubbling through her lips as she laboured to fill her lungs. She stared straight at him, her eyes reflecting her terrible pain.

Grey battled to free Raffin but only succeeded in adding to her suffering, her impaled body convulsing as he tried to move her. He stopped, tears of frustration stinging his eyes, nuzzling her neck, trying to comfort the dying sow with softly spoken words.

Raffin coughed quietly, then again, splattering Grey's coat with her blood. Then taking a deep, shuddering breath, she whispered four words. "Tell . . . Soffen . . . I'm . . . sorry."

As Raffin's eyes lost the sparkle of life to the totality of death, Grey patted her flank with a clumsy paw, softly calling her name, not wanting to admit that she was dead, but unable to deny the evidence of his own eyes.

The old boar stood alongside the dead sow for a long time, his paw lightly resting on her snout, his head bowed in silence, paying his last respects. Then, with one last glance at the cruelly violated body—the half-closed eyes, the delicate snout, and the small perfect ears—he turned away, thrusting his way back into the storm.

As the old boar struggled his way out of the clinging undergrowth, a voice called to him.

"Please . . . Please help me."

Grey wasn't sure which direction the call came from and concentrated his whole being on listening, the fine hairs on the tips of his ears trembling with the effort.

The words came again, "Please . . . I'm hurt . . . Please help me."

Grey had the direction now. Under the fallen trunk, away on his right. Pushing through the twisted branches, he followed the weak cries until he located the other badger trapped beneath a thick branch.

Working his way closer, Grey saw that it was Soffen.

"Are you all right? Can you move?" he asked.

The Healer shook her head, her snout wrinkling in pain. "No, my leg's caught. I can't move it."

Grey scrambled his way under the thick trunk and saw that Soffen's leg lay trapped between the branch and a large rock. He began digging, his thick stubby claws thrusting the earth aside in large scoops.

Finally Grey managed to loosen the rock enough for Soffen to wrench her leg free. She winced in pain as he helped her up.

"Can you walk? We've got to get you back to the sett," Grey said.

Soffen took a few tentative steps, limping badly, looking back at him. "Perhaps, if you help me."

Struggling clear of the tree, the pair stood in the lee of a bush for a moment, then Soffen's eyes suddenly widened.

"Where's Raffin? She was right behind me when the tree fell. Did you see what happened to her?"

Grey, caught off guard by her urgent questions, was unable to hide his reaction and she clutched at him, digging her claws into his side.

"Where is she? Is she hurt? Tell me!"

"She's dead. There was nothing I could do. The tree crushed her."

Grey's harsh words cut through Soffen, lancing her heart like a sharp stone. Soffen shook her head wildly, denying the words, her huge eyes studying Grey's face, trying to understand what had happened.

Grey cradled Soffen against his flank, whispering words of comfort as she cried. Eventually, wiping away the last of her tears, Soffen looked up at the Custodian.

"Where is she?" she asked.

Grey nodded towards the twisted branches and watched in silence as the Healer made her way into the entangled interior. He waited patiently, thoughtfully, lost in his own grief. Raffin had been a happy, well-liked badger in the sett and her laughter would be missed. And even though he had not known her that well, Grey too would miss her.

When Soffen finally reappeared, a hard determination burnt in her eyes and it was apparent to the old Custodian that something had changed deep within her— something that stirred an uneasy feeling in the pit of his stomach.

"Help me back to my burrow," Soffen said in a quiet voice. "I don't think that I can manage it on my own."

*

After a long and tiring struggle, Grey and Soffen finally managed to reach the safety of her burrow on the outer edges of Low Meadow, and as they pushed their way down into the narrow entrance tunnel, Grey wondered why any badger would choose such a desolate place to live. The air was damp and cold and it was clear that food would be hard to find. Entering the main chamber, he looked about in distaste.

"Soffen why have we come here. Whose burrow is this anyway?"

"Mine," Soffen answered, ignoring the old Custodian's disapproving stare.

Grey turned to her, a look of bewilderment on his face. "But surely your tunnels are in Bell Clearing, just off the main sett?"

Soffen exhaled deeply. "Yes Grey, but this is where I live now. At least for the time being."

Grey looked about with a sinking sensation. The walls were wet, giving an offensive scent to the air, and even though the chamber had been well dug, it still felt unwelcoming. Choosing such an inhospitable place to live made no sense to him.

"But why have you moved to such an appalling place?"

Soffen tipped her head, sniffing the air. "Can't you scent them Grey?" A look of defiance flickered in her eyes.

Grey raised his sensitive snout and there, just beyond the pungency of damp earth and rotting vegetation, he smelt them.

"Cubs," he said, questions flooding his eyes. "But why have you hidden yourself away here and not told the Council? Unless—"

He studied her quizzically, a serious expression creasing his face.

"Unless there's something wrong?" Soffen finished his sentence in a caustic tone. "Is that what you're thinking?" When the old badger failed to respond, she plunged on recklessly. "Well you're right, there is something wrong. At least, with one of them." Standing taller, a challenging tilt to her head, she continued in a defiant voice, "He's disfigured."

Grey's breath hissed across his teeth at her bald statement. "And you haven't informed the Council? You've hidden them away here instead?" He looked about in anger, then caught her with a piercing stare. "You of all badgers should know better. By Homer, you're a Healer. You use The Way like the rest of us breathe. Surely you're aware of how important it is to follow the creed."

Grey's voice grew in volume as he shouted the tenet at her. "All disfigured, malformed or aberrant cubs will be killed at birth. That's the immutable law Soffen. You know that. Think of what would happen if we just did as we pleased. No, we must keep ourselves pure. It's to protect our future, and it's never open to debate."

Soffen's answer whipped across the enclosed space, and as her voice lashed at him, Grey felt its full impact.

"Now you just listen to me." Soffen took a deep breath, trying to steady the tremble that had entered her voice. "Listen to me, this goes far beyond the limited knowledge of your precious Custodians. Further even than the ancient laws of The Way!"

Grey's eyes flared at such blasphemy, the fur along his back rising.

"Something dark and powerful happened out there. Something—"

Soffen hesitated, searching for the right words, "far beyond our understanding. Something stretching back into our ancient past." Slapping her chest in defiance, she let her voice swell. "I am a Healer and I know The Way, have an insight into its intricacies. I know the obvious path is not always the correct path and the traps that wait for the unwary traveller. And that insight tells me, with no room for doubt, that my cub should not be put to death."

Her next words were spoken in a softer but no less challenging tone. "It bids me to do all in my power to find a cure."

"Cure!" Grey's voice boomed off the walls of the small chamber. "Cure? Have you gone completely mad female? You can't cure a disfigurement. You forget yourself. You're a Healer, not the Prime Mover."

Soffen's voice overflowed with indignation at his attack. "You doubt me Grey? Knowing my powers as a Healer, you doubt me?"

"Of course I doubt you," he snapped back. "You're too near this thing to realise what you're saying. I have no choice, I must inform the Council at once. I just can't imagine what—"

Grey sputtered to a stop and shook his head. By Homer, this infuriating female had made him forget why he'd come searching for her in the first place. The stranger Brock was still lying out there in the forest!

"But Grey, you can't tell the Council." Soffen's eyes blazed with anger. "If you do that, then Raffan will have died for nothing."

A confused look clouded the old badger's eyes as he stared at her and Soffen hurried on.

"Raffen was going to tell the Council about my cub, just as you intend doing. But the storm killed her before she could do that. Don't you understand? Can't you see? It was no accident. The storm sought her out and killed her. She died because she was going to tell the Council about my cub."

"ENOUGH!"

Soffen jumped as the old Custodian reared up at her.

"Enough I say. I have no time for this arguing. Something more urgent has to be attended to."

Hurriedly explaining about his meeting with the stranger on the forest path, and how he had been forced to leave him to the mercy of the storm, Grey ordered Soffen to see to her wounds quickly and accompany him back to where he'd left the boar.

Soffen heard the old Custodian out, then slowly shook her head. "No Grey, I won't come with you."

"Now listen to me female, this badger is injured." Grey did his best to stem his rising anger, realising that losing it now would do little good. "You're a Healer, he needs your help. It's your duty to attend him."

"And why should I help a Teller of The Way, when The Way commands me to kill my cub? Tell me that, Custodian."

"Soffen, where's your compassion? This badger has seen his whole sett perish, would you deny him your help as well?"

Soffen's emotions boiled over into an angry spate and she reared back, spitting her words at him with great bitterness. "How dare you! How dare you question my ethics. You . . . you—"

Taking a breath, she steadied herself. "You come here, ordering me to kill my cub, and then . . . then you have the audacity . . . the insolence to question my compassion. If I weren't so offended, I'd laugh in your face."

Grey drew himself to his full height, staring hard at Soffen. "We waste time arguing female and in the meantime the badger suffers, maybe even dies. You're a Healer and your sworn duty is to help those in need. Are you turning your back on your responsibilities?"

Soffen studied the old boar for a moment, the angry glint in her eyes subsiding a little as she searched for a lever, any small advantage that might save her cub.

"If I come with you Grey, I want your sworn word that you'll delay telling the Council about my cub."

Holding up a paw to forestall any objections, she hurried on. "Just two moons. That's all I ask. Two moons."

Grey hesitated before answering. Being a Custodian, he was bound by his word, there could be no going back once it was given. In the end he agreed, as he could see little harm in the Healer's request.

"Get yourself ready," he said, reading the triumph in her eyes.

*

The journey back to the spot where Grey had left the Teller was slow and dangerous, the storm lashing them all the way. They were near the end of their strength when Grey finally stopped, nodding at a slight hollow in the ground.

"I left him there," he said.

"Well he's not there now. Are you sure this is the place?"

Grey nodded, looking about for signs of the missing badger. Stumbling off the path, he thrust his stout body into the wet foliage and a short while later Soffen heard him call.

"Over here. Quickly, I've found him."

Hurrying to his side, Soffen saw a badger lying under a fern, his fur streaked with mud, sodden from the heavy downpour. Pushing Grey aside, she quickly examined the unconscious boar, poking and prodding him until she was satisfied she knew exactly what was wrong.

The boar had a nasty wound on his leg, the skin blackened and hard. Although she'd never seen such an injury before, she had heard about them. It was a burn, caused by contact with fire.

As well as the burn, the badger's body was covered with numerous cuts and bruises, most of which were superficial. More serious was the fact that he was in deep shock, and Soffen knew there was a good chance he might die if she did not get him back to her burrow, where she would be able to treat him properly.

Leaning close to Grey, Soffen shouted into his ear. "He's in a pretty bad way. We'll have to get him back to my burrow. There's a nasty wound on his leg and he's suffering from shock. Keep an eye on him for a moment, I won't be long."

When Soffen reappeared a short time later, she was carrying a piece of fungus and a strange root between her teeth. Instructing Grey to hold the boar's mouth open, Soffen chewed on the root, allowing the juices to flow from her mouth to his. It was a slow process but she persevered until the very last drop had been extracted.

After this, she set about treating the burn on the Teller's leg with the fungus she'd gathered. And when Soffen was finally satisfied that she had done all that she could, she tipped her head to one side, studying the unconscious badger intently, a puzzled expression lining her snout.

"What have you given him Soffen?"

"It's a special root. It should stimulate him. It's very potent, so he should respond fairly quickly."

"Will it make him better?" Grey prodded at the remnants that Soffen had spat onto the forest floor.

"No, but it should revive him enough to help us get him back to my burrow. I can treat him properly once we've got him there."

Grey looked up into the storm and the black turbulent clouds above them. "It's a long way."

Soffen smiled. "Don't worry about the storm, it won't harm us now."

Brock moaned, his eyes flicking open as he looked about in confusion, his gaze settling on Soffen.

She stroked his head and shouted against the wind. "Come on badger, that's it. We can't stay here. You've got to get up now. Come on." Slowly, she coaxed the boar to his feet and he staggered slightly as he took his full weight on his unsteady legs. Soffen moved closer, supporting him. "Slowly now, there's no need to hurry."

As the anodyne circulating through the Teller's body took full effect, a wave of vigour swept over him, his aches and pains easing. Shaking the water from his fur, Brock laughed aloud, tossing his head back and forth.

Grey shot Soffen a worried look. "What's he doing?"

She smiled confidently. "Don't worry, it's just the effects of the root I've given him. Come on, let's get him back to the burrow before it wears off."

As the trio staggered along the slippery path, Soffen's mind was in a whirl. Ever since the stranger had regained consciousness, she'd been overcome by the strangest feeling that she had met him somewhere before.

But Soffen knew that had never happened.

Chapter 4

Grey's gaze wandered back to Soffen's cubs. One looked normal, its coat already changing from the early silver-grey of the new-born cub, to the dull brownish-yellow of the young badger. It would take some time yet for the darker blue-grey coat and the black cheek stripes to develop, marking the cub's passage into adulthood.

Grey flicked his gaze to the other cub, turning it over onto its back for a closer inspection. It wriggled, giving a high-pitched whicker, paddling its feet in the air. He studied the white coat intently, then turned his attention to the unnatural pink colouration of the cub's nose and eyes. It was an abomination!

Grey had heard of such cubs of course, the stuff of tales and warnings given to young badgers who did not behave themselves, but he had never had the misfortune of seeing one before. Watching the small creature squirming on its back, he felt affronted, a flicker of unease running along his spine.

Unsheathing his claws, Grey placed one on the tightly rounded belly, allowing a smile to touch his lips. It would be so easy to correct this filth. One quick slash and the balance would be restored.

But instead he reluctantly turned away, shaking his head at the Healer's actions. What was she thinking of? Whatever, he'd given his word and could do nothing about it for now, but in a few cycles-

The Custodian's thoughts were interrupted by Soffen's return.

"Is everything alright Grey?" Soffen entered the small chamber in a bustle. Not waiting for an answer, she crossed to her cubs, smiling down at them. "I've treated Brock's wounds, and fed him a grouse egg and a few acorns. He'll probably sleep for some time now, until the effects of the Henbane I gave him wears off."

Grey chuckled. "I thought he was going mad back there in the forest." He cocked his head at the entrance tunnel. "Did you see him trying to climb that tree?" Another chuckle, but less prolonged, bitten off with a short bark as a touch of scorn slipped into his voice. "Flying indeed! Who ever heard of such a ridiculous thing?"

Soffen turned from her cubs, her eyes widening. "The root I gave him alters the way we feel things. It's a bit like having a dream, where you see and hear things that aren't there."

The old badger almost missed her next words, leaning forward to catch them.

"I tried it once." Shaking her head at the memory, Soffen continued in a subdued voice, "It was very frightening." She looked away self-consciously, as the bare patch just above her nose turned bright pink. "You know how it feels when you finally manage to corner that adder you've been hunting?"

"When it turns, ready to strike, you mean?"

"Yes, that's it." Pausing for a moment, gathering her thoughts, Soffen wrinkled her snout. "Well that's the sort of feeling I had when I ate the root, a feeling of exuberance and strength. Total power, but at the same time an uneasy awareness of how frail we really are."

Soffen hesitated again, staring at the roof of the chamber, beyond such confines in her mind's eye now, out amongst the forest canopy.

"I've always thought it must be similar to how the kestrel feels when she swoops down to make her kill." Dropping her gaze, Soffen stared at the damp floor. "Or perhaps the acorn as it falls to the ground, strong in the knowledge that it will eventually grow tall enough to touch the moon."

Grey shifted uncomfortably, breaking the mood. "That's all very well," he said, nodding at the sleeping cubs, "but let's talk about them. You've forced me to keep your secret for the time being and I had no choice because I needed your help. But I want you to know that you've put me in a very awkward position with the other Custodians. The power of the sett is built on trust and I've broken that trust. By Homer sow, it doesn't sit easily with me. Not easily at all."

Soffen frowned, studying the old Custodian closely, unsure whether the creases furrowing his snout were anger or frustration.

"And the other Custodians, do they share your touching preoccupation with trust?" she asked.

Grey's eyes narrowed. "And what exactly is that supposed to mean?"

"You know very well Grey. The Custodians have been abusing their powers for many seasons now." Her stubby tail flicked angrily. "Why, only this winter, Harbrock used his position to get his brother moved to a better sleeping chamber."

"That was a special case."

Soffen barked a short laugh. "Yes, just like all the other special cases." There could be no mistaking the contempt in her voice.

"Enough!"

Grey's retort carried an edge of anger, the hackles rising along his back, and Soffen realised she may have pushed him too far.

Swinging his head towards her, the old badger growled threateningly, his snout wrinkling in agitation. "You're on hazardous ground, sow. That really is quite enough."

Carefully avoiding eye contact, Soffen went to Grey, touching him lightly on the flank. "You're a good badger Grey, and I respect you for that. But sometimes you're too trusting for your own good." Holding up a paw to forestall any protest, she moved away, then turned back to face him, a sudden determination surging through her. "I have something that I must do now, away from here. It'll take some time, will you look after my cub while I'm gone?"

Grey's anger subsided and he nodded in sullen agreement. "I can hardly leave them here to fend for themselves, can I?"

He surreptitiously studied the small white creature asleep on the bed of leaves, flexing his claws slightly. As much as I'd like to, he thought.

Soffen picked up the object of Grey's scorn by its scruff, making ready to leave the sett.

"But surely you're not going to risk your cub's life in this terrible storm?" Grey said, missing the irony of his statement.

Seeing the old Custodian's concern, Soffen put her cub down, answering him slowly, her voice carrying a conviction that surprised both of them.

"No Grey, the storm won't harm him." Gazing down at the wriggling youngster with a tenderness that belied the emotions raging in her mind, she smiled. "When he dies, it will be at a time of his own choosing. Not yours, not mine, not the Council's."

With these words still ringing in the chamber, Soffen picked her cub up again and padded out into the storm, leaving Grey to reflect on her words.

*

Grey sat at the entrance to Soffen's burrow for a long time after she'd left, allowing her after-image to fade from his mind. He realised the Healer was a fine-looking badger, even though her coat was lighter than usual, and that thought came as something of a surprise, because, like others, Grey had shunned the Healer, only acknowledging her existence when he needed her help for some mishap or other. He smiled, recalling the time—last winter was it—when he'd gone to her with a sore foot.

Grey was helping block the side tunnels of the sett with dried grass—a yearly duty undertaken to keep out the winter's raw winds—when a vicious thorn had buried itself deeply between the pads of his foot. No matter how hard he tried, Grey could not dislodge it, and in the end, after much probing and nibbling with his teeth, he could stand the pain no longer.

Grey had reluctantly visited the Healer, who welcomed him warmly, openly, chatting about the things that were happening around the sett. Leading him to a comfortable bed of bracken, the Healer enquired what the problem was, and for all the years that he was her senior, Grey felt as though it was his mother tutting softly beneath her breath as she gently probed his foot.

After removing the thorn and treating the wound with a soothing paste made from crushed Hemlock leaves, Soffen asked Grey to stay awhile and the pair talked for a long time, just as old friends might.

Grey had been grateful for Soffen's help and as he hobbled away up the entrance tunnel, he turned back to face her. "I'll bring something for you, as a thank-you for what you've done," he promised.

But when the pain subsided, so had his gratitude, and the 'thank-you' was forgotten.

*

Because Soffen used the powers of The Way in her healing, Grey—like most badgers in Brockenhurst Sett—felt uneasy around her. In general, magic was discouraged by the Council and it was only because the Healer was so skilled that she was allowed such latitude.

Pushing these uncomfortable thoughts aside, Grey returned to the sleeping chamber, looking about for something to do. Soffen's unexplained departure was making him edgy. Picking up a stray leaf, he dropped it onto a pile already neatly stacked in one corner, then sat back on his haunches, sighing.

Even though the burrow was obviously a temporary one, Soffen kept it tidy, unlike his own, which was always in a mess. He could see the Healer had done her best to make the burrow as comfortable as possible, working the packed earthen floor with deep grooves to draw off any water percolating into the sett. The walls themselves had strange patterns scratched into their surfaces, a reminder that this was the burrow of a Healer, and Grey looked away, quickly turning his back on the marks, studying the two short tunnels leading off the main chamber instead.

One tunnel, lined with leaves and dried grasses, contained the sleeping form of the stranger, Brock, with Soffen's remaining cub snuggled between his forefeet. Grey's gaze wandered to the other tunnel, which was filled with herbs and strange plants he couldn't identify. Wrinkling his snout as the different fragrances caught

his attention, the Custodian wandered over, absent-mindedly poking at some of the dried plants, until the cub mewled quietly in its sleep, attracting his attention.

Looking at it, Grey's thoughts roamed.

Whoever had sired these cubs was keeping very quiet about it, which was no surprise. After all, who in their right mind would confess to mating with a Healer?

No, the surprise was the Healer's attitude. He could make no sense of it. Why hadn't she followed the mores of the sett? And what was all this about destiny?

Grey's thoughts were interrupted when the cub mewled again, turning restlessly in its sleep.

His constant pacing seemed to be disturbing the sleeping badgers, so Grey decided leave the cramped chamber. He would lay in the entrance tunnel and wait for the Healer's return.

The wind howled across the narrow opening, echoing down the tunnel with an undulating groan that set Grey's teeth on edge. Even so, he found himself drawn to the eerie sound.

He lay in the entrance, unmoving, lost to his thoughts, unaware of the lashing rain and howling winds that blew small bushes and shrubs through the moving sheets of water.

As Grey's thoughts roamed, an uneasiness stirred in his mind. Where had Soffen taken the cub? Had she decided to kill it after all?

The old Custodian considered this idea at length. Yes, it made sense, she'd come to her senses and had taken the cub out to kill it.

*

Soffen had made good progress through the storm, standing now on the higher reaches of Fire Rock, her cub dangling limply from her mouth. Looking about for the best ascent, her feelings were in turmoil, the certainty that had driven her thus far, waning. So too, her confidence that the storm was her ally. She felt alone and frightened, a deep-rooted fear that was hard to ignore.

In the time it had taken her to scramble over the slippery slopes forming the lower regions of Fire Rock, darkness had fallen, and now a cold moon mottled the landscape, picking out the pathway ahead with bold shadows: foreboding phantoms that only added to her sense of unease.

When Soffen finally reached the upper slopes, she found another hazard waiting there. Water, cascading down from the higher escarpments, made the going treacherous and she was forced to make many detours, pushing herself to the limit, aware that time was running out. If she was late in reaching her goal—

Soffen quickly discarded that thought, the outcome was far too alarming to contemplate.

The higher Soffen climbed, the louder the thunder became, mounting in intensity until its echoes crashed and pounded through her head, reverberating in her chest like a worrisome cough. She struggled on, clawing her way up the slippery slope, driven upwards by a force that she only half-understood.

Soffen finally staggered onto the summit of Fire Rock and could do little more than collapse onto its hard surface in a heap, trying to recover her strength.

Painfully finding her feet, she carefully picked up the small sodden cub and reeled her way out across the plateau, ducking instinctively as another peal of thunder crashed directly overhead. Squinting her eyes against the harsh lightning that constantly seared the top of the mountain range, she carefully lay her cub at the very centre of the ancient rock.

Struggling to keep her feet in the buffeting wind, Soffen pulled a cord of twisted grasses from around her neck, examining the lodestone threaded onto it. Her father had given it to her, just before his death. She knew it to be a powerful and dangerous device; one of the keys to the Dark Healing. Holding it always brought back bitter-sweet memories of her father. Turning it over, she recalled the time she'd listened in rapt fascination as he had explained its magical powers.

The lodestone had sparked so brightly when her father struck it against another stone, a miniature version of the sheet lightning cascading about her right now. Soffen had watched in awe as he displayed how the lodestone always turned to face the same direction when floated on a piece of bark in water.

Now, other than dim memories, the lodestone was her only link with her dead father; the last of the powerful tools he had used during his years as a Healer.

Rolling her cub onto its back, Soffen placed the lodestone between his tiny paws, flinching as another clap of thunder crashed over the plateau, shaking the ground beneath her feet. The loud, rolling rumbles sweeping overhead tossed surges of bright light from sky to earth with eye-stinging brightness.

Soffen forced her weary way back to the rim of the plateau, where she lay huddled in the downpour, anxiously waiting for the Dark Healing to work its magic.

For a long time nothing happened and she began to fidget apprehensively. But then it came, so fast that she almost missed it and it was only the flickering after-image burnt into her eyes that allowed her to follow the bright bolt of lightning cleaving down through the air.

A jagged brightness hurtled from the clouds, engulfing the lodestone and her precious cub in a fierce blue-white light that crackled and danced over the tiny juddering body. Even from where she lay, at the very edge of the plateau, Soffen could feel the enormous surge of heat thrown out by the aura dancing around her cub.

Eyes wide with terror, she moaned, watching as her cub disappeared beneath the intense combustion. Then the storm ceased.

Not slowly, as is usual with such tempests, or even intermittently, as is sometimes the case, but instantly, immediately— from rage to calm, violence to stillness— as though suddenly frightened by the enormity of what it had done on Fire Rock.

Soffen's ears were left ringing by the stunning silence that unexpectedly fell over the plateau.

As the clouds broke and the moon washed the whole scene with bright light, Soffen trembled, too scared to move or think. She could only stare at the spot where a moment before her cub had been caressed by the life force of the angry storm.

Then spurred on by a desperate need to know, Soffen moved, her steps, shuffling and unsteady at first, rapidly gathered speed, until she was running flat out, streaking towards the smoking remains that had been her cub.

Chapter 5

Brock woke with a start to find himself lying on a soft bed of moss with a sleeping cub between his forefeet. Wrinkling his nose, he carefully withdrew his paws from beneath the small cub nestled on top of them and got up.

Dismissing the remnants of the dream still lingering in his consciousness— a strange dream in which he'd been flying through a bright moonlit sky, so real he was reluctant to leave the delights of swooping low over glades and rolling hills— Brock looked around.

The chamber he found himself in was damp and cold and he looked about for clues as to who the owner might be, wondering how he'd got here. Checking that the cub was still asleep, Brock headed for the surface, seeking some answers.

Moving up the sloping entrance tunnel, Brock became aware of a storm raging outside and it stimulated his memory: the old badger he'd met on the forest path, the sow who'd given him a horrible tasting potion, the euphoric feeling that had followed. They all came flooding back in a rush, crowding in on him, a kaleidoscope of confusing emotions.

Rounding a corner in the tunnel, Brock was confronted by the same old badger that he'd met on the path.

"You're awake then," Grey greeted him. "I was about to come down and check on you. Are you feeling better now?"

Brock nodded, watching narrow eyed, as the old badger cocked his head.

"Can you hear that?" Grey asked.

Brock listened hard. "I can hear the storm," he answered.

Grey turned his back on Brock, looking out into the forest. "Perhaps I felt it rather than heard it then. Didn't you hear anything at all?" he asked, looking back at Brock over his shoulder.

"Something," Brock acknowledged reluctantly, "Yes perhaps something."

Grey nodded. "I'm sure it's got something to do with Soffen."

Brock frowned. "You're the Custodian that I met in the forest, aren't you?"

Grey nodded his agreement and Brock wrinkled his snout.

"It's Grey, isn't it? Yes, I remember now. But who is this Soffen?"

Grey rolled his eyes. "Yes I'm sorry, you probably don't remember her. Not surprising really, the state you were in. She's our Healer. She helped get you back here, then treated you. This is her burrow."

"Soffen is the female who gave me that strange tasting herb back in the forest?"

Grey barked a short laugh, his snout creasing with fine lines. "Yes, that's right. You do remember then?"

A bolt of lightning tore through the dark sky, making both badgers jump, and as Brock blinked the after-image away, the smell of ozone filled the tunnel.

The pair stared out into the forest, amazement widening their eyes. In the time that it had taken the lightning to flicker and die, the storm had vanished, the only reminder, a muted split-splat of raindrops falling from leaf to leaf.

"But this is impossible!" Grey's voice was full of awe.

Brock followed Grey out into the calm air, looking about in amazement.

"How can this be? A storm can't just stop like this. What's happening?" Tilting his head back, Brock scented the air, which was full of strange aromas. "Do you think this has something to do with your Healer?"

Grey nodded slowly. "Yes, I'm sure it has." His voice was loaded with scorn.

"Where did she go?"

"I don't know. She just asked me to look after you and her cub, then went off out into the storm. That reminds me, I'd better go down and check if the cub's alright."

Once Grey had disappeared, Brock made his way out amongst the trees of the ancient forest, and standing up on his hind legs, rested his forepaws on the trunk of an elm, directing his thoughts into its essence, using the powers of The Way to seek connection.

Brock kept his position without moving for a long time, his snout furrowed in concentration, funnelling all his energies into the tree, as, moving from ring to ring, he hunted through its memories. And there, near the centre, he caught a fleeting glimpse of the forest's communal life force.

At first it was hesitant and disjointed, channelled as it was through the slender trunk, but it became clearer the further he reached. In the dim and distant adumbration, Brock finally detected the dying energies of the storm as it coiled in upon itself, and he saw that it had been no ordinary storm, linked as it was to The Way, fashioned by the Prime Mover to fulfil a task as yet unexplained.

Snatching away his paws, Brock dropped to his feet, trying to shrug off the feeling of doom that had suddenly enveloped him.

Making his slow way back to the burrow, he wondered why the Healer's image still floated at the back of his mind.

Grey stopped playing with the cub when Brock entered the chamber, looking a little embarrassed.

"The cub's fine," he said, as though in answer to an unasked question. "Just a bit frightened by all the thunder, that's all."

Brock ignored Grey's remarks, stopping just inside the entrance as a sudden thought struck him. All the things that had been happening— the fire, the meeting with Grey, the peculiar storm, even his treatment by the Healer— they were all bound together, somehow preordained, outside his control.

He'd been meant to come here. But to what end?

"Grey, I'm sorry to have to ask you this, but there's something I have to do in private. Would you mind leaving me alone for awhile?"

Grey gave Brock a thoughtful look, then nodded slowly, leaving the chamber. But once out of sight, he slipped back, his curiosity aroused.

Once Grey had departed, Brock dropped into a light trance. Regulating his breathing, as he'd been taught when a neophyte, he calmed his mind, allowing the special technique to circulate air in and out of his lungs in one continuous motion. This had the effect of saturating his blood with oxygen, deepening his trance.

Brock began to feel the familiar light-headedness that preceded Union and quickly channelled his thoughts into the complex patterns necessary to enter the First Path of The Way.

In his mind's eye, Brock joined his being with the Prime Mover, rapidly expanding his consciousness until he was filled with Her essence. Welcoming Her vastness into his mind, he immersed himself into Her wholeness, falling deeper into his trance, becoming one with the cosmos.

Entering the next path, he left behind his links with the physical world and his breathing began to falter, at times, almost cease altogether. Unmindful of his collapsed body trembling on the damp floor— far outside his control now— Brock continued to travel the paths of The Way.

From his hiding place just outside the chamber entrance, Grey watched Brock collapse. Hurrying to the Teller's side, he saw the young boar was in a state of deep trance. He leaned closer, fascinated by the strange way the young badger was breathing.

Along with his fellow Custodians, Grey had spent many a long winter-cycle discussing this very phenomenon but had never been lucky enough to witness it. This was a unique opportunity and he was determined to take full advantage of it. He watched the trembling Teller closely, aware that Brock's mind was now lost amongst the legends and experiences that formed Boddaert's continuum.

Brock had reached the stage known as Shar, where the mind is free from all physical sensation, existing only as pure thought, able to mingle and meld with the thoughts of others. Always a little frightened at this point, fearful that the next step might cast him adrift into an apogee from which there would be no return, he allowed the last tenuous link with the physical world to slip away, entering a mindset where all events fused together to become Now.

At the sixth path, Brock floated over the collective memories of his race, dipping his mind into the passing elements, as a badger might dip a grass-stem into a wasp's nest to extract the honey hidden there. Immersing himself deeply, he tried to locate a time-line but the elements were a jumbled madness.

This had never happened before and Brock became uneasy, gathering strength from about him, attempting to cross the threshold to the next path. But something was blocking The Way— a shadow on the fringes of his consciousness. Slipping back to a lower path, Brock collected himself and waited.

Such a swirling confusion was experienced when slipping from pathway to pathway, that during training, many neophytes became disorientated, some so badly they never recovered. Many had likened the feeling to that of a spider riding a twirling sycamore seed in a summer storm.

Grey studied the unconscious Teller closely, searching for any small clues that might help him understand the process at work. The Custodians had tried to uncover the techniques used by the Tellers in the past, believing such knowledge would give them the means to better control the destiny of Brockenhurst Sett. And they may well have succeeded, had their Preceptor not forbidden it.

Now Grey had a unique opportunity to gain control of the knowledge that would help him to build his own power base. He leant closer, the tension building in his chest. But the young badger's eyes suddenly snapped open and Grey was drawn into a deep pool of blackness that both fascinated and frightened him.

The pupils of the Teller's eyes rapidly grew in size until they encompassed the whole of Grey's world, and as he fought to tear his gaze from the emptiness yawning before him, the old badger's breathing became more and

more laboured, awaking emotions he did not understand; writhing ribbons of redness that licked at the corners of his mind with a harsh hunger.

Grey suddenly found himself fighting for his sanity, beating at the tenuous images swirling within his mind, as jostling for attention, they sped around his thoughts with a frenzy that churned his stomach. Whispering seductive promises. they beckoned him nearer to the chasm, slipping him away from reality, merging him with their madness.

In that last few moments, Grey relived parts of his life that he'd thought banished forever. Memories he had no wish to reawaken. Memories that should have stayed buried until his final meeting with the Prime Mover.

But now they welled up, out of the deepest recesses of his mind, answering the call of the darkness raging within his head.

The old Custodian began to let go, to join with the oneness, a part of him welcoming the darker edges. Then, suddenly, the contact was broken and Grey staggered back, rapidly blinking his eyes.

Brock had come out of his self-hypnosis, too disorientated to notice the Custodian's distress. He'd learnt little while in his trance and that had shaken him.

He turned to Grey, a red tinged darkness still glazing his eyes.

"I need to see the Council. At once," he growled.

*

Soffen approached the centre of the plateau, terrified at what she might find, her mind in a whirl. She'd been wrong to evoke such a dark force, to place such faith in her dead father's powers. And now she'd paid the ultimate price: her cub's life.

Bright moonlight reflected from the smooth surface of the stone, highlighting the sheer rock wall to the north. A jagged peak threw a dark shadow across the small form lying on the cold unyielding surface. Soffen was forced to squint through the smoke filled air to catch sight of her cub. The lodestone had been shattered into tiny fragments by the lightning, and beside the fragments, a small body lay, quite still.

As the harsh reality bit into her churning stomach, a huge weight bore down on Soffen and she shook from head to tail. But then to her utter astonishment, the small form moved. Raising its head, it mewed weakly at her.

Picking her cub up, Soffen gasped in delight as it squirmed in her grip. Moving towards the edge of the plateau she examined it with great excitement, and there, beneath the blackened fur, saw a lighter layer of soft silver-grey. Heart thumping, eyes full of tears, Soffen reached out a trembling paw, lightly touching the black nose, the black pads of the tiny feet. Then, blinking back her tears, she finally stared into liquid brown eyes.

Halfway along the tortuous path leading down from the high plateau, Soffen was suddenly overcome by a tiredness she could no longer ignore. Taking shelter by a large rock, she rested, her cub snuggled between her forepaws. Even though she was weak and exhausted, Soffen began grooming her cub's new coat, sighing deeply when it whickered and snuggled into her side. Humming a song that her mother had taught her long ago, Soffen continued to comfort her cub with soft caresses and tender words.

"And what shall we call you, my little lovely, with those beautiful bold stripes?" Smiling as a name popped into her head, Soffen nodded to herself. "Darkburst! Yes, that's it. Darkburst it shall be then."

Happy to have found such a suitable name for her cub, Soffen continued her caresses.

She was whole and content at last, but unaware that she had started a chain of events that would shake the very foundations of Boddaert's Realm itself.

Chapter 6

"The Council will attend to business." The Custodian's booming voice floated out to Brock as he waited in the antechamber.

Unable to hide his impatience, Brock paced back and forth restlessly while the badgers inside the Great Chamber discussed the affairs of the sett. Wrinkling his snout in irritation, Brock tried to calm himself, realising he could do nothing to hurry the process taking place just a few steps away in the main chamber.

What sort of badgers were these to treat him in such a manner? Back home a visitor would have been made welcome, be given some worms and a comfortable burrow in which to rest.

Brock quickly pushed these thoughts aside, bringing as they did, too many painful memories. Ceasing his agitated pacing, he sat on his haunches and began rehearsing what he was going to say to the Council when they finally summoned him. It was important that he got this right.

Finally, after an interminable wait, came the words that Brock was waiting to hear.

"Custodians, a visitor to our sett is outside. He has asked permission to speak to the Council." Brock did not miss the note of contempt in the speaker's voice and wrinkled his snout in puzzlement. "He is a Teller of The Way from the far beyond our mountains."

The announcement caused a buzz of interest amongst the Custodians and Brock's heart beat faster when he realised that he was about to be called to address the Council— an undertaking that would have intimidated even the bravest of badgers.

"Usher, fetch this Teller before us," the gravelly voice ordered.

A small badger suddenly appeared at Brock's side, urgently pulling at his coat. Taking a few deep breaths to calm himself, Brock followed the usher through the short, low tunnel leading into the Great Chamber.

Entering the chamber, Brock stumbled to a halt, not hearing the usher's urgent whispers to keep moving. He stood dumbstruck, overwhelmed by what he saw.

The magnificent chamber had been excavated beneath a gigantic oak tree, its domed roof so high that it was lost in the darkness far above Brock's head. The walls were entwined with countless roots, coiling and twisting through each other in such a complicated pattern that they seemed alive and in constant motion. Carved along these roots were intricate patterns that Brock instantly recognised as ancient symbols of The Way.

Brock had memorised, as all Tellers had to, the fables and tales that made up the history of Boddaert's Realm, and as he made his way across the vast chamber, the chronicle of the building of Brockenhurst Sett unexpectedly popped into his mind, as though pushed there by some outside force.

*

Boddaert, the first and most powerful Keeper of The Way, had constructed the Great Chamber, helped by a group of Magi especially trained for the task.

Firstly he used his awesome powers to command the roots of The Chosen Tree to coil about each other until they became an impenetrable mass; a cradle for this most sacred of places, henceforth known as the Great Chamber.

Once completed, he ordered his Magi to carve the Eternal Symbols along each root, which they did, using claws carefully sharpened on their master's Lodestone. Labouring during the two cycles, they toiled non-stop, until the complicated patterns had been completed. Then, as the planets dominating the dark sky swung into alignment far above the earth, Boddaert sanctified the Great Chamber with an incantation from the Ancient Rites.

Following the completion of the Great Chamber, Boddaert oversaw the digging of Brockenhurst Sett itself and the forest echoed to the noise of frenzied activity as a horde of badgers constructed the deepest sett ever created. The living chambers of this colossal structure were warm and snug, ensuring freedom from the hard winter frosts. The interconnecting tunnels, radiating outwards from the imposing Great Chamber, saw to it that a constant supply of fresh air reached even the remotest parts of the sett. And at regular intervals along the outermost tunnels, internal latrines were dug, an unusual feature then, and now.

When the work had been completed, Boddaert took his Magi to the top of Fire Rock, and from this high plateau overlooking Brockenhurst Forest, they undertook a ceremony to mark the beginning of Boddaert's Chronicle— a ceremony that lasted five full moons. Many badgers died during this self-imposed fast, giving their lives willingly, secure in the knowledge that they were sacrificing themselves for the good of all, knowing the Prime Mover would repay such dedication and unselfish sacrifice a thousand-fold.

Finally, at the height of the winter solstice, Boddaert cast his last spell, delving deeply into his knowledge of The Way, standing tall as he amalgamated his unity with the natural order.

There, at the very centre of the plateau, surrounded by his remaining Magi, the great badger threw back his head, his sightless eyes searching the dark skies, and slowly, majestically, began to sing. From his lips rose the beautiful sounds of Crom's *Elegy for the Dead*, which he sang for three moons, ignoring the pain racking his body, the thirst gnawing at his cracked lips. For three long moons, as the less strong died about him, he continued pouring forth the complicated patterns of notes, until finally, his faith was rewarded.

She appeared to him on a slim column of fire, undefined and insubstantial at first but growing stronger with every stanza, weaving and dancing to the pure notes of Her song, gaining substance, building Her strength.

The fire that was Her essence pulsated and swirled with such intensity that it stung the eyes of all who beheld Her. So fierce was Her being that even Boddaert's sightless eyes saw the mythical light, as thrusting upwards from the smooth surface of the plateau, the shimmering energy splintered into a myriad fragments against the low clouds.

Lightning rent the boiling greyness with great splashes of brilliant colour and the primeval forces flowed from Her deep cradle in the ground to Her high sett in the sky. With them flowed Boddaert's spirit, leaving his body a cold and empty shell.

And here began the Legend; a Fable foretelling a new beginning born of the old, a new challenge that would break loose from the very heart of Fire Rock itself.

*

"Come nearer badger!"

The harsh voice dragged Brock back from his reflections and he surreptitiously studied his surroundings as he followed the usher's bobbing back across the open space.

At the far end of the Great Chamber the oak's taproot thrust downwards through the roof, covering a vast distance before ramming itself into the packed earthen floor. High above his head Brock spotted an opening carved right into the taproot itself, and it was from here that the speaker had addressed him. The boar carried an unmistakable air of authority, glaring down frostily, beckoning Brock forward with an impatient gesture.

As instructed by the usher, Brock took up position in front of the assembly. He let his gaze follow the gnarled old taproot upwards until he was staring at the roof far above him, overwhelmed by its sheer size.

The Preceptor spoke again from his high perch, and even though his voice was low, such was the structure of the Great Chamber that Brock could hear every word.

"Grey informs me that you have demanded a hearing Teller."

The curt manner offended Brock but he ignored it and swallowed his nervousness, desperately trying to recall what he had come here to say.

It came as something of a shock to Brock to realise that he had completely forgotten what he wanted to tell the Custodians. For many moons now, he had cajoled and pleaded with Grey to get him this hearing, and now stood speechless, his mind a complete blank.

Something was jumbling his thoughts around, buzzing at the back of his eyes like an angry wasp. His attention kept wandering and he was experiencing the strangest sensation— as though his memories were being stolen by some intruder that had slipped into his mind.

Shaking his head Brock looked about, studying the Great Chamber. It was a beautiful place, no badger could doubt that, but it lacked the special spark that had been the life force of High Green. No, even with all its beauty, this place would never fill the terrible emptiness that gnawed away inside him now— the sadness of unfulfilled dreams, shattered hopes and lost loved ones.

"Teller, you demanded a hearing. You insisted you had something of importance to tell us, yet you stand before us like some tongue-tied cub!"

The Preceptor's sigh of annoyance was audible to all in the chamber and Brock fidgeted uncomfortably, dragging his attention back to the present.

"Well? What have you to say to us?"

Brock stared up at the shadowy figure above him, still struggling to order his thoughts.

Biting back the sharp retort that sprang to his lips, Brock forced a smile, bowed his head and, using the ancient title as Grey had advised, answered, "Preceptor, I have journeyed here from High Green, my home sett. It was destroyed by a terrible fire. It lies . . . lay, across the Brockenhurst Mountains. We had no Council like yours of course, our sett being smaller but—"

The Preceptor's voice whipped down, thick with sarcasm. "Teller we have already heard all this trivia from Grey, so I suggest you dispense with protocol and get on with it."

Caught off guard by the unexpected reprimand, Brock looked to Grey for support, but the old Custodian just wrinkled his snout, glancing away uncomfortably. Brock swung his gaze back to the Preceptor, glaring up at him angrily.

"Well, Teller," the Preceptor prompted again. "We're waiting."

Narrowing his eyes, Brock took a deep breath. "I came here because I had a vision." He paused, gathering his thoughts. "A vision that—"

Once again Brock was interrupted as the Preceptor's voice lashed down at him. "Yes we know all that. We were told how you hid away like some half-wit coward while the rest of your sett perished." The pause was just long enough for the barb to bite home. "So perhaps you would be kind enough to explain why we should waste our time listening to tales of visions and the like from one such as yourself."

Brock began to tremble, his anger welling up almost beyond his control. The fur along his back rose in a ridge, and without thinking, he unsheathed his claws.

Ignoring the murmurs this hostile act drew from the Custodians, Brock shouted back at the Preceptor, "How dare you address me in such a manner!"

A veiled glint of satisfaction lit the Preceptor's eyes as he studied the Teller far below him. "Never raise your voice here, badger," he warned quietly, his tone smooth and reasonable. "Not even a Custodian is allowed that privilege. When I speak, you listen. When I question, you answer. That and no more. Now wait outside while we discuss this matter."

Turning his back, the Preceptor dismissed Brock, disappearing into the interior of the taproot opening.

The usher immediately reappeared at Brock's side, nudging him urgently when he just continued to stare open-mouthed at the empty chamber far above him. Fighting the temptation to brush the annoying badger to one side and continue arguing his case with the remaining Custodians, Brock gathered his dignity as best he could and stalked from the Great Chamber.

Ignoring the usher's urgent whispers to wait within the antechamber, Brock pushed the small badger aside and made directly for the exit tunnel. With a mounting sense of frustration and anger, he burst from the sett, heading out into the bright moonlight.

He needed to talk to Soffen.

*

Brock found Soffen in her special glade, hidden deep within the remotest part of Brockenhurst Forest. It was here that she came when she wanted to be alone. The sun was breaking and he stood quietly amongst the tall bracken fronds watching her, only half-conscious of the nearby Redstarts and Hawfinches going about their business. He was close enough to hear her quiet sobs, and embarrassed by this unintentional intrusion, turned to leave, disturbing a nesting Blackcap. The bird shrilled an angry warning as it flew into the trees on the far side of the clearing.

"Who's there?" Soffen's light voice asked urgently.

Pushing the bracken aside, Brock stepped out into the open. "It's only me Soffen. I'm sorry if I disturbed you."

She smiled shyly, sniffing back her tears. Then wrinkling her snout in an attempt at light-heartedness, she cocked her head.

"Were you spying on me Brock?"

He felt the small patch of bare skin just above his nose grow hot, a sure sign of embarrassment, and wriggled uncomfortably under her stare.

"I'm sorry Soffen, I didn't mean to intrude on your privacy. I was just—" He faltered to a stop.

The Healer's gentle laugh echoed across the glade as she lightly touched his flank. "Why you look so flustered," she taunted playfully. "I do believe that I've embarrassed you."

Brock nodded once, then sighing heavily, settled down beside her.

"What is it Brock?"

"I've been to see the Council," his voice was flat, bitter.

Soffen nodded. "And they didn't listen to you." It was a statement not a question.

Brock shrugged. "The Preceptor treated me with utter contempt but I can't say I blame him too much in the circumstances. It was so humiliating." He glanced over at her, noting the concern deep within her eyes.

"You still don't understand, do you?" Soffen berated him lightly. "The Preceptor and his Custodians are frightened of you." She tapped his temple lightly. "Up here you carry our history. All the facts and happenings that make us what we are."

Glancing away, she absentmindedly flicked her stubby tail, dislodging the foraging ant that had slipped through the coarse guard hairs to nip at her skin.

"That knowledge is power," she continued quietly. "It's no surprise that they're suspicious of you, when you go to them with stories of death and rebirth."

"I didn't mention rebirth," Brock protested.

Soffen wrinkled her snout. "But your vision did Brock. It described the start of a new cycle. What's that, if not rebirth?"

Brock glanced away into the tall trees, uncertainty lining his snout, considering Soffen's statement.

"Well, perhaps you're right," he conceded after a few moments.

"And what role do the Custodians have in this vision of yours?"

"I don't know."

"Exactly," Soffen said, as though Brock had made her point for her. She moved closer. "Look Brock, the Custodians are unsettled. At present they control Brockenhurst Sett, and through that, all the other setts in Brockenhurst Valley, something they've done for generations. They've worked hard to make this a safe place to live, and in return we've given them the power to rule over us. Now you come along, with your stories of death and destruction." Furrowing her snout, Soffen looked at him. "I'm sorry to say this Brock, but it's no wonder they don't want to hear what you have to say."

"But ignoring the facts won't change them," Brock protested, glancing away. Then, with a shake of his head, he quickly apologised. "I'm sorry, it's not your fault. I shouldn't be taking it out on you like this. It's just that every instinct tells me that Brockenhurst Sett is in real danger."

"Have you explained your concerns to Grey?" Soffen asked.

Brock nodded as he answered. "Well partly, but I thought it would have more impact when he heard the whole thing at the Council Meeting." Barking a derisive laugh, Brock wrinkled his snout. "But I wasn't given the chance to explain anything, was I? Instead the Preceptor treated me like a two-moon cub."

Soffen slapped her paw on the ground, giving a grunt of satisfaction as she caught a beetle scuttling from beneath a nearby stone. Putting it in her mouth, she chewed for a time, lost to her thoughts.

Brock, reluctant to interrupt the Healer's private musings, watched the antics of two squirrels chasing one another up and down a nearby tree.

When Soffen finally spoke, her voice was more assured and Brock turned his head to face her.

"You know Brock, Grey's not like the other Custodians. He cares deeply about Brockenhurst Sett and if he really thought that it was threatened, I'm sure he'd do all in his power to help. We must make him realise the importance of your vision."

Brock poked aimlessly at the ground for a moment, the gentle breeze ruffling the guard hairs on his ears, wondering what else he could do to win the old Custodian over.

Then looking up with a glint of determination in his eyes, he said, "I'll have to convince him somehow, won't I? The Council must be made to see the danger."

Soffen shook her head impatiently. "Brock, why do insist on involving the Council in this?"

"What else can I do? I can't do this on my own. I need the Council's help."

"But I can help you," Soffen replied, touching him lightly, stopping his protest. "No, hear me out. We're both practised in the art of The Way. You're a Teller, I'm a Healer, and that's a powerful combination. Your vision hints that Boddaert's Magic can help protect Brockenhurst Sett. Well, who stands the best chance of finding it, us or the Council?" Soffen paused, studying Brock closely. "Think about it. It's almost as though we've been brought together for this very purpose. Can't you feel it? The affinity of our first meeting?"

Brock shook his head in confusion. "I don't know. It's just not that simple."

Soffen grabbed his paw excitedly. "But of course it's that simple. Together we can do this. Honestly, we can."

"No Soffen, I really don't think so. The Preceptor guards the Sacred Roots and we would need those to guide us to Boddaert's Magic. Without the Sacred Roots we wouldn't stand a chance of finding it."

Soffen nodded in agreement. "But don't you see? That's where Grey comes in. He's got access to the Sacred Roots. He can get them for us."

Brock looked dubious. "Do you think Grey would do that?" Considering the possibility for a moment, Brock shook his head. "No I don't think he would."

Soffen tilted her head, a distant look in her eyes. "You just leave Grey to me," she told him.

"And what about your cubs? You can't just go off in search of Boddaert's Magic and leave them behind."

"For goodness sake Brock! They're more than old enough to come with us."

"But it's not just that," he countered, placing a paw on her flank, indicating the clearing in which they were standing. "It's all this. If we take the Sacred Roots and are discovered, the Custodians would never allow us back. You'd be banished for life. Could you live with that?"

Soffen exhaled deeply, gazing at the familiar trees. "And what has life to offer me here, do you think? Because I'm a Healer, few badgers will talk to me. And now I've lost the only friend I ever really had."

Soffen shivered in the fading moonlight, staring up at the stars with bright, unfocussed eyes, remembering Raffens's laughter as they'd collected plants that cycle in the forest— memories best forgotten.

"You told me once that your sett was different from this. That badgers there didn't shun each other just because one happened to be a Healer, or a Teller of The Way. Well that's what I want for my cubs. Friendship and companionship, and perhaps someone to share my life with."

As Soffen lapsed into silence, Brock shifted uncomfortably.

It was some time before Soffen spoke again, but when she did her voice held a wistful note. "There must be another sett out there somewhere," she whispered softly, "where badgers live together with tolerance and understanding. Help me find a sett like that Brock, and I'll help you find Boddaert's Magic."

Seeing the tears suffusing Soffen's eyes, Brock moved closer, trying to comfort her, patting ineffectually at her flank.

Soffen finally managed a self-conscious half smile. "I'm all right," she said.

Brock nuzzled gently at her neck. "Come on, let's get back to your sett and find some worms. If we're going to invite Grey over we'll need plenty of those, you know what a greedy old badger he is."

They laughed in unison, breaking the black mood that had enveloped them, walking along the path towards the sett.

As Soffen followed Brock's broad back, she deliberately trod in his footsteps, trying to come to terms with the feelings that were welling up inside her. Feelings that centred more and more around the badger ambling along in front of her.

Chapter 7

Grindel impatiently tapped his claws on the stone floor, frustrated at being kept waiting so long in such a grim place. Glancing along the sweating rock walls, he shivered, ruffling his coat against the cold. No matter how many times he was summoned here, he was never prepared for the sombre experience.

Coughing quietly, wrinkling his snout against the foul smells, he settled down to wait, passing the time by going over what he would say, determined that this time it would be different. When he was finally admitted to the inner chamber there would be no fawning or deferential adulation, no flattery or false praises, because this time he would take control.

The bile rose in Grindel's throat as he glanced about the filthy charnel house, trying to ignore the heaps of bones and rotting carcasses laying in the dark corners. Black liquid oozed from one pile of putrefying flesh, running across the floor to collect in a dark pool, busily attended by carrion beetles.

Eyes widening, Grindel studied the familiar shape tossed carelessly on top of the sickening mass, the black and white stripes still plainly visible through a thick coating of congealed blood. Stumbling forward, repelled and fascinated at the same time, Grindel tentatively reached out a trembling paw towards the severed head.

Raffen? Could this be Raffen, he wondered.

"Grindel!" His name rebounded from the dank walls, and he froze, paw still outstretched. "Come here badger."

Turning away from his grisly discovery, Grindel hastily entered the inner chamber, all thoughts of rebellion vanishing once he stood before the bent and twisted old figure dominating the small space.

Lowering his snout, Grindel touched it to the slime-coated floor in the expected gesture of subjugation.

"Have you carried out my instructions?" The voice was harsh and gritty.

Keeping his gaze on the floor, Grindel nodded. "Yes Skelda, I gave the Teller, Brock, no chance to speak. He seemed very disorientated."

The gnarled head bobbed slowly. "Good. That's good. And what was his reaction?"

Grindel studied the misshapen badger surreptitiously, not daring to look directly at him, but ever watchful for signs of approval.

"He left the chamber in confusion. He appeared upset."

"And where is he now?"

"With the Healer, the one called Soffen." A short pause, followed by, "But—"

Skelda raised his snout slightly, giving Grindel permission to continue.

Grindel took a breath before plunging on, "I was wondering how you managed to influence him at such a distance."

The distorted head bobbed again. "The Dark Healing works well under my command Preceptor. You would do well to remember that."

The gaunt, twisted figure studying Grindel with such intensity carried about it the smell of death. Patches of discoloured skin could be seen through the dull, sparse coat, a deformed spine made movement more a shuffle than a walk, and part of the head was covered by a cancerous growth, glistening in the dim light. A weeping canker replaced one ear and the one good eye, staring now with such obvious ill humour, harboured a menace that terrified any badger unlucky enough to attract its attention.

No matter how hard he tried, Grindel could not bring himself to think of this creature as anything other than pure evil, something to be feared and obeyed.

The gruff voice sounded again. "Even as we speak, the Teller and Healer are planning a journey to find Boddaert's Magic, and to undertake such an adventure, they'll require access to the Sacred Roots."

While in no position to question this statement, Grindel did not doubt its validity. The badger facing him had proved time and again his access to extraordinary powerful magic.

Skelda smiled, which twisted his features into an even more grotesque mask. "They'll enlist Grey's help to get at the Sacred Roots. He will be the one to betray us."

"But he would never do that." Grindel immediately lowered his gaze, realising the terrible mistake he'd made, bitter experience having taught him that Skelda brooked no contradiction.

Moving with astonishing speed, the deformed badger pushed a claw deep into the Preceptor's ear, twisting it savagely. Grindel, overwhelmed by the sudden pain, dropped to the floor, begging Skelda to stop his sadistic attack. Skelda ignored the Preceptor's screams and the trembling badger could do little more than lay on his side, head thrown back, eyes wide and staring, desperately searching for some small corner of his mind in which to escape the torment.

Then as suddenly as it had started, the pain stopped, and there was nothing to mark its passage, except a fading memory.

"Grindel," Skelda's voice dripped with the honeyed tones of reason, "I believe I've warned you before about questioning my judgement?"

The Preceptor could only manage a hoarse whisper. "Yes."

"Then I trust it will not be repeated?"

"No."

Skelda smiled, nodding benignly. "Good. Very good." Settling his bloated body into a more comfortable position, he stared hard at the fawning badger. "Now listen carefully Grindel, because I want no mistakes. Allow Grey access to the Sacred Roots but do it in such a manner that it won't arouse his suspicion. Tell him you're going away on a trip or something. That should do it. Tell him you want him to take over your duties while you're gone." Skelda smiled again, his eyes blazing with inner excitement. "Once they have the Sacred Roots, they'll be able to begin their search."

"And when will that be?" Grindel asked sulkily, still favouring his injured ear.

"Use your head idiot. They'll hardly leave just as winter is making ready to set in. No, they'll delay until spring brings new life to the forest. That much is certain."

The Preceptor lowered his head in respect. "Forgive me for being so stupid Skelda, but why can't I just find out from the Teller what he so obviously wants to tell us and save all this subterfuge?"

Skelda studied the cringing Preceptor carefully. Was the badger really so stupid, or was he playing some game of his own? Had he perhaps figured out that it was impossible for him, caught as he was in such a deformed and twisted body, to leave these dank tunnels? That without Boddaert's Magic to help him become whole again, he would be trapped here until he died?

Skelda shuddered at the thought of what might happen if Grindel ever gained control of Boddaert's Magic before he did.

Finally, curling his upper lip in contempt, he snapped, "You try my patience, badger!" The underlying threat was implicit in his tone.

"I'm sorry Skelda," Grindel purred. "Forgive me, I'm but a simple badger, and like all simple creatures, I tend to follow the most obvious path."

Skelda sighed impatiently. "If we allow the Teller to convince the Council that Brockenhurst Sett is in danger, they'll be forced to help him and we'll have no chance of keeping the magic for ourselves. No, this way he'll be forced to get together a party of like minded badgers to help him seek it out. Given half a chance, the Council will interfere and neither of us want that, do we?"

"But why can't I go instead?"

"Because only one badger can survive direct contact with Boddaert's Magic, and that badger is not you."

Grindel wrinkled his snout. "I see Skelda."

"I doubt that," the deformed old badger snapped back. "Go on. Get out!" Then, as Grindel turned to leave. "No wait, there's something I want you to do."

After receiving his instructions, Grindel backed from the inner chamber, heaving a silent sigh of relief to have survived yet another meeting with Skelda. Each time he was summoned, the meetings were harder to take.

Pushing aside such thoughts he headed for his sleeping chambers, planning his next move, the move that would put him in possession of Boddaert's Magic.

*

As Grindel backed out of the chamber, Skelda's features relaxed into something that might have been a smile; it was hard to tell on such a deformed countenance. Scratching at a suppurating patch of bare skin near his tail, he grunted softly. Not because the wound hurt, that had ceased to happen long ago, but because every new malaise only served to remind him of how little time he had left.

Leaving the chamber, he made his way along tunnels known only to him, mumbling softly to himself, a habit that was growing more frequent of late. He barked a short laugh, recalling Grindel's past attempts at trying to outwit him. The Preceptor would never accomplish that.

"Not so long as I'm alive, my wily friend," he muttered darkly. "Not so long as I'm alive."

Skelda sighed deeply, entering his sleeping chamber, glad to be out of the oppressive tunnels. The walls were too straight, the floors too smooth, the unnatural smell offensive.

Settling himself down on a bed of moss, he dismissed the tunnels from his mind, turning to the future instead— to a time when he would run along the tunnels like a young badger again, a time when Boddaert's Magic would return his failing body to the youthful and vigorous thing it had once been.

*

And as Skelda dreamt his dreams of power, savouring his dominion over all badgers, the sun slid behind the horizon, bringing the moon's dark shroud across Brockenhurst Forest. And with the falling temperature, badgers stirred in their warm chambers, readying themselves for the moon's foraging.

*

Slowly, over the following moons, the darkness lengthened, and the chill winds turned the last of the heather brown, covering the trees with a light mantle of frost.

Once more the coldest season had begun to cup Brockenhurst Valley in its chilly embrace, turning the sun's cycle into white swathes of crisp frost and the moon's cycle into reflected points of light that almost out-sparkled the stars.

As badgers hurried about their business, trying to lay down enough body fat to carry them through the coming moons, the mist gathered between the trees, swirling about, its inquisitive fingers touching every surface.

The first snowflake hit the ground and disappeared before any badger saw its descent, but soon the air was full of drifting flakes. They covered the ground, the now dormant shrubs, the branches and trunks of the trees, and the badgers knew it was time to stuff the sett's entrance tunnels with grass and retire until the warm cycle returned.

Chapter 8

The winter was harsh and cold, and most badgers stayed semi-dormant in their snug sleeping chambers.

During the prolonged cold period the sett took on its usual familiar smells, brought on by the blocked entrances and fermenting leaves, the musty moist warmth spreading through the tunnels and chambers, making them a secure and pleasant place to be.

Occasionally the throaty purr of a mating adult could be heard, or the deep warning growl of an aggressive encounter, but mostly the sett settled quietly into the slow rhythm of winter.

With the first winter easterly, the forest was dusted in a light coating of frost which, after a further drop in temperature, turned to a heavier layer of ice. The cutting winds tried shaking a copse of evergreens, but after failing to dislodge any leaves, sulkily blasted the debris of the forest floor instead.

Everywhere life slowed, taking on a less hurried tempo, keeping pace with the icicles growing like long teardrops from bare limbed trees. Deep within Brockenhurst Forest the Aro Brook wound its slow way through the trees, gurgling and muttering to itself where the ice encrusted banks widened, before thrusting out onto the flat plains of Low Meadow.

And so winter passed, as many winters before.

*

Spring was Grey's favourite season. A time when daffodils thrust aside dead leaves, splashing the dull-brown accumulation with vivid yellow reflections. A time of new growth, new life, new hope.

He stood now, just outside the sett entrance, taking a short break from the chores of chasing out the rabbits, foxes and other small creatures that had taken advantage of the sett's warm interior during the winter-cycle. Breaking open a snail's shell the old boar nibbled the delicate flesh, pondering what had happened to Soffen and Brock during the long winter months.

During the harsh winter, Soffen's cubs had grown rapidly. Broshee, the image of her mother, had an impish manner, endearing her to everyone. Darkburst, who'd kept mostly to himself, appeared surly and moody.

Both cubs had visited the sett frequently during the winter-cycle, Broshee making a number of new friends, but Darkburst hadn't fared so well.

One friend Darkburst had made however, was Grindel, The Preceptor. Their friendship became so close that Darkburst was allowed to use the Preceptor's name, a rare privilege indeed.

Grey scratched his snout, watching a large beetle scuttle its way under a nearby stone, then glanced up to study the piles of earth thrown up around the sett, recalling his father's explanation on what the earth-works said about the size of the sett below. From the proportions of the embankment fronting Brockenhurst Sett, no badger could fail to be impressed at how big an area it must cover.

Back in the upper tunnels, Grey could hear other badgers moving about and knew it was time he returned to his work, but he sighed gently instead, settling his large bulk into a more comfortable position.

He would go shortly. First, he had some thinking to do, and there was always the question of that large beetle!

*

During Soffen and Brock's only winter visit with Grey, the trio discussed Brock's vision at length, exploring it in every detail.

Brock's interpretation was part fact and part revelation, so the conversation had been stilted and difficult.

Soffen accepted Brock's vision without hesitation, convinced that the events foretold would happen, but Grey remained sceptical, finding such a catastrophe impossible to accept, especially as there were no hard facts. To him, it was inconceivable that Brockenhurst Sett could erupt into an expanding fireball, devouring all before it— that badgers would die horrible deaths, beating at flames as they sprang into life on their fur. To him, Brock's vision was unthinkable.

To help make his case, Brock had dropped into a trance and used the powers of The Way, reaching back through time to discover what history had to say about Boddaert's Magic.

Recovering from his trance, Brock then told them how, following the last spell cast by Boddaert, the surviving Magi had discovered his dead body on Fire Rock, and frightened by the magical powers they believed it still contained, hid it deep within a crevasse in the Brockenhurst Plains.

And there the body had lain for generations, until Evaert, twenty-third in line of succession, found it. This puissant badger, hopelessly lost to the forces of the Dark Healing, planned to use the powerful magic of Boddaert's remains to further his own ambitions, and what followed was indeed a dark period in badger history.

With the power given to him by Boddaert's remains, Evaert set out on a campaign of butchery and destruction, bent on conquering all of Boddaert's lands, and it was only the intervention of Bawsen, the fabled fighter from Badachro, which finally put an end to his tyranny.

After Evaert's defeat, Bawsen determined that such a thing would never happen again and assembled the first Custodians of The Way. He ordered them to form a Council, which he then instructed on the history of the badger's race, starting the first line of Tellers.

Bawsen split Boddaert's remains into three parts—the Circle of Claws, the White Coat, and the Fire Soul—hiding them in separate places. The Fire Soul he buried beneath Fire Rock but the White Coat and Circle of Claws were hidden far from Brockenhurst Forest.

Before he died, Bawsen carved the whereabouts of Boddaert's remains on the Sacred Roots, knowing that only a badger expert in the use of The Way would ever be able to decipher the locations and unify Boddaert's body again.

Grey listened to Brock's account with intense concentration. He had heard the story before as a young badger, but it carried more weight coming from a Teller's lips. After Brock had finished, Grey wandered off on his own to ponder on what he had learnt.

In the end, after much consideration, the old Custodian returned and reluctantly agreed to join their search.

*

Once winter had eased its cold grip on Brockenhurst Valley, Brock was keen to begin his search for Boddaert's Magic. The three conspirators, rightly cautious about their plans, arranged to meet in a secluded glade.

While he waited for the others to arrive, Grey dug around in the earth for a bluebell bulb. Failing to find one, he tutted in frustration, listening instead to the sounds of the forest—the rustling leaves, the shrill 'ke-wick' of a tawny owl, the steady tap of a wood boring beetle searching for food.

The old Custodian revelled in the sounds, loving the forest with a passion deeper than mere feeling. It was an empathetic and intimate bonding with the Prime Mover that could find no expression in words.

Grey exhaled loudly. He'd spent a lot of time since Brock and Soffen's visit going over all the arguments in his mind and had begun to waver. Now he wasn't sure that what they were going to do was the right thing at all.

They were asking him to gamble all this on a vision that had no more substance than a cub's dream. If he did as Brock asked and was caught, there was a good chance he would be banished from this wonderful place forever.

Soffen's greeting dragged Grey back to the present and he carefully put the half-eaten grub to one side so he could finish it later.

"Look," he began as soon as Brock appeared, "I'm sorry if I'm less than enthusiastic about all this, but I've been thinking, and I don't believe Boddaert's Magic really exists, let alone that it's the answer to saving Brockenhurst Sett. I mean, how do I know your vision has any substance at all and isn't just remorse?"

Brock glanced at Soffen, then back at Grey. "Grey, we went over all this the last time we met. I don't know for certain, I've admitted that. Visions aren't . . ." casting about for the right words, he continued, "well, a certainty."

Gesturing with a paw, the Teller's voice took on an authoritative tone. "They're a mixture of fact and fiction, stories, fables, happenings and dreams. All coming together at a crux of inevitability, but they nether-the-less hold the kernel of truth. Even when I travel the paths of The Way, the truth sometimes remains elusive. You know this already. But for all that, I really do feel the vision to be genuine."

"You feel the vision to be genuine!" Grey responded with sarcasm. "And on that fallacious evidence you expect me to chance everything. On the foundation of this fantasy, you expect me to throw away all the advantages I've built up over the seasons."

The stinging retort hurt Brock but he kept silent as Grey continued.

"Toss it away on some search that will prove to be utterly futile!" The old badger's voice was laced with the hard edge of anger.

Soffen stepped between them, trying to defuse the growing tension. "Grey, the only way to save Brockenhurst Sett is to find Boddaert's Magic. Listen to Brock, he's a Teller of The Way, he knows."

Grey turned away. "Yes, he's a Teller alright but that doesn't make him infallible."

Soffen tried to reason with the old Custodian. "Please Grey, listen to him. He's trying to help us."

Grey frowned. "So why involve me in this mad scheme of yours? If you already know what you have to do, do it and leave me out of it." Grey didn't miss the look that flashed between Brock and Soffen.

"Because the Legends only tell what happened to Boddaert's body, not the exact locations where his remains were hidden. We don't know where to search." Brock stared Grey straight in the eyes. "But those secrets lay on the Sacred Roots."

Grey began shaking his head, the rolls of fat down his flanks shimmering in response. "By Homer, Brock, but you've got a nerve. You ask that of me? No, I'll not do it. No!"

Soffen placed a paw on Grey's flank, gazing up at him. "We can't do this without you Grey. We need your help. You're the only one of us who has access to the Sacred Roots."

Grey backed away. "I've already taken a great risk on your behalf. Now you ask me to steal the Sacred Roots." His voice dropped to a whisper. "By Homer, if I do that, there'll be no future for me here, ever."

Soffen stamped her foot. "And what future do you think there'll be for you if we don't stop Brock's vision from becoming a reality? Tell me that badger!"

Brock's hard voice thrust between them. "And what would the Council say if they found out that a certain Custodian had kept information about a disfigured cub from them?" His eyes bored into Grey's. "How do you think they might react to that news?"

Grey glowered back at him. "You'd do that? After all the help I've given you? You'd really do that?"

Brock nodded slowly, glaring back at the Custodian intently. "If you forced me to, yes."

The old Custodian seemed to deflate for a moment, then sat back on his haunches, sniffing at the light breeze, wrinkling his snout as fresh scents impinged on his senses.

Spring had come, a time that heralded new beginnings. Maybe this was such a new beginning, he thought.

Sighing deeply, feeling somehow cheated, Grey shuddered, wondering if this would be the last time he'd see his beloved Brockenhurst Forest shake free from its winter mantle.

Chapter 9

"And this is the Great Chamber where I oversee the Council Meetings."

Darkburst could hear the ring of pride in the Preceptor's voice as he paraded Brockenhurst Sett's seat of power.

They had climbed the long sloping tunnel leading to the taproot chamber, talking animatedly as they went. Darkburst, a touch overawed at the prospect of seeing the legendary enclosure, stumbled to a stop at the edge of the opening and looked out into the colossal space spread out below him.

Head slowly moving from side to side, he drank in every detail— the large expanse of floor that still held the Magi's teeth-marks, even after all the generations of badgers who must have walked across its sanctified surface, the walls covered with deliciously intricate and delicate patterns, the vaulted ceiling that disappeared from view far above his head. Closing his eyes and drawing air into his lungs, Darkburst breathed in the atmosphere, imagining how it would feel to address the Council from such an exalted position of power.

The Preceptor came and stood alongside Darkburst, pointing at the vast chamber below. "Wherever you stand down there, you can hear every word spoken from up here. Such was the skill of Boddaert that even the quietest whisper will carry to the furthest corner."

Darkburst turned his back on the Great Chamber, allowing his gaze to wander over the walls of the taproot chamber. They were covered with innumerable small marks carved into the hard heartwood of the root, the rich patterns dazzling his eyes with a confusion of compelling shapes. Staring at them, he became a little dizzy.

"Come and stand here Darkburst." The Preceptor beckoned the young badger to the very centre of the taproot chamber. "Now, look carefully at the carvings on the wall over there."

Grindel pointed at a particularly tight-knit group of images, which appeared to flow upwards from the floor, following the gently curving grain of the heartwood.

As Darkburst stared at the carvings, his dizziness increased.

"Concentrate now. Concentrate really hard. That's it, let your mind take in the carvings," Grindel whispered from behind him.

Darkburst gasped when the carvings unexpectedly merged to become a view of Brockenhurst Forest. As he blinked, stumbling backwards in astonishment, the view of the forest vanished.

"A vision," he whispered through dry lips. "I saw a vision of the forest."

The Preceptor chuckled in delight, nodding his head eagerly. "Legend has it that these carvings were worked by Boddaert himself and possess magical properties which produce illusions if you stare hard enough. Though try as I might, I've never managed to see any." Grindel sounded disappointed as that observation left his lips.

Darkburst's eyes widened. "But yes, that's exactly what happened. I saw a scene of Brockenhurst Forest."

Grindel's smile broadened and he winked slowly. "Yes, I had an idea that you might."

"But why? Why would I see something that you cannot?"

"Because you're the son of a Healer, with the power of The Way running in your blood. If it would work for any badger, it should work for you."

"Can I try again? Please?"

The Preceptor chuckled. "Of course youngster but let's try another carving. Look, that one over there, perhaps you'll see something different this time."

"Is that possible?"

The Preceptor nodded at the carvings. "It is said that each of these carvings holds a different illusion. Though why that should be, I have no idea."

Darkburst stood in the centre of the chamber, staring hard at the carvings, eyes narrowed in concentration, excitement tightening his chest. And even though expecting it, the illusion that suddenly sprang out at him did so with such intensity that he gasped aloud.

Darkburst found himself looking at a small forest glade and he quickly realised that he had seen it before, had in fact played in this very glade as a cub. To one side, the rotting tree stump where he'd so often hidden from his mother when there were chores to do. And there, the tall elm he'd used to sharpen his claws, the long scratches still plainly visible in the bark.

Without conscious effort, Darkburst willed himself forward, moving further into the forest clearing, and even though he knew it to be impossible, every sense told him that he was walking on soft grass.

Concentrating harder, willing his body upwards, Darkburst was instantly transported high into the air. Upwards he flew, above the canopy of Brockenhurst Forest, swooping and gliding like a buzzard hunting prey, delighting in the sensation of the wind against his face.

Sweeping low over Fire Rock, he headed out beyond the trees to the sparkling waters of Migaro Lake, chasing shadows across the gentle swell of the water as he skimmed the surface. Turning back again, he laughed in exhilaration as he dived back and forth over the forest pathways, surging upwards into the clear sky, totally immersed in the thrill of flight.

"Darkburst!"

A muffled voice called from somewhere nearby.

"Darkburst! Darkburst!"

The voice held such intensity that he was snapped back.

Vision swirling, Darkburst fought to hold onto his illusionary world, but it slipped away and the feeling of overwhelming loss that unexpectedly crushed him, made Darkburst gasp, almost cry.

The Preceptor stood before him, concern lining his snout.

"What happened? I couldn't wake you. You seemed to be in some kind of trance."

The young badger laughed his delight, stumbling over his words. "It was so . . . so . . . well, amazing." Darkburst paused, unable to describe what had just taken place. "I flew high, high above the trees. Then low, low down over the water." But he knew this pathetic description fell far short of the ineffable journey he'd just undertaken.

"Well that's certainly very strange." Grindel patted the young badger's flank. "But don't make too much of it. After all, it's only an illusion when all's said and done."

"But I flew like a bird," Darkburst cried excitedly, still caught up in the wonder of the experience. "Over Fire Rock, to a lake in the far distance. Its surface sparkled in the moonlight. I was there!"

The Preceptor studied the young badger closely. "You hallucinated. You just imagined you were flying."

Darkburst was shocked that the Preceptor did not believe him.

Grindel relaxed, barking a short laugh. "Well that's some imagination you have there, youngster." Pointing at the carvings, he continued, "But these are just a collection of clever illusions. Don't let your imagination overrule your sense."

Darkburst worried at his lower lip, thinking furiously. He knew what he had done and that it was no illusion. The Preceptor was wrong. As unthinkable as that was, the Preceptor was wrong.

He had flown high above the forest, even though his body had been stationary in the taproot chamber. He knew it to be true, because during the flight he'd seen his mother and sister talking together in the forest, and swooping low over them, had heard their words. There could be no mistake. It was no illusion, somehow he'd been in two places at the same time.

The young badger lowered his gaze to study the floor. He needed time to think this through.

"Well, perhaps you're right," he finally responded. "My mother's always telling me that I've got an over-active imagination."

The Preceptor smiled and nodded. "Tell me something Darkburst. How would you like to be Preceptor?"

"Me? Preceptor?" Darkburst could hardly talk at the thought. Too much was happening too quickly.

Grindel stared hard at the young badger, as though seeking some clue in his eyes. "I could make it happen, you know. Come on, what do you say? Would you like to be Preceptor?"

"Yes of course I would. Who wouldn't?" Darkburst replied, dazed at the thought. "But me . . . Preceptor?"

"You'd have to become a Custodian first of course, but I could arrange that quite easily."

"But why would . . ." The young badger stopped, staring at the Preceptor with a new understanding. "You're leaving, aren't you? You're going away somewhere."

Grindel smiled, a tight self-satisfied smile. Then shaking his head slowly, he said, "No, I'm not going away anywhere, but I do have other plans to pursue, plans that leave no room for the responsibilities of being Preceptor any longer."

"But I've no experience. Besides there's no opening for a Custodian on the Council."

A flicker of a smile crossed Grindel's lips as he let his gaze settle on some distant point only visible to him. "Oh, I think there'll be an opening for you before too long Darkburst."

"And you would train me?" Darkburst asked, wrinkling his snout in excitement, sensing the power he was being offered. But then another doubt crept into his mind. "Won't the other Custodians object? Surely one of them will expect to take over from you?"

"It's traditional for the Preceptor to select his own replacement. The Custodians have no right of objection, it's up to me who my successor will be." Grindel tipped his head to one side. "From all your objections," he continued in a serious tone, "one would think you don't want to be Preceptor."

Darkburst shook his head, bemused at the stunning offer being made. "I really don't know what to say."

"Thank you would be a good start," Grindel answered with a chuckle. "But before you fall over yourself with gratitude, I think I should warn you about something. There are certain conditions attached to my

patronage." The Preceptor nodded at the uncertainty that suddenly flared in the young badger's eyes. "Oh don't worry, it's nothing you'll find too objectionable."

Grindel beckoned Darkburst to follow him, leading the young boar down onto the floor of the Great Chamber. Here, standing at the very centre of the vast space, he studied the youngster with a serious expression. When he finally spoke, his voice was grave, and Darkburst had to lean very close to catch the words.

"Darkburst, your mother and the badger called Brock are about to embark on a journey. They're going on a quest and their search will take them far from Brockenhurst Valley, but it is certain your mother will want you and your sister to go along." The Preceptor paused for a moment before continuing. "You must go with her, Darkburst. The journey will be long and arduous and very dangerous, so it's crucial you are there to protect your mother." He paused again, adding more weight to his next words. "The Teller, Brock, he's not to be trusted. He's a danger to your mother."

Darkburst fidgeted uncomfortably as the Preceptor's eyes pierced him with an intensity that made his head spin.

"He wants your mother dead."

The bald statement shocked Darkburst and his breath caught in his throat. "What do you mean?" he demanded.

"Exactly what I've just said, but don't repeat this conversation to anyone, doing so would only place your mother in greater danger. Do you understand me Darkburst? Say nothing."

When Darkburst nodded, Grindel relaxed a little.

"Good. Now listen carefully. Your mother is going to undertake a search for something very special. A dangerous treasure that has the power to destroy her and anyone else who touches it. So it's important that you find this treasure before any other badger does." Grindel's expression softened a little at the young badger's obvious apprehension. "Don't worry, a badger under my protection, as you are, can come to no harm. That's why you must go, to bring this treasure back here to me, to make it safe. Only I can do that, no other badger can. For them to even try would mean certain death. Do you understand?"

Darkburst nodded silently, and Grindel smiled. "Good," he said, "it will be your first step to becoming Preceptor."

"You want me to steal from my mother?" Darkburst asked in a tremulous voice.

Grindel shook his head. "Not steal, no. Protect. I only want you to protect her."

The young badger looked confused. "What is it Grindel, this thing that's so dangerous?"

"Don't concern yourself with that for now. When the time comes, you'll know. You'll need no telling."

Darkburst thought hard, going over all that Grindel had told him.

The Preceptor could see the questions forming in the young boar's eyes even before he asked them and moved closer, a grim expression creasing his snout.

"Listen carefully to me," he growled, thrusting his face so close that the young badger could smell the sour odour of his breath. "Under no circumstances are you to tell your mother that we have talked about this. Nothing you can say will stop her making this journey, it is pre-ordained, but forewarning her of its dangers will almost certainly lead to her death."

Grindel stepped in front of the pacing youngster. "I have things to attend to now. So quickly, tell me. Will you do as I ask?"

Darkburst nodded distractedly and Grindel smiled at him. "I think you're going to make an excellent Preceptor, Darkburst. You have a quick and adaptive mind. Now go to your mother and see to it that she's protected."

As Darkburst turned to leave, Grindel called to him. "Here, take this." He handed the young badger a small piece of root threaded on a length of twisted grass. "It's a Talisman, for good luck. Keep it close to you at all times and it will help you to protect your mother."

The Preceptor watched silently as the young badger left the Great Chamber, pleased with the results of the meeting. Such a simple badger. So trusting. He chuckled quietly, recalling Darkburst's response to the carvings in the taproot chamber.

What an imagination though. Flying indeed!

Grindel, still chuckling at that thought, left the Great Chamber, still so engrossed with the image that he failed to notice the dark figure skulking in the shadows of a side tunnel.

The shadowy figure growled low in his throat, scratching at his suppurating tail, watching Grindel disappear around a bend in the tunnel.

*

"But we need the Sacred Roots to know where to start our search," Brock argued heatedly.

Grey stared at him, his snout puckering as he leant forward. "It's all very well for you Brock, but you're not the one who has to steal them, are you?"

"But we can't afford to miss this opportunity. How often is a chance like this going to present itself? The Preceptor probably won't leave the sett again this season."

The old Custodian shook his head slowly. "I know that but I still don't like it."

Brock nodded his understanding. "But this is our only chance. We must take it."

"And what's the Preceptor going to do when he returns and discovers that I've stolen them?" Grey shot back angrily.

"Don't worry, we'll have them back in place long before he even knows they're missing. We only need them for a short time, just to start us off."

Soffen nodded her agreement. "He's right Grey. Brock will use them to find out where we need to search and then you can put them back."

Brock smiled at Soffen, thankful for her support. "Have you told Broshee and Darkburst about the trip we're making Soffen?" he asked, effectively dismissing any further objections from Grey.

Shaking her head, Soffen returned his smile. "No, not yet. I started to tell Broshee when we were in the forest but then I decided it would be better to wait until I had them both together." She sighed, looking around as though searching for something. "As usual Darkburst has disappeared somewhere again. He really does try my patience at times."

Grey sulkily plucked a tick from his leg and examined it, cracking the hard insect with his teeth. "I think I saw him with the Preceptor earlier on." He smiled contentedly at the reaction his words aroused.

Soffen looked at Brock with a frown, obviously ill at ease.

"What are you going to tell them about the trip Soffen?"

"The truth. There's no point in lying. They'd find out soon enough anyway."

Brock shrugged. "I wasn't expecting you to lie to them. I'm just concerned that the Custodians will hear about our plans and stop us before we have the chance to leave. The fewer badgers who know what we're up to, the better."

Grey wrinkled his snout. "You know, I really don't understand you Brock. First you do everything in your power to inform the Custodians about your plans, then you're hiding everything from them." Exhaling heavily the old badger shook his head. "I hate all this subterfuge, I really do."

Brock flicked his tail. "And so do I Grey, but my vision shows us how to save the sett. Nothing can be allowed to get in the way of that."

"But why must we lie all the time?" Grey retaliated.

"Because the Preceptor would surely kill us rather than let us gain control of Boddaert's Magic," Soffen's clear tones cut across the argument with a ring of authority. "There's no way he would allow any badger to gain such power. Think about it for a moment. Think of the power that the holder of Boddaert's Magic would have."

Grey's snout wrinkled as he considered her statement. Yes, perhaps the Healer was right. At the very least, any badger having the strength of Boddaert's Magic behind him would certainly be a force to be reckoned with.

"Hello mother."

The group fell silent as Darkburst entered the chamber.

Soffen smiled at her cub. "Hello Darkburst and where have you been all this time? I've been looking for you."

"By the rookery mother, looking for fallen squabs. I thought I saw you there earlier with Broshee, talking by the nettle patch."

"Yes you could have, we were there for awhile. I was telling Broshee about a trip we're making."

Darkburst nodded to himself, as though his mother's words confirmed something he already knew.

"Yes, I overheard you." He looked uneasy at Soffen's sharp glance.

"I didn't see you," she replied, consternation clouding her face.

Darkburst looked away for a moment but quickly recovered. "I was practising my stalking mother, that's why you didn't see me. I was hiding in the long grass but I was only there for a moment."

Grey passed Darkburst a worm. "Your mother wants you to come on a trip with us, youngster. What do you think about that?"

"Where to?"

Soffen touched her cub's flank. "We're not sure exactly but we'll be gone for a long time. That's why I want you and your sister to come with us."

"As protector?"

"What?" Grey's sharp eyes searched the young badger's face.

"Oh nothing, nothing. I was just thinking aloud, that's all. So when are we leaving mother?"

"Grey has one or two things to arrange first. So probably in two or three moons."

"I've got something that I must do too," Darkburst called over his shoulder as he turned away. "I won't be long."

Soffen stared after her cub, an uneasy feeling filling her chest.

Chapter 10

A thick evening mist swirled around the five badgers as they moved through the undergrowth, muting their voices. Brock gave occasional orders in a low growl, as though afraid the forest might overhear. The dew, glistening on their fur, made them appear as phantoms gliding over the pathway in the moonlight.

Brock led, followed by Darkburst, and close on their heels came Soffen and Broshee, with Grey bringing up the rear. They travelled fast, determined to put as much distance as possible between themselves and Brockenhurst Sett before they were missed.

Their immediate aim was to reach the Andith River and find a crossing before the sun pierced the darkness. Once there, they would feel safe enough to take a rest and plan their next move.

They walked in silence, each lost in their own anxieties, all having doubts about the journey they were undertaking but none wanting to raise them. The only sounds, other than the sharp rustle of undergrowth being brushed aside, was the slap of a paw on stone and the occasional cough.

Darkburst's thoughts returned to the small Talisman tucked safely beneath the fur about his neck, as though seeking some reassurance from it. Grindel had given it to him to help protect his mother against the dangers she faced, but he still had no idea what those dangers might be. The adults had not discussed the journey in front of him, so he didn't know where they were headed. He'd spent a long time examining the Talisman when Grindel had first given it to him, fascinated by the tiny marks covering its surface, which were so like the carvings on the taproot chamber walls.

Brock's thoughts were centred on a different puzzle: how to decipher the Sacred Roots and locate the hiding place of Boddaert's Magic.

Having eagerly studied the roots when Grey had first passed them over, Brock quickly admitted defeat, unable to make any sense of the miniature carvings running from tip to tip. It would take time to unravel the secrets hidden there, time they didn't have.

After much debate, Brock had persuaded the others that the only option was to take the Sacred Roots with them and hope that somehow they'd be able to return them before Grindel noticed their absence.

Grey had protested violently, and Brock's nose twitched in vexation as he recalled the remarks that the old badger had thrown at him. But such were Soffen's skills of diplomacy, that she had been able to calm things down enough for them to form a plan of action.

Soffen moved up until she was walking directly behind Brock, purposefully treading in his footsteps, something she'd done as a cub when out walking with her father. It had made her feel safe then and it made her feel safe now.

With each passing cycle Soffen's feelings were growing stronger for the Teller and she wondered if he felt the same way about her. Unlike the others, Soffen's concerns were centred more on her cubs than the journey they were making—Darkburst, who but for the Dark Healing, would now be walking in the shadow of the Prime Mover, and Broshee, carefree Broshee, who wanted nothing more than to mate and raise cubs. Soffen smiled, quickening her pace to catch up with Brock.

Of the five badgers walking the path that moon, Grey was the least happy. The long walk had given him time to reflect on the enormity of his actions. When the theft of the Sacred Roots was discovered it would cost him his place as a Custodian, and probably his right to live in Brockenhurst Sett as well.

By Homer, why on earth had he allowed himself to become involved in such madness as this?

Snout creasing with anxiety, Grey wondered how long it would be before the Preceptor discovered the theft of the Sacred Roots and sent out a search party. The Preceptor might even resurrect the ancient rite of Rock Piling, especially for him!

Grinding his teeth in agitation, Grey contemplated his fate, his anger quickly building. He'd been weak to let the others take advantage of his tolerant nature. He should have reported them to the Council when they'd first suggested this scatterbrained scheme.

As Grey continued to worry, a grim determination overcame him. It wasn't too late to save himself, not by a long way. He would slip away at the earliest opportunity, return the Sacred Roots to Brockenhurst Sett, then throw himself on the Preceptor's mercy.

Satisfied that he'd found the right solution, the old Custodian plodded along after the others with a new spring in his step and a new hope in his heart.

As the small group made its way along the well-worn paths of Brockenhurst Forest they were followed by a skulking figure. Hidden in the shadows of the thickening mist, Grindel watched them leave the confines of

Brockenhurst Forest, and once he was satisfied that they were well on their way, turned back towards the sett, ready to report to Skelda.

Flicking his tail in agitation, Grindel did his best to ignore the sour taste that had suddenly welled up in his mouth at the thought of seeing that deformed old monster once more.

*

Back in the Great Chamber, Skelda did not need Grindel's report to know that the search was well underway. The wily old badger had his own methods of following the group's progress. He'd only set Grindel the task of following the group so that the Preceptor wouldn't see him using the special carvings.

Through the medium of the carvings in the taproot chamber, and the Talisman carried by Darkburst, Skelda was able to observe all that was happening within the vicinity of the young badger. He chuckled contentedly, feeling happier than he had for some considerable time.

Chewing on a piece of rank flesh, pleased at his own cunning, Skelda considered his solution.

The ancient ones would have been able to view the forest without the aid of the Talisman of course, their powers being far more potent than his. The carvings alone would have been enough to see everything throughout the great forest and surrounding district, but he was well satisfied with the answer he'd devised. The Talisman gave him a direct connection to the carvings. He just hoped it would be a strong enough connection to cover the distances involved.

*

A keen breeze had cleared the mist and the sky was filled with a myriad twinkling points of bright light. Brock had allowed the group only one short break for food before resuming the punishing pace. The path they were travelling now meandered through open countryside and the moon shone down with an intensity seldom experienced beneath the canopy of Brockenhurst Forest.

Grey quickened his pace, drawing level with Brock. "How much further do you intend going before we stop?" he asked.

Brock halted, cocked his head and smiled. "Hear that?" The others formed a circle around him, listening.

"It's running water, isn't it?" Broshee asked.

Brock nodded. "Yes, I think it's the Andith River and we need to cross it as soon as we can. I'd like to push on."

Not waiting for their agreement the Teller put his head down and set off again.

As the sky lightened with the first streaks of dawn the tired badgers finally reached the source of the running water, Brock sighing his disappointment when they discovered it was not the Andith River after all, just a small tributary. Now exhausted, the group agreed to stop for food and a rest. As they were still close to Brockenhurst Forest, Brock suggested they post a lookout, volunteering to take the first stint himself. Digging a small burrow under a fallen tree, the foot-sore band settled down to sleep.

Brock was glad of some time alone as it gave him the chance to examine the Sacred Roots undisturbed. He studied the enigmatic pieces of wood from every angle, even trying to use his knowledge of The Way to unlock their secrets.

Brock worked at the small carvings until his eyes watered with the strain, rocking back and forth in an unconscious rhythm as he searched for the answer. In the end, frustrated and angry, he sat back on his haunches and turned his thoughts to recent events instead. Maybe Grey was right and his vision was the product of his own guilt-ridden imagination, his way of dealing with the fact that he'd survived when his friends and family had perished.

Tossing the Sacred Roots aside, Brock decided to take a walk to clear his mind. Crossing the small stream he wandered aimlessly up the gentle slope of the bank and stood on the brow.

From his high vantage point Brock spotted the Andith River curving gently away in the valley below. Looking at the water swollen by the spring rains, splashing froth and foam high into the air as it pounded its way over the stony riverbed, he cursed softly. It would be impossible to cross when in full spate like this. Turning aside he headed back to the temporary burrow, responsibility hanging heavily on his mind.

Darkburst woke with a start, looking up at Brock with sleep-clouded eyes.

"Your turn to keep watch," Brock whispered, so as not to disturb the other sleeping badgers.

As soon as Darkburst crawled from his sleeping place, the Teller flopped down in his place, curled into a tight ball and quickly fell asleep.

Rubbing his eyes, Darkburst made his way outside. The sun was high on the horizon, colouring the sky a brilliant red. Settling down with a collection of worms, beetles and grubs, he began sating his appetite, the rising sun warming his back as he savoured each bite. Contentedly crunching his way through the last of a beetle, Darkburst sucked the soft meat from its plump body, then cast the hard wing cases adrift. As they fluttered away on the breeze, he walked to a nearby tree and cleansed his claws with long, deep sweeps.

Turning away from his ablutions, Darkburst hesitated as something caught his attention. Sunlight was reflecting from an object half-hidden in the grass. Squinting against the glare the young badger moved closer and looked down, a sudden fullness filling his chest when he spotted the Sacred Roots.

Reverently picking up the five pieces of ancient wood, Darkburst smiled broadly, nodding his head slowly when he saw they were covered in the same unusual carvings adorning the taproot chamber walls.

With a mounting feeling of excitement, he willed the Sacred Roots into life, but despite his best efforts they remained just five pieces of inert wood.

The young badger thought long and hard, studying the carvings on the Roots as well as on the Talisman that Grindel had given him. Then a thought struck him. The patterns formed by the carvings on the walls back in the Great Chamber were interconnected in a circular pattern, layered one on the other.

Darkburst began arranging the Sacred Roots into different circular patterns, hoping that the right combination would unlock their secret.

He kept at his task as the sun rose higher and higher, all thoughts of waking his relief now forgotten. Time after time he carefully placed each root into a new shape, but as the sun moved directly overhead, his patience began to wear thin.

Even so the young badger persevered, until he was unexpectedly rewarded with a flash of bright light. Wrinkling his snout, Darkburst stretched out a trembling paw and separated the roots from each other. Then holding his breath in anticipation, he gently pushed them back together again, gasping in delight as a bright spear of light flickered between their ends once more.

Darkburst repeated this action over and over, and each time the same bright light flickered for an instant, but no matter how hard he tried, the young badger could make no further progress. Finally, in total frustration, he threw the ancient pieces of wood onto the ground and turned away in disgust.

From the corner of his eye a movement caught his attention. Looking back, heart fluttering wildly, Darkburst lowered his head and carefully counted the Roots. Then wrinkling his snout, he counted them once more, and just to be certain, yet again.

Yes he was right, there were now eight pieces of root, where before there had only been five. He counted them one last time. Eight. But where had the other three pieces come from?

Forming a new circle with the eight pieces of root, Darkburst gasped when a searing white light exploded into being, momentarily blinding him with its intensity. He staggered backwards, blinking his eyes rapidly until his sight recovered.

The young badger stood transfixed before a swirling multi-coloured layer of light that grew in intensity as it pushed upwards from the ground, curling in upon itself, taking on the shape of a sphere dancing on the gentle breeze.

A shape began to form within the sphere, incomplete and uncertain at first, but growing stronger as the swirling colours span faster and faster. Finally, deep within the bluest of blues, Darkburst glimpsed a moon swept landscape— a panoramic view of a large flat meadow.

Smooth grass undulated away to the horizon, drawing his eye with it. And there, outshining the cold moon, where the dark sky met the darker ground, were the brightest stars that he'd ever seen.

No ordinary stars these, for they were trapped between the low clouds and the ground, travelling across the horizon at an incredible speed. Almost too fast for the eye to follow they streamed along in an unending line that slashed a white swath across the landscape.

Here was something frightening and far beyond his comprehension, but for all that, exciting in its strangeness. Forcing his attention away from the strange lights, Darkburst allowed his gaze to encompass a large lake nestled in a low hollow— its source, a meandering river stretching across the landscape as far as the eye could see.

The young badger suddenly realised that this was the Andith River. His excitement built as he felt himself being pulled into the scene. He wanted, no needed, to become a part of it, to meld with it, until it filled his being.

"What are you doing?"

The unexpected question caught Darkburst by surprise and he jumped, knocking the Sacred Roots apart. At once the ball of light collapsed, snapping out. Darkburst glowered at Grey, his heart pounding so hard that speech was impossible.

"What are you doing?" Grey repeated.

"I was watching the stars," Darkburst replied in a distant voice.

"Watching the stars. Were you indeed? I see."

Darkburst looked at Grey as though only just realising that the old badger was there. Then shaking his head, replied, "No, I don't think you do. Here, let me show you."

Darkburst leant forward to begin rearranging the Sacred Roots into the pattern he'd discovered, but as he touched the first one, he froze and glanced back up at Grey, his snout wrinkled in agitation.

"What's wrong?" Grey demanded.

"What's happening?" Broshee called as she emerged from the burrow.

"Broshee, go and get mother and Brock!" Darkburst shouted at her.

"What?" The young sow stretched and yawned, sleep still clogging her eyes.

"I said go and get mother. NOW!"

Broshee looked hurt. "Well there's no need to be so rude about it," she shouted back.

"What's the matter with you youngster?" Grey scolded Darkburst. "Why are you taking that tone with your sister? She's done nothing to deserve being shouted at."

Darkburst fixed Grey with a cold stare and the old badger shifted uncomfortably. "I think I've found the key to the Sacred Roots," he said quietly.

Grey reached over, picking up one of the short, blackened sticks. After studying it intently for a moment, his features shifted from inquisitiveness, to puzzlement, and finally, to rage.

"By Homer," he whispered hoarsely, "but this is one of the Sacred Roots!" Turning on Darkburst, the old Custodian shouted at him, "You've destroyed the Sacred Roots! Look at them. How am I supposed to return to Brockenhurst Sett now? What possessed you? How could you have done this to me? You . . . you young idiot!"

The old Custodian's anger, full of venom and bitterness, caught Darkburst totally by surprise and he stepped back warily.

Brock thrust his head out of the burrow. "Hold on Grey, what's all the shouting about?"

"Ask him," the old boar roared, nodding in Darkburst's direction.

When Grey had finally calmed down, Darkburst explained to everyone how he'd seen the bright sphere of light by using the Sacred Roots, and how, within that sphere, the vision of the meadow had appeared to him, and how he'd seen the Andith River flowing into a large lake, and how beyond the lake, the bright stars had raced across the sky.

Grey snorted at Darkburst's tale and turned away, wandering off into the undergrowth, his anger hardly suppressed.

"No, leave him be," Soffen said as Brock made to follow him. "he'll be back when he's calmed down a bit."

Chapter 11

"What's wrong Grey?"

Broshee had dropped back to check on the old Custodian when she saw how far he'd dropped behind the others. She thought he'd become very morose since the decision to push on to the lake had been taken by Brock.

Grey shook his head, smiling at her. "Nothing's wrong Broshee, I'm fine. Just feel a bit tired, that's all." He blew out his cheeks. "It must be all this extra weight I'm carrying around."

They were travelling a barely discernible path that meandered along the bank of the Andith River, searching for a place where they could cross, and Broshee wondered if they would ever find one. Suddenly she stopped, cocking her head towards the river.

"What's that splashing noise?" she asked.

Grey listened for a moment, then smiled and winked. "Unless I'm very much mistaken—"

Walking to the edge of the bank the old Custodian looked down into the water. The river was calmer here, quietened by a large sand-bar on the curve of the bank.

"Ah, just as I thought," he whispered, beckoning Broshee closer. "Come and look, but keep very quiet. See, there."

Broshee gasped in delight as a lithe silver body sped away from her with a flick of its tail.

"You're shadow frightened it," Grey explained quietly. "Stand back from the edge a bit."

"But what is it?"

"Hush, not so loud. It's a fish and if we keep very quiet, it should come back."

They waited patiently, staring down into the water, and suddenly there it was again, swimming gently in the lee of the sandbank. With a flick of its tail the fish edged nearer to the bank and Grey, moving with a speed that caught Broshee by surprise, plunged his paw deep into the river.

Grey hooked the fish out onto the bank where it landed with a wet thwack, flipping its body in urgent arcs as it tried to re-enter the water. Holding the fish between his paws, he bit into its back, killing it with a swift twist of his head.

Broshee sniffed dubiously at the soft white flesh. It looked appetising enough but she was not quite brave enough to try it. After Grey began eating the fish with obvious relish, Broshee nibbled at a small piece. Pleasantly surprised by the flavour, she quickly set about finishing her portion.

After completing their unexpected meal, Grey buried the remains, and the pair set out after the others.

Following the trampled grass through the gently undulating landscape, they walked on in silence for some time.

"Grey?" Broshee finally broke the quiet mood.

"Yes?"

"I know mother and Brock are looking for Boddaert's Magic but what is it exactly?"

"That's a little difficult to explain." Grey was silent for a moment, then said, "The Legends tell us that a powerful magic resided within Boddaert and it remained in his body after he died. So I suppose it must be his body."

Broshee shook her head. "But that's silly. I mean his body would have rotted away to nothing by now, wouldn't it?"

Grey smiled at the young sow and nodded. "Yes, you're right of course, but perhaps the Legend isn't meant to be taken quite so literally."

"You mean it might just be a story and the magic doesn't really exist at all?" Broshee hesitated, placing a paw on Grey's flank. "But then what is it that mother and Brock are looking for? I mean, if it's all just a story, what are we doing here?"

Grey shook his head and walked off. "By Homer, Broshee. Will you stop asking silly questions and get a move on. Your mother will be worrying about what's happened to us."

Broshee frowned, trying to make sense of what Grey had told her as she followed his swaying figure.

*

At that moment, Broshee's mother had other things on her mind. Along with the rest of the group, Soffen was looking into the dark opening of a tunnel. The ground where they stood dropped away sharply from the river. The bank was covered with large clumps of nettles and they would have missed the tunnel completely if Darkburst had not disturbed a field mouse which had then darted into the darkness for safety.

Brock shouted into the opening, listening carefully to the echoes.

"It sounds as if it goes a long way, maybe even right under the river to the other side," he said.

"Where have Broshee and Grey disappeared to Darkburst?" Soffen demanded.

"I don't know mother, perhaps they stopped for a rest or something."

Soffen began to worry. "Brock, Grey and Broshee aren't here, let's go back up the rise and wait for them, otherwise they might miss us. We can explore this tunnel later."

Brock nodded his agreement, but Darkburst, showing the impatience of youth, didn't want to delay his exploration of this exciting find.

"Mother why don't I take a quick look to see if the tunnel does reach to the other bank? It will save us time later if I look now."

Soffen glanced at Brock, who shrugged.

"Well if you promise not to be gone for too long," she replied.

Darkburst nodded eagerly, setting off into the tunnel, already creating all sorts of adventures in his mind. Perhaps he would find a monster that lived under the river, or some ancient lost treasure, or a beautiful sow that needed rescuing.

Maybe even Boddaert's Magic itself!

*

The tunnel was unnaturally straight, the walls smooth and unblemished. Scratching at the concave surface, Darkburst grunted in annoyance when all that he managed to do was break off the tip of one claw. Ignoring the uneasy fluttering in his stomach, he made his way further into the tunnel, pulled along by his excitement.

The whispering echoes of claws on the hard surface accompanied him, causing Darkburst to constantly stop and look back over his shoulder, ready to run at a moments notice, convinced that something might well be following him.

Stepping up his pace, Darkburst convinced himself that he was doing so because he wanted to find out if the tunnel reached the far side of the river as quickly as he could, not because of some imagined monster that might be hiding in the dark shadows, ready to jump out at him. And with this thought held firmly in mind, he pushed onwards along the tunnel, the eerie whispers following him lending an extra urgency to his movements.

After some distance, the surface of the tunnel began oozing small droplets of water that gathered into small wriggling rivulets, which trickled down to the floor, where they collected into large puddles.

Further in the walls were rougher, and Darkburst began to notice small cracks appearing here and there. These grew in number as he progressed, until the whole tunnel was crazed with them. As he advanced further, the floor began to slope downwards, causing the puddles to join into a steadily deepening pool.

Darkburst pushed on, ignoring the cold cloying touch of the water as it moved higher up his legs, but by the time it had reached halfway up his body, the young cub began to feel cold and tired.

Pulled along by alluring whispers emanating from somewhere ahead, Darkburst quickened his pace. The whispers had begun quietly, almost unheard, like a soft wind blowing through grass— a gentle rustle overlain with drawn-out sighs. But as time passed, it took on a different sound, not that of a voice exactly, but something close. Growing in strength, it caught his imagination with promises of hidden delights.

The water, much deeper here, continued to rise until it had almost filled the tunnel with its wet embrace. Darkburst struggled onwards, forced to swim now, his nose thrust into the small pocket of air trapped against the roof. He was finally forced to a halt when the tunnel completely filled with water.

Backing up a few strokes, Darkburst floated with his nose brushing the roof, breathing heavily. As the water slopped up and down his snout, he considered returning to the others, but quickly pushed the thought away.

He couldn't do that. If he gave up now, he would look weak. He had no choice, he would have to press on to the other side.

With a beating heart, Darkburst took a deep lung-full of air and ducked beneath the surface again, staring at the lighter patch of water further along the tunnel that marked the place where the floor rose again— the other side of the blockage.

It seemed tantalisingly close. If he swam quickly he should be able to reach it with no trouble. Why was he hesitating, he could do this.

Poking his nose back up into the air space, Darkburst took another deep breath, then set off through the murky darkness, concentrating all his efforts into his flailing legs.

Darkburst swam with strong strokes, his back bumping along the roof of the tunnel, guiding him through the darkness. Staring intently at the lighter patch of water ahead, he paddled his feet through the cold liquid, relieving the, pressure in his lungs by trickling small bubbles of air from his mouth.

But the swim was taking much longer than he'd anticipated, and a funny buzzing sensation had begun in his ears.

Darkburst pressed forwards, quickening his strokes, but all too soon the last of the air trickled from his mouth and he began to panic.

With bulging eyes and swirling vision, he struggled on. The tunnel walls seemed to pulse in time with his heartbeats as he thrashed his way forwards, swimming as he had never swum before. Digging his paws deep into the cold liquid, he fought against the water, trying to gain speed, but with each passing moment his lungs became tauter and heavier, his throat bulging with the effort of not breathing.

The young cub was finding it harder and harder not to open his mouth and gulp in the filthy water. The compulsion to breathe was so overpowering now that he began thrashing about in desperation, heart hammering as he rolled onto his back and began scrabbling at the roof in a desperate search for air.

A thin line of blood laced the water around him as a claw was torn loose from his foot. It slowly drifted away, along with his strength.

Darkburst's last conscious thoughts were a collection of fleeting images of his mother standing in a clearing deep within Brockenhurst Forest, her head tilted to one side as she listened to the liquid, switt-witt-witt-witt of a goldfinch singing in a nearby tree.

As the likeness of his mother faded from his mind's-eye, Darkburst finally gave up his struggles and hung unmoving in the water— a buzzard hanging on a warm updraught of air— his body gently swaying to and fro, the fur along his flanks swirling in unison with the eddies caressing him.

Then slowly, silently, the young cub's body sank to the mud-covered floor, where it lay quite still.

*

Their worried voices overlapped with echoes, making it difficult to talk.

"But he must be in here. If he had come out, we'd have seen him."

Brock placed a paw on Soffen's flank, doing his best to calm her. "Perhaps he decided to swim right through to the other side," he suggested quietly. "He might be there now, waiting for us, so that he can boast about how clever he's been."

"Do you really think so?" Soffen asked, grasping at the hope these words brought her.

"Yes, I'm sure of it. Come on, let's go back outside and see if we can spot him on the other bank."

Soffen shook her head slowly, knowing from the tightness in her chest that something was terribly wrong.

"No Brock," she whispered, her tone tearing at the Teller's heart. "You go if you like, I'm staying here, just in case he decides to swim back."

Left on her own, Soffen listened to the footsteps dying away up the tunnel, castigating herself for allowing her cub to explore this place unaccompanied. Something had happened to him, she knew it with a certainty that only a mother could know.

Sitting at the water's edge she patted the cold dark surface, whispering her cub's name over and over, lost in a grief which threatened to crush her.

In the cloying darkness a small creature twitched its nose nervously, disturbed by the steady slapping sounds. Keeping tight to the tunnel wall the mouse quickly slipped away, oblivious to the events that it had set in motion.

Chapter 12

Brock waited a further moon before suggesting that they resume their journey, not because the delay might help them to discover what had happened to Darkburst— that hope had quickly disappeared— but because he couldn't bring himself to ask Soffen to leave her lonely vigil.

The Healer had lain by the water's edge throughout the rest of the long moon and the following sun, shivering in the cold, waiting for her cub to return.

Brock had gone to Soffen that first moon, suggesting that he might swim through the water-filled tunnel to see if he could find any sign of her young cub but she had become so agitated at this suggestion that Brock quickly dropped the idea.

"Isn't it enough that Darkburst should drown," she had shouted at him, "without you doing the same?"

Brock finally left to joined Grey on the riverbank, leaving Soffen to resume her solitary watch, unaware that her daughter sat a short way off sharing in her anguish.

Broshee had matured quickly during the winter and was not the same self-centred youngster that had romped through Brockenhurst Forest such a short while ago.

Broshee lay quietly now, watching her mother rock back and forth in an endless ritual of grief. Sighing heavily to herself, she clenched her teeth, trying to keep the tears from filling her eyes, her feelings ambivalent; her longing to comfort her mother, offset by her anger at being shut out.

Darkburst had always been the favourite, she'd known that from an early age, but right now she needed to share her grief, to hold her mother closely, and try to fill the dark emptiness growing inside her.

Broshee's quiet words echoed through the darkness. "Mother, its time to go now."

Soffen shook herself, pulling her mind back from the far off place it occupied. "Yes Broshee, you're right. I must be strong for Darkburst now, mustn't I?"

Broshee felt a shard of ice pierce her heart. "Come on mother," she urged, "the others are waiting for us."

Soffen appeared not to hear, staring intently at the water instead, but finally she tore her gaze away, looking over at Broshee, her eyes glistening in the dim light.

"Yes Broshee, there's no point waiting any longer is there? Darkburst has gone and . . ." Soffen faltered, too overwhelmed to continue.

Broshee squeezed the fullness from her eyes, running to her mother, nuzzling gently at her neck, trying to comfort her, but she was unable to bring her mother the comfort she so desperately needed.

Turning aside Broshee ran from the tunnel, standing just outside the entrance wondering when the pain would stop.

"Broshee, how's your mother?" Grey called from the riverbank.

Tossing her head angrily, Broshee squeezed her eyes tight shut, locking in the tears, determined not to show her hurt. Even Grey was more concerned about her mother than how she might be feeling!

"Broshee . . . Broshee wait!"

Brock stopped Grey as he started after the young sow. "Leave her be. She's obviously very upset. I expect she wants to be alone."

"Do you think Soffen will be alright?" Grey turned back to stare at the tunnel. "Perhaps it would be better if we just gave up this ridiculous search and went back to Brockenhurst Valley?"

Brock frowned. "And do you want to be the one to suggest that to Soffen? Tell her that Darkburst has died for nothing? That she should just give up the search for Boddaert's Magic and creep back to Brockenhurst Sett in defeat?"

Turning away Brock studied the starlit sky, pushing his anger away. The moon broke through the thin covering of clouds, bathing them both with its silvery embrace. It seemed so unfitting that this moon, of all moons, should be such a beautiful one.

*

It had taken the small group a long hard trek to find a place where they might cross the Andith River. A tree on the opposite bank had fallen into the water, almost spanning the fast flowing torrent, stopping just short of where they now stood, leaving a short, but impassable gap.

"We can't chance wading across to the tree in this," Brock shouted above the noise of the raging spume-flecked water. "We'd all be swept away and drowned. We'll have to find something that will reach from the bank to the tree."

A short time later they were all gathered back on the riverbank, where collected by the water's edge were, three thick branches, a collection of thin switches, a pile of strong grasses, and a large piece of bark.

Laying the branches in a row, Brock wove the switches cross-wise through them, and when he was satisfied that the makeshift platform was strong enough, the four badgers carefully eased it out over the water until its far end rested on the trunk, bridging the gap perfectly. Next Brock placed the piece of bark on top, securing it with lengths of twisted grass.

Standing back to examine his work with a critical eye, he nodded. "It should be strong enough to take our weight if we cross one at a time."

Brock was the first to try the makeshift arrangement, weaving extra sticks into the structure as he went, giving it added stability. Soffen and Broshee crossed next, each moving quickly, their hearts in their mouths. Finally, Grey took a deep breath and stepped out onto the rough surface.

The platform bobbed under his weight and, not for the first time, the old Custodian wished he were not so heavy. As he reached the middle of the span the structure sagged, bouncing in time with his movements, and Grey's progress quickly became a series of slow, uncoordinated lurches. Twice he nearly lost his footing, only to recover and stagger on.

It was Grey's last panicky scramble that proved his undoing as, accompanied by a loud crack, one of the supporting branches snapped, allowing the whole fabrication to slew sideways and slip down into the rapids.

Grey slid across the bark, scrabbling furiously for a foothold, bellowing in terror as he was catapulted into the icy water.

Brock shot out a paw, managing to force one claw through the skin on Grey's neck before the old Custodian completely disappeared beneath the surface.

Another sharp crack signalled the complete collapse of the shaky structure, and Grey screamed in agony as he was left dangling on Brock's claw.

Brock, dragged forward by the old Custodian's weight, cursed loudly as Grey slipped further into the torrent's cold embrace. Broshee ran forward and together they slowly began to haul Grey clear of the water.

"Pull harder Broshee, pull harder!" Brock shouted, as they fought the hungry river.

Redoubling their efforts, the two badgers hauled for all they were worth, Brock's features twisting with the effort.

Unexpectedly Brock's claw tore through the skin on Grey's neck and they watched in horror as the old badger plummeted backwards into the raging torrent below.

"Greeeeey!

Soffen's shout cut through the loud splashing of the river as the Custodian was swept away by the overpowering current.

"Help him Brock," she screamed. "He'll drown."

Brock set off on a desperate race after the old boar.

Bounding lightly along the tree-trunk, he jumped onto the river bank, then tore alongside the swirling water, trying to keep abreast of Grey. But as the fierce currents swept the old badger along, Brock began to lose sight of his bobbing head.

Rounding a thick bed of reeds, Brock slid to a stop and heaved a sigh of relief when he saw Grey clinging to a rock in the middle of the river. The old Custodian had managed to grab hold of an outcrop, but was struggling to retain his grip as the pounding water did its best to wash him away.

"Hang on Grey, I'm coming," Brock shouted from the river bank, desperately searching for something to help him reach the drowning badger.

Anything would do— a branch, a thick root, anything.

Grey's strength weakened and he slid further down the wet rock, his screams, now high pitched and panicky, carrying across the river to Brock, who was forced to watch helplessly as the old Custodian finally lost his grip and slid under the water.

Brock caught one last glimpse of the terrified Custodian as he was finally swept away beneath the foam, his body turning over and over.

Shouting Grey's name above the roar of the pounding river, Brock beat at the bank in helpless frustration. If only there was something he could do. Grey was dying and it was his fault!

He had been the one who'd insisted on bringing the old boar on this dangerous journey, surely there was something he could do to help him now. He couldn't just stand by and watch him drown.

In desperation, Brock turned to the powers of the Dark Healing.

Sending out his anima, the Teller sought the old Custodian's aura, locking his thoughts onto the tenuous contact, flooding Grey's mind with his own determination.

Don't breathe! Don't breathe in the water!

Brock pounded the message into Grey's mind.

Don't breathe! Don't breathe in the water!

Brock paid a high price for his desperate use of the Dark Healing, as slowly, from the depths of his mind, the pernicious tentacles of the ancient black art began slithering into his consciousness.

Brock, having had no formal training nor any experience in the use of the Dark Healing, could do little to protect himself against the Guardian of Blackness as the dark entity lay down new pathways through his mind—pathways that would have far reaching consequences in the Teller's future.

As the oxygen levels in Brock's blood fell, his head began pounding and a sensuous ringing sensation started in his ears. A black cowl crept over his vision, but still he sent out his message, holding his own breath to produce a symbiosis of minds.

Brock's desperation outweighed his common sense, but he was far too guilty over the deaths of his sister and friends, and now the old Custodian, to pay any heed to that now.

"Brock! Brock! What are you doing?" The voice seemed to come from far away; from another time.

Poised on the Fifth Path of Darkness, Brock hesitated for a moment, balanced on the very edge of a deep emptiness— on the point of melding himself with the Guardian of Blackness, of giving himself to the swirls of fascinating darkness.

The voice came again, hard, insistent.

"Brock! Brock, take a breath. Take a breath!"

Senses spinning, Brock withdrew his mind from the comforting blackness. Reeling from the chaos swirling through his head, he reluctantly opened his eyes, sucking in lungful after lungful of cool life-giving air. Brock gasped, the oxygen hitting his bloodstream with such force that he sat back on his haunches.

"If you hadn't stopped me, I would have suffocated," he managed through dry lips.

By Homer, how could he have forgotten the seductive nature of the Dark Healing, after all the warnings he had received during his training?

"Are you alright?" Soffen wrinkled her snout, studying him with a worried expression.

"Grey—?" Brock left the question unfinished.

Soffen shook her head, staring at the floor.

*

Broshee looked up at the bright moon hanging low in the black sky and sighed. She got up, shook some loose earth from her coat and joined Brock, who was laying on a small hillock, staring at the clouds.

Settling down beside him, Broshee studied the moon's splendour.

"How's your mother?" Brock's low voice was full of concern.

Broshee said nothing for a moment, then shook her head slowly as if something had annoyed her.

"Much the same," she answered.

Brock's mind was elsewhere and Broshee's words might as well have been the whisperings of bat's wings for all the impact they had.

The Teller was reliving his conversation with Soffen three moons earlier.

"It's my fault that Darkburst and Grey are dead," Soffen had whispered, her eyes filled with hopeless desolation.

"Don't be silly. Of course it isn't."

Soffen turned away looking at some distant place known only to her, and when she finally responded, it was with an insistence that brooked no argument.

"If I hadn't used the Dark Healing to save Darkburst in the first place, none of this would be happening."

The depths of her despair had caused him much pain.

Brock had tried talking Soffen out of her black mood but she wouldn't be moved. If she felt guilty because she'd used the Dark Healing to save her cub, there was little that he could do to change her mind now. Anyway he was just as guilty. Hadn't he used the Dark Healing to try and save Grey?

Finally Soffen wandered off in the direction of the river, and it was here that Brock found her later, laying beside the remains of the plant that she'd eaten.

Soffen's snout was slick with vomit and her legs curled tightly beneath her, as though she were already dead.

Neither Brock nor Broshee could wake her, or identify the plant she'd used. They could only stand by helplessly, watching as she slipped into a deeper coma.

Later that moon, Broshee placed a paw on Brock's flank. "You must stop blaming yourself," she said in a gentle voice. "It's really not your fault."

Brock turned to the young sow, a strange look in his eyes. "Did I tell you about the stars?" he asked quietly.

Broshee shook her head, confused by the turn the conversation had taken.

"I've been thinking about the Legends," he continued, "and I believe I know where the Circle of Claws is hidden."

As he recited from the Legends, Brock raised his eyes to the moon and adopted the Teller's flat monotone.

"It is said that there is a place where the stars fall to earth, and here the trees reach out to touch one another. It is a mystical place between the earth and the sky. A place where monstrous beasts roam and magical powers reign. Where a strange energy leaps from treetop to treetop as the stars fall to earth."

"Or so the Legend has it," Brock said, blinking his eyes rapidly.

He suddenly turned, staring at Broshee so intently that she stepped back in alarm, frightened by the fanatical look in his eyes.

"It's there that The Circle of Claws is hidden. I'm sure of it. High in a tree, looked over by fearsome creatures who guard it with fulgent light. Just as it says in the Legend."

"The Circle of Claws is hidden in a tree?" Broshee's voice was barely audible.

Brock turned abruptly, pointing at the star-splashed sky, his voice swelling to a shout.

"Look there."

"Where? What are you pointing at?"

"The horizon. Look hard. Can't you see them? Can't you see? Those are the stars that Darkburst saw in his vision."

Broshee squinted her eyes, but could see nothing except the darker shapes of the trees against the lighter sky. She wondered what Brock was trying to show her— the sky and the trees certainly— but what else? Then a movement drew her attention.

Far away, so faint that she almost missed them, two stars skimmed across the horizon. Then, as her eyes adjusted to the distance, additional stars followed them. Broshee's heart quickened when she realised that it was in fact a whole line of stars moving low across the sky.

"You see them," Brock stated flatly.

Broshee nodded silently, unable to speak, her eyes locked onto the display taking place on the horizon.

"What are they?" she asked, her voice barely audible.

"I saw them first two moons ago."

His voice, flat and unemotional, came to Broshee as though from a great distance.

"I studied them for a long time, trying to make sense of them."

Brock flicked an ear when a breeze ruffled the guard hairs along its edge. "Then last moon, while you were watching over Soffen, I went to see if I could discover what they were. From a distance I saw the trees where the Circle of Claws may be hidden, just as the Legend describes them. And it's true Broshee, they do reach out and touch each other with the thinnest of branches."

"You went to where the stars fall to earth?" Broshee asked quietly.

Brock nodded. "Yes I went to where the stars fall to earth. I saw the trees reaching out to each other. I saw the mystical place." Brock's tone changed and he began spitting out words as though they were causing him pain. "And I heard them Broshee. I heard them. I heard the stars talk. I heard them calling to each other in voices that I could not understand. Harsh, uncompromising words. They frightened me. They frightened me badly."

"The stars talk to each other?" Broshee's voice trembled.

Brock nodded slowly. "They howl and they moan."

"Are you going back to get the Circle of Claws?"

Brock shook his head decisively. "No, I'm not. There's been enough heartache and death already, why should I make more."

As Brock looked directly at her and Broshee could see the despair in his eyes.

"I'm going to stay with Soffen until—" Turning away, he sighed deeply.

"You think mother's going to die, don't you?"

Brock didn't answer her question, just continued to stare into the distance. In the end Broshee crept away, trying to ignore the empty feeling welling up inside her. She went and sat with her mother for awhile, but quickly grew restless and decided to take a walk.

The black sky was ablaze with stars, which reminded her of the earlier conversation with Brock. Since she'd seen the stars sparkling on the horizon something had been nagging away at the back of her mind, pulling at her, tugging urgently.

"I hear you calling," she caught herself muttering, staring at the line of stars in the distance. "I hear you calling and I'll come."

With no power to resist the invisible forces acting on her, Broshee could only give herself to the persistent entity.

"I'll come soon. For my mother and Grey, I'll come. For Brockenhurst Valley and its ancient forest, I'll come. For my dead brother, I'll come."

Then, joining her mind with the vitality of the stars, Broshee smiled, feeling complete for the first time in her short life.

Finally Broshee returned to the burrow, determined to tell Brock where she was going, and if he objected, well she would go anyway.

Chapter 13

Skelda woke with a start and getting to his feet, shook his head, trying to clear the last vestiges of the dream from his mind. Taking a deep breath, he wrinkled his snout. It'd been a long time since that particular dream had troubled him.

In the dream he was a young cub again, playing around an old tree stump from which the middle had rotted away. The stump was full of rainwater and the reflection shimmering in its depths fascinated him.

Leaning over to get a better view, he slipped, plunging headfirst into the cold scummy interior. Struggling only made matters worse and he quickly found himself wedged tightly. He began to panic, thrashing his legs about in a hopeless attempt at freeing himself, and just as he thought that he was about to drown, he was lifted high into the air.

After being unceremoniously dumped on the ground, where he lay coughing and gasping for breath, the large badger who had pulled him from his plight, glared down at him and wrinkled his snout in anger.

"What have I told you about playing around when you should be studying?" his father chastised him. "Now let that be a lesson to you. The next time I catch you away from your studies, be sure you'll not get off so lightly."

Skelda cringed in expectation of a physical assault but on this occasion it never came.

"Go on, get back to the sett," his father finished with a toss of his head.

Expecting a blow to land across his back at any moment, Skelda hurried away before his father changed his mind and exacted the usual punishment.

Beatings had been an integral part of Skelda's upbringing over the years, and he had learned to live with them, but the constant punishments had built up a smouldering hatred for his father in the young cub's mind which one cycle exploded into an attack that surprised them both. It had left Skelda's father seriously injured and from that moon forward the old boar had never laid a paw on his young boar again.

Shaking himself back to reality, Skelda hissed his annoyance at the emotions the dream always aroused in him.

Absentmindedly rubbing at the growth on his head dislodged the grubs feeding there, and he paced back and forth, trying to understand why the dream had returned after such a long absence. It always forewarned of some danger or other and Skelda had learnt to ignore it at his peril.

As the misshapen badger continued his pacing, his one good ear laid flat along his head in concentration, the answer suddenly struck him. Something had gone wrong with the search for Boddaert's Magic— that was what the dream was trying to tell him.

Leaving the comfort of his sleeping chamber, Skelda hurried along the tunnels leading to the Taproot Chamber. Finally he stood before the carvings, breathing hard from his exertions.

Then, melding his own powers with the carving's magic, Skelda directed his mind towards the Talisman that had been given to Darkburst. A few moments later he gasped in horror as the scene shimmered into view before his eyes.

Darkburst was thrashing about in a water-filled tunnel, fighting for his life!

In other circumstances Skelda might have enjoyed watching a badger slowly drown, but if the young acolyte died before he'd completed the task set him, then all Skelda's carefully laid plans would fall apart.

Focusing his mind on the Dark Healing, Skelda quickly dropped into a trance, plunging down the First Path of Darkness. It was familiar ground and he quickly reached the threshold of the Ninth Path, where he willed his essence to conjugate with the Guardian of Blackness.

Grunting in reaction as the sentinel clawed itself deeper into the more primitive areas of his mind, Skelda pushed on, even though he knew the gamble he was taking. He had no choice, because if he failed to save his drowning son, all his planning and dreams would have no meaning.

His whole life, his very being, had been aimed at just one event: obtaining Boddaert's Magic.

*

The small creature who had started the chain of events leading to Darkburst's demise lay quietly, every sense alert, whiskers twitching nervously, frightened by the sounds that had begun a few moments earlier. As the sounds grew steadily louder the field mouse flicked her ears urgently. One, with a ragged notch gained from fighting, lay pressed close to her head, the other stood erect, the hairs on its tip quivering. As the sounds grew nearer the tiny creature scurried from its hiding place between the joints of the old field drain, running soundlessly over the rough surface away from the threat.

The noise that had startled the field mouse quickly developed a new quality—reminiscent of dead leaves rustling in an autumn breeze. Then, from a crack where one section of the concrete field-drain abutted the next, a spider appeared.

Another popped into view.

And another.

Then more and more, until hundreds upon hundreds of the creatures flowed from the joints along the tunnel, jerking this way and that, their small, yellow-tinged bodies joining together into one undulating stream that oozed like pus from a gaping wound.

Dropping into the water the spiders disappeared below the surface, a thick glutinous mass, each carrying its own tiny bubble of air trapped between the fine hairs on its body.

Darkburst's vision was rapidly fading and, somewhere in the dim recesses of his mind, he realised that he only had a few brief moments left to him. But he wasn't frightened now, floating in the water with a stillness that spoke of death—of an embrace with blackness.

His mind was losing its sharpness to the reality of death, and his thoughts meandered amongst happy cubhood memories . . .

. . . running along the moon-dappled pathways of Brockenhurst Forest, his sister chasing him, Darkburst gave a squeal of delight—

a swift change of viewpoint and he was pouncing on an anthill, chasing the myriad small creatures as they flowed from their damaged nest—

now his mother stood before him, just a shimmering outline, smiling quietly—

an unexpected change as the moonlight was replaced by a harsh sun. Staring at it hurt his eyes and he turned away to discover that he was in a meandering tunnel, floating freely, pulled along by a brightness that lay ahead—

Then something touched Darkburst's snout, an irritation that made his skin pucker. Opening his eyes, he saw that the water about his head was filled with thousands of iridescent bubbles, each jostling the other as they crowded in upon him.

Darkburst gazed at them in awe. Was this the Prime Mover come to collect him, he wondered. Was this the final state?

Urgent legs scurried back and forth across Darkburst's snout as the spiders wove their webs, building a net of shimmering fibres around his mouth and nose. Then darting forward, each tiny creature unloaded its precious bubble of oxygen into the fine structure, the water frothing as their small bodies flitted hither and thither, diving this way and that.

Time and again the tireless arachnids returned to the surface, where they recharged the fine hairs on their abdomens before plunging down again with their fragile loads.

Then finally their work was completed and they departed as silently as they had come.

As the air entered his mouth, Darkburst's instinct took over and he gasped a deep shuddering breath, filling his lungs. Adrenaline pumped through his body, stirring his tired muscles into action.

Wiping the remnants of the web from his mouth, the young cub struck out for the patch of light beckoning from the far end of the tunnel.

Darkburst finally broke free of the water, greedily sucking in air, coughing repeatedly as he purged droplets of water from his lungs. Weak though he was, he managed to pull himself from the water before collapsing onto the cold floor and passing out.

*

Darkburst had no idea how long he'd lain unmoving and half-conscious on the dank surface, but when he finally found the strength to stagger out of the tunnel, he saw that the sun was high in the sky.

Standing on the bank, he shouted across the river repeatedly but there was no reply, just the urgent call of a bullfrog hidden in some nearby rushes. Darkburst continued calling, over and over again, until his voice croaked with hoarseness and he was forced to admit that the others had gone on without him.

They had left him behind!

Hunting up some food, the young badger sat eating, his body slumped in dejection. As he tore at the flesh of the scrawny squab he'd found under a nearby tree, he brooded on his misfortune.

Why had they left him behind? He could think of no reason. Unless—

Darkburst stood up, the fur down his spine standing erect.

—unless Brock had persuaded his mother to leave him behind so that he wasn't there to protect her.

Brock would kill his mother now. There was no badger there that could stop him!

Darkburst's mind raced at the thoughts suddenly cascading through it.

Was this what Grindel had warned him about?

Shaking his head, Darkburst swallowed the bile that had risen in his throat, searching for an answer in the low, oppressive clouds.

He had to find his mother, quickly.

*

Brock carefully swallowed the last of the field mouse he was eating, his first meal in quite some time. Tossing a bone aside, he stretched languidly and stood up. Then after cleaning his claws on a nearby tree, he decided to go and check on Soffen.

Quietly entering the temporary burrow, Brock leant over Soffen's still form, a fullness tightening his chest. She was still unconscious but looking a little better. He nuzzled her neck, murmuring soft words of encouragement.

"Have strength my love. I'm here."

Grooming her soft undercoat, he stroked her, as though handling a small cub.

"I'm sorry I wasn't strong enough when you needed me," he whispered, voice cracking a little, "but I didn't understand. I didn't realise how much you blamed yourself for what's happened."

For two moons Brock had kept a lonely vigil over Soffen, trickling water from his mouth into hers when she grew hot, piling dry leaves over her when she shivered. For two suns he'd lain by her side, not knowing whether she would live or die, cursing his impotence as she slipped ever deeper into a place he could not follow.

But now his heart felt lighter because Soffen was showing signs of recovery; her gums no longer so pale, her breathing no longer so laboured. Brock settled beside her, his paw resting lightly against her flank, his thoughts turning idly to the events of the past few moons.

Broshee had gone off in search of the place where the stars fell to earth. She had some crazy idea that they would tell her where Boddaert's Magic lay hidden. She planned to use the magic to heal her mother and all of his arguments had failed to deter her from making the journey.

A headstrong youngster at the best of times, Broshee had refused to listen to him, determined to follow her own destiny. But for all his arguments, part of him had been glad when she'd left because it gave him more time alone with Soffen.

As the sun prepared to welcome the moon, Brock half dozed, allowing disjointed memories to flow through his mind— a fire raging out of control, a long hard walk, his meeting with Grey, his first sight of Soffen, all jumbled together in a collage of colourful recollections.

Brock knew he'd made a lot of mistakes, it was all so obvious now. His responsibility for the deaths of his family and friends, for Grey and Darkburst— all these thoughts lay heavy on his mind. He'd have done better dying in the fire with the others, but instead he'd survived, survived long enough to persuade Soffen to come on this fruitless search. And worst of all, he'd only done it to assuage his own feelings of culpability.

Laying his chin between his paws, Brock closed his eyes, coughing heavily, trying to loosen the tightness in his chest. A listlessness crept over him, making everything seem like too much trouble. Snuggling closer to Soffen's soft warmth, he fell into a fitful sleep.

*

Far away, across Low Meadow, the sky grew darker and the stars brighter. Dwarfed by their magnitude, a small, frightened badger rested from her exertions, glancing about nervously, wondering what madness had brought her here.

Staring intently at the horizon, Broshee silently studied the stars, their brilliance reflecting in her eyes. She was much closer to them now and could clearly hear the strange noises they made calling back and forth to each other.

Her gaze swept the trees standing in stark contrast against the sky, like slender sentries marching across the land. Broshee shuddered. It was so cold and foreboding here, so different from anything she knew. The moonlight cast deep shadows and as she hurried along her mind turned to thoughts of her father.

Broshee had asked her mother about him many times, but Soffen always changed the subject, and in time Broshee had stopped asking. However this didn't stop the young sow from wondering.

Broshee knew that her father would be a special badger, an extraordinary badger, because no ordinary badger would have mated with a Healer. He'd have exceptional insight, be sensitive and strong— with a strength that nurtured rather than overpowered. Perhaps he was a Teller of The Way, like Brock, or even a Healer from another sett. Broshee smiled as Brock's image entered her mind. She liked him, he was kind and patient, just as her father would be.

Still trying to piece together the enigma of her origins, Broshee continued picking her way across the desolate countryside, scrambling over the smaller rocks and skirting the larger ones.

Sometime later, Broshee's thoughts turned to her brother and a quiet sadness filled her heart. Darkburst may have been moody and shy but she'd loved him all the same. The thought of her brother's one close friendship, with the Preceptor, Grindel, caused Broshee to shiver.

That badger frightened her so much. Even his name sounded harsh and unfriendly.

Broshee began whispering it as she walked along, in a kind of chant. "Grindel . . . Grindel . . . Grindel . . ."

Finally she pushed the name aside and let her thoughts wander back to her father, smiling softly at the face that hovered in her mind's-eye. It would be a proud face, with bold black stripes down each cheek.

The distant echo of a dog's howl abruptly shattered Broshee's reflections and she froze for a moment, her hackles rising. She'd never actually seen a dog but like most young badgers, she'd been warned about their legendary ferocity and hunting skills.

How often had she heard that familiar threat: "If you don't go to sleep right now, I'll let the dogs come and get you."

Broshee scented the air, her skin tingling as the dog howled again, ending in a series of sharp barks and a deep growl. It sounded a lot closer now and she hurriedly searched for somewhere to hide.

Pushing her way between two large rocks, Broshee began digging frantically at the hard ground, ignoring her bleeding pads as she clawed her way deeper into the stony soil.

Muted at first, but growing steadily louder, the soft clicking of claws on stone announced the dog's arrival. It passed close to Broshee's hiding place and she pushed herself backwards into the hole, holding her breath, willing the dog to go away. It stopped to sniff at the ground, growling deep within its throat, a harsh, rumbling sound echoing the depths of Broshee's fear.

The dog scented her, moving closer, sniffing between the rocks, barking excitedly when it realised how near its quarry was. Then digging in earnest, the animal cascaded earth and stones down on top of her. The nearer the dog got to her, the more frantic it became, its digging interposed by high, tight yaps.

There was nothing the terrified sow could do, except bury her head in her flank and make herself as small as possible.

Broshee whimpered softly, convinced she was about to die a slow and agonising death.

Chapter 14

Brock woke with a sore throat, a hacking cough, and a terrible pain raging in his head. Staggering to his feet, he swayed from side to side. His sleep had done little to refresh him, in fact he felt much worse.

He checked on Soffen, grunting his approval when he saw that she was breathing much easier. Staggering his way out into the balmy air, he watched as an owl, out searching for food, swooped low over a nearby tussock, reminding him that he hadn't eaten.

Scrabbling about at the base of a bush, Brock was eventually rewarded with a plump worm, but no sooner had he put it in his mouth than he was violently sick. A fit of coughing ensued and he nearly choked on the thick yellow mucus filling his throat. Spitting the lump of phlegm onto the floor and turning away, he missed the thin line of blood lacing its way through the spittle that was now oozing its way into the cool soil.

Looking about in confusion, Brock tried to order his thoughts. There was something nagging away at the back of his mind, something he had to do. Shaking his head he struggled to remember what it was but seemed incapable of coherent thought.

Wandering in aimless circles, his brain on fire, Brock felt his head droop. Finally, coughing violently, he lay down, his body shuddering as the air whistled in and out of his mouth.

As he lay on the ground, fighting for breath, Brock's rising temperature tipped him into a world of confusing thoughts and half-remembered regrets.

*

When he spotted the fallen tree laying across the river, Darkburst's spirits rose. Nearby was a large patch of trampled grass on the bank and as he scented the ground, the short whiskers on his snout quivered in excitement.

Yes, they had come this way, and judging by the pungency of the odour, not too long ago. Setting out once more, Darkburst followed the trail, calling their names in the hope that they might hear him.

As he wove his way in and out of the bulrushes edging the riverbank, Darkburst's mind returned to the spiders that had saved his life in the tunnel. He worried away at the enigma until he finally came to the conclusion that the strange event must be somehow linked to Grindel. He could think of no other explanation.

That thought brought to mind the Talisman nestled deep within the fur around his neck, and as he stopped to stare out across the turbulent river, he touched it lightly, his mind as chaotic as the raging water.

*

Brock groaned, opening his sticky eyes, running his tongue over the foul taste filling his mouth. Then wrinkling his snout, he squeezed his eyes tight shut again, trying to clear his head. Something had woken him. Someone had been calling his name. He heard it again, faint and far away.

"Brock, mother, where are you? Can you hear me? Are you there?"

Brock's eyes opened again and he managed a half-smile. It was Broshee come back. Everything would be alright now.

"Can you hear me? Where are you?"

The voice faded in and out as it was carried about on the wind.

Brock tried to drag himself out of the shallow depression he was laying in. "I'm here. Over here," he croaked.

"Can you hear—?"

As the wind changed direction, the voice rose in volume then faded again.

Brock groaned a curse, swallowing painfully. He was confused. It sounded like Darkburst, but Darkburst was dead!

Finally, the voice faded away altogether and Brock became convinced that he'd dreamt it. Settling down once more, he coughed weakly and collapsed back into a fitful sleep.

*

Darkburst stood quite still, listening, but other than the echoes of his own shouts, he could hear nothing. Dipping his snout to the ground and the faint scent he'd been following, the young badger set off again at a fast trot.

A short time later the tracks freshened and Darkburst's hopes rose, his heart beating faster at the thought of joining the others. He'd not realised just how frightened and alone he felt.

As he hurried along Darkburst fretted about his mother and the danger she was in. Grindel's warning about Brock hung heavy on his mind, because without the Talisman to protect her, Darkburst knew that his mother was in terrible danger.

Stepping up his pace even more, the young badger thrust his way through the undergrowth at a half-run, all senses directed on the scent trail he was following.

Sometime later, Darkburst rounded a large rock, unaware that a creature watched his passing from the cover of a thick shrub, its bared teeth glistening in the fading light.

The dog let the young badger pass its hiding place, then set out after him, its large, well padded paws making little noise on the crushed grass.

So single-minded was Darkburst in following the spoor, that he missed the tell-tale odour drifting on the wind. It was the low half-growl that first warned him of the danger lurking behind.

Turning quickly, one fore-paw half-raised, hardly able to breathe, Darkburst took in the terrifying sight facing him.

The dog, head and neck extended low over the patchy grass, top lip curled back over its long sharp canines, studied him intently. Saliva tracked from the corner of the creature's mouth and every muscle in its body quivered with tension. As he backed away from the fearsome sight, Darkburst noticed a long bloody rip extending from the dog's eye down the length of its snout.

The dog followed Darkburst step for step, the soft rumbling in its throat building into a menacing snarl.

Darkburst sensed the rock behind him far too late, and the dog's swift advance trapped him against its unyielding surface. The young badger glanced about desperately, searching for some means of escape. The dog glared at him, its yellow-tinged eyes, ablaze with hatred, bored into Darkburst's. Tearing his gaze from the dog's terrifying stare, he looked to one side, seeking some avenue of retreat.

As he glanced away from the dog, it took its chance and moved in for the kill.

In a frantic attempt at flight, Darkburst threw himself between the dog's legs, heaving upwards. Thrown off balance, the creature yelped in surprise, staggering to one side.

Seizing this slim chance Darkburst slipped around the rock, running as fast as his legs would carry him, knowing he stood little chance of outrunning the enraged animal.

Crashing through the bulrushes, Darkburst pushed himself as hard as he could, his feet sucking noisily in the mud of the bank with cloying squelches. Behind him the heavier bodied dog gained ground.

Too terrified to look back the young boar forced himself onwards, heart pounding so hard that he could feel the blood pumping through the large veins in his neck.

Fleeing over the uneven ground, the distressed youngster gulped great mouthfuls of air, his throat afire with the effort of running, each footfall splashing mud along his flanks, weighing him down.

Twice he stumbled, but managed to recover himself.

The dog finally caught up with Darkburst as he scrambled his way up a sharp incline, lunging at his hindquarters and grazing his skin. The sudden lancing pain gave Darkburst an extra burst of energy and he jinked to one side, trying to throw the dog off.

The animal followed close on his heels but slipped on a wet stone, giving Darkburst the chance he needed.

Topping the rise, the young badger threw himself over the crest, rolling down the other side in a tangle of legs. Unable to gain his feet, he overshot the bank and dropped into the river's cold embrace with a loud splash.

Desperately paddling his feet, Darkburst fought to keep his head above the turbulent water as the fast current bore him away. The dog, frustrated at its quarry's escape, ran to the water's edge, barking loudly in impotent fury.

Already tired from his exertions, Darkburst was quickly overcome with fatigue and could do little more than struggle to keep his snout above the waves as he was whirled around and around by the river's fierce current.

Four times he was dragged right under the tempestuous surface, but each time he managed to fight his way back to the open air with panicky determination.

The water finally soaked through the outer layer of his thick fur, saturating the soft undercoat, dragging him down into the dark depths of the river, his energy all but spent.

Deep down along the stony riverbed, a fish appeared, its glinting eyes taking in the scene above it. The fish was not frightened by the jerking limbs of the drowning creature and swam closer, allowing the tips of swirling fur to gently caress its scaly back.

Another fish darted forward, joining the first, then another and another.

The fish began to shoal, a few at first, then others— ten, twenty, more and more, until the whole river writhed with their iridescent bodies.

After collecting into a thick slithering mass, the fish rose as one, propelling Darkburst upwards, buffeting him with their countless bodies, the water boiling with their urgent movements.

Darkburst's head broke the surface of the water and he gasped long, shuddering breaths. Then spotting a sandbank, he found a last reserve of energy to thrash his way onto the low ridge. Dragging himself clear of the river, he lay exhausted, covered in sand.

When he had finally recovered enough strength to struggle to his feet, Darkburst looked back at the river with narrowed eyes. There was not a single fish to be seen, just the spray flecked aftermath of their activities.

Darkburst thought hard, his mind working at the enigmas that seemed to surround him.

Twice now he'd been saved by creatures that in normal circumstances would have left him well alone.

This could only be the work of Grindel, and with that thought came the realisation of just how powerful the magic encapsulated within the Talisman must really be.

*

Grindel cradled the dying badger's head, looking down into the glazed eyes with a hard, uncompromising stare.

Grindel had been studying the carvings in the Taproot Chamber when the familiar tug cut through his thoughts. He'd resisted at first, annoyed that Skelda had chosen that moment to summon him— just when he was on the point of discovering what Darkburst had seen in the carvings. But Skelda's prodding insistence shattered the shimmering image and the Preceptor turned away from the roots.

Grindel arrived in time to witness the gathering of the fish, as Skelda, using the powers of the Dark Healing, saved the drowning badger. The vision of the river scene shimmering before his eyes brought the realisation of just how powerful the magic wielded by Skelda was, and it left Grindel badly shaken.

But staring now into the deformed old badger's eyes, Grindel saw their wild red spark diminishing.

After saving Darkburst from drowning, Skelda had seemed to collapse in upon himself, falling to the floor as the Dark Healing finally extracted its ultimate penalty. Sensing the coming death of their benefactor, hundreds of tiny grubs dropped from his deformed head.

"You're dying Skelda," Grindel whispered.

Skelda nodded with much effort, his twisted body trembling as he fought the inevitable.

"And that's as it should be," his feeble voice managed. "It's the price paid for using the Dark Healing."

As the twisted old badger's trembling turned to spasmodic jerking, Grindel leant closer, urgently shaking the dying boar.

"Tell me," he shouted. "Tell me the secret. Tell me how to use the Dark Healing and I'll save you."

Then placing his ear to the old badger's mouth, he strained to catch the dying words.

"Secret?" Skelda mumbled. "You wish to know the secret of the Dark Healing?"

Grindel's breath faltered. "Yes, yes, tell me."

But Skelda's face relaxed and his eyes lost their light.

Grindel began pounding the already dead body. "Tell me you old fool, tell me the secret." Snout thrust right into Skelda's face, doing his best to ignore the stench, Grindel ground out words between clenched teeth. "Tell me how to use the Dark Healing!"

Skelda's mind was elsewhere now, floating on the Thirteenth Path of the Dark Healing, high above, near the roof of the chamber. Ignoring the exchange taking place below, the essence that was Skelda directed his consciousness outwards. Somewhere out there was the receptacle he needed, but he had to find it quickly.

Deep within the Darkness that was his anima, something flickered, stirring from the depths, and as the last threads of life drained from his body, Skelda discovered the way forward.

Grindel threw back his head, shrieking his frustration, tossing the useless body aside.

"I'll do it alone then, you old fool. I don't need you, I never did."

So saying Grindel stomped from the chamber, leaving behind the dead thing that up to now had been such a dominating force in his life.

*

Broshee hummed to herself as she tended her coat but there was a sadness to the sound. She had always enjoyed the closeness that grooming had brought between her and her mother; the idle chatter, the intimate touching, the lingering caresses. It was a part of cubhood that she found difficult to put aside.

Allowing her thoughts to drift back to her confrontation with the dog, Broshee realised how lucky she had been.

The animal, scabbling at the earth between the rocks, had dug into her hiding place, and all she'd been able to do, was push herself further into the shallow burrow, hoping that the animal would give up and go away.

But the dog kept up its frantic activity, until it finally managed to make a space large enough to reach her, and all too quickly its powerful jaws were snapping dangerously close. Broshee growled, striking out with her claws, ripping a long, jagged tear down the dog's snout. The animal yelped in pain and sprang backwards.

This small victory gave her the courage to launch a counter attack, and thrusting against the hard earth with her back feet, she hurled herself from between the stones, biting deeply into the dog's flank. The dog reared up, wary now that it had been hurt.

*

They circled each other, eyes locked, each seeking an advantage.

Broshee sensed an open space behind her and glanced over her shoulder, instantly realising her mistake.

Taking her attention from the dog, even for a brief moment, had given it the advantage, and it lunged forward, snapping at her neck, causing a painful wound.

Broshee stood her ground as the dog snarled at her, not yet confident enough to follow through with its attack, its hard yellow eyes watching her every movement.

They moved back and forth across the bare earth, testing each other's defences, looking for any weakness to exploit. Warm blood trickled from the wound on Broshee's neck and she realised she had to finish this quickly.

Sinking her claws into the dry ground, she turned sideways to the dog, scooping a pawful of earth into its face. Her heart faltered as the animal growled deep within its throat, tossing its head violently to clear its eyes.

The stinging dust had momentarily blinded the dog and taking full advantage of her luck, Broshee turned and fled.

Running like the wind, her heart pounding, her breath pumping through her open mouth, feet barely touching the ground, Broshee fled for her life.

Onwards she ran, on and on through ferns and thickets, across deep leaf mould and hard stony ground, beneath tall trees and high waving grasses, until she finally collapsed, unable to run any longer. But even as the young sow lay exhausted, her legs twitched and shook, as though still carrying her away from danger.

*

Shaking a light layer of moisture from her coat, Broshee stopped to rest. It was impossible to see very far in the thick early mist, and she was afraid that she might lose her way if she continued. Settling down she ate the solitary worm she'd found earlier, but was still ravenous. The countryside around her was desolate, flat and featureless.

She'd tried digging for food, but it had proven fruitless and frustrating. The black surface was much too hard, refusing to yield to her tough claws. Here and there, an odd tuft of grass, or a tenacious spindly plant, had somehow managed to grow to maturity, but apart from that, even the vegetation had given up the unequal struggle.

Running the tip of one claw over the strange looking ground Broshee shuddered, feeling exposed and vulnerable. Tilting her head to one side she listened attentively, hearing once again the voices of the stars as they called to each other. She was much closer to them now and felt their movements beneath her feet— the soft vibrations they made as they flew on their way.

Broshee waited patiently in the slowly shifting mist, her thoughts turning once again to her father.

*

Broshee stretched and stood up. The sun had finally burnt off the mist and it was time to go. It felt as though it was going to be hot and sultry, the kind of sun-cycle when sensible badgers should be safely tucked up underground, not traipsing about on a surface that burnt their feet. She was hoping that arriving at the trees during the sun-cycle would mean that the stars would not be there. Something about them frightened her deeply.

Broshee started out once more, her determination to succeed burning brightly in her mind. As she walked she allowed her thoughts to wander, reliving past times; happy moments spent in Brockenhurst Sett.

She smiled, remembering the gossip she'd swapped with her friends. Greenblade's assignations with young Hawn— the secret meetings of two badgers in love— and Hawn still almost a cub at the time. Broshee giggled at the memory. But then her face saddened.

She should be back there now, she told herself, not out here in this strange land chasing the Circle of Claws in the middle of a hot sun-cycle.

Clinging to these fond memories Broshee continued on, hoping her journey was nearing its end.

*

Climbing a gentle rise Broshee topped the hill and stumbled to a halt, her mouth falling open in amazement, struggling to make sense of what she saw. Sweeping her gaze over the scene from side to side, eyes widening as her brain unscrambled the confusing messages it was receiving, Broshee took a shuddering breath. Then her nerves gave out, and her mind screamed at her to run.

But Broshee, too shocked to move, stood rooted to the spot, her heart thumping in her chest. She was looking at a track, but a track so wide that she could barely see to the other side. It was the widest track that she had ever seen, so wide she wondered if it was really a track at all. And hurtling along this track were monsters that could only have come out of her worst dreams.

Gross, overpowering creatures, that smelt of burning bushes. Creatures that blasted out great bouts of heat as they rushed passed, howling and screaming at each other with voices that deafened any badger who listened.

Running on strange round paws that hummed on the hard surface, these terrifying creatures chased each other with a speed that was breathtaking. Broshee wondered what they might do if they ever caught each other.

The young sow finally turned and fled, running mindlessly over the hard ground, petrified that one of the monsters would see her before she could get away. Tumbling back down the hillside, Broshee collapsed in a heap at the bottom, her limbs trembling so violently that even her teeth rattled.

Finally regaining some composure, Broshee glanced back over her shoulder towards the brow of the hill, breathing fast. Her trembling eased a little when she saw that no monster had followed her.

She slowly regained her feet, still on the verge of panic, every muscle tense and ready to flee. More time passed and the monsters still did not come, so she began to relax a little more, giving some thought as to what she should do next.

Broshee felt less panicked now. It was becoming obvious that the creatures had either not seen her or were just not interested in following her.

Perhaps she'd be able to find Boddaert's Magic after all, but to do that she'd have to cross the track to reach the trees growing on the other side. The thought brought a new terror to her mind and she sat back on her haunches trying to control the trembling that had started in her limbs. Her mouth went dry when she thought about what the monsters might do if she tried to cross the track.

They'd surely kill her.

Slowly the answer came to her and the young sow breathed a little easier. She would wait until the moon rose, and when the stars came out they would chase away the monsters. It was so obvious!

The stars had called her here so they would protect her. Having reached her decision Broshee settled down to wait.

Chapter 15

He mumbled and tutted and grumbled at every step. Mumbled whenever a particularly large stone got in his way and he was forced to go around it, tutted when his failing eyesight led him astray and he had to retrace his steps, but mainly he just grumbled. Grumbling was a way of life with Slikit, he was the kind of badger who would always find something to grumble about, even when things were going well.

As Slikit plodded along, the moonlight reflecting from his silver-grey fur, caused his jerky movements to stand out in the darkness.

Slikit would have been hard put to tell you his exact age, he'd forgotten that long ago, but in his mind's eye he was still the lithesome young badger who'd bounded along forest tracks without a care in the world. But cold moons told a different story and he knew that the lithe young body had been replaced with something older and slower and now it would often fail him, letting him down when he needed it the most. Like now, when the damp weather affected his joints, making walking a touch painful.

When had it happened, he wondered? Where had he been when time had stolen his young body away?

In his long life Slikit had witnessed many things, amongst them the destruction of his home set in Spinningbrock. It had been so many moons ago now that the memory was almost lost in the hazy mists of time. Screaming yellow monsters had scooped up the sett by the mouthful, spitting them out into the maws of other creatures that had scurried away with their prize. At the time Slikit could only suppose such a terrible thing was happening because the Custodians of Spinningbrock had forsaken the old ways when younger more impatient badgers had challenged their customs, thinking they knew better how to live life.

Slikit had left the ruins of his sett on the edge of Veyatic Copse and never returned. Since then, he had lived a solitary life, roaming Boddaert's Realm in an uneasy search for he knew not what.

Slikit was thin, his ribs clearly visible along his flanks, but it was a wiry thinness that belied surprising strength. His claws, now blunt and well worn, had lost the ability to regenerate themselves, his teeth too, so he found it hard to chew anything other than soft worms. Slikit would grumble heartily when trying to crack the shell of a beetle, but he seldom gave up until he'd succeeded.

Slikit had lived alone for longer than he cared to remember, so when he stumbled across the scent of another badger, he was tempted to turn aside and continue on his way. But something stopped him— an unusual feel about the badger's scent invoked his curiosity and he decided to track it.

When Slikit eventually found the badger he was tracking, he could see he'd been right to follow up on his instincts.

"Oh dear!" Slikit shook his head, peering closely at the unconscious badger laying in the shallow hollow. "This poor boar is very ill indeed."

Swaying from foot to foot in a hiatus of indecision, Slikit grumbled quietly to himself, wondering what to do, his nose jerking this way and that in an endless search for clues.

"He just lies there, as though he's dead!"

Circling the badger Slikit tutted angrily when a large thistle snagged his coat.

"Are you alright badger?" he asked, prodding the prone figure then wrinkling his snout in consternation.

Looking closer, Slikit noticed that the boar's chest rose and fell in a gentle rhythmic pattern.

"Ah, then at least you're not dead," he muttered with a feeling of relief before stumbling on. "That's good, very good."

Prodding the boar with another determined poke, Slikit tried to wake him, but only managed to cover his snout with some sticky yellow mucus that was oozing from the boar's mouth. After wiping his snout on a nearby tuft of grass, Slikit shook the stranger again, more roughly this time.

"Come on, come on, you can't just lay there. Get up! Get up!" But the sick boar still refused to respond to his urgent demands.

Slikit began pacing back and forth in agitation. "Oh dear, he must be very ill indeed. What shall I do?" Pacing off a short distance he thought hard, then paced back again. "He'll surely die if I don't help him, indeed he will."

Grumbling mightily to himself, Slikit looked longingly at the moon but found no inspiration there.

"In past times there would be a Healer to help in such a situation, indeed there would."

Slikit quickly lost himself in one of his usual tangents, arguing the merits of the past compared to the present, regaling himself with memories of his cub-hood and better times. Then the moon broke through the clouds and he noticed a trampled grass trail leading off into the undergrowth.

"Ah now, there's a clue," he muttered.

Keeping his snout close to the ground, he followed the spoor, bumbling along as he contentedly grumbled at anything that got in his way.

Even though Slikit had his eyes screwed up tightly to see all the better in the dim moonlight, he still managed to miss the dark shadow standing in his path.

"Ouch! Who put that there?" he demanded, pulling his snout from a pile of earth, snorting crumbs of soil from his nose. "Stupid badger! Stupid, stupid, badger!" he ranted, cocking his head to one side as he studied the fresh mound. "But that's from a burrow, indeed it is. And it's a badger's burrow."

Searching around, Slikit found a small opening in the ground which was obviously an entrance to a temporary burrow.

Pushing his head inside, he shouted, "Hello in there," but there was no reply.

Slikit grumbled and fussed around the entrance for a time.

Why didn't the badger inside answer, he wondered? He could scent her clearly enough. Should he wait for an invitation or just go down anyway?

Finally growing impatient, Slikit pushed his way into the tunnel and grumbled his way down into the interior of the burrow. On entering the crudely dug chamber Slikit immediately spotted a sow lying on a pile of dry leaves.

"Well this is a fine how-do-you-do," he began at once. "He's out there and you're in here and when I called you, you ignored me. A fine how-do-you-do indeed." The sow made no reply and Slikit moved nearer, tutting impatiently. "What's the matter with you? Are you ill as well, or is—?"

Slikit's voice trailed off when he reached the sow's side and saw that she was indeed ill as well.

"Two," he grumbled, "bad enough with one, but two—"

Slikit suddenly felt as though the troubles of the whole world were bearing down on his thin back, and shaking his head, he exhaled heavily, then turned to study the burrow entrance as though contemplating leaving. But finally he turned back, sighing yet again, even louder this time.

"A fine mess this is. A fine mess indeed," he muttered to himself.

*

Broshee lay quietly, her mind in turmoil. She was studying the moon, seeking reassurance from its pockmarked surface and eventually the bright countenance calmed her. She jumped when a dog barked in the distance, flicking an ear in alarm, perhaps it was the same dog that had attacked her earlier. Broshee shivered, reluctant to move, her courage deserting her now that it was time to leave.

Once sunlight had begun to fade, the stars had appeared, but contrary to Broshee's expectations, they did not chase the monsters away. Indeed she could still hear their horrible calls as they thundered passed on the far side of the hill.

Broshee began finding more and more reasons not to move, but the strange force she'd felt earlier began exerting itself once more, and reluctantly rising to her feet, she headed for the brow of the hill, her steps faltering and trance like.

Topping the rise Broshee looked down at the scene below, her mouth slack, her heart pounding so wildly that she thought it must surely tear from her chest.

The monsters were rushing along the track and screaming their rage at each other, just as they had the last time that she'd been here. But now they were illuminating their way with light stolen from the moon!

Broshee was mesmerised by the sight and stood watching for a long time, until drawn to the very edge of the track by the compelling force that had brought her here. She stood all atremble, breathing in the monster's sharp scent. They ignored her, rushing on their way, buffeting her with their hot wake.

Closing her eyes, Broshee took her first tentative steps onto the wide black surface.

The creatures did not attack her, they just kept chasing each other, growling and howling their displeasure.

Growing bolder, Broshee opened her eyes and locked them on her target, a tall tree standing directly opposite. Trying to ignore the pounding noises all around her, she padded onwards, flinching as one monster actually passed right over the top of her, its hot breath scorching her fur.

And as the terrified badger made her hesitant way across the smooth surface of the highway, the drivers—safe in their self-contained metal boxes—hurried about their business, isolated from her world. If they noticed anything at all, it was a dark shadow on a darker surface, one of many such shadows littering the busy road that night.

*

Slikit collapsed into an exhausted heap, praising himself triumphantly. "You see, you did it. I said you could."

It had taken the old badger most of the moon to drag the unconscious boar back to the burrow, but somehow he'd managed it and now, patting the badger's flank, Slikit's eyes twinkled with his accomplishment.

"You're really lucky I happened along. Do you know that?" he told the unconscious boar.

As he mumbled contentedly to himself, Slikit piled leaves in one corner for a make-shift nest.

"Without Slikit's help you'd be dead by now, do you realise that?"

Standing back to admire his work the old badger nodded, then manoeuvring the sick boar onto the nest, he piled more leaves on top of him, all the time mumbling and grumbling and fussing around until he'd made the sick badger as comfortable as he could.

"What's the matter? Is he hurt?"

Slikit had been so involved in his work that the voice startled him and he jumped in reaction to the softly spoken words, his heart beating wildly.

"Dear oh dear, but you scared me female, you really did." Waddling across the chamber Slikit stared at the sow short-sightedly. "You're awake then," he observed.

Soffen lifted her head and studied the small bedraggled stranger with a critical stare, but the effort proved too much for her, and she dropped her head back with a thump that made the old badger wince.

Soffen's voice, though weak, carried a determination that demanded an answer. "Tell me what's wrong with him."

Slikit tutted at the sow's impudence. "Where I come from females know their place, indeed they do," he replied, wondering if he should leave right now and let the sow deal with the unconscious boar on her own.

Soffen struggled to raise herself, this time making it to her fore feet. Slikit could see how weak she was and piled leaves under her chest to help support her.

Soffen wrinkled her snout at him. "Thank you badger. My name is Soffen."

The sow's statement warranted an answer, and even though Slikit was loath to start a conversation, he felt it might be churlish not to respond.

"I'm Slikit," he finally mumbled self-consciously, keeping his eyes focused on the floor.

Soffen indicated the badger that Slikit had so valiantly laboured to drag back to the burrow. "That's Brock."

Slikit glanced up at Soffen, then quickly over at Brock. He nodded. "Well whoever he is, he's very heavy," he stated, before sighing loudly at all the hard work he'd put in dragging Brock back to the chamber. Tilting his head to one side he stared at the sick boar and added, "I'm no Healer, but he seems pretty ill to me."

"Well fortunately I am," Soffen's curt reply cut across the old badger's thoughts and his face split into a huge grin.

"You are?" he checked quickly, suddenly worried that he might have misheard. "You're a Healer? Really? Well that's good news. Very good news indeed."

Brushing some loose leaves from his sparse coat, Slikit backed away towards the entrance, making ready to leave.

"Well I'll be on my way then, shall I?"

"No you can't go yet," Soffen's tone was urgent. "I'm much too weak to cope alone. You'll have to stay, I need your help. Stay, stay and help me."

Slikit sighed heavily as he turned back to consider the Healer's request, mumbling softly under his breath, weighing up his choices. He was unhappy at the prospect of spending even more time in the company of these badgers, but he could hardly just go off and leave them helpless like this. No that wouldn't be right. Not right at all.

"Go and feel his nose Slikit," Soffen instructed the old badger. "Tell me if it's hot."

Standing taller Slikit cast Soffen a look full of disdain. "I've already done that female. Indeed it was the first thing that I did," he added proudly, nodding his head.

"Well?" Soffen queried. "Are you going to tell me or just stand there like a lost toad?"

Slikit leant closer. "Female, I already know what's wrong with your friend." Furrowing his snout, the old badger tipped his head quizzically. "But tell me, what's made you so ill?" First glancing at Brock, then back at Soffen, he finished quietly, "Because it's obviously very different from what ails him."

Soffen looked at the floor, her embarrassment evident.

"It was something that I ate," she replied slowly, "and none of your business."

Although the Healer's tone was sharp, Slikit continued to stare at her, waiting her out and she looked away in confusion.

"So what do you think is wrong with him then?" she countered.

Glancing at Brock, Slikit's countenance sobered. "From the yellow spittle dribbling from his mouth and the difficulty he has breathing, I'd say he's got yellow cough. But then, I'm no Healer, am I."

Soffen's breath caught in the back of her throat. If the old badger's diagnosis was correct—

She shook her head in denial, her mouth suddenly dry. "The yellow cough? Are you sure?" When Slikit nodded yes, Soffen's heart sank. "But then you must leave at once!"

Slikit just smiled at the Healer's concern. "What fear does the yellow cough hold for an old badger like me?" he reasoned. "If I catch it, I catch it. If I don't, I don't." He flicked his tail grandly, as though he'd just made a winning point in an important debate.

From the moment Slikit had stumbled across the unconscious boar, he'd known that the badger was suffering from yellow cough but had chosen to ignore the fact. The disease was not new to him.

Once, when just a cub, yellow cough had spread its evil tentacles throughout his sett, killing most of the badgers living there, including his own family. It had been a hard time for Slikit and even now the memory brought a heavy sadness to his old heart. As usual the illness had disappeared as quickly as it had come, leaving death and misery in its wake.

Yellow cough was a slow and painful way to die, feared by all badgers. The first sign was an innocuous cough, quickly followed by the spitting up of a thick yellow pus, often laced with blood. Over the next few moons the sufferer lost weight, becoming weak and emaciated, unable to care for themselves any longer. Then patches of fur began to fall out, leaving dreadful sores that oozed a clear sticky fluid. In the end stages some sufferers hallucinated, often convinced that they were recovering. Feeling stronger, they would leave their chambers and wander into the forest, dying a lonely and painful death far from loved ones.

Slikit smiled at Soffen. "No female, I have no fear of the yellow cough, indeed not."

Soffen shrugged wearily, suddenly looking very tired and shrunken. "Then badger," she replied, "you are a fool!"

Ignoring her jibe, Slikit picked up some leaves and began cleaning the fur around Brock's mouth. His reply when it finally came, was sharp and to the point.

"That may be so female, but at least I don't eat things that violently disagree with me."

Slikit rubbed hard at the sick badger's neck, allowing time for his barb to strike home.

"Not me," he finished with a final downward stroke.

Soffen ignored the old badger's remark, saying instead, "I need to collect some Mouse-ear. I can treat him with that. It's the only chance he has. I think I saw some . . . some . . . I think—"

Slikit turned as Soffen's voice faded away, in time to see her collapse. Running over he shook the Healer urgently, shouting in her ear.

"What was that female? What did you say?"

Tutting angrily when she failed to respond, Slikit stood in the centre of the small chamber, his snout wrinkled in agitation.

"Something about a mouse's ears. The female said something about a mouse's ears. I'm sure of it." Shaking his head in confusion, the old badger studied the floor. "That's very strange. Very strange indeed."

Slikit fussed about in the burrow for a time, moving things from here to there and from there to here, all the while mumbling and grumbling about the smallness of the chamber, the smelliness of the leaves covering the floor, and anything else that caught his eye. By the time he'd finished, the chamber was spick and span and both badgers as comfortable as he could make them. Then taking one last look around to check everything was as it should be, Slikit made his way outside.

Retracing his steps along the track he'd taken earlier, Slikit's snout twitched zealously. "It was somewhere along here," he assured himself, scenting the ground with his wrinkled old nose. "Somewhere along here."

Pressing on, Slikit jerked his head from side to side, trying to spot the spoor he'd seen earlier.

The old badger pushed on with his search, even though he knew it was all to no avail. In his experience, any badger unlucky enough to catch Yellow Cough always died.

*

While Soffen and Brock lay ill in the burrow, and Slikit searched for the Mouse's ear, Broshee reached the base of the tree on the far side of the track. The monsters had roared and screamed their annoyance at her invasion of their track, but none had done her any real harm. Her eyes still stung from the dust and grit thrown up, and her ears still rang from the terrible noise, but she was alive and well. Now standing at the base of the tree, she drew back her head and looked up along its length.

Broshee had never seen such a tree before, its trunk so straight and smooth to the touch. Its strange configuration made her feel uneasy, but she had no choice, she would have to climb it if she wanted to retrieve Boddaert's Magic.

She hoped that Boddaert's Magic would help make her mother well again, and that alone would make the struggle ahead worth the effort. Taking a deep breath, she reared up and flexing her claws, began the long hard climb.

The tree exuded an unpleasant odour that stung her eyes and offended her nose, but she pressed on, doing her best not to breathe too deeply. Upwards she struggled, with many stops to gather her strength. And as she

climbed, Broshee thought about her brother. Her dear, dead brother, Darkburst. The image of his strong handsome face buoying her up, giving her the strength to continue.

A long time after starting out on her arduous climb, Broshee finally reached a series of strange looking objects protruding from the side of the tree. Situated one above the other, they were long and thin, cold to the touch, and the colour of shimmering starlight. Unable to decide what these bizarre objects were, Broshee sat on the topmost one to rest. The view was disorientating and her senses spun, so she closed her eyes and clung on tightly, breathing deeply to calm herself.

Recovered, she started out again, climbing higher and higher, afraid to look down now that the height made her feel so dizzy. Slowly, slowly, the top came closer and she realised that her journey was nearing its end. Soon Boddaert's Magic would be hers for the taking.

As she reached the top of the tree, Broshee stopped to gaze out over the land below. She had climbed so high now that there was no sense of dizziness anymore and even the monsters below seemed far smaller and less frightening. Looking along the track she could make out the line of trees edging its black surface, stretching away into the distance either side of her.

Without being able to explain why, Broshee was convinced that this was the tree. Out of all the trees flanking the track, this was her tree: the tree that hid Boddaert's Magic.

It was this unspoken certainty that had given her the energy to set out on this dangerous journey in the first place.

With the last of her strength, Broshee fought her way to the very top of the tree, finally reaching its uppermost branches in a breathless tumble.

But what strange branches were these? Like none she'd ever seen before. No thicker than her leg, made up of thin wisps twisted around each other, dropping away in a gentle arc before rising gradually to meet the next tree. There were four such branches, two growing from each side of the trunk.

Searching about the top of the tree Broshee's heart sank in bitter disappointment when she found no sign of Boddaert's Magic. She'd been so certain, so sure she would find Boddaert's Magic here.

Tears of frustration filled her eyes as she realised she'd have to climb all the way down again and try the next tree. Wondering if she had the strength to undertake another such climb, Broshee turned to begin her descent, crying out in terror as she slipped.

Reaching out Broshee clutched wildly at a branch, trying to steady herself. But as she grasped it, she was embraced in a harsh blue flickering light that singed her fur and shook her violently from side to side.

The bolt of electricity from the overhead power line seared its way through the young sow and she screamed in agony as her body was thrown fully across the high voltage wires. The current engulfed her, eagerly flowing through her, searching out susceptible areas, sizzling the nerve endings over her whole body. The smell of burning flesh assailed her sensitive nose and the claws of her right paw, now tightly clasped about the vibrating wire, popped and bubbled, welding themselves together into a smoking lump.

As the last vestiges of life fluttered weakly in Broshee's mind, a vision came to her. It was bright and clear and her heart beat faster for seeing it.

It was a vision of her father, but not the strong handsome father that she had so often imagined. This badger was small and twisted, his body covered in bare patches and sores that wept a green-coloured pus.

He smiled at her, holding out his paws to her. "Come daughter," he beckoned. "It's truly time that we were one again."

Broshee twisted away in horror, falling clear of the power lines. The persistent flickers of electricity even then trying to sustain their contact, crackled about her head.

As she fell, Broshee's body turned end over end, and it seemed to her that her fall would last forever. Time slowed and she felt at peace with the world, comprehending for the first time in her short existence, the fact that life would go on without her. She did not feel frightened anymore, just a great sadness that she would no longer have the chance of rearing her own cubs, of digging her own chambers and filling them with laughter.

Darkburst's image filled her mind and she sensed that she would soon be with him once again. Then her father's image superimposed itself over Darkburst's and he beckoned her, but now with the face of Brock. Back and forth the images flowed. Back and forth. Back and forth. First Brock, then Darkburst, then her father. Her father, then Darkburst, then Brock, until she could no longer tell the images apart.

"Father," Broshee cried in a small, terrified voice. "Help me please. It hurts, it hurts so much."

The young sow bounced just once after hitting the hard surface of the road, her small frail body bursting as a car smashed into it. Thrown high into the air, she landed in a mud-filled ditch where she lay quite still, unable to move, her back broken.

Broshee died slowly, slowly and in terrible pain. And as the last thoughts flickered and faded from her mind she cried, because there was no badger there to share in her anguish and distress.

*

They gathered in the early morning light. One . . . two . . . then a group.

Black and shiny they glided in on the wind, their wings held high as they fought over the unexpected prize. And so Broshee's body was devoured, slowly and thoroughly, until even her bones had been scattered and the only sign left that she had lived such a short life— that she had lived a life at all— was the blood-red patch that now stained the grass.

As the last crow left it circled the electricity pole twice, cawing its pleasure. The meal had been good and its stomach was full. Dipping low it swooped over the road and headed off towards the tall trees of Migaro Lake.

And with the crow went Broshee's claws, fused into a tight circle by the high voltage that had passed through them. The bird flew higher, gaining speed on the currents of warm air rising from the ground below. Primitive urges sped it on its way; the urge to mate, to build a nest. Clutching its prize tightly the bird winged its way onward, hoping the strange object it carried might attract a mate. Then dipping its head the black shape glided across the treetops, searching for a nesting site.

Chapter 16

The air was full of murmuring voices and Grindel waited patiently until the noise died down before speaking. When he finally addressed the assembly on Fire Rock, his voice boomed out over them like thunder rumbling in the sky.

"Badgers—" he paused until he had their full attention. "Friends you've been gathered here this moon because I have grave news. News which affects each and every one of us."

Nodding slowly Grindel watched heads turn in a flurry of movement as badger looked at badger, wondering why they had been called away from their hunting. Grindel followed the ripples of motion through the crowd, as those at the front relayed his words to those further back. Finally the gathering stilled and looked up at him expectantly. Speaking slowly and clearly, pausing between each statement to add emphasis to what he was saying, Grindel continued.

"You know me, I am a fair badger. A badger who only has the good of this sett in his heart. A badger that has done all in his power to protect both the sett and those living in it. It is because of this that I now ask you to trust me. To help me in what I must do."

There was an uneasy movement within the crowd, and a few shouts, at Grindel's words.

"From this cycle the Council has been dissolved, and I—"

Drowned out by a sudden roar of protest, Grindel was forced to wait until things had settled down again.

"Yes, you heard me right. I have disbanded the Council. In the circumstances I had no other option." With heavy creases lining his snout Grindel slowly nodded his head. "I have done this because there has been treachery amongst the Custodians."

A gasp, as if from one throat, rose from the crowd.

Grindel nodded in agreement and continued. "A small group of badgers has acted directly against the Council. But worse than that, they have acted directly against the sett. Directly against you. **YOU HAVE BEEN BETRAYED!**"

The mountains amplified his words, throwing them back at the crowd in a confused conglomeration of echoes. Holding a paw aloft, Grindel implored the throng to silence once more. Then rearing up on his hind legs, he reiterated his accusation.

"Yes badgers, you have been betrayed."

Bellowing loudly, so that even those at the back could not mistake the scorn in his voice, he punched his words right at them, as though addressing each badger individually.

"I have discovered treachery, right here in Brockenhurst Sett. In our own Council, this very moon." Pausing, he scanned the crowd. "Treachery by the very Custodians that were elected to protect us!"

The stunned silence following this revelation was eventually broken by a voice from the back of the crowd.

"What treachery?" it demanded.

Grindel swung his head in the questioner's direction, as though he could actually see the individual in the sea of faces before him.

"You," he yelled back, "You ask what treachery and you deserve an answer. Well I will give you one."

Pausing for a moment, he played the crowd, allowing them to become restless before tossing his next words at them, like sharp-edged stones.

"The Sacred Roots have been stolen."

Grindel's voice quivered as he delivered these words, as though he had difficulty containing his outrage. Glaring down at them, he nodded his satisfaction at the reaction this news evoked.

"**THE SACRED ROOTS HAVE BEEN STOLEN!**" he shouted, his voice rebounding from the nearby rock face.

Shouts of dismay rang out amongst those gathered on Fire Rock. Some badgers pushed forward in their anger, crushing those at the front. Grindel urged the gathering nearer, which only added to the panic and injuries being suffered. The circle of guards forming a protective ring around him fought desperately to try and restore some semblance of order.

"Who has done this shameful thing?" the same voice from the back of the crowd called above the melee.

Grindel leant forward, looking out over the assembly and they fell silent once more. Raising his eyes to the moon, he stared at it for a long moment, drawing out the crowd's tension. The atmosphere was now so charged that the air was almost unbreathable. Hesitantly, as though reluctant to accuse another badger, Grindel lowered his gaze once more and gave them the name they wanted.

"It was the one called Grey."

Abruptly the name was taken up by the mob, shouted by more and more voices, until the very air itself reverberated with it. "Grey . . . Grey . . . Grey!"

Grindel nodded at his guards and they moved forward to quieten the crowd, beating those that continued to shout. When the guards had finally returned some semblance of order to the meeting, Grindel pointed to the circle of boars protecting him.

"These badgers have been selected to replace the Custodians, and their orders must be obeyed." Holding a paw aloft to stem the flow of protests that followed, Grindel smiled broadly. "I assure you that as long as you do what you're asked nothing will happen to you. And it is only a temporary measure, until I have discovered how deeply this treachery runs. Remember, it is essential that I find out how many more badgers are involved, because it is obvious that Grey could not have done this thing alone. Others must have helped him."

Pointing into the sea of upturned muzzles, Grindel wrinkled his snout and shouted, "Perhaps one of them stands next to you right now!"

With his words, movement rippled through the ranks as badger turned to badger, studying their neighbour with deep suspicion.

Grindel pushed home his advantage. "Soffen, our Healer, was one such."

The crowd moaned in unison, as though being struck by the guards again. They quickly quietened when Grindel raised his paw, hushed, gripped, hanging on his every word.

"And the stranger, Brock," Grindel continued. "The one who calls himself Teller of The Way. He was another!" Pausing again Grindel let the crowd digest this information for a moment. "He too was part of this plan to steal our most treasured possession."

Grindel's next words echoed down from the mountains, whipping the crowd into uncontrolled hysteria. "What happens now will not— must not— be my decision alone, but yours my brothers. What shall we do badgers? What shall we do with these traitors? What shall we do with these thieves?"

"WHAT SHALL WE DO?"

From the back of the crowd came the reply Grindel sought. "Kill them. Kill the traitors!"

Grindel nodded, cocking an ear sky-wards. "What did you say?" he shouted back. "I can't hear you. What did you say?"

A roar rose from the enraged mob, washing over the elated Preceptor as he beamed down at them. A roar as if from one throat.

"Kill them! Kill them! Kill the traitors!"

Grindel gazed out over the crowd as they bayed for the death of their Healer and her accomplices. This was far better than he could have dared hope for. He'd expected at least some resistance to his taking over the Council so completely, but it had not come.

When the throng had finally shouted themselves out, Grindel spoke his next words carefully, assuaging them with his reasoned argument.

"Badgers," he began, pausing to let his gaze traverse their faces again, caressing them with his smile. "If we hope to recover the Sacred Roots, we will need a leader. A badger who is not afraid to face this danger head-on. A badger who has courage and foresight." Quickening the tempo Grindel allowed his voice to rise to a shout again. "A badger with the strength of will to fight the evil that now faces us all." Rearing up he threw back his head and bellowed at the dark clouds. "Who shall this badger be, my friends?"

"WHO SHALL THIS BADGER BE?"

The voice from the back of the crowd cried out once more. "The Preceptor shall be our leader. I say the Preceptor. The Preceptor will lead us."

Grindel's name was taken up by the excited mob and it was a long time before he could make himself heard above the noise.

*

Grindel studied the sombre badger standing before him and smiled. "You did well my friend."

The badger lowered his gaze in respect, trying to hide his pleasure at such praise. It was as well not to give too much away.

Grindel sucked at a worm for a moment, then discarding the empty skin, he beckoned the badger nearer. "Tell me Cherva, how goes it with the Custodians?"

Cherva moved his considerable bulk nearer to the Preceptor, feeling uneasy at such closeness. He was a large badger, muscular, his coat sleek and grey. Most other badgers were cowed by his size, doing as he ordered without argument, but he knew that mere strength would be no match against Grindel's cunning. It was even rumoured that the Preceptor had magical powers.

Grindel had taken great pains in searching out a badger such as Cherva, travelling to many setts on the periphery of Brockenhurst Forest before finding a suitable candidate. He studied his choice, aware that the

badger's hard, muscular body housed a cunning brain. He would need watching. True, the boar lacked the shrewdness that would make him a direct threat, but still, he would need careful watching.

"The Custodians have been imprisoned as you directed," Cherva answered. "I have posted guards. They will not escape, Preceptor."

Grindel leant closer, smiling his satisfaction when Cherva's eyes widened slightly. "And Fenn, what about him?"

Cherva drew back a pace before answering. "I did as you instructed, Preceptor. I broke his jaw with a rock. He won't be talking to any badger for a long time now. If ever."

Grindel nodded. "You may leave me now, but return when the moon is full. I want to speak with you again before the next meeting is held. There are certain preparations we have to make."

*

Cherva backed from the chamber then hurried away to inspect the badgers guarding the Custodians. He checked everything meticulously, knowing that he would suffer horribly if anything went awry with the Preceptor's plans. The knowledge that he could have ripped the life from Grindel's body with a single slash of his sharp claws made little difference to the respect he felt for the Preceptor's powers. He shuddered as he recalled how he had been forced to watch the slow death of one of the Custodians.

Not that seeing a badger die upset him unduly, he'd killed more than once himself. No, not the death, but the manner in which it had been accomplished. The Custodian had slowly choked to death in front of Cherva, killed by the Preceptor's magic.

After being dragged before them by the guards, the Custodian was thrown to the floor at Grindel's feet, where the Preceptor glared down at the badger, his eyes full of contempt. It was obvious from the state of the boar that he'd been savagely beaten. After finally gaining his feet the Custodian scowled at Grindel through the one good eye left to him.

The Preceptor had ordered the boar to leave Brockenhurst Valley and never return, but the Custodian refused outright. Grindel did not argue. Instead he simply cast a pawful of fine dust over the badger's head and uttered an incantation. The Custodian's body arched dramatically as he tore at his throat, his mouth opening and closing in a vain attempt at breathing. Finally he collapsed onto the floor and died, terror bulging his rolling eyes.

Cherva did not know what had killed the Custodian. Whether it was the dust cast over his head by Grindel, or the badgers own terror. Either way, with the pragmatism of a survivor, Cherva immediately threw his strength behind the Preceptor and swore his allegiance. Then on his new master's orders, he imprisoned the remaining Custodians in a damp chamber beneath Fire Rock.

Even outnumbered ten to one, Cherva had easily taken them during a meeting in the Great Chamber, overcoming their weak resistance before they could organise themselves. They'd had grown soft in their protected positions and were soon cowering before him.

Roughly pushing a guard out of his way when the boar failed to move aside quickly enough, Cherva stomped into the chamber where the remaining Custodians were being held. They lay about dejectedly on mouldy leaves, looking frightened and confused. As he entered the chamber Cherva studied the straight walls and sharp angles uneasily. It was an unnatural place, oppressive and threatening.

He crossed quickly to one badger laying alone in a corner and turned the Custodian's head so that he could look him straight in the eyes. The boar whimpered quietly at the rough grasp on his broken jaw, his body trembling with pain.

Cherva noted the rebelliousness still lurking in the badger's bright eyes and grunted.

"Have your moment of defiance, fool," he growled in a low voice. "You'll soon loose that sparkle of fight when the Preceptor gets through with you."

Satisfied that all was as it should be, he called a guard forward and gave instructions that the prisoners were to receive water.

There was no sense in letting them die too quickly.

As Cherva hurried along the now familiar tunnels leading to his sleeping chambers, he thought back over the past few moons.

His life had changed dramatically since he'd come to Brockenhurst Sett, almost beyond recognition.

After the Sacred Roots had been stolen from the Great Chamber, the Preceptor had come to visit him with talk of a diarchy and a promise of power. It was a persuasive declaration, hard to ignore. Cherva had immediately recognised that the Preceptor was offering him the chance to become the first suzerain of Brockenhurst Sett, with the authority to rule a realm within a realm. It was a dream he had held since cubhood. Position, power, perhaps even— but Cherva forswore the luxury of finishing that particular thought. There would be time enough for such dreams later.

After the Preceptor's visit Cherva quickly set about collecting a band of badgers to train as guards, only choosing the largest and most aggressive, those with grudges against their fellow badgers.

Taking them away from the main sett he ordered them to dig a temporary burrow in Low Meadow. The burrow was damp and dismal just as Cherva knew it would be, discomfort would lend a sharpness to their training.

Cherva trained the badgers hard, never letting up on the pressure. It took a great deal of effort on his part to get them to overcome their natural aversion to killing, but they slowly succumbed. It was necessary if the Preceptor's plans were going to work.

After two new moons, Cherva had done the best he could, and the new guards were a team that worked well together. They knew how to disable and maim, would kill on his orders, and showed no mercy to themselves or others. With these badgers Cherva would hold sway over the whole sett, second only to the Preceptor himself.

Promising the guards rewards of the best sleeping chambers and choice of females for all the hard work they had put in, Cherva left to report back to Grindel, smiling broadly as he considered his new position.

*

Grindel was well pleased with the progress being made. Through Cherva and his guards, he now had total control of Brockenhurst Sett.

The first phase of his plan was to fortify the sett against attack and this was well under way. The main thrust was an earthwork to guard the entrance to the sett. This would allow defenders to protect the sett and confuse any attacker trying to gain entrance. Backing this up would be a special group of fighters trained by Cherva.

Regular patrols had been set up on all the pathways leading into Brockenhurst Forest. Any badger foolish enough to be found wandering them was brought back and put to work on the complicated earthworks that was steadily growing larger.

The sett entrances were guarded each cycle, with badgers only being allowed out under strict supervision to collect food or work on the defences. Any dissent was dealt with publicly and harshly.

Grindel wallowed in the atmosphere of fear that had now settled over Brockenhurst Valley. Using Cherva's terror tactics, he had consolidated his position and all badgers now cast their eyes to the ground when he passed. No longer under the hated Skelda's power, Grindel was free to pursue his own plans with a vengeance and this he did, his grip tightening on the sett with each passing moon.

During this time, Grindel had begun to explore the tunnels that had been Skelda's lair. On first entering them he had been frightened by the strangely shaped burrows and chambers that he'd found. Quickly though, he managed to push his fears aside and became fascinated by the bizarre configurations the tunnels took. One chamber especially intrigued him and he spent many moons there, trying to unlock its secrets.

The walls of this chamber were so smooth that even fine dust did not cling to them. They rose higher than his eyes could see, and somewhere far above him, lost in a murky darkness, he sensed a roof that spanned an incredible distance. The chamber felt oppressive and the smallest noise, even his own soft breathing, echoed back to him from every direction.

When Grindel had first entered the chamber he'd looked about uneasily, expecting the roof to come tumbling down on top of him at any moment. The floor was covered with a deep layer of dust and it was obvious that no creature had crossed its surface in a long time. Tentatively he walked out into the enormous underground space, sneezing frequently as the dust swirled up around his head. Creeping across the vast emptiness Grindel forced himself forward until he reached the far side where he found a large, flat-sided object that towered above him.

The sides of this object were grainy, the edges sharply angled, its shape the same as that of the chamber in which it lay. Moving warily Grindel walked around the object, sniffing it now and then. The object had an unidentifiable scent that was sharp and musty. It was perhaps four times his height and six times as long. Licking it with a tremulous tongue, he discovered it was made of a ligneous substance. This comforted him a little. He understood trees. They were familiar and posed no threat.

Strange black markings covered the larger of the flat surfaces, their shapes vaguely reminiscent of the carvings in the Taproot Chamber. Grindel had spent many moons in that strange chamber studying the object resting there. But in the end he was none the wiser than when he'd first entered.

Shortly after this Grindel had the first dream. A dream that recurred repeatedly over the following seasons. A dream that quickly became an obsession, consuming as much of his wake-time as it did his sleep-time.

In this dream, Grindel entered the vast, dusty chamber and stood before the object resting there. A power radiated from it, an almost palpable, physical thing, that drew him closer— as though the moon, trapped inside, was trying to break out, oozing through the rough, grainy surface in bands of bright, cold light.

In the dream Grindel approached the object and set to work with his powerful jaws, finding little difficulty in chewing his way into the flat, woody surface. Pausing frequently to spit out the splinters, he steadily gnawed his way through the thick layers until he'd broken through into the interior.

It was at this point that the dream always ended, and the frustration at being so near to discovering what might be inside the object, always cut through his mind like a spume of fire. It felt as though the answers to all the questions he could ever possibly ask were just out of reach, tantalisingly close, but still unobtainable.

Grindel was convinced that the dream was a vision sent by the dead Skelda. A message telling him that the object hidden in the underground chamber was connected to Boddaert's Magic, possibly part of the magic itself.

Yes, he thought, that would explain why he felt such power radiating from it. It must be the Fire Soul, spoken of in the Legend.

Deciding that his best course of action would be to leave the Fire Soul undisturbed, until he could bring the other parts to the underground chamber and make Boddaert's body whole again, Grindel arranged for the chamber entrance to be blocked up. He then instructed Cherva to kill the badgers who had done the work and dispose of their bodies.

Grindel stood now on the ramparts of the giant earthworks he'd had built, surveying his new domain with a broadening smile, already savouring the absolute power that would soon be his.

When Darkburst finally returned with the missing elements of Boddaert's Magic, Grindel would put his final plan into action. Until then he would continue building a fighting force strong enough to destroy every sett in the outlying lands—a force to bring every badger living in Boddaert's Realm under his subjugation.

*

Due to the steady influx of badgers brought in by Cherva's guards, there was hardly any room to move on top of Fire Rock when Grindel called his next meeting.

The throng waited for the Preceptor to appear, impatiently fidgeting and murmuring in subdued voices. Flanked on all sides by the guards that had become so prevalent of late, most badgers kept their gaze lowered. They'd learnt very quickly that a challenging stare was usually met with a stinging blow or a bruising bite.

Grindel mounted the rock platform that Cherva's minions had constructed and waited for the badgers ranked around him to quieten down. When he finally had their full attention, his powerful oratory rang out over their heads.

"Badgers, friends, I have information you should know. News of those who stole the Sacred Roots. The low-bellied cowards who sneaked away with our oldest and most treasured artefacts."

Grindel paused, allowing the crowd time to assimilate his words. One or two badgers began whispering excitedly but quickly settled down when a guard approached them. Grindel's next words were spoken in a softer tone, as though he empathised with their worries.

"Now I've heard questions being asked by some of you." Nodding slowly Grindel let his gaze meander over the upturned snouts, pausing here and there, pinpointing a badger with his deep, piercing stare. "And you are right to ask such questions. But I want you to remember the reasons for your present discomfort and the hard work you are being asked to endure, the hardships you are being asked to bear, the fortitude you are being asked to show. Does any badger here doubt that I have their best interests at heart?"

He left the question hanging in the air, and the crowd, guessing it to be rhetorical, remained silent.

Watching the assembly carefully, Grindel picked out those badgers who might cause him trouble in the future—the hardened stares, the eyes that questioned even though the owner remained silent. Smiling down on them he continued.

"When you were asked to spend time and effort building the earthworks around Brockenhurst Sett, it was for a reason." He nodded again with more significance, wrinkling his snout as he shared in their doubts and concerns. "Not because I wanted it of course, but because of the dangers posed by Grey and his cohorts."

Grindel paused, raising his eyes to the sky as though pondering those very dangers. Then letting his gaze roam the crowd again, he touched his chest.

"At great risk to myself I have discovered why the Sacred Roots were stolen in such a cowardly way. Yes my badgers I, Grindel, your Preceptor, have risked my life finding out the answer so that I could bring it to you and ask your forbearance in what must now be done."

Grindel's next long pause was too much for the excited crowd and they pushed forward expectantly, eager to hear why they had been summoned.

"These cowards have taken the Sacred Roots to help them search out Boddaert's Magic." Shouting above the clamour this statement caused, Grindel continued berating the crowd, eager to build on their hysteria. "And having stolen this treasure from us, what do they want to do with it? What do they intend doing when they return with Boddaert's Magic? What evil are they going to use it for?"

Massaging the crowd's fear, Grindel glared at each badger in turn, seemingly picking them out one by one with an accusing stare, making them feel individually responsible for the theft.

"I'll tell you what they'll do with it, my friends. They'll use it to destroy us!" Shouting even louder now above the moans of the hysterical crowd Grindel's voice boomed out, drowning even the most boisterous cries. "They'll use Boddaert's Magic to destroy Brockenhurst Sett, and that includes every badger here this moon. You and your cubs!"

The tightly packed mass swayed back and forth as Grindel's words bit home

"And I for one am determined that won't happen. I'm not going to stand by and do nothing while our sett, our dreams, our very lives, are ravaged!" Grindel skilfully brought the mob to fever pitch, rising to his hind legs as his voice rose another notch. "Are you with me, badgers?"

Eyes dancing with excitement, spittle flying from his lips, Grindel continued his tirade at the top of his voice.

"Are you strong, my brothers?"

"Yes," the boars shouted ecstatically.

"Are you strong, my sisters?"

"Yes," the sows screamed, a large number almost fainting with excitement.

"Will you stand by my side and fight this evil?"

The badgers crammed on Fire Rock that fateful moon, galvanised by Grindel's oration, erupted with one voice. Spurred on by the rising fever gripping every last one, they screamed their allegiance, no longer despondent and distrustful, fired now by a common purpose.

Grindel threw back his head, his voice shaking with elation. "Will you fight with me, my badgers?"

"Yes!" they roared, overwhelmed by their own emotions.

Grindel looked down on them, his gaze piercing in its intensity.

"I need volunteers," he cried. "Volunteers to finish building the fortifications. Volunteers to gather food for the workers and guards. Volunteers to watch the pathways. Will you volunteer, my badgers?"

As one, the crowd surged forward, urged on by the guards at the rear. Shoving excitedly, ignoring the terrified screams of those being trampled at the front, pushing closer in their search for a saviour, urging Grindel to wash them clean, give them the strength to fight the coming evil.

And above them stood their master. Tall, regal, smiling broadly, waiting to give the signal to Cherva.

At the Preceptor's nod, Cherva rose to his full height, his powerful body dwarfing those around him.

"Guards," he bawled above the melee, "bring me the traitor. The one called Fenn."

Heads turned and the throng immediately took up the Custodian's name.

"Fenn! Fenn! Fenn!"

As the unfortunate badger was dragged before the mob, the shouting swiftly built to a roar. Clearing a space in front of the rock staging, the guards threw Fenn to the ground and Grindel stared down at the hapless Custodian, nodding contentedly as he studied the boar's swollen jaw.

"Well badger, what have you to say in your defence?" he demanded. "What have you to tell us about your part in this plot to destroy Brockenhurst Sett?"

Fenn looked about helplessly, unable to speak, scarcely able to breathe, so swollen was his snout.

"I'm waiting badger," Grindel threatened, his voice vibrating with indignation that a Custodian should refuse to answer like this.

The helpless Fenn just shook his head miserably, gazing at the crowd with fearful eyes, finding only enmity in his search for a friendly face.

Grindel's voice lashed down at him again. "Do you deny you're part of this evil plot to take over Brockenhurst Sett? To enslave every badger living here? Do you deny you helped Grey steal our beloved Sacred Roots, killing two Custodians in the process?"

This revelation brought a gasp of horror from the crowd and they surged nearer Fenn, threatening him with flashing claws and sharp teeth. The guards hurriedly pushed them away.

"Well?" Grindel demanded, but Fenn could only continue staring at the crowd, unable to answer. Grindel's next words were loaded with a flat menace. "If you don't answer me badger, I shall have no option but to take your silence as an admission of your guilt."

Fenn tried desperately to answer his tormentor but the pain proved too much and he collapsed.

Grindel pointed down at the prone figure, a look of triumph glowing in his eyes. "Do you see, my badgers?" he crowed in delight. "Do you see the guilt? The traitor Fenn is so overwhelmed with remorse that he can't face you. He's fainted. A coward as well as a traitor." Rearing up again, Grindel solicited the crowd's approval. "What do you say my brothers? Shall he die?"

"SHALL HE DIE?"

"Yes!" howled the mob in unison.

Chapter 17

Slikit lay on his back, legs splayed awkwardly in all directions, chest rising and falling rapidly as he tried to recover his breath. It had been a long, hard chase, but he'd succeeded.

He had left the temporary burrow, determined to get the ears needed by the Healer. And here lay the prize by his side.

Slikit's poor eyesight had made catching the creature difficult but his old nose had not let him down. The mouse, though quick, had made the mistake of diving headlong for cover. Had it stayed in the open, it would have seen another moon, but even Slikit's blunt claws had no difficulty digging it from its ill-chosen hiding place.

Moaning softly, Slikit rolled over and stood up, favouring his aching muscles. Bending over the mouse he deftly nipped the ears off. One . . . two . . . frowning at the notch he spied bitten into one.

Slikit ate little now— his appetite had lessened in direct proportion to his age— so he left the mutilated body of the mouse for some other hungry creature to discover and made his way back to the burrow. The mouse ears, now clamped tightly between his teeth, kept the old boar from his favourite past time, but he made up for this by grumbling away to himself in his imagination.

On the long trek back to the burrow, Slikit thought about the two badgers waiting for him— one sick with the yellow fever, the other sick with a very different illness. It was obvious that the Healer held strong feelings for her companion, and he pondered how she'd managed to accidentally eat something that so violently disagreed with her. Slikit smiled, recalling the way she'd looked at the sick boar with such obvious affection.

Sighing heavily, he pushed such thoughts from his mind, afraid they might stir too many memories of happier times, gone now forever.

Fussing his way back into the burrow, Slikit worked his way down into the chamber and greeted Soffen with a nod, glad to see the Healer was awake and looking much better. Unfortunately the same could not be said of her companion, who lay half-curved on his bed of leaves, breathing with difficulty.

Slikit crossed the chamber and spat the ears onto the floor in front of Soffen.

"Here you are, female," he said. "I had some trouble finding these for you but I managed it."

Soffen glanced down at the two small bedraggled ears, then back up at Slikit, and for a moment did nothing more than stare at him intently. Slowly a sparkle entered her eyes and she began shaking her head from side to side, as though in denial, until unexpectedly she burst into a fit of laughter, her breath exploding from her mouth in a warm blast of air.

Soffen struggled to speak but found it impossible, and looked at Slikit helplessly, her body shaking as though she were having a fit. All the tensions and worries she had suffered since leaving Brockenhurst Forest had built into an hysterical outburst that she could not control.

Slikit frowned in anger. Having done as the Healer asked— having brought her the mouse ears— why was she laughing at him this way? It was so humiliating!

Soffen finally managed to find her voice. "I'm so sorry Slikit," she gasped. "I didn't mean to offend you. But it's so f-f-funny!"

Soffen turned away, hiding her snout in her flank, but Slikit could see that she was still giggling.

"What are you laughing at?" he demanded.

Pushing at the ears with a paw, Soffen answered slowly, trying to maintain her dignity. "When I said Mouse-ear I meant the plant, not real ones!"

A heavy silence descended on the burrow and Soffen held her breath, trying to keep a serious expression, afraid she might offend the old badger even more. After all, he'd gone to a lot of trouble finding them, she reminded herself.

But Slikit found himself joining in with the Healer's giggles and pretty soon he too was gasping for breath.

It'd been too long since the old badger had laughed this way, such helpless, happy laughter, laughter that purified the soul and lifted the spirits.

"You didn't mean a mouse's ears, you m-m-meant mouse ears," he spluttered. "And I chased that idiot mouse all over the place. F-f-from here to there and then b-back again!"

It took some time before either badger could look at the other without bursting into a fit of the giggles, but at length their laughter subsided and both turned away as though embarrassed.

Eventually, after checking on Brock, Soffen asked Slikit to help her collect the proper Mouse-ear and they set off to find some.

Outside the moon was bright, the clouds sparse, with a light wind blowing across the low hills, bringing scents both familiar and pleasant. The laughter had cleared the air between them and both now felt easier in the

other's company. They walked side-by-side lost to their innermost thoughts, savouring the mood— a mood they hoped would last.

Since leaving his sett all those seasons ago, Slikit had spent so little time in the company of other badgers that he always felt awkward, never knowing what to say or how to behave. Now that he wanted to talk to Soffen, he was finding it extremely difficult.

After a couple of false starts, he finally managed to ask a question. "Where are you from Soffen?"

Soffen took so long answering that Slikit began wondering if she'd heard his question. When Soffen's answer came it was spoken so softly that Slikit had to strain to hear.

"I'm from Brockenhurst Sett," she finally answered. "Have you heard of it?"

Slikit nodded. "But of course, hasn't every badger?" They walked on in silence for awhile then at length Slikit tried again. "So what brings you all the way here from Brockenhurst? It's a long way to come, quite a journey, in fact."

"We came searching for Boddaert's Magic," Soffen answered quietly.

Slikit stumbled to a stop, staring at her. Surely he'd misheard? Had she really said that she'd come searching for Boddaert's Magic?

Soffen stared back at the old badger with an equal intensity. "What's wrong?" she asked, wrinkling her snout.

Slikit licked dry lips. "Did you say you came searching for Boddaert's Magic?" and when Soffen nodded yes, he hurried on, "The ancient magic?" he persisted, so taken aback that he almost breathed the words.

Soffen nodded again. "Yes Slikit, the ancient magic. We came searching for the ancient magic."

"But that's just a myth . . . a story!"

Soffen smiled, suddenly looking at the old badger with surprising affection.

"No Slikit, it's true," she assured him. "I'm a Healer, Brock's a Teller. Who better to know that the Legend is true? In here," tapping her chest lightly as she slowly frowned, "I have no doubt about that at all."

Slikit silently walked by the Healer's side for some while, mulling over what she'd told him. At length he asked another question.

"And the two of you came searching for this myth?"

"Five," Soffen corrected him abruptly, "there were five of us who came searching for this truth."

Ignoring the jibe, Slikit pushed on. "There are five of you? But where are the others? Did they go back for help?" The old badger was confused.

Soffen did not answer Slikit's question straight away and he'd almost given up hope of her doing so, when she suddenly spoke, a heavy sadness tingeing her voice.

"Two of them died."

She paused, her eyes shut tight and her body taught. When she finally opened her eyes again, they appeared lifeless and dull.

"Grey, a Custodian from Brockenhurst Sett, and Darkburst . . . one of my cubs." There was another long pause. "Broshee, my other cub . . . well she's disappeared. I've no idea what's happened to her."

"Two dead?" Slikit murmured quietly.

"Yes, both drowned." Another pause, then, "Oh my poor cub," the last word came out as a sob.

"And your other cub . . . disappeared?"

A large tear ran down Soffen's snout and she shook it away with a quick flick of her head. When she finally spoke again her voice was full of despair.

"Yes. When I woke up she'd gone. Did you notice any signs of her when you found me?"

Soffen had longed to scream the question at the old badger from the first moment she'd seen him but had been too frightened to ask.

Deep inside she already knew the answer. Broshee was dead. The emptiness she felt in her heart told her that truth. She hadn't asked because she didn't want to know.

Suddenly everything became too much to bear and the unhappy sow collapsed onto the grass, sobbing quietly.

"Oh Darkburst, Broshee, what have I done, what have I done to you? Why did I drag you along on this stupid journey?"

As Soffen cried for her cubs, for Grey and Brock, for the life now lost to her forever, Slikit stood at her side in embarrassed silence. Twice the old badger extended his paw making as if to comfort her but his paw hovered uselessly over her back, his ingrained self-consciousness holding him back.

Finally he withdrew altogether, sitting a short distance off, studying the moon as if it was the most important thing in his life.

Let Soffen suffer her grief in privacy he thought. That would be best.

Soffen slowly gathered her tattered emotions and her tears eased. Then throwing Slikit a hesitant look, she half-smiled at him.

"Come on," she said in a quiet voice, "let's go and find that Mouse-ear."

Soffen pushed the hurt and guilt into the deepest recesses of her mind. After all, it had been such self-indulgent feelings that had brought about her attempt on her own life in the first place, and had led to Brock's grave illness.

If she'd been there to help him in his time of need, how different things might have been.

But that was in the past. Now she would need to be strong for him, she would save him. She could do it, she had the power.

Stay positive, she told herself, don't give in to despair.

She would do her best— better than her best— using all the knowledge and skills that her father had taught her. And if that failed, then there was always the Dark Healing.

Quickly pushing that thought aside, Soffen hurried on with her search, leaving Slikit to bumble along behind as best he could.

It was some time before Soffen spoke again, and when she did, her voice held a raw determination. "You know Slikit, I think Broshee may have gone to fetch help. I think she's gone back to Brockenhurst Sett. I'm sure of it."

"Yes, I'm sure she has," Slikit agreed quietly.

The two badgers fell silent again, continuing their search, pushing their way through the thick undergrowth. Every now and then Soffen stopped to examine a plant before rejecting it with an impatient shake of her head.

Finally Slikit could stand the silence no longer. "Soffen what did you hope to do with Boddaert's Magic when you found it?"

Soffen stopped for a moment, scratching her flank. Then wrinkling her snout as though a nasty taste had flooded her mouth, she answered, "Brock had a vision in which he foresaw the destruction of Brockenhurst Sett." Having said that much, she fell silent again.

"And you hoped to use Boddaert's Magic to save the sett?" Slikit prompted.

Soffen nodded. "The vision wasn't too clear about how that could be done. But yes, that was our hope."

Slikit thought this over for a moment. "But how could you possibly hope to find Boddaert's Magic?" he finally asked. "Where would you begin?"

"We were hoping to find that answer on the Sacred Roots."

Slikit's eyes widened in horror, his mind thrown into turmoil on hearing these words. To be in possession of the Sacred Roots could only mean that they had stolen them. There could be no other explanation. The Preceptor of Brockenhurst Sett would never have let such precious items out of his protection. Not under any circumstances. And here he was, an old fool helping the thieves!

Soffen appeared not to notice Slikit's reaction to her words, tipping her head to one side, sniffing at the air. "Come on, this way," she called heading off at a tangent.

In truth, Soffen was worried that she might have said too much and the old badger would refuse to help her any longer.

Slikit followed Soffen, his slow movements reflecting his reluctance. She led him through a tangled patch of undergrowth, stopping abruptly at a stunted bush.

"Here's some, over here," she called. "Come and take a look so you'll know what it looks like in the future."

Slikit studied the plant. The leaves were small, with sparse hairs on top and white down underneath, the pale yellow flowers were tinged red.

"Is that mouse's ears?" he asked, his mind still struggling with the idea of her stealing the Sacred Roots.

A soft smile formed fleetingly on Soffen's lips. "Yes that's Mouse-ear," she replied. "And all we need now is a special fungus that usually grows in the same place."

Gathering a selection of leaves from the plant, Soffen quickly located the fungus that she needed and headed back to the burrow. Slikit trailed along behind, doing his best to hide his agitation as he deliberated on what he was getting himself involved in.

*

By the time Soffen and Slikit arrived back at the temporary burrow the sky had deepened to a bright, blood red, and the air, crisp and clear, carried the scent of rain. With the prospect of a shower at any moment Soffen and Slikit hurried down to the chamber below, glad to be undercover.

When Soffen saw how much worse Brock had become in their absence, concern clouded her face. His breathing was so laboured now that every lungful shook his whole body.

She prepared the plant and the fungus they'd gathered, laboriously chewing them into a sticky paste, which she carefully dribbled into Brock's mouth.

When she had finally finished her ministrations, Soffen looked across at Slikit, tears shining in her eyes.

"He's dying," she said softly. "He's dying and there's nothing I can do about it. The only chance of saving him now is for me to get him back to Brockenhurst Sett. I've got a potion there that might work. I don't know, but he'll die for sure here. Will you help me Slikit? Will you help me get him back to Brockenhurst Sett?"

The old badger exhaled heavily as he rose, weary and depressed. "Yes Soffen," he agreed, "I'll help you."

Reluctant though he was to accompany Soffen and Brock to Brockenhurst Sett, Slikit felt obligated. Having stopped to help in the first place, he was loath to back out now. And anyway, he could slip away quietly when the time was right, there would be plenty of opportunities on the trip back to Brockenhurst.

The febrifuge Soffen had given Brock began its work and he had soon recovered enough to sit up on his haunches. Looking about in confusion he smiled at Soffen.

"You're better," he said throatily, his voice still weak.

Soffen drank in every word, hungry to hear him, but knowing the effects of the medication would all too quickly fade.

Brock looked about, wrinkling his snout as though trying to remember something important.

"Broshee has gone to look for the stars," he suddenly blurted.

Soffen's eyes widened in shock. "She's alive? Broshee is alive?" Soffen could scarcely believe her ears, so overcome with emotion that for one moment she could barely breathe. "But I thought—" Then shaking her head in confusion, she asked, "Stars? What stars?"

Taking his time, with many pauses, Brock told them about the place where the stars rushed along beneath the sky following the long line of trees. How they howled and moaned at each other as they went, making the earth tremble with their anger.

As Brock told his story, Slikit stayed well in the background, growing more and more taciturn now that there was another badger to deal with.

When Brock had finally finished his tale, Soffen explained why they must return to Brockenhurst Sett as quickly as possible.

Yes, she knew he felt better right now, but it would soon pass, she told him.

Soffen was elated to hear that Broshee was still alive, but was worried that waiting for her return before starting the long journey back to Brockenhurst Sett, would mean that Brock might be too ill to travel. She would leave a sign for Broshee telling her where they'd gone and that they would meet her back in Brockenhurst.

As they prepared to leave, Brock suddenly clasped a paw to his head, crying out in pain.

Soffen's eyes widened in alarm and she rushed to his side. "What is it? What's the matter?"

"A pain," Brock mumbled through clenched teeth. "A terrible, terrible pain." He shook his head violently, as though trying to dislodge something. "What? What did you say?"

Soffen shook her head. "Nothing Brock. I said nothing."

Brock staggered backwards, his eyes rolling wildly.

"But I can hear voices," he cried, pounding at his head with a shaking paw. "In here, I can hear voices."

Slikit mumbled something under his breath, backing away, wary at the way Brock was behaving.

Brock grimaced again, then suddenly relaxed a little. "It's alright. I think it's easing now. Yes . . . it's definitely going away."

He took a tentative breath as though testing himself, ready to stop the moment he felt the pain again.

Soffen wrinkled her snout, smiling uneasily at him. "Are you sure?" she checked, worried by Brock's behaviour.

Brock nodded slowly. "Yes. I just feel a bit weak, that's all."

"Help me Slikit," Soffen ordered. "Help me get Brock outside." When Slikit hung back, Soffen frowned angrily at him, then tried reassuring the old badger. "It's alright, he's fine now. Really it's only a reaction to the potion I've given him."

But Soffen knew that this was no reaction to the medication, or the result of the illness Brock had. Something else was at work here. Something beyond her understanding.

*

The trio stopped for a rest beside a small pool of water and Soffen ate the worms she'd gathered. As she swallowed each mouthful, she watched Brock thoughtfully from beneath hooded eyes.

There was something disquieting about his behaviour. It reminded her of another badger, but she couldn't think who it might be. Since leaving the temporary burrow Brock had begun talking to himself, answering questions nobody had asked, mumbling jerkily as though talking to another badger.

Rested the group pushed on, both Soffen and Slikit taking turns to help the rapidly weakening Brock, but finally he collapsed from exhaustion and Soffen called for a further rest.

Brock lay on the ground, his sides heaving as he struggled for breath. Soffen's snout wrinkled in concern as she watched his body twitch and judder, as though beyond his control.

Turning away Soffen forced herself to think about other things, things she would have to do once they arrived back at Brockenhurst Sett. She would need to dig up the piece of bark in which she'd hidden her strongest potion. She had buried it soon after her father's death, cursing it for the pain it had brought her.

Soffen's father had prepared the potion using the Dark Healing, and she was convinced it was this action that had drained the last of his strength.

Over many seasons Soffen had begged and pleaded with her father not to use the Dark Healing when he was preparing his palliatives, but he would never listen to her, boasting instead how his potions were the finest and most powerful in Brockenhurst Valley, indeed in the whole of Boddaert's Realm.

Soffen had to admit that she never had succeeded in producing anything that matched the potency of her father's specifics, but she remained too frightened of the Dark Healing to ever consider using it as an aid.

One moon, after an absence of almost three seasons from the sett, her father had returned to tell her that he was dying. As she stood before him it was obvious how weak he had become. His limbs trembled with the effort of keeping on his feet and his head hung low. He asked her to help him get to the base of Fire Rock, not having the strength to manage the journey on his own.

On their stumbling walk, he had told her about the secret chambers located beneath Fire Rock, and how he wanted to spend what little time remaining to him in their confines.

Following his instructions, she dug out the entrance tunnel and helped him inside, imploring him to let her stay and comfort him while he died. He would have none of it, instead making her promise to hide the entrance once he had entered.

Reluctantly Soffen agreed, watching her father struggle into the dark tunnel through tear filled eyes.

She could picture him now, as though it had only been yester—moon, turning to say goodbye, his body swaying from side to side as he tried to keep his footing. The fur on his back, patchy and thin, with the scabby skin beneath showing through. Soffen's eyes suddenly widened when she finally made the connection.

There it was, the similarity that she'd been reaching for as she'd watched Brock.

It was her father!

That time beneath Fire Rock, when he'd entered the tunnel. The vacant, troubled look in his eyes, the uncertain gait, the mumbling talk to a badger who was not there to hear.

Quickly pushing the memories aside Soffen stood up, shaking her head as though dismissing the idea. She had enough to worry about already without letting an overactive imagination make things seem worse than they really were.

Shaking Slikit and Brock awake, she led them out into the wilderness again. They must continue with their journey she told them, they still had a long way to go.

Walking through the darkness, taking many stops to rest, they struggled on. Brock fluctuated between bouts of energy and lethargy— Soffen, between hope and deep despair.

And as the sun tinged yet another sky, she dug a temporary burrow so they had somewhere to rest, after which they all crawled inside and immediately fell into an exhausted sleep.

*

Slikit was worried and dithered about the burrow entrance in agitation. He'd woken from a deep sleep, and rising to relieve himself, had spotted at once that Brock was missing.

Hurrying outside the old badger scouted around, finding some tracks leading away into the undergrowth. Hurrying along the trail, he followed the tracks as far as he could until they eventually petered out on the stony ground.

Slikit returned to the burrow in a dejected mood, knowing that he would have to tell Soffen about Brock's disappearance, but he delayed, frightened of what her reaction might be. She'd blame him for not keeping a closer eye on the Teller.

Now would be as good a time as any to slip away and return to his life of foraging and sleeping, he thought.

But in the short time that he had known Soffen, he'd grown close to her. He liked the way she put others before herself, her strong will and her gentle strength. Soffen reminded Slikit of his own mother, evoking cherished memories that were special and secret.

"Soffen, wake up." Slikit shook the sleeping badger carefully. "Soffen come on, wake up!"

Soffen yawned loudly and looked up at Slikit, her eyes still clouded by the vestiges of sleep. Getting stiffly to her feet she yawned again and shook herself, looking around the temporary burrow, her eyes widening in alarm when she saw that Brock was not there.

"Where's Brock?" she asked at once, concern lining her snout.

"I don't know," Slikit admitted. "He was gone when I woke up." Turning his head, Slikit nodded at the entrance. "I followed his trail for as far as I could, but lost it when the ground got too stony."

Soffen left the burrow at a trot, with Slikit right behind her, doing his best to keep up as she ran through the undergrowth. They reached the point where Brock's trail disappeared and Soffen cast about in frustration, her nose quivering urgently as she scented the ground.

Slikit stood off to one side watching the Healer's frantic actions, which quickly became more and more desperate.

Finally, Soffen stopped her search, looking over at Slikit, shaking her head in confusion.

"I don't understand," she complained. "His scent just vanishes." Slapping a paw on the ground in frustration, Soffen exhaled loudly. "There's fox and stoat aplenty here, but no badger, not one single trace. How could he have just disappeared like that?"

Chapter 18

Brock woke with a start, his mind still echoing with unintelligible words. Tossing and turning he tried to get back to sleep but finally gave up and left the burrow so as not to disturb the others.

The sun blazed down from a clear blue sky and a heat-haze shimmered on the horizon. Hunting up some worms he sat and ate them in a despondent mood. His head hurt and his back felt as though someone had been repeatedly jumping on it. His cough had disappeared and he silently thanked Soffen and her powers of healing for that but now there was something else wrong.

Raising a paw he touched the tender patch of skin on his head, feeling a hard lump beneath the surface just behind his ear. Sitting back on his haunches he finished the last of the worms and sighed dejectedly.

"Brock!" the pervading, now familiar voice spoke seductively from within his head. "Brock, you cannot deny me."

The voice had grown steadily stronger over the past few moons, sounding now as though someone were speaking to him from right inside his head. But worse than that were the spurious memories he was experiencing.

Memories of a strange cubhood; memories that did not belong to him; memories that wove themselves into his own recollections until he wasn't sure which were real and which imagined; another badger's memories.

Throwing back his head Brock bellowed at the madness that had invaded his mind, imploring it to leave.

"Don't deny me Brock," the insidious voice came again. "You're not strong enough."

Screwing his eyes tight shut, Brock tried to ignore the voice, knowing his acknowledgement would be an admission of his own insanity—he was near enough to that already.

When the voice first made itself known to him, Brock had thought it a symptom of the yellow cough, but no matter how hard he had tried, he couldn't rid himself of the annoying whispers. In the end he turned to the powers of The Way to cast it out but quickly realised his mistake.

After falling into his usual trance, where he stood amongst the familiar pathways, Brock witnessed a shimmering shadow emerging from the far recesses of his psyche. This shadow, though insubstantial, emitted an aura of great evil and Brock could not help but flinch away from it.

But the blackness swirled nearer, its deep, dark centre filling his mind until its pernicious tentacles froze the very core of his being. Brock felt as though his mind had been unexpectedly plunged into a deep foul hole—a place where the rocks bore inwards with unrelenting pressure—and as his thoughts began to slip away, he realised that he must act decisively if he was going to save himself.

Brock suddenly understood that the powers of The Way had somehow been wrested from his control and were now threatening to crush his mind. He was on the point of losing his sanity, and with it his life. Snapping open his eyes he forced himself from his trance, gulping great breaths of air into his lungs. Then he collapsed back onto his haunches, trying to control his trembling body, panting loudly as though he'd just outrun death itself.

From that moment onwards, Brock was too frightened to use the powers of The Way again, recognising how close to madness it had brought him. Something frightening and very dangerous had just happened but he'd no idea what, and as he constantly picked over the events, the questions spun around in his head.

Was this the Dark Healing that he'd been warned about during his training? In his attempts to cast the insidious voice from his mind, had he somehow activated it?

Shaking his head in confusion Brock tried to ignore the indomitable feeling of alienation that now lurked at the back of his mind, as though a stranger were settled there.

For the present the voice had faded but Brock knew the compelling whispers would soon return. As surely as the sun followed the moon, the voice would rise again from the peccant foulness where it had set up its burrow. It would rise again to tempt him with its beguiling promises of wonderful rewards, and all he had to do was listen; listen and let go. Become one with it.

Something was happening to him. Something outside his control. Something that made him feel dirty and used.

Brock struggled to his feet, shaking himself, as though ridding his fur of unwanted invaders. He'd made a decision, he would tell Soffen what was happening to him. The Healer would know what to do. She would help him.

As Brock hurriedly retraced his steps back to the burrow, a blinding pain suddenly lanced through his skull, bringing him to a halt.

"You are mine Brock," the voice cried in triumph. "I am Darkgrass; mother of Soffen: Fernbreak; father of Darkburst: Rockstay; creator of the Cimmerian Moon: Skelda; Master of the Dark Healing. You cannot cast me aside as you would a worrisome insect, I am too strong for that. Hear me. I am. You cannot deny me."

Slowly and unremittingly Brock felt his mind slipping from his control as one-by-one each layer was taken from him.

Finally, when there was nowhere left to go, Brock was forced to retreat into the foulest recesses of his mind, deep down where the darkest tenets lay.

Lurching through the undergrowth, Brock staggered about as though he were a cub taking its first tentative steps. Having lost control of his mind, his psyche could do little now, other than crouch in a terrifying darkness, surveying the world from another badger's eyes.

*

He was thrashing about in deep clinging mud, his mouth open so that he had little choice but to swallow the cold, clammy liquid. His screams went unheard as he sank deeper and deeper beneath the stinking surface, his nostrils filling with the cloying slime. He struggled desperately, but the harder he fought, the deeper he sank. It was happening again. He was drowning.

Darkburst came awake with a start, his heart hammering in his chest and his legs flailing wildly. Taking a deep shuddering breath, he tried to calm himself. It was only a dream. A dream. Just a dream.

Clambering from the shallow burrow that he'd dug earlier, Darkburst shook the last vestiges of the dream from his mind and looked about. The sky was overcast but the moon shone brightly through breaks in the cloud. He'd slept a long time and judged it to be well into the moon-cycle.

A dog barked in the distance and for a moment Darkburst's eyes flickered with fear. Then smiling to himself, he shook his head, giving a short bark of a laugh. The creature was too far away to be of any concern to him now.

Tipping his nose to the breeze he scented the air. Fox and rabbit but little else, except the soft, cloying aroma of the nearby river.

It had swept him a long way downstream from where he'd fallen in and Darkburst had no idea where he was. Grooming the tangles from his fur, he thought back over this second brush with death. The fish had saved him, buoying him up with their silvery bodies until he'd been able to clamber out onto the sandbank.

Not knowing what to make of it, he pushed the thought from his mind. That particular mystery would have to wait until another time.

Darkburst studied the clouds, pondering what he should do. He could follow the river, which would eventually lead him back to Brockenhurst Sett, but it was a winding and tortuous route, or he could strike out overland, using the stars as his guide. He'd done that often enough when a small cub playing on the forest paths. It would be the quickest way but he was reluctant to take it, especially as the sky was so overcast.

Darkburst suddenly felt very small— small and frightened. He was alone in a strange land, reliant for the first time in his life on his own skills for survival and the sudden realisation almost overwhelmed him.

For no particular reason, other than he had to take one course or the other, he finally struck out overland.

*

After walking for what seemed to be half the moon-cycle, Darkburst climbed to the top of a steep rise and stopped to get his bearings. As he mounted the crest and looked out over the vista, his breath caught in the back of his throat.

He closed his eyes for a moment, then slowly opened them again, expecting the view he had just seen to have disappeared; be a figment of his imagination. But it was still there, and was not, as he had thought, the workings of an over-active imagination.

There it was in front of him, the vision he'd seen within the Sacred Roots. The lake reflecting the moonlight from its calm surface, the tall stand of trees marching down to the water's edge, and further off, above the edge of the silver water, a line of stars moving swiftly across the horizon. It was an incredible sight, just as it had been when the ball of light erupted between the Sacred Roots, allowing him a brief glimpse into its secret world.

All thoughts of returning to Brockenhurst Sett vanished abruptly, and with a growing sense of wonder, he studied the landscape, suddenly realising his destiny. It was beyond the shimmering lake where the stars fell to the earth.

It was here that Boddaert's Magic awaited him.

*

He was going mad!

As he lay in the undergrowth Brock's mind swirled wildly with the memories of what had happened to him over the past few moons— the pain in his back, forcing him to limp along with a shuffling gait; the growth on his head, now weeping a foul smelling pus; the voice constantly pursuing him into the furthest recesses of his mind.

These events were not normal. He had no choice but to admit that to himself now. And the conclusion was obvious, could mean only one thing.

He was going mad!

Brock had no idea how long he'd lain under the bush while his mind and memories were systematically stripped from him. One by one they had flickered and died, becoming overlain with memories of another badger's life.

Now, as he peered out from his prison with an acceptance born of hopelessness, Brock gave up the unequal struggle, realising at last that he'd lost the battle.

Strangely enough, with that realisation came an inexplicable feeling of relief. He could give up the struggle now without guilt. Having done his best it was not his fault that the dark shadow in his mind— so much quicker, so much stronger— had crushed him so completely. He'd give himself to the seductive aura waiting on the edges of his consciousness and stop his ineffective resistance.

Settling back Brock began to do just that, feeding his memories to the hungry force that waited so impatiently to devour them.

Starting with his earliest recollections— those of his birth and the first opening of his eyes as he stared about in fright and fascination at the strange new world surrounding him— Brock allowed each moment to slip away, fluttering towards the blackness, like a leaf on a summer breeze. As the process continued more and more memories followed, each blinking from existence like a firefly's brief flash.

But then Brock glimpsed an image of Soffen, and so strong was the image that it jolted him from his hopelessness.

It was a reflection of her gentle face, outlined by the strong, full moon. She was beckoning to him, a half-smile on her lips, waiting patiently for him to come to her. The gentle sonnet that she sang stirred a haunting emotion within Brock's heart, but eventually even this image flickered and faded, until it had disappeared along with the rest.

As the dark aura sent its tentacles into this last bastion of Brock's being, the realisation came to him that he was about to lose a love he'd not yet experienced. It brought a great ache to his heart, a soul-lurching numbness that angered him to the very core of his being.

"NOOOOOOO!"

Brock's anguish rang out into the still air echoing back from an emptiness that matched his mind. Three times he screamed, and each scream generated a renewed strength, a renewed resolution.

Brock felt himself fill with a deep intensity, a determination to regain control of his mind. He would fight to wrest his soul back from the darkness that was swallowing it piece by piece.

Digging deep into himself Brock connected with his strongest instincts, using them to bolster his fight for survival, and suddenly his imprisoned being broke free, racing upwards and outwards, rekindling the dim memories of a life that had almost been extinguished forever.

However, as Brock fought to regain control of his being the dark aura rose up once more, stronger now, it's voice more powerful and painful in its intensity.

"It is useless Brock. Give this up!"

But Brock had been fortified by the images of his love and he refused to be stilled.

As the two essences struggled for control of the one mind, Brock's body twisted and turned as though he were standing on burning grass. He fell, his limbs flailing the ground with such force that it was a wonder his bones did not break. His tortured cries echoed through the undergrowth as he regained his feet, staggering about, struggling with the unseen darkness threatening his mind.

Desperately clinging to Soffen's image, Brock fought off the tentacles swirling inside his head, his mind filling with the love he felt for her.

Slowly, layer by layer, Brock began to reassert himself, taking back control of his mind as he pushed the dark aura back to the depths from which it had come.

As Brock regained control of his body, his senses began to return, and with them the sights and sound of the countryside.

First his hearing, and the soft, piping wheeb of a distant bullfinch. Then his sense of smell, and the sweet scent of crushed grass and the earthy aroma of fresh worm casts. Lastly, that of touch and taste.

Until that moment Brock hadn't realised how completely his mind had been taken over, how even his most basic senses had been wrested from him.

He fought harder still, grunting in triumph when the cloak covering his eyes lifted, allowing the bright colours of the world to come flooding back in. And with the return of his sight came an understanding of what had taken place here beneath the low gorse bush under which he sheltered.

Using the force of the Dark Healing, an unknown badger had attempted to take over his being, take his mind for its own. But the mind-snatcher had failed; Soffen's love had given him the strength he needed to cast it out.

But at the pinnacle of Brock's triumph, just when he thought he'd won his battle, he was cruelly cast down again. Deeply, through a swirling kaleidoscope of images his mind was speedily overlain until he was locked away inside a colourless silent prison from which there was no escape.

Brock screamed a soundless plea to the Prime Mover, begging Her to help him, even though he knew there was no defence against the dark aura that now held his mind in its rock-like grip.

*

Skelda's invasion of Brock's body marked another successful step in his stratagem. Stretching the strong limbs that were now his, he nodded in satisfaction as powerful muscles rippled beneath the skin. It was a fine body, a body that would serve him well.

He stood with his head held high, scenting the cool air. Sharp smells came to him, stirring memories of a better time. His legs trembled and he shifted them warily, first one then the other, until he could coordinate his movements. His blood, powered by a powerful heart, thrummed through his veins with a vibrancy not felt since cubhood, and his eyes flicked here and there with renewed pleasure, picking out colours he'd forgotten existed. This was better than he'd ever imagined it could be, and he celebrated with a silent elegy to the Guardian of Blackness, who had made it all possible.

It took Skelda a little practice before he was able to make his new body obey him, but eventually he was gambolling around like a young cub again, with no shortage of breath and no searing pain in muscles deformed by the use of the Dark Healing.

How long had it been since he'd been able to do that? Far too long.

And this new back of his—it was flexible, pliant, which meant that he could walk properly and was no longer forced to scurry about like a crab because of his bent and twisted frame.

Skelda looked up at the clouds and smiled, his lips moving at his command instead of hanging slack as was usual. His brilliant success brought a lightness to Skelda's heart and a new determination to his being. This was his duty, his future, and he would bear it well.

But first he had to get back to Brockenhurst Sett and deal with Grindel, and somehow he had to accomplish this without Soffen and Slikit realising what he was up to, or they would do their best to thwart him.

Scenting the air, Skelda began an exploration of the area. He was searching for a particular odour; dead flesh, a scent well familiar to him. Locating what he sought at the base of a gorse bush he began to dig, his sharp claws quickly stripping the clods of earth aside.

Revelling in the strength of his new limbs, he dug the dead vixen from her lair. She'd suffered a broken leg and unable to hunt, had starved to death. By her side were three dead cubs.

Working quickly Skelda chewed off four pieces of the vixen's pelt and wrapped them around his feet. Then smiling at his own cunning, he made his way across the stony ground, happy in the knowledge that the scent he was leaving behind would confuse even the best hunter, let alone an ancient badger like Slikit and a Healer as inexperienced as Soffen.

Chapter 19

Grindel inspected his fortifications with a satisfied air of accomplishment. Cherva had turned his vague orders into reality and now the sett was protected on all approaches.

Using badgers drafted in from the surrounding districts, Grindel and Cherva had raised the tall banks of earth in front of the sett in a surprisingly short time. As well as this precaution, most of the entrance tunnels to the sett were now filled with large stones and packed earth, which ensured that no badger could gain an entry unnoticed.

Only two tunnels remained open— one facing the large semi-circular clearing between the front of the sett and the new earthworks, the other, a much smaller tunnel leading into the rear of the sett. The smaller tunnel acted as a vent, allowing the circulation of air through the various levels. Even so, closing down all the other entrances had made the lower chambers hot and uncomfortable to live in, but Grindel considered this a small price to pay for the security the arrangements gave him.

To ensure the loyalty of his guards, he ordered chambers to be set aside for them in the fresher upper tunnels, the remaining badgers having to make do with the discomfort of the lower levels.

Grindel nodded in satisfaction, Cherva would see to it that they learnt to live with the new arrangements with no complaints.

Brockenhurst Sett was now filled to overflowing with conscripted badgers brought in from the smaller setts scattered about the forest and space was at a premium. Even the internal latrines had been filled in to make room for more badgers.

However the Great Chamber had been kept free for Grindel and Cherva's personal use, a fact frequently commented on behind the guard's backs by badgers forced to live in the discomfort of the deeper chambers.

The earthworks laid out around the main entrance formed a complicated maze of corridors that had to be negotiated before gaining admittance to the large semi-circular clearing in front of the sett itself. Its walls were thick and walkways of packed earth had been fashioned along the tops. At regular intervals along these walkways were tall piles of stones, ready to be thrown down on any invader. As an additional precaution the undergrowth for a considerable distance around the sett had been cleared so that no badger could approach the sett without being spotted.

Grindel had covered every eventuality he could think of and felt confident, that should a group of badgers decide to attack the sett, they would fail.

But there was one weak point— the air vent at the rear of the sett.

Unlike the main entrance, this had no labyrinth to protect it, so Grindel had Cherva and his minions build an enormous mound of rocks on a ledge over the opening.

This precarious mound was held in place by a single small keystone, the removal of which would cause the whole pile of rocks to come crashing down. Any badger unlucky enough to be standing below at the time would be killed instantly. Two badgers were on permanent guard duty here, with another pair posted nearby as a precaution.

Grindel looked out over his domain and sighed happily. As yet it was small, only reaching to the periphery of Brockenhurst Forest, but soon he would expand his influence to encompass all of Boddaert's Realm. His fighters were well trained and keen to follow Cherva's lead.

At the thought of Cherva, Grindel frowned, pondering the power he'd given this boar, his eyes clouding as he schemed how he might ensure the badger's loyalty. Grindel had realised early on that he needed some hold over Cherva, something to keep him compliant.

For the present he pushed the thought aside, there would be time enough for that later.

Chewing on the remains of a small hedgehog, Grindel considered his next move. Badachro Sett was the key to his plans, that much was certain. If he wanted to succeed he would need to destroy it.

*

The name, Badachro Sett, was really a misnomer, because in the strictest sense it was not a sett at all, more a scattered collection of separate tunnels and chambers that made extensive use of a natural cave system at the base of the Badachro Mountains.

A frightened sow who had been chased from her sett with her tail-less cub many generations earlier had discovered the caves and made a home for herself there. It was this same tail-less cub who had grown up to be the fabled fighter, Bawsen: the badger who fought so bravely to save Boddaert's Realm when Evaert had threatened to destroy it.

Over time, other badgers had joined the embryonic sett, until now, outside of Brockenhurst Sett itself, it was home to the largest cete of badgers in Boddaert's Realm.

But the population of Badachro was unlike that of any other sett.

Most of them were refugees from their home setts, outcasts with nowhere else to go. Some had missing or misshapen limbs, others had deformed ears or eyes, but most had variations not so easily spotted. Whatever their differences, they found a home in Badachro Sett amongst badgers of their own kind.

Over the generations the sett had grown so large and sprawling that most other badgers left it well alone, even Evaert giving it a wide berth during his attack on Boddaert's Realm. A decision that cost him dearly when Bawsen and her ragbag collection of followers had risen up against him.

Grindel was determined not to make the same mistake. He knew it would be necessary to crush Badachro Sett if he wanted to gain control of the lands surrounding Brockenhurst Forest.

Letting his gaze sweep the clear sky, he studied the stars for a favourable sign. They shimmered back at him with a comforting brightness that cut to his innermost core. Closing his eyes, he began a chant of laudation to the Guardian of Darkness, gathering his strength for the coming battle.

*

Brokin took life seriously, very seriously indeed, tackling even the smallest and least important tasks with a pride and dedication setting him apart from other badgers.

He stood now on a small ledge far above Badachro Sett, studying the shadows cast onto the rocky cliff face by the moon. He was small of stature and spoke with a soft voice, a fact which led many badgers who did not know him to assume he was also soft physically. This was far from the truth because Brokin was a gifted fighter and justifiably proud of the fact that he could beat any badger in a fight, fair or otherwise.

Turning aside from his shadow fighting, Brokin took a rest and stared down at Badachro Sett spread out below him. It was unlike any other sett in Boddaert's Realm; the tunnels— the few there were— being short and shallow. The ground around Badachro Mountain was very thin and hard to dig, so most badgers chose to live in the caves that extended well into the rocky outcrop.

The badgers dwelling in Badachro Sett were considered deviant by others and Brokin himself was no exception, but it wasn't until he took up his fighting stance that you might notice he carried an extra claw on each foot.

The sound of an argument reached Brokin as he rested from his exertions and he chuckled quietly to himself when he recognised the voices. Checta had strayed into Root's hunting grounds again, something she did quite often, and the fact that she only had three legs, and found it hard to hunt for food, seemed to hold little sway with Root. Once again the bad-tempered boar was chasing her off. Brokin shook his head sadly: they all had their burdens to bear.

Badachro Sett was a loose conglomeration of smaller badger communities and as each group mistrusted the other, an uneasy alliance existed. A Council of Elders kept the peace between the factions, setting down the laws and mores of the sett. Meeting infrequently, usually when a crisis arose, they promulgated their decisions and of necessity, most badgers accepted their rulings.

Brokin had been summoned before the Council of Elders two moons earlier and as he'd listened to Checta and Root's argument being played out below, he thought back over the encounter.

*

Drac, the leading Elder, scowled at Brock as he entered the cave. "You've heard the rumours?" he asked abruptly.

"Yes," Brokin answered with a curt nod.

The rumours referred to by Drac had been circulating the sett for some time now. They concerned stories of badgers being kidnapped, in some cases killed.

Drac nodded slowly as Brokin answered, throwing the other Elders a meaningful look before continuing.

"During the last full moon we sent Elka to Brockenhurst Sett to check out these rumours." The Elder paused, looking uncomfortable for a moment. "He hasn't returned," he finished flatly.

Brokin was not surprised, because from what he'd heard, any badger entering Brockenhurst Forest was likely to be taken prisoner and put to work on some crazy earthworks that were being constructed. Wild stories about badgers being trained as fighters were also circulating, but no one knew how true these were. A large boar named Cherva was rumoured to be in control of the fighters and was reputed to be ruthless in his dealings with any badger who dissented.

"We were wondering if you might agree to go to Brockenhurst Sett and find out what's going on."

The Elder looked at Brokin, uncertainty wrinkling his snout, unsure of what the young boar's reactions might be. Then sighing heavily he stared down at the floor.

"To be truthful, we need your help Brokin," he finally admitted. "We need to know what's happening, because if these rumours are true, and the Preceptor is planning to take over Boddaert's Realm, it's inevitable that he'll attack us at some point in the future."

Brokin's breath caught in the back of his throat and his eyes narrowed. "But I've heard nothing of this. What makes you think the Preceptor of Brockenhurst Sett is aiming to take over Boddaert's Realm?"

The Elder shifted uncomfortably and glanced at the others before answering. Two nodded as though in assent.

"Well," Drac continued slowly, "When I told you just now that Elka hadn't returned from his trip to Brockenhurst, it wasn't strictly true. He was found a half-moon walk from here, dying from his wounds. He had a high fever and wasn't making much sense, but he did tell the badgers who found him that the Preceptor was taking over control of all the setts in Brockenhurst Forest and had plans to expand his power into all of Boddaert's Realm. Unfortunately he died before he could tell us anything more useful.

Brokin stared hard at Drac, as though trying to read his mind. The Elder looked away, then down at the floor again. The dark shadows cast by the uneven walls of the cave hid the fact that the old badger had one blue eye and one brown.

"We know how skilled you are at stalking," Drac continued quietly. "If any badger can get into Brockenhurst Sett and out again without being caught, it's you."

"What wounds?" Drac suddenly asked in a sharp voice.

"What?" Drac responded, shaking his head in confusion.

"You said that Elka had died of his wounds," Brokin reminded the old boar. "What wounds? I want to know what I'd be up against if I went."

A small involuntary shiver ran down Drac's back. "His stomach had been ripped open, his snout crushed, and his leg broken. But he somehow managed to drag himself all the way back here before he died. The Prime Mover knows how!"

"I'll agree to go on one condition," Brokin stated flatly.

They waited expectantly but Brokin just continued to stare at them silently while they squirmed.

Before training himself to such a high degree in the art of fighting, some of these very badgers had made Brokin's life a constant misery, taking great delight in baiting him about his size and the way he spoke. Now he wanted them to beg for his favours, make them realise how much they needed him. He wanted his pound of flesh.

"What condition?" Drac was finally forced to ask.

"That I'm put in charge of training our fighters if the Preceptor does decide to launch this attack. Do you agree?"

After a short pause and a surreptitious glance at the other Elders, Drac nodded his consent.

Brokin left the cave deep in thought, already planning his strategy should the need arise to defend Badachro Sett.

Later that moon, Brokin ate a good meal of worms, and set out on the long journey to the Brockenhurst Mountains, well satisfied with the way things were turning out for him. From a small insignificant badger, constantly taunted about his appearance, he'd turned himself into a boar whose opinions and skills were sort by the highest authority in the sett. Not bad, not bad at all.

*

Cherva stood quite still, watching the Preceptor standing atop the fortifications. The boar was staring at the stars, and even though Cherva was too far away to hear any words, he instinctively knew that Grindel was talking to them.

The breeze was warm, the moon bathing the forest in a bright white light that brought everything into sharp relief. It was well into the summer-cycle now, but soon life would slow as the winter-cycle approached. If the Preceptor left his planned attack on Badachro Sett much longer, he'd be forced to postpone it until after the cold winter winds had relinquished their hold on the forest.

Cherva decided to check on his guards, they were becoming slack of late. Leaving the Preceptor to his communion with the stars, he quietly slipped away.

Cherva heard the guard's voices long before reaching their position. A bad sign, lax guards were a danger to the sett. These two obviously needed a sharp lesson and he looked forward to giving them one.

Creeping through the undergrowth with a stealth surprising for one his size, the big badger circled the two guards. They were eating worms and chatting animatedly a short distance from the pathway they were supposed to be guarding. Taking his time Cherva worked his way nearer, hardly disturbing the large area of ferns as he moved through them.

"I don't care what Lish says, I've had enough of all this." The guard's disgruntled complaints carried to Cherva as he moved into position above the pair.

Cherva had approached the guards through the tangled undergrowth growing along the top of a low ridge running parallel to the forest path, and he now lay directly over their heads, a perfect position from which to launch a surprise attack on them.

He smiled in anticipation.

"Don't talk so loudly Cros! If any badger overhears us, we'll be in deep trouble."

Cherva poked his snout out over the edge of the ridge, studying the guards carefully. He didn't recognise either of them, but that was no surprise, given the large influx of badgers into the sett lately.

The first guard spoke again. "All I'm saying is now's the time to go. If we're going to do it, it has to be now. We can't wait much longer. Our relief will be here soon and when they come it'll be too late to do anything. Do you really want to spend the rest of your life stuck in this place?"

Cherva growled low in his throat as the rebellious words reached him, raising himself to his feet, making ready to attack.

"Don't move, not one muscle, not so much as a whisker." A sharp claw pressing into the large artery under Cherva's jaw accompanied the whispered order.

Cherva instinctively knew the badger at his side had only to make the slightest movement to spill his life-blood onto the forest floor, so he kept very still, hardly daring to breathe.

Moving carefully, Cherva's assailant picked up a small stone and lobbed it over the edge of the ridge.

"Hey you two down there," he called. "Get up here now."

The softly spoken words stirred the two guards below and one cursed loudly.

Cherva waited patiently, aware, that for the moment, the small badger at his side was in complete control. The two guards scrambled their way up onto the ridge and stared in fascination at the scene that greeted them.

Cherva, their taskmaster, head bowed to the ground, held there by a diminutive figure half his size.

The stranger smiled a greeting at them and nodded at Cherva. "This badger was about to attack you," he said. "I thought you ought to know."

Cherva growled quietly, grimacing as the small badger pressed his claw harder into his neck. A warning to be still.

"By Homer badger!" The nearer of the two guards protested. "What are you doing? That's Cherva."

The stranger looked at his captive with a quizzical expression and smiled. "You're Cherva?" he asked, quickly releasing his hold.

Cherva grunted as the pressure on his neck eased and turned to face the small badger who'd attacked him, his eyes smouldering with rage. He responded in a menacing tone.

"You have just forfeited your life stranger," he snarled. Turning to the two wide-eyed guards he pointed at his assailant. "Kill this interloper and report to me when your replacements arrive."

So saying, Cherva stalked off into the undergrowth, leaving his guards to carry out his orders.

Chapter 20

The ten-moon journey from Badachro to Brockenhurst Forest had been for the most part uneventful, which made Brokin's present situation all the more awkward.

He realised now that he should have stayed well hidden after spotting the large badger preparing to attack the guards, but he had hoped to use the situation as a means of winning favour and gaining entrance to the sett.

Brokin stood perfectly still, watching the two guards glance nervously at each other. It was obvious to him that they were unsure of themselves, and because of their nervousness, the slightest movement might cause them to attack him in a panic. So he did nothing, just smiled at the guards, trying to ease the tension.

The badger on Brokin's left moved closer to his companion keeping a wary eye on Brokin all the time.

"What do you think?" he whispered.

The other guard responded with a grunt, looking about nervously.

Brokin kept his equanimity when the pair began arguing with each other, standing stock-still, waiting to see what they would decide to do. He was confident, that should they try to kill him, they would both die very quickly, but he hoped he wouldn't be forced to take that course, surreptitiously flexing his claws in readiness.

Finally the pair reached a decision and glanced over at him.

"Stay where you are and don't move," one ordered. "We're going to get help. If you move, one of us will come back and kill you!"

Brokin managed to keep a straight face at the guard's audacity, but only just. He nodded slightly, letting them know that he'd heard and understood their orders.

These two idiots had no intention of going for help, he thought. They were about to take off as fast as their cowardly legs would carry them.

Brokin watched the pair scramble over the edge of the ridge and down onto the path, still arguing as they went, and as they disappeared along the forest footpath, he quietly slipped into the air vent they'd been guarding.

As Brokin squeezed himself along the narrow vent, keeping alert for any guards that might be posted along the way, he found his small size a distinct advantage.

Deeper into the sett the tunnel became more and more stuffy, the scents invading his sensitive nose making him gag. Moving quickly now, he followed the twists and turns, trying to keep track of the direction he was travelling in.

Gradually a sound began to make itself felt, a soft rumbling that got louder the further he went, and suddenly he realised what was causing it— voices.

It was the noise of hundreds of voices echoing along the tunnel towards him. Slowing his pace to a crawl, Brokin proceeded with more caution, his excitement building.

At last he reached the end of the tunnel and stopped just short of the opening, tentatively poking his snout out over the sheer drop for a look. The noise and stench hit him like a physical blow and he quickly withdrew, trying his best not to gasp too loudly.

After some time, he was able to breathe the fetid air without wanting to vomit and decided to try another quick peek, discovering that the air vent he'd so laboriously manoeuvred his way along was situated high up on one wall of an enormous chamber.

Looking upwards he could see that a gigantic root pierced the roof, snaking down until it disappeared into the floor far below him. High up in this root, a large chamber had been fashioned.

Brokin's eyes widened as he suddenly realised what he was looking at. This was the fabled Great Chamber of Brockenhurst Sett itself. The very burrow that had been dug by Boddaert all those generations ago!

The Great Chamber was packed tightly with badgers of every shape and size, the whole conglomeration filling the space available to overflowing. In some places badgers were so tightly squeezed together that they were almost standing on top of each other. As they jostled for more space an occasional fight broke out, but even these outbursts were quickly smothered by lack of room.

The almost unbearable noise suddenly quietened and Brokin saw that a boar had entered the taproot chamber and was now staring down at the assembled badgers. He studied the seething mass far below him, the corner of his lips upturned in an unconscious sneer. Brokin guessed that this must be Grindel, the Preceptor of Brockenhurst Sett.

"Badgers," the boar's harsh voice boomed out, bringing every eye in the Great Chamber to his position. "We are almost ready. Our defences have been built. We have captured females for our pleasure. And together, we have crushed those setts standing in the way of what is to come. Only one obstacle remains now and that is Badachro Sett."

The Preceptor paused for a moment, licking his lips before continuing, as though savouring his next words before their delivery.

"When Badachro Sett is finally destroyed, Boddaert's Realm will be ours for the taking, and every badger living in it will bow to our power."

As the Preceptor paused again, the badgers assembled in the Great Chamber exploded into a cheer that almost deafened Brokin in his hiding place, and it was as well that they did, because the shock of hearing the Preceptor's words had wrung a loud gasp from his throat.

Withdrawing back into the vent, Brokin tried to steady his rapidly beating heart. He must get back to Badachro Sett at once and warn the Elders.

As he struggled to turn around in the tight tunnel, the Preceptor's voice washed over him again.

"Winter is almost upon us badgers, so we must wait. But after it has shed its cold embrace, then we will attack Badachro Sett. Under Cherva's command, our fighters will search out and kill every malformed freak living in that cesspit, so that no misfit is left alive to contaminate our future. Not one boar. Not one sow. Not even a single cub, will escape our retribution. Then, then my brothers, we will be free to restore the splendour that once dwelt in every sett throughout Boddaert's Realm. Once this curse has been lifted from our beautiful domain, our cubs will inherit a land of plenty. No more winters so cold that the lowest levels freeze. No more summers so wet that our setts flood. We will live in a land of abundance, a land with a future, fit for all who hold true to the mores. What say you my brothers? Is this not just? Is this not our right?"

The noise of the baying badgers echoed up to Brokin as he negotiated the tight turn and set off along the tunnel as fast as his legs would carry him.

Finally reaching the welcome fresh air, he slowed his pace, and after a moment's hesitation to check whether the coast was clear, broke from the air vent at a fast run, hoping to catch any guard stationed there by surprise.

He need not have worried, the two deserters had not yet been replaced.

*

Brock slowly realised that he was not going mad after all.

A badger named Skelda had invaded his mind and had somehow taken over his body. All that was left to him now was this deep recess in his consciousness where he was forced to hide like some frightened cub. But along with this realisation, came a determination to wrest back control and throw out this invader of his being.

There must be a way, what one badger could do, then another might undo. Thinking about Soffen had given Brock the strength to fight back once before and he reasoned that it might do so again.

Tentatively sending out his anima, Brock let it slither through the pathways of his mind like a slow-worm, wriggling along the edges—slyly, stealthily, so that Skelda would not be alerted.

Concentrating on Soffen's image, Brock drew her essence into his mind's-eye. It was a slow process but he persevered, building the icon piece by piece.

Taking every opportunity presented to him, Brock quietly dipped into Skelda's thoughts as he crept passed them, learning how, through the use of the Dark Healing, the boar had flipped his persona into Brock's mind at the moment of his death. And how, before leaving the temporary burrow, the loathsome, twisted badger, had wrapped their feet in the fox's skin to throw Soffen and Slikit off the scent.

Brock's body felt like a dirty receptacle to him now, filled with the purulent entrails of another badger— not his anymore, defiled as it was by Skelda's persona. The invasion of his body had been so complete and intimate that every nerve, every sinew, had been taken from him, consumed by the evil boar's carnality.

Brock found that immersing himself in Skelda's thoughts was a nauseating chore, so cold and full of hate were they. The malevolence radiating from them left him reeling and confused, but by using the powers of The Way as a filter, he managed to continue with his task.

As he shared Skelda's thoughts, Brock felt the badger's pleasure in their body, the new liberation that the strong, powerful muscles gave him.

Brock continued slithering from thought to thought desperately searching for any weakness, but he found none.

He did discover however, that Skelda had lived under Fire Rock for many seasons, using the powers of the Dark Healing to keep himself alive while he developed and improved his warped plan to conquer Boddaert's Realm.

Brock understood at last that nothing could stop this cunning boar from completing his plans. But Brock's greatest shock came when he learnt that Skelda was not only Soffen's father, but had also sired Darkburst and Broshee as well.

As the duality set out towards Brockenhurst Sett, Brock, forced to lay in the darkness of his prison, felt a deep despair overcome him. His mind quickly turned in upon itself and began to eat away at his spirit. The thought of having to spend the rest of his life as an observer, unable to participate in life, except through the

eyes and ears of another badger, overwhelmed him. To be forced to watch helplessly as his own body was used to commit atrocities over which he would have no control, sent a shudder to the very core of his being.

Brock was in no doubt that Skelda was the embodiment of pure evil. Surely, he thought, it would be better to die, rather than live such a life? But even that release was denied him.

Skelda continued to push his new body to the limit, eager to be back in Brockenhurst Forest. In his imagination he was already running along its sweet smelling paths, as he had in cubhood. He would take a new mate and raise many cubs and they would be his strength. Together they would sweep out into the surrounding countryside and conquer every sett in Boddaert's Realm.

Still lost amid these dreams of what was to come, Skelda climbed to the top of a steep escarpment and stopped there to rest. Standing at the very edge of a deep precipice, eyes glazed with excitement, he surveyed his imagined forces gathered on the plain below.

While Skelda was distracted with his fantasies, Brock's anger erupted almost beyond his control, and it was this anger that now directed him. He saw one slim chance, and even knowing that success would mean his death, he made up his mind to act.

For what was life without the freedom to choose? No, in the circumstances, death would be a welcome release.

Concentrating every atom of his anger into a bright point of light, Brock used its power to force his body forward. It was only a small step, hardly noticeable really, but enough to cause a stumble.

The loose earth at the edge of the escarpment crumbled away under their weight and they fell, plummeting downwards, bouncing and tumbling over the steep slope with an ever increasing speed. And even as they plunged onto the ground at the base of the escarpment, where they flew high into the air before hitting a small tree, the two personae fought for control— Skelda desperately trying to stop the fall, Brock doing all in his power to continue it.

The descent had been long and painful, the sharp rocks tearing unmercifully at their flesh, the snapping of bones heard even over the howls and screams torn from their throat. But through it all Brock remained elated, for he knew that he had won.

Their body came to rest at the base of the tree in a cloud of dust, flopped over once and lay quite still. For a long moment all was silent, then the birds in the high foliage began to twitter sharp warnings to each other, but eventually even they quietened and the countryside returned to its gentle routine once more.

The remainder of the cycle passed slowly. The sun reached its zenith, and after bathing the scene in a strong light for a time, disappeared behind flat topped clouds blown in by a high wind.

The body lay unmoving where it had fallen, its fur occasionally ruffled by a gentle breeze. The unseeing eyes, dull and glazed, continued to stare at nothing in particular.

As the sun finally set, and the moon made ready to wash the precipice with its gentle radiance, the sky darkened, casting long shadows over the landscape.

Now other creatures began to stir, crawling and scurrying out into the moonlight. From beneath the stones scattered about the plain, from small openings in the ground, they emerged, their antenna waving as they scented the air.

The blood that had oozed from a torn ear, long dried now into a crusty dark-brown patch, began to attract the foraging insects.

*

Brokin was on the sixth moon of his journey back to Badachro Sett when he spotted the body at the bottom of the deep ravine.

It looked as though the unfortunate badger had fallen from the top of the high ridge opposite.

Brokin almost turned aside to carry on with his journey, thinking that the badger must surely be dead after such a fall, but something made him hesitate, some uncertainty playing at the corner of his mind.

Carefully making his way down the side of the ravine, Brokin reached the rocky floor and quickly hurried across to the prone figure. Now that he was nearer, he could see one leg was bent at an odd angle and definitely looked broken, a bad sign.

Reaching the badger's side, Brokin was amazed to discover that the boar was still alive. The glazed pain-racked eyes stared up at him uncomprehendingly.

Brokin had helped Smint, their Healer, on many occasions, so he knew a little about the art of Healing. He could tell the boar was near to death and that there was little he could do to save him.

Casting about the ravine, he found some, Ugly Milk-Cap growing next to a birch tree. The mushroom had a dark olive-brown cap with a central depression in it, and when Brokin broke it open, the cap oozed a hot-tasting, milky juice.

Dribbling some of the juice between the badger's dry lips, Brokin waited, and quite quickly the boar began breathing a little easier, even managing a painful half-smile.

In the three pain-racked moons that they'd lain at the base of the ravine, the personae that were Brock and Skelda had melded into one consciousness, and together were now far more than their single entities.

They looked out from the broken body that had been their battleground with a peace neither had experienced before. The Dark Healing had met with The Way and was now one, cancelling and complementing each other— two opposite energies become whole.

Through Brock and Skelda, the Prime Mover had brought together these primitive forces, melding them into something far more powerful.

The dual life essence flickered weakly. The body holding it was dying, but that certainty held no fears for either of them.

Brock's skills in The Way, combined with Skelda's knowledge of the Dark Healing, had shown them a different path, a new direction to take, and Brokin's palliative administered at just the right moment, had given them the strength to take this one last journey.

Finally, as Brokin watched with sad eyes, the essence flickered and died, leaving its physical boundaries, reaching upwards and outwards. It had started a last search, a quest for the Prime Mover and a new beginning.

Before leaving the ravine, Brokin dug a shallow grave for the stranger he had tried to help, and as he stood beside the fresh mound of earth, felt that he had been part of something far greater than the last moments of a dying boar. An air of mystery hung over the place and Brokin looked about uneasily, shivering slightly in the growing coldness.

On his journey back to Badachro Sett, Brokin's thoughts returned often to the boar that he'd buried in the ravine. Something about the dying stranger had touched him deeply, had left him with the certainty that all was not well with the world.

Chapter 21

Darkburst rested beneath a gnarled elder eating the worms he'd gathered earlier. He yawned loudly, his breath forming a halo in the frigid air. The breeze had a chill feel about it and flurries of soft snow danced between the bare branches of the trees. A fox slipped quietly passed in the distance, single-minded in its search for a winter lair. All about, animals were preparing for the coming cold season.

Darkburst shook off his lethargy, got to his feet, stretched and continued to follow the spoor he'd discovered earlier that moon-cycle. The scent told him a sow had made the trail and as he swayed on his way, he wondered what she might look like. Whatever, he would follow her scent until he found her sett and ask her for help.

It was sometime later, as he emerged from a particularly dense patch of tangled undergrowth, that he spotted the sett beneath a tall ash tree on the edge of a large meadow. He stayed where he was for the moment, studying the mound of earth thrown up around the entrance, surprised at its smallness.

Surely no more than one or two badgers could be living here, which was unusual because most badgers he knew hated living alone.

Darkburst approached the sett warily, but could detect no other scent than the females around the entrance, so it appeared that she did indeed live here on her own.

"Hello, is any badger there?"

Darkburst shouted the greeting down into the sett, shaking his head in annoyance when it echoed back up to him unanswered.

He tried again. "Hello, can you hear me?"

But still there was no reply.

Darkburst shrugged. Perhaps the sow was out hunting for food? Yet his nose told him she was definitely in the sett below.

Cautiously making his way down into the chamber, Darkburst looked around. It was deep and snug, and would be a good place to spend the coming winter.

But would the badger living here let him stay, he wondered.

Searching for signs of life, he looked in every chamber, becoming more and more puzzled when he found no sign of anybadger. The sett was empty, yet the sow's scent was strong, very strong, as if she was standing right there beside him. Wrinkling his snout Darkburst cast about in ever growing confusion.

Eventually he gave up on the conundrum, accepted the evidence of his own eyes and gave a long drawn-out yawn.

Darkburst was really tired, the long journey had exhausted him. Settling down on a bed of dried leaves spread out in one corner, he contemplated his next move. He'd travelled a considerable distance over the past few moons but he still had a long way to go.

On clear moon-cycles the stars had twinkled their message to him— on overcast ones they had used their strong, almost ethereal force on his mind, pulling him forward.

But now it was time to rest, time to find a safe place in which to spend the cold cycle. Perhaps the female living here would allow him to stay once she got to know him.

Where was she anyway? The sun was rising and she should have been back from her hunting by now.

Closing his eyes, Darkburst made himself more comfortable amongst the leaves, sighing contentedly. The sett was warm and relaxing and his eyes grew heavier as sleep began to creep up on him.

Perhaps just a short nap, he thought. After all, he'd come a long way.

For a short time Darkburst fought the almost overpowering feeling of tiredness, but all too quickly he gave in, and the small chamber was filled with the sounds of gentle snoring.

In the meadow above, the sun rose, lighting the low grey clouds with a red glow. The snow eased, then turned to light drizzle.

As the temperature rose, creatures began scurrying about their business, using this last opportunity to collect winter stores. Tucked snugly in the warm chamber below, Darkburst missed the dawn's display as it drove his stars away.

Time passed and the snow returned, gathering its strength to send heavy flakes scurrying around the slender trunk of the ash. The tree, sensing the coming winter, as it had for many generations past, settled itself more comfortably into the ground, its great roots creaking in protest as it did so. In the tree's slow continuum, winter was but a small blip in temperature, a regular occurrence that came and went, cycle on cycle; a short period of rest and recovery before it sent out fresh young shoots to welcome the warmth of the returning sun.

Deep in the earth, beneath the ash's root system, Darkburst opened one eye and listened intently. What had woken him? Had he heard something? A cough perhaps? Yes, there it was again.

Looking around expectantly, his eyes widened in surprise when he discovered that he was still alone. Settling back down again, he feigned sleep, snoring loudly, but staying alert, every sense quivering with expectation.

Again a soft cough came from across the chamber. Very faint, but unmistakable.

Getting up, Darkburst quietly crossed to the far wall and studied it. There, just visible, was a lighter patch of soil to one side of the entrance tunnel. Darkburst nodded his head in admiration.

Yes, that was very clever.

"You'd better come out now," he called loudly. "I know you're in there."

After a short pause, a few grains of soil trickled down from the patch on the wall, then a few more, then a whole stream as the lighter coloured section collapsed onto the floor in front of him. The soil had been blocking a short tunnel dug into the side of the chamber.

"Please, don't hurt me," a tremulous voice pleaded from the darkness.

"It's alright," Darkburst called softly. "Come on, come out. I won't hurt you."

Darkburst's eyes widened in surprise as a frightened sow scrambled out over the loose pile of earth. She was completely white.

Backing away awkwardly, fear alive in her pink eyes, the terrified badger looked about apprehensively, every nerve taught. Realising how frightened she was, Darkburst's heart suddenly went out to her.

"No, it's alright," he responded, trying to reassure the sow as she backed further away, her eyes seeking the reassurance of the entrance tunnel. "Really, I won't hurt you. Really, I mean it."

Darkburst stepped off a few paces, aware that his closeness was disturbing her.

"What's your name?"

The sow glanced at the entrance tunnel again, as though making ready to flee, but when Darkburst made no move towards her, she relaxed a little.

"My name's Brightness," she replied at length, her voice subdued, her eyes lowered.

Darkburst smiled reassuringly. "Do you live here by yourself Brightness?"

The sow's eyes widened in fright, as though an admission would be dangerous. Darkburst moved further away, giving her more room.

"Come on, it's all right," he coaxed. "Really, I promise I won't hurt you."

Slowly crossing the chamber, the sow settled herself on the leaves, still very much on edge, her nervousness apparent in the shimmering white guard hairs that quivered on the tips of her ears.

Darkburst smiled at Brightness again, then cocked his head to one side in a friendly gesture. When he spoke he was careful to keep his voice low and amicable.

"I've a story I'd like to tell you Brightness," he said. "If you'll listen?"

Brightness nodded.

Taking his time, Darkburst told the young sow the story of his life. How he'd been born an albino, just as she was. How his mother, using her great skills as a Healer, had made him as other badgers. And how the Preceptor of his sett had given him a great task to carry out.

Darkburst talked on and on, far into the sun-cycle, reliving his encounters with dangers—telling Brightness how, twice he'd nearly died, only to be saved by creatures appearing at his side as if by magic.

Brightness listened to Darkburst's story with rapt attention, her pink eyes following his every move as he paced back and forth across the chamber, lost in his description of the bright ball of light that had emerged from the Sacred Roots and the wonderful image it had contained.

As she listened to this strange badger, Brightness slowly overcame her fear of him, and while he continued with his tale, she uncovered a store of worms at which Darkburst took quick impulsive bites, swallowing rapidly so that he could continue his narration.

Brightness lay down to listen, relaxed now, nibbling delicately at each morsel. Darkburst had no idea how long he talked for, but when he finally stopped, the sun was high in the sky.

They stood together then, under the shade of the ash, two very different badgers sharing a common heritage. Darkburst, his coat a sleek grey, and close by his side Brightness, her pure white coat reflecting the weak winter sun. Darkburst shook the snow from his back and smiled down at her.

"Brightness," he asked quietly, "do you think that I could stay here for the winter-cycle?"

"Yes," she replied without hesitation.

*

During the long moon-cycles that followed, Darkburst and Brightness lay snug within their cosy chamber, serenaded by the sounds of the ash tree's roots as the winds swayed its slender trunk back and forth.

They mostly slept, but occasionally one would venture forth to grub around the base of the tree for an insect or two. On these occasions they would talk or mate, or just share each other's company before returning to the somnolent state that marked the passage of the winter season.

It was during these occasional wakeful periods that Darkburst learnt how the Elders in Brightness's home sett had forced her mother to abandon her on an exposed hillside because she had been born with white fur.

*

Ignoring convention, Brightness's mother had crept back to feed her cub every moon-cycle, leaving her in a different location each time, so that no badger would discover the hiding place.

Brightness soon became used to being left on her own but always looked forward to her mother's visits with anticipation. Then one moon the visits stopped. Brightness began to worry about what had happened to her mother, her mind full of pictures of her lying injured somewhere, or worse still, dead. So after four moons with no sign of her mother's coming, Brightness set out in search of her.

During her brief visits to the hide-away on the hillside, Brightness's mother had repeatedly warned her cub never to go down into the sett below, no matter what happened. She filled Brightness's head with terrible images, explaining how the badgers living there would hunt her down and kill her because she was different from them.

Having convinced herself that her mother had only told her these things to stop her wandering off and getting lost, Brightness pushed the warnings to the back of her mind and set out for the sett.

Following her mother's faint scent through the undergrowth she waddled her way down the hillside under a bright moon, eager to see her once more.

After losing herself in a dense thicket, Brightness heard faint voices on the far side. Forcing her way through the tangled undergrowth she tumbled out, spotting four young cubs playing catch-as-catch-can on a nearby hillock.

Calling out to them, Brightness laughed when they shrieked their surprise at her sudden appearance. But to her dismay the youngsters backed away, a deep fear evident in their darting eyes as they scattered in panic, screaming for their mothers.

Brightness was dumbfounded with shock. Why were they so frightened of her? She had done nothing to threaten them.

Hearing a low growl, Brightness turned to find herself confronted by a large boar, top lip curled back over his teeth in a threatening gesture. The boar's coat stood erect, adding to his impressive size.

Without warning, he swiped Brightness across the snout, raking her from eye to nose. Shocked at this unprovoked attack, she turned and fled, terrified the boar would hurt her again.

Brightness ran and ran, back through the thicket and up the hillside to her hiding place. But she had only been there for a short time when the murmur of voices reached her from the distance.

Peeking out from behind a large rock she saw a band of badgers heading up the hill, the boar who had attacked her earlier leading the way. Not waiting for their arrival Brightness fled.

Her mother had been right, she should have kept well away from the sett. The badgers living there were horrible.

During the following moon-cycles, Brightness's snout swelled alarmingly, one eye closing so tightly that she could scarcely see out of it. She felt hot and weak, vomiting each time she ate. For five moons she lay under a thick bush, shivering violently, even under the hot sun that beat down on her during its cycles.

Brightness was convinced that she was dying, but she had slowly recovered, regaining a little strength with the passing of each moon.

Now all she had left to show for her brush with death, was a jagged black scar running from eye to nose, marring the pure whiteness of her fur— a permanent reminder of the hatred directed at by her fellow badgers, and the fact that she would always be an outcast.

It took a long time for Brightness to accept that she would never see her mother again, and when she finally did, a tight fluttering filled her stomach, as though she were falling from a great height, the world spinning about her head fast enough to make her vomit. Not knowing what to do, she stayed near the hillside until a new moon rose, hoping against hope that she was wrong and that one moon her mother would reappear out of the darkness, a bundle of worms in her mouth and a soft smile on her lips.

But it wasn't to be and finally Brightness left the hillside for the last time, turning her back on her burrow with a heavy heart.

From time to time Brightness tried approaching other setts she discovered during her lonely wanderings, but these attempts always ended in her being driven away. The last time this had happened the assault was more verbal than physical but it hurt her just as deeply. Brightness ran from the encounter, tears stinging her eyes, determined never again to allow any badger the opportunity of hurting her that way again.

Then one moon, stumbling upon a slender ash tree on the edge of a large meadow, Brightness decided to dig herself a small comfortable sett beneath its protective roots. Here she would spend the rest of her life, living in isolation, dreaming of things that might have been, if only she had been born as other badgers.

Brightness had spent many seasons living out a quiet existence on the edge of the meadow, snug in her sett during the winters, roaming the nearby copse during the summers. Not happy exactly, but as content as she could be, as she had any right to be.

And so time passed and her life settled down into a reassuringly dull routine.

It had alarmed Brightness deeply therefore, when late one moon she heard a badger's footsteps approaching her sett.

Thinking for one awful moment that the big boar had come back to kill her but quickly realising that this was unlikely, she'd tried to stem her rising panic. It made no difference who was coming, because whoever it might be was still a very real danger. Brightness had learnt her lessons the hard way.

But this was so unfair. Why should she have to abandon her home again? Run away and leave everything behind? No more, she decided. Enough was enough, it was going to be different this time.

Rushing back to her sett, Brightness hurriedly dug a short tunnel into the side of the sleeping chamber. Then backing into it, she carefully packed the earth back in front of her, hoping the stranger would not see her hiding place.

How long she had lain in her self-imposed prison, trembling with fright, she had no way of knowing but it seemed like forever.

Laying close to the floor and breathing slowly to preserve the air, Brightness tried to ignore the stuffiness that quickly built up, forcing her mind to be calm. She concentrated on memories of her mother and the hillside that had been her playground for so long, but finally the air became so foul that she could scarcely breathe.

She couldn't help herself and coughed once, then again. And it was this second cough that woke the snoring badger from his sleep.

When Brightness finally emerged from her hiding place, trembling and scared, it had been Darkburst waiting for her, not the monster she'd expected. Instead of an attack she'd been shown only friendship and understanding, and for the first time in her young life, discovered what friendship really was.

Brightness had finally met a badger who could accept her for what she was, a badger able to look beyond the colour of her fur.

During the following long winter-cycle, Brightness fell deeply in love with Darkburst. How could she help herself?

And now, laying snuggled against his side, watching the gentle rise and fall of his ribcage, she wondered if the future might hold some happiness for her after all.

*

Brightness stood forlornly, her heart beating wildly as she watched Darkburst moving out across the meadow under the weak sun.

Last moon he'd told her he was leaving.

In a low, faltering voice, he explained how he had to continue his search for Boddaert's Magic now that winter had ended, and all of her entreaties had been in vain, because the young boar had remained adamant.

Darkburst gave Brightness a keepsake before he left—a small piece of root that he said would keep her safe until he returned. She touched it now, feeling its warmth flood through her paw as Darkburst made his way to the summit of a far hill.

Scenting the air, she sighed heavily.

The warm cycle was returning and everywhere plants were thrusting up new growth, creatures stirring from their winter lairs. It was a time of new beginnings, not a time for such sad partings.

As she watched Darkburst grow smaller, Brightness thought back over what he had told her.

Over the past few moons a powerful urge had come upon him, giving him no rest. He'd been out hunting beetles by a large tumble of rocks when the Talisman hanging about his neck had flashed brightly, reflecting the moonlight into his eyes with a piercing intensity. Thoughts of Grindel and the unfinished search for Boddaert's Magic suddenly flooded his mind, and no matter how hard he had tried, they would not be stilled.

Darkburst explained in a low voice that he had never been happier than during the past winter-cycle spent with her beneath the ash tree, and wanted nothing more than to stay with her, but knew that he would find no peace until he had completed the task Grindel had set him. He had to continue the search for Boddaert's Magic. It was his destiny, his reason for being, and he must do it alone.

Stumbling over his words, he'd told her that her white coat would be far too conspicuous for him to be able to take her with him. That he would be unable to protect her and undertake his task at the same time.

With a final nuzzle at her neck, he had turned away and left.

Darkburst turned back to look at her— small now from the vantage point of the hill he stood upon. Then giving one last wave, he topped the brow of the hill and disappeared from sight.

As her new found love vanished over the rise, Brightness lowered her gaze to the ground, wondering if she'd ever see him again. Then slowly raising her eyes, she let her gaze linger on the spot where, just a moment before, Darkburst had waved his last goodbye.

She stood perfectly still, almost afraid to breathe in case the overwhelming feeling of loneliness knotting her stomach crushed her completely. She stood there for a long time, empty and totally alone.

Not since her mother's disappearance had she felt so desperately unhappy and abandoned.

"Come back to me quickly, my love," she whispered at the hilltop. "Come back to me quickly."

Then, slowly turning her back on the grey heavy sky, she returned to her sett, where she lay on the bed of leaves she'd shared with Darkburst, closed her eyes and began sobbing.

Chapter 22

Soffen gazed at the old badger, sadness misting her eyes.

"I shall miss you Slikit," she said.

Slikit smiled and nodded slowly. "And I shall miss you too," he replied quietly. "But I really don't want to go to Brockenhurst Sett. You do understand that, don't you?"

When Soffen shrugged, Slikit looked away into the distance.

"I'm used to living on my own, you see." His voice took on a defensive quality. "My future is out there somewhere, in the wide spaces and lonely hills. Not in the busy tunnels and crowded chambers of Brockenhurst Sett, as grandiose as they probably are."

"I know Slikit," Soffen assured the old badger softly.

They stood quietly for a time, neither moving, both reluctant to break the mood. Then Slikit awkwardly touched his nose to Soffen's neck, turned his back and pushed his way into the undergrowth.

Soffen was able to follow the old badger's progress for quite some time as his cracked old voice, mumbling and grumbling at everything that got in his way floated back to her.

When silence finally fell over the landscape, Soffen shook her head forlornly, turning back towards the burrow. Now that Slikit had decided to leave, there was little reason to delay making preparations for her journey to Brockenhurst Sett, where she would wait for news of Brock and Broshee.

Humming a sonnet from her cubhood, Soffen cleaned the burrow for the last time, leaving it tidy for the next badger who might happen along, and once everything was spick and span, could think of no more reasons to dally.

Setting out beneath a bright moonlit sky, her spirits already back in Brockenhurst Forest, Soffen brought to mind her favourite spot, eagerly exploring it in her memory— that hidden glade, deep within Brockenhurst Forest where she'd spent so many happy moon-cycles hunting for worms, while owls flew low over the footpath hunting in their own unique way.

Travelling by moonlight and taking temporary shelter beneath a bush or thicket of ferns during the sun-cycle, Soffen made good progress. True the weather was turning cold but she was confident that she could reach Brockenhurst Forest before the chill winter winds descended and forced her to dig a burrow to wait out the snowy cycle.

Soffen's journey was mostly uneventful, with only two circumstances standing out in her mind. The first was reaching the tree that the group had used to cross the rushing torrents of the Andith River on their journey out. It seemed so long ago now, such a lot had happened.

Stopping to rest there, Soffen ate a small meal. Then, before continuing her journey, she stood on the riverbank, paying a last homage to a gentle old badger.

Tenderly dropping holly leaves onto the rippling water, Soffen watched them swirl away on the current, picturing once again the compelling smile and rotund proportions of the old Custodian. Wiping a tear from her eye, Soffen bade Grey a last farewell and resumed her journey.

The other outstanding moment was her arrival at the tunnel where Darkburst had drowned. Soffen was reluctant to enter its dark portal at first, but having no other way of reaching the opposite bank, was left with little choice. A shiver ran down her spine as she hesitated before the opening.

Would she drown when she tried to swim through, as Darkburst had done? Or perhaps stumble across his bloated body floating in the water?

This thought provoked such a deep horror in Soffen that she almost fainted, but she pushed it aside, and after much dithering, finally summoned up the courage to enter the tunnel.

Soffen discovered that the long hot summer had dried the tunnel out and now only a slick layer of mud remained. There was no sign of Darkburst's body and that fact raised a small hope in her heart.

Perhaps he'd not drowned after all, perhaps he'd survived to make it back to Brockenhurst Forest.

Hurrying through the tunnel, constantly slipping in the sticky mud, Soffen breathed a heart-felt thanks when she finally emerged on the far side.

As the sun speared the morning sky with long slim claws of brightness, and the stars twinkled and dimmed, Soffen decided it would be better not to rest during the sun-cycle. She was so near Brockenhurst Forest now that it made little sense to wait for the next moon before pushing on.

The new cycle dawned dull, with grey clouds hanging low in the sky, making Soffen feel vulnerable and exposed as she hurried along beneath their cover.

The sun had long passed its zenith when Soffen finally reached the outskirts of Brockenhurst Forest and she quickened her pace in anticipation of seeing Darkburst, Broshee and Brock once more— having convinced herself during her return journey that they would be waiting for her when she finally arrived.

Her heart pounded at the thought and it was as much as she could do not to break into an undignified run at every step.

*

"Stop right there female!"

Soffen stumbled to a halt, startled by the unexpected command.

Two rough-looking boars stepped out from behind a thicket and confronted her, their gaze roaming her body with barely suppressed lust. She stared back at them, her nerves taugth.

One approached, thrusting his snout under her tail in a most ill-mannered fashion, laughing when she jumped back and squealed her indignation.

"Who are you? What do you want here?" his companion demanded of her.

"My name is Soffen," she answered with as much dignity as she could muster. "This is my home."

The boar's demeanour changed when he heard her name. "Soffen, the Healer?" he asked.

When Soffen nodded yes, both guards quickly took up position on each side of her, then keeping close in so she could not escape, they began shepherding her along the path towards Brockenhurst Sett.

The larger of the two boars wore a huge grin. He was contemplating the reward Cherva would give him for bringing in such a valuable prize. A bigger chamber certainly, and perhaps—

He leered at the female stumbling along beside him. What would she be like, he wondered? Certainly better than the skinny sow that he'd been given last summer.

As she was hurried along the forest path, Soffen kept silent, aware of the surreptitious glances she was receiving from one of her guards. His constant leers were making her uncomfortable.

Soffen was shocked at how dull and lifeless all the badgers they met along the path appeared to be. Without exception every one cast their eyes to the ground as the trio bustled by.

Rounding a sharp bend in the path, Soffen could not help but gasp aloud at the sight that greeted her.

Massive earthworks defiled the once beautiful Brockenhurst Sett. High banks of dark soil had been thrown up, dwarfing everything around the main entrance.

Gone were the bushes and plants that had provided cover for her hunting excursions. Gone were the wild flowers that had swayed in the summer breezes, lending their scents to the comforting smell of the sett. All that remained now was a pathway leading into the great bulwark of earth that dominated the scene.

Pushed from behind by one of the impatient guards, Soffen was forced forward again.

Entering the gigantic earthworks by a small opening that pierced its walls, Soffen and her guards passed into a confusing labyrinth of passageways that twisted and turned, splitting and rejoining each other in such a confusing pattern that it made her senses reel, and before they had taken more than a hundred paces or so, Soffen had become hopelessly lost.

At regular intervals along the twisting passageways, small alcoves had been scooped out of the walls, and here large boars stood guard, nodding silently as the party passed through the maze. Soffen could not understand why they all scowled at her with such hatred in their eyes.

And where had all these strangers come from anyway, she wondered. The questions spun round and around in her head, leaving her feeling sick and confused.

The passageways narrowed and the trio fell into a single line, one guard leading, the other bringing up the rear. In this fashion the small party moved through the maze, stopped occasionally by one of the guards lounging in the alcoves. Each time her guard explained who she was, Soffen was treated to an accusing glare, sometimes even a rough slap as she passed by.

After what seemed like ages, they reached a large semi-circular clearing fronting the entrance tunnel into the sett itself. The walls surrounding the clearing had been smoothed with mud, making it impossible to climb, the sheen reflecting from the burnished surfaces hurting Soffen's eyes. She squinted, turning her head away, watching the comings and goings of the badgers in the entrance tunnel.

Soffen was surprised to see so many badgers out and about during the sun-cycle, usually they would have been settled in their sleeping chambers, especially as winter was almost upon them.

As the party entered the clearing, the two guards took up position each side of her again, guiding her at an angle across the packed earth clearing. Finally they stopped in front of the main sett entrance.

"Wait here," one of the guards barked at her, then hurried off to speak to a large boar guarding the opening. The pair talked animatedly for a moment, then he returned. "Cherva is in the Great Chamber," he told his companion, prodding Soffen into motion again.

The stench that engulfed Soffen as they entered the sett made her gag and it was some time before she could see through the tears stinging her eyes.

One of the guards barked a short laugh at her reaction. "You'll get used to that," he growled, nudging her further into the sett. "We all do, eventually."

Soffen was in familiar territory now and her heart beat faster at the thought of seeing Brock again. He would explain what was happening to Brockenhurst Sett and where all these rough badgers had come from.

Finally, having reached the entrance to the Great Chamber, the trio halted and for the first time the two guards seemed unsure of themselves. They exchanged nervous looks with each other before glancing into the chamber. The air was less repugnant here and Soffen took a deep breath to steady her pounding heart.

The smaller of the guards swallowed loudly, looking at his companion. Getting no reaction, he shrugged, then slowly disappeared into the chamber, only to reappear a short while later.

"In you go," he instructed, pushing Soffen forward.

Soffen took a few tentative steps into the Great Chamber, then stopped in surprise.

Facing her was a badger she recognised, and her heart beat faster. Grindel, the Preceptor, leader of the Custodians and Guardian of the Sacred Roots, glared back at her, his feelings of contempt apparent in his dark eyes. Standing off to one side was a giant hulk of a badger whom Soffen had never seen before and guessed must be Cherva, the boar that the guards had talked about in hushed voices on their journey back through the forest.

"Come forward female," the Preceptor ordered.

Soffen moved further into the chamber, casting her eyes to the floor in respect. The Preceptor stared at her for a moment before speaking.

"This is our fabled Healer," he told Cherva in an aside, not taking his gaze from Soffen. "One of the thieves who stole the Sacred Roots."

"But I can explain—"

"Be quiet sow," the Preceptor cut short Soffen's explanation with a harsh growl. "Speak only when you're spoken to and not before."

Then turning to the giant boar, the Preceptor continued his conversation as though there had been no interruption.

"Now why do you suppose she did that Cherva? What possible reason could our Healer here have to steal such a precious item from us? Perhaps she took them to help heal a sick cub? Or maybe ward off an attack by some marauding badgers? What do you think Cherva? It would need to be something important, wouldn't it? After all, stealing the Sacred Roots is not something you would undertake lightly, is it?"

Turning his dark eyes back on Soffen once more, the Preceptor scowled at her.

"Well, Healer?" he prompted when she remained silent.

Soffen explained how she had gone with the others to search for Boddaert's Magic in the hope of saving Brockenhurst Sett. How she believed that all the badgers living in Brockenhurst Forest would die if Brock's vision were true. She told of the tragedies that had befallen her on the journey. Of Grey's death, the drowning of Darkburst and the disappearance of Broshee.

Finally in a voice so full of pain, that for just one moment, Cherva almost felt sorry for her, she told of Brock's sickness and ultimate disappearance.

All through the Healer's narration, the Preceptor listened intently, nodding his head occasionally, as though encouraging her to continue. When she had finally finished he stood quietly, staring at her, his silence adding to the tension.

Cherva moved his considerable bulk slightly and the Preceptor barked a short laugh.

"Healer," he said, shaking his head in disbelief, "you certainly can tell a good tale. I'll give you that. So tell me, who thought up this preposterous story? Was it you, or Brock? Or perhaps Grey? Yes, probably Grey. He was always too sharp for his own good." Shaking his head again Grindel chuckled his amusement, laughter dancing in his eyes.

"But it's all true Preceptor," Soffen protested softly. "I promise you."

"No female," Grindel retorted. "I'll tell you what's true. The truth is that you and your little gang of followers went looking for Boddaert's Magic— not to save Brockenhurst Sett— but to destroy it. You planned to use it for your own twisted ends but things went wrong for you, didn't they? And the others sent you back here with this ridiculous tale in the hope that I could be persuaded to turn a blind eye to your misdeeds. Well we'll see about that later. First tell me about your cub, Darkburst. You say you never found his body in the tunnel under the river?"

Soffen shook her head and Grindel nodded.

"I see," he responded. "Then perhaps there's a chance he still lives."

Glancing at Cherva, Grindel wrinkled his snout as though an unpleasant smell had entered the chamber.

"Take this away somewhere and put a guard on it," he ordered, indicating Soffen.

But as Cherva began to herd Soffen from the chamber, Grindel stopped him momentarily. "Make sure no badger touches it," he added in a low, harsh growl. "You understand my meaning?"

Cherva nodded and turned away, pushing Soffen before him, wondering why the sow rated such special treatment.

Guiding the Healer through the tunnels towards the chamber below Fire Rock where the other prisoners were kept, Cherva pondered on the reasons why the Preceptor might be so interested in the Healer's cub. He was missing something important here and would do well to question the Healer about this himself, but how to do it without the Preceptor finding out was the problem.

Soffen was thrown into a small chamber already overcrowded with other badgers. They looked weak and emaciated, their eyes dull and sunken. A few heads turned in her direction as she stumbled about looking for somewhere to lay down, but mostly they just stared vacantly at the floor.

As she searched for a place to rest, Soffen noticed all the badgers in the chamber were avoiding one corner, even though this meant that there was less space for everyone else.

Soffen pushed her way to the corner, weaving her way through the crowd until she finally burst through the tightly packed bodies to find three dead badgers huddled on top of each other in a pile. One, just a cub, was scarcely a season old. She looked to her fellow prisoners for some sort of explanation but none would meet her gaze.

Making her way back through the press of bodies, Soffen crossed to the low archway and prodded the badger guarding the entrance with her snout.

"There are three dead badgers back here," she protested angrily. "How can you just leave them laying there. Haven't you got the decency to take them out and bury them? What's wrong with you all?"

The guard turned and raked Soffen's snout with his sharp claws. She fell back with a cry of pain, her sensitive nose dripping blood. She stood motionless for a moment, her heart beating fast, not really believing what had just happened.

When no badger came to her aide, Soffen angrily pushed her way to the nearest wall and lay down facing it, her sobs lost amongst the constant moans and whimpers of those around her.

A short time later three large boars pushed their way into the crowded chamber and dragged the dead bodies out, and for that small mercy she was thankful.

Soffen lay facing the wall, curled into a tight ball, her stumpy tail covering the tip of her nose. She cried softly to herself, her claws clenching and unclenching as she sobbed. Time passed and she began to breath more easily, her tiredness dulling her misery.

Finally she found herself in that misty place between sleep and wakefulness, where troubles seemed to dissolve away and the harsh world become unreal. Her memories took her back to the forest that she knew so well, along paths bathed by golden moonlight, beneath trees that spread their protective canopies over all badgers, no matter how horrid.

Soon Soffen fell into a deeper slumber and dreamt about Brock. Together they ran along riverbanks, jumping in and out of the sparkling water as they chased fish from their hiding places on the stony bottom. Then they were flying through the cool air like two owls hunting mice, and for the first time since Grey's death, Soffen's lips formed a smile, her eyelids flickering as the eyes beneath them darted this way and that.

Soffen jerked awake at the gentle shake and the softly spoken words of a badger calling her name. Looking around she saw the familiar face of Moss, a friend of Raffin's. This unexpected sight brought the memories of her dead companion flooding back and she felt her eyes misting over.

Dear Raffin, dead because of her. When would it all end?

"That was a very brave thing you did, getting those brutes to remove those poor badgers like that," Moss said quietly.

"What's happening Moss?" Soffen mumbled despondently. "Has the whole sett gone mad?"

Moss settled herself down, flicking her tongue over dry lips. She looked tired, her fur unkempt and her claws dirty. Talking in an undertone, Moss told Soffen about the changes that had taken place since she had left on her search for Boddaert's Magic.

Though weak and thirsty, the young sow talked for a long time, hardly pausing to gather her thoughts, and the details she shared with Soffen shocked her so much that she scarcely drew a breath as she listened to the terrible account.

Soffen felt a new respect for the exhausted badger. Unlike many of her stronger peers, this gentle sow had refused to give in to the demands made upon her by the badgers now controlling Brockenhurst Sett: the fighters and guards who considered it their right to be fed, watered and mated whenever the fancy took them. Like most

of the others packed into the small chamber, Moss had refused to cooperate and was now paying dearly for her stubbornness.

After Moss had finished telling Soffen about the ills that had befallen the sett, the exhausted sow fell into a restless slumber, leaving Soffen to ponder on the facts.

Getting stiffly to her feet, Soffen shook the knots from her body, then, being careful not to disturb her sleeping friend, she looked around at the miserable scene, sighing despondently.

Moving slowly, she quietly went to each badger in turn, asking them one question, steadily working her way through the chamber, persevering until she had spoken to every badger there. And when the last badger had answered her question with a negative shake of the head, she slumped back down beside Moss again, losing herself to a feeling of utter desolation.

Wearily closing her eyes, Soffen extended her mind, sending her thoughts outwards, imploring the Prime Mover to end her torture right now, before the next moon bathed the Brockenhurst Mountains with its gentle light.

She had no wish to live any longer. She had lost everything that was dear to her, everything that had any meaning in her life.

As Soffen closed her eyes and fell into a fitful doze, a badger standing nearby nodded at her as he spoke to his neighbour in an undertone.

"What did she ask you?" he wanted to know.

"She asked me if I'd heard anything about some badger called Brock," came the disinterested reply.

"Yes," was the response, "she asked me that too."

*

The cold weather fell on Brockenhurst Forest with an unexpected ferocity, and due to the large numbers of badgers over-wintering in the sett, food— always scarce at this time of the cycle— was even scarcer.

Deaths from illness and malnutrition quickly mounted, until those living in the lower chambers became restless, the less frightened amongst them mumbling their discontent more audibly as the corpses mounted. Cherva's guards were forced to keep up a constant patrol through the tunnels, putting down any dissent that arose— a task the privileged guards pursued with great relish.

When the Preceptor realised how bad things were becoming in the lower tunnels of the sett, he ordered Soffen's release from the chamber where she was incarcerated. His fear was that Yellow Cough might sweep through the crowded sett, decimating his fighting forces.

Soffen heard rumours that the Preceptor had ordered Cherva to throw any badger who became ill through fever, out onto the deep snow banks to die. Even though sick herself and having little heart for it, her conscience would not let her ignore so many sick badgers, so she agreed to return to her Healing duties.

As Soffen helped the suffering badgers, she managed to smuggle a few of the worst afflicted ones to her old burrow in Bluebell Clearing, where she could tend to their ills without the threat of their eviction and subsequent death.

Soffen accomplished this remarkable feat by convincing Cherva that she needed help to collect fresh plants and herbs with which to treat the sick. Masquerading as her helpers, these sick badgers were whisked away to her tunnels, safe from the dangers threatening them. By arranging these excursions as the guards were changing, Soffen ensured that when she returned alone the guards would be none the wiser.

During the long winter cycle, Soffen was kept busy tending the constant stream of sick badgers being sent to her chamber. Her trips into the forest to collect the few herbs that survived the harsh weather also gave her the opportunity to familiarise herself with the labyrinth guarding the entrance to the sett. By pretending to get lost from time to time she took full advantage of her time there, memorising every detail of the complicated layout. Whenever she got the chance and the guards were distracted, she made small marks at the intersections which would act as a guide through the tangled web of corridors.

Soffen was determined that when the weather warmed, she would escape the terrible place that Brockenhurst Sett had become and take the knowledge she had gathered to others. Surely there was some badger somewhere in Boddaert's Realm, who could put an end to this madness. In the meantime she would continue to help the sick as best she could.

However, for all her planning, Soffen never got the chance to put her scheme into action. At the first signs of warmer weather, Cherva withdrew her privileges and once again Soffen found herself confined to the overcrowded chamber.

Until she lost her freedom again, she hadn't appreciated how much she'd come to rely on her trips out into the snow-covered forest to keep her sane. Now that they had been withdrawn, she fell into a deep, dark depression.

One moon, Cherva came to her, saying that the Preceptor wanted to see her in the Great Chamber immediately. Before going to the meeting Soffen made her way down to the lowest levels, hurrying towards the large drinking pool at the very bottom of the sett. If she wanted to take advantage of this opportunity she would need to make herself presentable.

She would persuade the Preceptor to let her out on one last collecting trip. That's all she would need, just one last opportunity to slip away from the horrors surrounding her.

Standing over the shimmering pool, Soffen stared down into its depths, shocked at how thin she had become. Her reflection stared back up at her, almost a stranger. Leaning closer she studied the deep furrows in her snout, the grey hairs liberally sprinkled throughout the black stripes on her cheeks. She looked so old, so worn.

What would her Brock make of her now, she wondered.

As Brock's image flooded into Soffen's mind, leaping at her from the distant past, something stirred under the rippling water. Deep down at the bottom of the pool, in the murky layers where the past and the present merged— where the netherworld permeated the badger's world— something ancient awoke.

Stretching up from the mud, it tentatively tested the water, undefined and insubstantial at first, but intensifying as it became more confident.

It probed further, then rested.

Then, after gathering itself again, it quickly expanded outwards, slithering over and through itself, cleaving rapidly upwards with coils of brightly coloured tendrils, until it filled the pool.

Soffen gasped as a stream of light exploded upwards from the water, spraying her with such force that she was sent stumbling backwards. Shading her face with a trembling paw, she watched in awe as points of brightness bobbed and weaved about the roof of the chamber. Greens and blues swirled urgently around her head, chasing each other like young cubs playing in a forest glade. Round and round they swirled, laced here and there with blood red and moon yellow, the colours contracting and expanding before merging into a bright point of light which exploded outwards again in a breathtaking display of energy.

Over and over again, until it made her head spin.

Soffen's eyes widened and the short bristles on her snout tingled as she watched the colours swirl through each other with such speed that they appeared solid.

Finally they formed a sphere, which then flattened itself into a large disc. The disc hovered in the air for a moment, then tilted sharply, presenting its circular face to her, its mid-section flashing and shimmering as it expanded outwards towards its circumference.

The boundary of the disc flickered, pulsing faster and faster, ruffling Soffen's fur with its energy, drawing her gaze to its very centre.

Soffen found herself staring through a portal into another world, where a faint light flickered, soft and fine, like the belly-fur of a newborn cub. The light grew, expanding slowly, stretching until it solidified into a recognisable form.

As Soffen staggered to the edge of the pool, drawn there by the image that was staring down at her— his soft smile wrinkling his snout in that familiar way that she knew so well— Soffen's heart beat faster and her stomach rolled, before emptying itself onto the floor.

The portal expanded even further, and Soffen was left staring into the blackest of black eyes, her breath coming in patchy gasps, a thin trickle of spit hanging from the corner of her mouth.

Then a single large tear rolled from her eye and down to the end of her snout before dropping off and hitting the now calm surface of the pool with a soft plop, rippling its surface outwards in an ever expanding circle.

Chapter 23

Darkburst was ravenous. His last meal, an adder that he'd stumbled across four moons earlier, was long digested.

As it had lain hidden amongst the pine needles, the whitish spots marking the snake's back reflected the dim moonlight back up at him, giving away the adder's presence.

Darkburst had approached the snake cautiously, knowing the danger. It reared up at him, fangs extended ready to strike. Twisting to one side, Darkburst darted forward, seizing the snake just below its head, biting down hard. The snake's tail whipped violently back and forth as it died, but he brought its suffering to a quick end with a flick of his head.

The unexpected meal temporarily filled the void gnawing away at Darkburst's belly, but all too soon he felt hungry again. Locating food in the pine forest had become a never-ending struggle.

Darkburst's constant hunger was making him light-headed and he found it harder to concentrate, his thoughts constantly straying as he walked along.

What was he doing here in this gloomy place where the moon never shone? Why were the trees packed so tightly together, blocking out the sky?

Shaking his head, Darkburst tried to focus his thoughts. He was searching for something. Yes that was it. He was searching for something. But for what?

Suddenly the tree nearest to him seemed to shift, and with a jump that brought it right next to him, lunged forward, towering right over him, threatening to engulf him with its branches.

Darkburst began to panic, looking about wildly, desperately searching for a way out of the forest, but seeing only trees.

Tree, upon tree, upon tree, upon tree, as though they were growing from each others trunks, like some gigantic shrub which had suddenly sprouted thousands of claws, reaching out for him with wildly rattling branches.

Closing his eyes the frightened badger shook his head, taking deep breaths to steady himself.

He opened his eyes again, and there ranked before him in their thousands, the trees stretched away for as far as the eye could see. Darkburst's world had condensed into a swirling kaleidoscope of shifting tree trunks.

He broke and ran, swerving between the trunks when he saw them, bouncing off them when he didn't. Onwards he ran, the pine needles beneath his feet swirling about his belly as he kicked them high.

Gaining the top of a rise he raced down the far side, eyes wide, lips pulled back across his teeth in terror.

In his panic the young boar saw nothing, constantly banging his sensitive snout and bruising his body. Then tripping on a root he twisted sideways, instinctively tucking his head into his flank to protect it.

He landed heavily, with a thump that forced the last of his breath from his lungs, but it shook some sense into him and his panic subsided a little.

What was he doing? Why was he running like this, like some crazed youngster being chased by a rabid dog?

Then he remembered. The trees had appeared to reach out for him, to want to hold him in an inescapable embrace. But that couldn't be, trees didn't move.

It was almost as though they had come alive and were trying to walk!

Darkburst span around, trying to catch a tree moving, but they stood quite still— tall and majestic, as though mocking him.

He span around again, then again, chasing his tail until he could spin no longer, and when he finally stopped, his senses continued to reel, causing him to stagger from side to side.

Throwing his head back, Darkburst shouted his frustration at the trees, imploring them to give up their secret, to show him where Boddaert's Magic lay. But they studiously ignored him, standing silently aloof in their dark broodiness, showing that his search held no importance for them.

Darkburst's thoughts continued to swirl round and around, and he continued to swirl with them. Back and forth his body swayed, faster and faster, his flexible trunk whipping violently in the wind. Round and around, until his thin roots were torn from the ground. Round and around, until he crashed to the earth with a force that knocked him senseless.

While he lay on the ground moaning, the grass seemed to writhe beneath him, bearing him upwards off the ground. Then his senses swirled and his vision dimmed, the darkness surrounding him becoming deeper.

When Darkburst finally regained consciousness he felt weak and knew that if he didn't find some nourishment quickly he would never find his way out of this confusing place.

As he staggered to his feet, a movement caught his attention. It was a pine marten, running up the trunk of a nearby tree, its body undulating as it moved over the rough surface. He watched the animal's fluid movements, noting how its prominent eyes flicked back and forth in a constant search for danger.

Darkburst knew that pine martens sometimes reared their young in discarded crow's nests, so it was probable that this female was on her way to feed her kittens. Digging his strong claws into the rough bark, he took a deep breath and began to stealthily follow the pine marten's musky scent.

As a cub, one of Darkburst's favourite pastimes had been tree climbing, and he now put that experience to good use. Wrinkling his snout in concentration as he scaled the trunk, knowing this was the easy part, getting back down again was always a lot harder. Pushing the thought from his mind he gave his full attention to the task in front of him.

When Darkburst finally reached the crow's nest, which was securely tucked into a fork of the tree, a ferocious pine marten faced him. Intent on protecting her young, she hissed angrily, flattening her broad, rounded ears against her skull. Then moving forward, she arched her slender body protectively over her kittens, her lips pulled back over her teeth.

Moving quickly Darkburst lunged forward with his paw, flipping the nest from the branch. The pine marten and her three kittens, were sent spinning from the tree, tumbling to the ground far below.

Darkburst realised that some of the kittens might survive the fall, but with any luck at least one would be waiting for him when he finally made it back down the tree.

*

Darkburst studied the rippling reflection of the moon in the dark waters of Migaro Lake. It shone back up at him like a single large shimmering eye.

Gazing at the reflection, his eyes widened in wonder as the silvery light coalesced into an image of his mother's face. Darkburst held his breath, leaning closer for a better view. His heart went out to her, she looked so weary and forlorn.

Reaching out, he gently touched the surface of the water with the tip of one claw, as though caressing his mother's face. At his touch the likeness disintegrated, expanding outwards into ever widening ripples.

Sighing heavily Darkburst shook off the feeling of tiredness that had suddenly overcome him, turned away from the lake and began eating the hedgehog that he'd killed earlier.

It was calm and the churring call of a nightjar floated to Darkburst through the tall pine trees, which were so densely packed together that little life survived beneath their crowded canopy. The earth was covered in a deep bed of dead pine needles, adding to his feeling of melancholy.

Darkburst found a small pool of water in a nearby hollow and took a deep swallow. Hunger sated and thirst slaked, the young badger moved his body around in a circle a few times, until he had cleared a depression in the pine needles.

Having journeyed such a long distance since leaving the safe confines of Brightness's sett, he felt totally worn out. He curled up on the forest floor, closed his eyes and instantly fell into an exhausted sleep, during which he dreamt of monsters.

*

On his journey to Migaro Lake, Darkburst had come upon the track where the monsters roared and chased each other, but because it was the sun-cycle, he hadn't realised that these were the same stars that slashed their bright lights across the sky in his vision.

Frightened by the noise and stench the monsters made, he gave the track a wide berth, paralleling it at a safe distance.

The young boar followed the track until he eventually found a narrow culvert which led underneath it. Waddling his way through the chilly water that lay belly-deep on the muddy floor, he'd emerged on the far side, cold and wet but triumphant.

*

Darkburst stirred in his sleep, the short whiskers on his snout quivering, his feet twitching slightly. He growled quietly, his lips drawing back across his teeth.

He was dreaming, but he quickly settled again, his growls giving way to long, shallow breaths. The thick canopy far above him allowed little light to penetrate to the forest floor, so the hollow in which he lay remained shaded and dark.

As he slept, he continued to dream.

Dreams of monsters. Dreams of his search for Boddaert's Magic. Dreams of Grindel and his promises. Dreams of his mother.

*

Awaking from his sleep, Darkburst stretched languidly, shaking the knots from his muscles. Getting to his feet, he looked around, deciding that he would leave this confusing wood. There was no point in continuing with the useless search, he would find nothing here.

But first he needed food. Perhaps he should go back and check the remains of the crow's nest. He might have missed one of the pine marten's kittens.

A short while later he was making through the remains of the nest, grunting his disappointment when his search proved fruitless, but as he turned from the debris, a glint caught his eye— something down in the bottom of the nest twinkling up at him.

Whatever it was had been used as a foundation on which to build the nest and was woven into the very fabric itself. Curiosity aroused, Darkburst picked at the mixture of twigs and grasses until he was able to free the object entangled there. It dropped clear, bouncing onto the forest floor, where it rolled in an ever decreasing circle until finally dropping onto its side, hardly disturbing the pine needles littering the ground.

The world suddenly tilted and Darkburst's mind reeled, his eyes widening in awe, every hair on his body standing erect.

There, lying at his feet, was the very object he'd been searching for all this time.

The legendary Circle of Claws!

Darkburst stood transfixed before the hallowed object for a long time, unable to take in what his eyes were telling him.

The Circle of Claws: here it was, on the forest floor before him!

Breathlessly stretching out a paw, he touched the object, and as he did, thoughts of his sister unexpectedly sprang into his mind, causing an involuntary shudder to run down his spine.

Darkburst ignored the sensation, happy that his search was at an end at last. He had succeeded, Grindel would be so pleased with him.

Holding the magical object close to his eyes, Darkburst studied it under the little sunlight that managed to struggle through the dense canopy. He could see that it had been formed from five badger claws, the tips of which were fused together, the whole forming a perfect star-like shape.

There could be no doubt about it, here was part of his history, a history that connected him directly to the ancient badgers who had ruled over Boddaert's Realm since the beginning of time. Wrinkling his snout in excitement, Darkburst turned the prize over and over in his paws, examining every detail.

Finally he laid the object on the ground, closed his eyes and raised his snout to the hidden sky, giving thanks to the Prime Mover for choosing him to be the recipient of such a powerful and breathtaking possession.

The air grew heavy and the sound of thunder rumbled menacingly in the distance. Darkburst looked about uneasily as the few drops of rain that had begun to fall turned into a sudden torrent.

The storm grew closer, punctuated by the clashing of thunderclaps— angry voices bouncing from tree trunk to tree trunk.

All at once the charged atmosphere brought the guard hairs on Darkburst's coat erect, where they crackled with static energy. He was suddenly overcome with a feeling of danger.

The rumbling grew in intensity, building roll on roll, until it came from everywhere at once. Then a deep silence unexpectedly dropped across the forest. Even the trees stopped their constant rustling, waiting in tense expectation for what was to come.

Darkburst jumped in fright as a lightning bolt seared downwards through the canopy, striking the ground nearby. Thrown backwards by the blast, he careened into a tree and lay where he fell, stunned for the moment, unable to move.

Shaking his head, Darkburst struggled back to his feet, turning to face the shaft of sunlight that now poured through the hole left by the lightning strike. The tight beam lit the forest floor in a perfect circle. The dazed youngster staggered towards it as the last rumble of thunder died away somewhere in the distance.

His eyes narrowed and he suddenly tensed, terrified that the Circle of Claws had been destroyed by the lightning bolt. The thought of losing such a precious object, so soon after finding it, made his heart flutter.

As he entered the beam cast by the sunlight, he saw a darkened patch of pine needles, a great scorch mark made by the lightning bolt hitting the forest floor.

His heart froze. The Circle of Claws had been laying right there. Right where the lightning bolt had struck. It must have been blasted out of existence!

A muted cry was torn from Darkburst's throat and he rushed forward, but then stumbled to a halt, a paw half raised to his mouth.

The Prime Mover may well have destroyed the Circle of Claws, but in its place, She seemed to have left him an even greater gift.

There, at the very centre of the sunbeam, lay a small black stone, its scintillating surface reflecting the sun's radiance back up at him in a breathtaking array of colours. Locked into the stone's flat surface he could just make out the perfect image of the Circle of Claws. The stone sparkled up at him invitingly, like a twinkling star stirring primitive emotions in his chest.

Reaching out a tremulous paw, Darkburst picked up the stone and studied it carefully. At the very centre, where the tips of the claws met, was a small hole surrounded by a rim of tiny crystals and it was these crystals that reflected the sunlight with such intensity.

Finding a length of stout grass he quickly threaded it through the stone and hung it about his neck, where it burrowed itself deeply into his fur— as though it belonged there, as though it had always been there.

And as the stone nuzzled deeper, Darkburst closed his eyes, feeling its fiery warmth caressed his skin. The stone felt good, a part of him, a replacement for the Talisman he'd left with Brightness.

Turning his back on the charred ground, Darkburst headed off through the trees towards Migaro Lake full of renewed energy. He would spend some time beside the lake, resting and eating, then set out for Brockenhurst Sett with his prize.

Chapter 24

Brokin glanced over his shoulder, marvelling at how such a large body of badgers had managed to move into the fringes of Brockenhurst Forest without disturbing the local wildlife. Worrying at his lower lip, he wrinkled his snout.

A large part of his force still lingered out beyond the boundary of the forest, gathered in a low meadow that swept down from the edge of the mountains, waiting his order to move forward. He needed to get them under cover quickly before they were spotted.

As Brokin waited for his forward scouts to report back to him, he tapped the claws of one foot against a large stone. His impatience was obvious to those around him and they talked quietly, expectantly, their voices a soft drone in the background.

Brokin let his gaze wander along the lines of badgers spread out around him. It had been hard work getting them trained to such a high standard so quickly, but somehow, against all the odds, he'd managed it.

*

On the journey back from his undercover mission to Brockenhurst Sett, Brokin had formulated a scheme to meet the threat posed by Grindel.

On reaching Badachro Sett, he put his proposals to the Council, who then held a private session to discuss his plans. More than half a moon passed before the young badger was finally called— so long in fact that he began to wonder if they ever would call him.

Had they dismissed his plan out of order, he wondered.

But finally, just as the sun began staining the sky, the message came.

As Brokin moved across the chamber towards the group of sombre Elders, Drac, their leader, studied him intently. The old badger seemed to be searching for some enigmatic answer in Brokin's eyes.

"Brokin," Drac began in a grave tone, "the Council of Elders is divided on this issue and have left the final decision to me."

The old badger looked uncomfortable, his one brown eye appearing almost black in the half-light. Staring out across the rocky valley floor he continued in a quiet voice, "But I must admit right now that I'm reluctant to agree to such a proposal. It would mean the loss of so many lives."

"Far more if we don't act first," Brokin answered abruptly. "Do you really want to wait until we're attacked before you do anything? Think about what will happen if we loose this fight, and we will if we let them attack us here. We can't defend the sett, it's too spread out for that."

"You know what the outcome will be don't you? Those who survive will be enslaved, made to work for the victors until they drop from exhaustion. How long do you think you'd last at your age? And what about your cubs? With such oddly coloured eyes, do you imagine for one moment that the Preceptor will let them live? Are you really trying to tell me that you're just going to abandon all those who look to you for their safety to a murdering tyrant like that?"

Drac shook his head and stared at the ground. "I know, I know," he replied in a tight, throaty voice. "What you say may well be true Brokin, but think about the loss of life. How can I condone that?"

Brokin took a deep breath. He knew that loosing his temper now would only anger the Elder. He needed to win Drac over, not alienate him.

"Badgers are going to die either way Drac," he answered quietly. "But at least my way will give them a chance at success." Nodding at the tight group gathered around them he continued. "Look around you. You hold all these badger's lives in your grasp. Are you really going to let them die for no other reason than your misplaced morality? Let me take a force out to Brockenhurst Forest and attack Grindel and his hoard before they attack us. It's the only way. We can't defend our sett here. Please, listen to me."

The Elder wrinkled his snout, considering the points Brokin had made, his old mind a whirlpool of jumbled emotions.

"We could always leave. Move somewhere else," he said half-heartedly. "That's a suggestion that I would find more acceptable."

"And go where!" Brokin snapped, his temper breaking through. "What badger would allow us to live anywhere near them?" Deep bitterness leant a hard edge to his voice.

"Yes I suppose you might be right," Drac admitted reluctantly, accepting the inevitability of the young badger's arguments. "But there'll be no unprovoked attack, understand that Brokin. Choose your fighters and train them well, but when you go to Brockenhurst Sett, it must be to negotiate, not to fight. Is that understood?"

*

Brokin was brought back from his reveries by the abrupt appearance of Thesa, his most skilful scout. The badger was completely black, even the skin on the inside of his ears and mouth so heavily pigmented that they matched his fur. This anomaly gave the scout a distinct advantage when he was out patrolling in the darkness of a moonless sky, moving through the undergrowth like a phantom unseen, until he spoke quietly into an unsuspecting ear. The badger's sombre eyes flashed excitedly as he reported his findings to Brokin.

"How many?" Brokin asked quickly, referring to the number of guards posted along the track leading into Brockenhurst Sett.

"Four are spread evenly along the main pathway and three more nearer to the sett itself," The black head swung around as his eyes focused on Brokin. "What's that?" he asked, nodding in the direction of a body lying amongst the roots of a nearby tree.

Brokin wrinkled his snout. "He was hiding behind the tree. He jumped out and attacked me as I passed by."

It was the first time Brokin had killed a fellow badger, and loath though he was to admit it, the experience had left him shaken. Forced to fight for his life, Brokin had quickly countered the unexpected assault, leaving his attacker with little choice but to parry the frenzied blows being rained upon him from every direction. Stumbling backwards, Brokin's assailant did his best to dodge the swiftly moving claws as they repeatedly raked across his snout, but with little success.

Sensing triumph, Brokin kept up the pressure, giving the boar little chance to recover, pushing him further backwards until he finally lost his footing on a slick stone. As the badger stumbled, Brokin darted forward, jamming his snout between the boar's front legs, powering upwards, flipping his attacker over onto his back, exposing the boar's vulnerable belly.

As the hapless badger thrashed about in a vain attempt at righting himself, Brokin made the final cutting-thrust with fully extended claws, suddenly finding himself covered in a warm sticky stream as the bright arterial blood pumped from deep within the badger's vitals.

The fatally injured boar lay on his side, moaning in pain until his eyes finally lost their sparkle of life.

Killing the boar had left Brokin completely deflated. When he'd been practising the killing thrust, high up on his favourite ledge above Badachro Sett, he'd always imagined he would experience jubilation when he finally used it in earnest— that he would be more alive, nearer to Her. In truth, he just felt cold and empty.

"Have you noticed how few guards there are about?" Thesa asked, interrupting Brokin's thoughts.

Brokin snapped the unpleasant memories away and studied the sky. "The sun will rise soon," he observed. "Perhaps they don't expect us to attack while the sun is high."

"Perhaps," the scout agreed, his voice reflecting his doubts.

Shaking off his feelings of ambivalence over the killing of the boar, Brokin gave the scout his orders.

"Prepare our forces to attack at sunrise. Make sure they know what's expected of them. After that, take three of our best fighters and clear the pathway ahead of any guards you find. Wait for me in the clearing by the broken oak tree, this side of the main earthworks."

Thesa nodded, then hurried off towards the edge of Brockenhurst Forest, where the main body of Brokin's forces rested.

As Thesa disappeared, Brokin settled down to wait for the first rays of the sun to appear in the sky, pondering on the colossal responsibilities that he'd undertaken, and whether he was right to go against the express wishes of the Elders.

He saw no sense in trying to negotiate with the likes of Cherva, that badger would only respect a show of strength.

*

Cherva made himself more comfortable in the fork of a gnarled elder tree and smiled. The cunning badger had settled himself in his high perch earlier, after one of his scouts had reported the movement of a great number of badgers across Low Meadow. Amongst them were a large number of boars with unusual markings, and Cherva had correctly surmised that this was the long awaited attack from Badachro Sett.

When winter finally broke its hold on Brockenhurst Forest, the Preceptor cautioned patience when Cherva had suggested that they launch an attack on Badachro Sett as soon as possible. The Preceptor had assured him that, given time, the troublesome badgers would come to Brockenhurst Sett, saving their own fighting force the trouble of a long trek out to Badachro, and he'd been right.

Here they were, the poor fools, walking straight into a well prepared trap. Cherva smiled contentedly, secure in the knowledge that he would soon rout the invading force and raise his credibility even further in the eyes of the Preceptor.

Studying the movements of the attacking force carefully, Cherva tried to determine a pattern. On reaching the outskirts of the forest, the long column had settled down amongst the thin covering of trees. A small party

had then been sent forward to scout the land. Whoever was in charge of this ragtag band of losers was certainly taking no chances.

A moment of doubt clouded Cherva's eyes as it quickly became apparent that the leader of these boars was not stupid. Still that didn't really matter, because whoever it was, they were in for a big surprise when they attacked Brockenhurst Sett.

Cherva's eyes widened in consternation when he finally spotted the boar directing operations.

It was the same small badger who had attacked him during the last summer-cycle!

He'd somehow escaped from the two guards who'd been ordered to kill him. Cherva's anger rose but he pushed it from his mind. He needed to keep a clear head for the coming battle. Guile, not anger was needed right now.

As time passed, Cherva began to develop a grudging admiration for the diminutive leader of the opposing force as he darted hither and thither on his various tasks. The badger had posted guards at all the access points to the encampment, and had ordered scouts to continually circle the circumference, watching for signs of approaching badgers. They would not be taken by surprise, that much was certain.

Shifting his bulk to a more comfortable position, Cherva nonchalantly shrugged his shoulders at these precautions. All the worry and planning undertaken by this hothead leader and his harum-scarum band– the hard march from Badachro Sett, the time spent training– would be to no avail, because soon after they attacked the sett, they would die– every last one of them.

No badger would survive an attack on Brockenhurst Sett, the Preceptor's ingenious defences would make sure of that.

The clear liquid call of a skylark marked sun-break and Cherva nodded in satisfaction as the badgers encamped amongst the trees, stirred and began massing behind their leader. After a few moments confusion, the force set off in a column of threes. Better and better Cherva thought as he watched the sudden activity, they were going to attempt a direct frontal assault during the sun-cycle.

As the large band of badgers marched towards their destiny, the column passed directly beneath Cherva's hiding place and he stared down at them in contempt, picturing their lingering deaths in the coming battle.

As the last of the badgers disappeared from sight, Cherva climbed down to the ground and cautiously set off after them, hoping the sentries guarding the forest paths had been pulled back out of sight as he'd ordered.

*

Brokin halted his column as the forward scouts returned to report. The path ahead was clear, the sentries having withdrawn back to the sett at sun break. Brokin's heart lightened when he realised, that by some quirk of fate, he'd arrived at the precise moment that Cherva had decided to change his guards. He must make full use of this piece of luck.

The fighters hurried along the forest pathway behind their leader, their tramping feet swirling the dry surface sky-wards, so that those at the rear were forced to march through a thick cloud of dust. As the sky lightened and the first rays of sunlight pierced the trees with long, slender slivers of light, the wakening birds fell silent, disturbed by the activity in their midst.

All through the forest creatures paused in their activities, sensing some awesome event was taking place. The more timid ones bolted for their holes, or quickly crawled beneath the litter on the forest floor, where they waited in silent anticipation.

In the undergrowth lining the sides of the path, in foliage topping the graceful old trees, and in shallow pits dug in the forest floor– from all these places glinting eyes watched the passing badgers with a mounting excitement.

As the attacking boars passed by on their way towards battle, the hidden defenders slipped quietly out of their hiding places to join with those already stalking the column from the rear, and by the time that Brokin had halted his badgers at the broken oak tree, he was already trapped between Grindel's superior forces in the sett and Cherva's boars in the rear.

When the sun finally broke free of the horizon, Brokin ordered the storming of Brockenhurst Sett, watching proudly as his fighters streamed into the openings in the high walls of the earthworks. He was confident that under Thesa's command his brave boars would put up a strong fight.

Brokin was dividing his forces at this point: the main body of his fighters launching a frontal assault, while a small band of specially trained boars under his direct command, would enter the sett through the air vent at the rear.

As the last of the main force disappeared into the giant ramparts, Brokin and his small group set off on their own special mission.

The badgers entering the ramparts quickly found themselves lost in a network of confusing passageways. Blundering about in a vain attempt at finding the right path out of the maze, they only succeeded in

disorientating themselves even further. Stumbling to a halt, they looked about in confusion, not sure what to do next.

Suddenly triumphant shouts filled the air and the sett's defenders, hidden along the tops of the walls, rose up, showering rocks down on the attackers from their vantage points.

The Preceptor ran back and forth amongst his garrison, striking them in his excitement, compelling them to greater efforts, even joining in the melee by rolling several stones over the edge onto the badgers below, shouting his delight when one particularly large rock smashed onto the back of a three legged boar, breaking his spine.

Far below Grindel, Thesa suddenly flitted into view, his black body making him almost invisible in the shadows of the high walls. Bending over the injured badger, he quickly examined the boar's terrible wounds. Then with a thrusting slash from his sharp claws, put a swift end to the fighter's unbearable pain.

After performing this act of mercy, Thesa glared up at the figure standing on the parapet above him, hatred and anger dancing in his black eyes.

The Preceptor stared back down at the apparition, a sudden chill running along his spine. Shaking off the feeling, he frantically rolled another rock up to the edge, heaving it over with a grunt, but he was far too late, because his target had already slipped away.

Thesa looked about as the stones and rocks hurtled down all around him. Already a large number of his badgers lay injured or dying, and in their panic, the rest were milling around aimlessly, which only added to their confusion and injuries.

Thesa stood pressed against one of the walls under a slight overhang, desperately seeking some way out of their plight. He knew that keeping his fighters confined in this exposed position for much longer would mean the death of every one of them.

He had to find a way out, and quickly.

Then he heard a shout from an intersection further along the passageway. Hurrying forward he stopped beside a bloodied boar who looked as though he was about to collapse. Too exhausted to talk, the badger merely pointed to a spot on the wall above his head.

Thesa saw some kind of mark had been dug into the wall and reared up on his hind legs to take a closer look. Examining it intently, his hopes revived when he saw the shape of a small footprint had been scratched into the hardened surface. Dashing to the next intersection, Thesa scouted about and quickly discovered that another footprint had been scratched there as well.

Could it be that some badger had marked a way through the maze? Yes that had to be it.

Having little choice, except to trust this deduction, Thesa stopped a passing badger and muttered an order into his ear. Word quickly spread amongst the fighters that a way had been found through the labyrinth, and those still able to, gathered about their leader.

The remnants of the fighting forces that had so confidently entered the labyrinth such a short time ago, was now blindly following the flitting black figure along the twisting passageways, doing their best to dodge the rocks still falling from above, hoping against hope that their path-finder knew where he was going.

After negotiating a series of twists and turns the fighters finally burst out of the convoluted corridors into a large semi-circular space fronting the main entrance of Brockenhurst Sett.

Unnerved by the sudden silence that had descended around him, Thesa studied the scene.

The defenders had disappeared from the walkways on top of the walls and he wondered what they had in store for him next. Looking over his tattered force, he realised that most of the badgers who'd entered the sett with him, were either dead, or so seriously injured as to be useless in further fighting. All who were left stood around him now in a dejected group and he felt the heavy burden of responsibility begin to weigh him down.

Even now, after all that had happened to them, these brave badgers were looking to him to lead them to victory. They trusted him totally, and he knew that he'd let them down badly. To make matters worse, not one of Grindel's defenders had so much as received a scratch.

The whole thing had turned into an unmitigated disaster. He'd been outwitted at every turn by a very clever badger who, given the chance, would have no compunction in killing every last one of them. Thesa fervently hoped that Brokin was having better luck.

As that thought formed in Thesa's mind the air was filled with the rumble of falling rock and his hopes soared as he guessed that Brokin had breached the rear of the sett. Perhaps they had a chance after all, they might be able to escape back through the labyrinth while the defenders attention was diverted with what was happening at the rear of the sett.

But that hope was quickly dashed when an enormous group of badgers spewed from the entrance of the sett ahead of them, and at the same moment, a yelling mob charged from the labyrinth behind.

Thesa's remaining forces found themselves trapped between these two groups with nowhere left to run.

Early on in his plans, Brokin had realised that a successful attack on Brockenhurst Sett would depend far more on stealth than numbers. The defences surrounding the sett would be impossible to storm successfully without a large loss of life, if at all.

Their only hope of a successful attack lay in, 'biting off the head of the snake'.

If Brokin could infiltrate the sett and kill the Preceptor while his main force was fighting at the front, then the headless snake would quickly wither and die.

When he had suggested his plan to the Elders, they were less than enthusiastic, preferring instead to wait for the Preceptor to attack them and hope that they could negotiate with him.

Brokin had argued long and hard, pointing out the difficulties they would face in trying to defend the caves. He was also faced with the further problem of trying to keep his fighters on top form.

They'd all expected the Preceptor to launch his attack as soon as the winter snows melted, but it was well into summer now, and still no attack had materialised. Brokin's fighters were losing their edge. If he waited much longer they might well lose the will to fight altogether.

In the end Brokin managed to persuade the Elders to see sense, but it had been touch and go for awhile.

Even so, the Elders had only given him permission to negotiate with the Preceptor, not attack the sett.

From his previous visit to Brockenhurst Sett, Brokin knew the biggest weakness in the Preceptor's defences lay in the air vent he'd already penetrated. He planned to take a small group of badgers through this vent while Thesa kept the defenders busy at the main entrance. Once inside, he would seek out the Preceptor and kill him. That was the only form of negotiation the badger would be offered— it was the only form of negotiation he understood.

As the shouts and screams of the badgers fighting in the labyrinth echoed to him from the thick canopy overhead, Brokin moved his small group through the undergrowth parallel to the pathway leading to the air vent. This was familiar territory and they made good progress.

Suddenly Brokin spotted two sentries lurking in the bushes and waved his party to a halt. Narrowing his eyes, he studied the guards carefully. There was no way of bypassing these two without being seen, so they would have to be killed . . . or perhaps not.

Waving his group back out of sight, Brokin readied himself with a few deep breaths. Then, when his mind was calm, he stepped from the undergrowth and down onto the pathway.

As he began walking towards the guards, he hummed loudly to himself as though he hadn't a care in the world. When he drew level with the guards, one broke cover and hailed him.

Brokin jumped in simulated surprise, stumbling to a stop. Adopting his most ingratiating smile, he turned towards the guard.

"Oh thank goodness I've found you!" he said in a breathless voice, waving a tremulous paw in front of his snout.

The guard, taken by surprise at the badger's apparent innocence, stared at him suspiciously.

"Who are you? What are you doing here?" he demanded.

"Cherva sent me," Brokin replied, managing to sound hurt at the guard's gruff tone. "We're under attack at the front of the sett. Listen, can't you hear all the noise?"

Hopping from foot to foot, Brokin pulled at his ear in agitation.

"Oh dear, please come quickly," he pleaded. "Cherva sent me to get you and if you don't come straight away he'll punish me horribly. You know what he's like."

"But we're guarding the pathway to the vent," the badger protested, wrinkling his snout at the unpleasant image Brokin had raised in his mind.

"I don't care, and nor will Cherva if you don't do as you're told. The badgers from Badachro can't possibly know about the vent back here, so there's no point in you staying here to guard it, when you're needed to help fight at the front, is there? Quickly, you're to go at once. You go on ahead and I'll let the other guards know what's happening."

The badger glanced back over his shoulder to where his companion was still standing half hidden in the undergrowth, but then he looked back and nodded warily.

"Yes, I suppose that makes sense," he agreed reluctantly, not savouring the prospect of having to join the fighting at the front of the sett, when he would far rather remain at his present comfortable post.

"Well then?" Brokin urged. "Go on, hurry up or Cherva will be down here himself. Quickly. Quickly now!"

The guard walked over to his comrade and after much pointing and gesturing at Brokin, the pair finally rushed off.

Heaving a sigh of relief that his act had worked so well, he hurried back to his fighters, and the group moved off, with him leading the way through the trees and out across the same embankment on which he'd attacked Cherva during the last summer-cycle.

It already seemed like a lifetime ago!

A short time later the small band was forced to a halt again as Brokin contemplated the lone guard stationed just off the pathway. He shook his head in frustration, because unlike the first two, this guard appeared very alert.

Standing behind a large rock, the guard's position gave him an unrestricted view of any approaching badger, and it was only because Brokin had decided to cut across the embankment, that they had not been spotted yet.

The guard stood stock still, his attention focused on the noise of the fighting carrying to him on the gentle breeze. Brokin didn't think that this guard would be so easily fooled.

There was no choice but to kill him.

Chapter 25

Darkburst travelled for many moons and the journey became a dull, boring routine. Wake from a restless sleep beneath a bush or an overhanging fern, get up and search for food, check which direction to take from the stars, then walk, walk, walk. Moon after moon after moon, with no variation.

But the young badger had also found a soothing comfort in these numbing patterns of behaviour. While his body carried out the action of walking, his mind, free to roam at will, relived his time with Brightness.

It was Darkburst's misfortune that this same monotony also proved to be his undoing. If he'd been more focused on where he was going, instead of who he'd left behind, he might have spotted the tell-tale sparkle of moonlight reflecting from the half-hidden object on the pathway ahead.

The first indication Darkburst had that something might be wrong, was the sharp spasm of pain that unexpectedly shot through his leg. Crying out in surprise he fell forward, his leg caught tightly in what he thought must be some creature's jaws.

Blinking back tears of pain he gasped aloud as its grip tightened. Growling low in his throat, he curled his lips over his teeth in a threatening posture and swung his head around to confront his attacker.

But to Darkburst's utter astonishment, he was alone!

Quickly rolling onto his side, he bent double, so that he could see what his leg had become trapped in, and discovered it was a strong, pliable plant stem, which had wrapped itself around his leg just above the hock. The end of this strange looking stem was attached to a stout root buried in the ground, and no matter how hard the young badger pulled at it, he couldn't free himself, only succeeding in drawing the plant stem tighter about his leg until it began to disappear into his flesh.

Darkburst tried biting through the stem, but its slippery surface was too hard for his teeth to penetrate. It was unlike any plant he'd come across before— starlight in colour and cold to the touch. In desperation the young badger sat back on his haunches and began tugging at it with strong lunges.

As the stem cut deeper and deeper into his tender skin, blood began oozing from the wound. Darkburst was finally forced to stop struggling when the thin stem sliced right into the muscle of his leg.

Licking at the bloody injury, he considered his position with care, staring intently at the plant stem that held him.

How could he free himself? He had already tried pulling the root from the ground with no success.

He would have to dig it out, but the slightest movement now caused him so much pain that he doubted he would be able to dig.

He could only think of one option.

Finally, after a long wait, during which he gathered his courage, Darkburst closed his eyes against the expected pain, and threw his full weight backwards, at the same time twisting his body from side to side, trying to rest the root from the ground.

As stars of unbelievable agony exploded within his head, the young boar groaned and fainted.

*

Slowly regaining consciousness, Darkburst kept his eyes closed for a moment, trying to mentally ease the pain that was coursing through his body. When he failed to accomplish that, he groaned softly, cracked open his eyes and slowly looked about, for a moment, wishing that he hadn't.

Any movement increased his suffering almost beyond endurance, blurring his vision and bringing bile rising from his stomach.

Taking a deep breath, Darkburst raised his head again to look at his leg, causing a cloud of flies to rise from the wound. They buzzed about his head in angry circles before settling back onto the brown incrustations once again.

Examining the deep cut, the young badger's lip curled in disgust as he saw that it was full of small white wriggling objects. The flies had obviously been very busy while he'd been unconscious.

Unable to stop the tears of rage, pain and fright from rising up in his eyes, Darkburst lowered his head to the ground and groaned, finally admitting that there was nothing he could do to release himself.

Settling down onto his side, the young boar took deep steady breaths, allowing his mind to return to the ash tree and his time with Brightness. It eased the pain somewhat, and a small smile formed on his lips.

Finally closing his eyes one last time, the young boar sighed heavily for what might have been, and prepared for death.

*

The sun was beginning to set once more and Darkburst sighed gratefully. It had blasted down on him relentlessly, adding to his pain and discomfort. In the cool fading light of a new moon, he looked about in desperation, searching for some small hope, even though he knew there was none.

Scattered along the pathway ahead were a number of loops similar to the one that still held him in its tight grip. Darkburst could see how other creatures had suffered the same fate as himself. Two rabbits, one caught by the neck, lay side by side further along the path, obviously long dead. Further away, what looked to be the remains of a chewed off forepaw still dangled from another bloody loop, giving mute testimony to a fox's gruesome struggles.

The frightened young badger shuddered. Would he be able to show the same sort of courage when the time came for him to act?

Pushing the unpleasant image from his mind, Darkburst shook his head. It would not come to that. Twice before when his life had been threatened, he had been saved. The Prime Mover was protecting him and She would save him again, he was sure of it.

But as the sky slowly darkened on yet another sun, the young badger's conviction began to waver.

Darkburst's trapped foot, and most of his leg, was now so swollen that the skin had begun to split. Thankfully it had stopped hurting some time ago, but as the moon slid its slow way across the sky, it finally dawned on Darkburst that he might well die in this lonely place.

Belatedly wishing that he had stayed with Brightness in the safety of her sett instead of chasing his wild dreams, the young badger felt himself plummet into the depths of a deep despondency. His thoughts turned to his mother and he wondered if he would ever see her again. Stretching out his neck he laid his head on the ground, closed his eyes and tried to empty his mind of the unpleasant thoughts that kept arising.

Just before dawn, a noise in the undergrowth brought Darkburst out of his stupor. With a great effort he raised his head and listened intently, trying to detect what it was that had disturbed him.

He could just make out a faint rustling noise in the nearby bushes, and as it steadily grew louder, his heart began to beat faster. He squinted into the darkness but could discern nothing in the heavy shadows. Then a new musky odour wafted towards him on the damp air and his eyes widened, the stubby whiskers on his snout standing erect in recognition.

Rats! A pack of rats was moving through the long grass towards him. Help was here at last, the Prime Mover had sent the rats to help him.

As the first rat loomed out of the thick undergrowth, Darkburst managed to struggle to his feet. The animal was large, its yellow eyes staring at him intently. It stopped a short distance away, testing the air with quivering whiskers, its long tail curled forward, the tip slightly raised.

Other rats silently appeared, crowding in behind the first. In its excitement a latecomer rushed past the others and the lead rat snapped at it viciously, sending it squealing back into the pack, where it sat licking its wound.

The larger rat moved nearer— tentatively, almost reluctantly, continually scenting the air. Darkburst kept perfectly still, waiting to see what the rat would do, how it would go about releasing him. The rodent continued to move closer, its head darting this way and that, constantly alert for danger. It did not approach Darkburst directly but stayed off to one side, its head turning with tiny jerks as it kept its eyes firmly fixed on him.

When it was perhaps two body lengths away the rat stopped, staring at Darkburst with unblinking eyes, as though waiting for him to do something. Darkburst relaxed a little, settling back on his haunches to relieve the pressure on his leg.

At his movement, the rat flattened itself along the ground, the tips of its ears quivering as it studied him warily. The rat stayed perfectly still for a moment, then stealthily curled the claws of its forefeet into the earth. Darkburst could see the tension building in the rat's body, but even so, was taken completely by surprise when the rodent unexpectedly launched itself at him.

Along with the unprovoked attack came the sudden realisation that the rats were not here to rescue him at all. They must have been out foraging for food and he was now their intended meal!

As the rat sank its teeth into his snout its companions quickly flanked him on either side, looking for an opening. Shaking his head violently, Darkburst managed to flip the rat away, roaring in pain as it ripped out a large chunk of his skin in the process.

The rodent was back on its feet in an instant and charged him again. Darkburst tried to buffet it away, but the rat managed to twist its body in mid-air and landed on Darkburst's back, its feet scrabbling in the soft fur.

Seeing this the other rats crowded closer, waiting their chance.

Before the rat on Darkburst's back had managed to get a good purchase, he reared up on his hind legs, trying to dislodge it, but his injured leg gave way and he crashed onto his side, landing on the rat with a thump

that blasted the air from his lungs. The rat squealed, scurrying away a short distance before turning back to face him again.

Lips pulled back across its teeth, the rat watched him as though not sure what to do next.

An excruciating pain stabbed through Darkburst's injured leg and his vision blurred. He shook his head in desperation, knowing that if he fainted now, he was dead. Groaning loudly he rolled onto his belly, panting deeply. The movement caused an immediate attack from the pack and he was quickly overwhelmed by a vicious flurry of bodies.

Pulling against the plant stem, Darkburst desperately tried to free his leg, gritting his teeth against the pain, twisting and turning this way and that, rolling over and over in his attempt to free himself.

The stem cut ever deeper into his muscles and he screamed his rage as all the time the rats kept up their attack, dashing in to nip him with their sharp teeth whenever the chance arose.

Then against all his expectations, Darkburst was suddenly free.

Turning on his attackers, the exhausted badger lashed out at the lead rat with a slashing blow. The rodent squealed loudly as the skin and muscle along its spine parted, exposing the blood stained ribs beneath.

The stricken rat swayed back and forth on shaky legs, fear flaring for the first time in its yellow eyes.

The rat realised it had been mortally wounded and quietly mewled to itself as it slowly collapsed onto the ground.

The rest of the pack stopped their attack on Darkburst, lifting their sharp noses to the air the better to scent their leader's demise.

Taking full advantage of the hiatus, Darkburst tucked his injured leg up into his side and ran from the pack as fast as he could. Pushing his way through the tangled undergrowth, he could still hear the sounds of excited, high-pitched squeals behind him.

The rats were busy fighting each other over the body of their dead leader, but Darkburst knew that it wouldn't be long before they finished their gory meal and set out after him.

Chapter 26

After killing the lone sentry guarding the pathway, Brokin returned to his group of fighters and together they moved up the stony track leading to the air vent at the rear of the sett. When they reached the edge of a small clearing, he called a halt and told his companions to hide in the undergrowth and wait for him.

Setting off on his own, Brokin moved around the edge of the clearing until he had a good view of the air vent. His hopes of a quick entry were dashed when he saw that it was well defended by three guards.

One guard lounged inside the small tunnel, another was off to one side gathering worms, and a third lay on a rock ledge next to the keystone that kept the rock pile from collapsing over the air vent entrance.

Brokin muttered angrily to himself as he studied the situation. It was obvious it would be impossible to reach the tunnel without being spotted by at least one of the guards.

Withdrawing a short distance, he set his mind to the problem. There had to be a way of getting into the tunnel before the guard at the rock pile spotted them and released the keystone, he told himself.

A plan slowly began to form in his mind; not much of a plan he admitted to himself, but a plan that might well get him into the air vent. It was the best he could come up with in such a short time and would have to suffice.

Stealthily making his way back to the track where he'd left his companions, Brokin called them close and whispered his instructions. The badgers nodded their understanding as he explained what it was he wanted them to do.

The signal to begin their attack would be the call of an injured weasel, he told them.

If all went well, the sentry at the keystone would be distracted long enough to allow him to enter the tunnel. If not, well they would have done their best and no badger could do more than that.

Brokin mentally ran over his plan one last time. Had he thought of everything, covered every aspect?

Taking a deep breath, he tried to stem the trembling in his limbs. Once inside the tunnel there would be no turning back, no changing his mind. Even if the boar guarding the keystone did not trip it when they made their attack, he had ordered one of his own fighters to do so. It was the only way that he could be certain no badger would follow him inside and take him by surprise.

Brokin led the way back around the edge of the clearing and the group stopped when they were as near to the vent as they could get without being seen by the guards. Then keeping low, they cautiously crawled their way beneath a narrow rock overhang that afforded some cover.

As two of his party gathered some ferns, Brokin chanced a quick look. The guard at the vent had joined the one searching for worms and together were now digging in the loose soil at the base of a nearby tree. Brokin licked his lips nervously, readying himself for his next move.

He made a slight gesture and the two badgers at his side arranged the ferns they had gathered over his back, tying them in place with long twists of grass. Then moving around the rock, and making good use of the cover afforded by the long grass, Brokin slowly crawled nearer to the air vent.

If the badger guarding the rock pile above him would just keep his attention focused on the two boars gathering worms for a while longer, Brokin knew that he would reach his objective with no problem.

Cautiously, he continued to creep forward, stopping often to take stock of his surroundings. Brokin's heart was hammering in his chest so hard that he was finding it difficult to breathe: surely the guard at the vent would hear it!

Brokin jumped uncontrollably, almost giving himself away, when one of the guards suddenly laughed loudly. Feeling as though he was about to throw up, he closed his eyes, then after taking a few deep breaths, managed to control his moment of panic before setting out again.

Finally Brokin reached the point where the long grass ended. From here he would have to make a dash for the air vent and hope he reached it before the rocks came crashing down on top of him.

Raising his head, he got ready to give the signal, but only managed a hoarse croak. His mouth was so dry that his tongue was sticking to the roof of his mouth. The boar guarding the keystone sensed something and turned his head, studying the undergrowth where Brokin lay hidden for a long moment.

Had the guard spotted him? Well it was too late to worry about that now. Wetting his lips, Brokin tried again and this time the shrill, high-pitched shriek of an injured weasel rang out across the clearing.

On the signal, Brokin's fighters attacked the guards by the tree, yelling at the top of their voices to distract the badger posted at the rock pile. Breaking his cover, Brokin ran headlong towards the air vent, his heart racing faster than his feet.

Everything was going as planned. The sentry on the ledge had not spotted him yet. He was almost there, just a few more paces. Brokin's heart beat even faster. He was going to make it.

What Brokin did not know was that another badger lounged inside the tunnel, catching up on lost sleep. On hearing the shouting and yelling outside he shook himself awake, lumbered to his feet and wandered out to see what was going on.

The guard spotted Brokin, just before the small badger hit him headlong in the flank. Gasping for breath, the guard span around, bellowing in surprise.

Brokin grabbed the guard's ear, biting down hard, twisting his head from side to side, causing the guard to roar in pain when his ear was ripped off. The guard leaped backwards, shaking his head wildly, splattering Brokin with his blood.

The guard quickly recovered his composure and backed further into the tunnel, favouring his damaged ear. Brokin sensed a movement and side-stepped as one of the other guards ran in to attack him from the rear.

Warily circling this new attacker, Brokin cursed his luck in having lost the element of surprise. This had to be ended quickly, before the guard on the ledge above was able to release the keystone.

He continued moving to his left, searching for an opening, gasping in surprise when another badger landed on his back, but before he could react, the badger had jumped off again.

Using Brokin as a springboard, one of his fighters had managed to jump clear over his head, landing squarely on top of the boar in the tunnel. With a blood-curdling yell, Brokin's fighter took on an opponent twice his size with no thought for his own safety. The pair rolled over and over in the entrance of the air vent, teeth and claws flashing as they grappled for a hold.

Brokin swiftly turned his attention to the guard circling cautiously in front of him, but his mind was still half-occupied with the badger guarding the keystone.

The guard sensed Brokin's distraction and lunged forward, catching him a stunning blow above his eye. Twisting to one side, Brokin used the guard's own momentum to toss him aside. The boar roared, turning back to attack again. Brokin darted to one side, snapping at his adversary.

Locking his jaws around the badger's leg, Brokin threw his weight forward, twisting his head savagely, breaking the bone in the guard's leg, as though it was a twig.

As the boar fell onto his side, exposing his stomach, Brokin took full advantage, ripping the badger's abdomen from flank to flank. Then dodging the steaming entrails sliding from the fatal wound, he thrust one sharp claw through the badger's eye and into his brain, cutting short the terrible screams.

Turning away from the dead boar, Brokin threw a glance upwards, spotting two badgers locked in a fierce battle on the narrow ledge by the rock pile. One of his fighters had managed to reach the keystone before the sentry had been able to fully release it, but Brokin could see that it had been a close thing.

Even from where he stood at the base of the rock face, Brokin could clearly make out the dislodged keystone trembling under the weight of the rocks bearing down on it. At any moment the whole edifice would come crashing down.

There was no time left, it was now or never!

Dodging around the two badgers still fighting in the vent entrance, Brokin threw himself into the narrow opening, just as a long drawn-out rumble signalled the final collapse of the rock pile above.

Covering his head, Brokin cowered down, trying to make himself as small as possible.

The crashing of falling rocks seemed to go on forever, the air becoming so full of choking dust that he could scarcely breathe, but finally the terrible noise subsided and Brokin was able to stand, spitting dust from his mouth.

Catching a movement from the corner of his eye, he glanced upwards, just in time to see a large rock bearing down on top of him.

*

"Hold fast badgers. Think of your families and home."

Thesa's steady voice rang out above the triumphant shouts of his enemies as he readied his fighters for the attack that was gathering about them like a thunderstorm.

The Preceptor's forces suddenly charged, screaming at the tops of their voices— one group from the front, closely followed by Cherva's group from the rear.

Thesa and his remaining fighters were caught between the two groups, with nowhere left to run. Hurriedly ordering his boars to form a ring with the strongest fighters on the outside, Thesa waited. The attacking badgers thundered across the ground towards them and he continued to steady his small group with quiet words of encouragement.

And there, in front of the largest sett ever built, the final Great Battle commenced as the two forces clashed in mortal combat, with only the Prime Mover knowing what the outcome would be.

Thesa's badgers were attacked with such hatred and ferocity, that for a moment, he thought they would be overrun straight away, but the black badger's bravery was a spur to those around him, and they managed to repel the first charge.

Beneath the brightest of moons the air rang with the screams and shouts of the struggling boars as they swayed back and forth across the clearing, their changing fortunes marked by the growing bloodstains on the soil.

The heady scent of fear hung heavy in the air, and Thesa's courageous group continued to fight off the attacking hoard as best they could, but eventually the enemy's superior numbers began to tell.

One by one Thesa's fighters were being isolated and cold-bloodedly butchered.

Thesa's black form continued to flit in and out of the enemy's lines, gouging here, slashing there, hard to see in the shadows cast by the tall walls of the labyrinth, but he could do little to stop his comrades from falling around him with horrifying regularity.

*

After fighting for most of the moon, as the first shards of sunlight touched the sky, Thesa's remaining badgers found themselves pushed further and further back, until they felt the solid wall of the labyrinth behind their backs.

They were surrounded by a multitude of baying enemies, forced to stand their ground, bunched tightly together, waiting for the final onslaught. Badly beaten and with what little spirit they had left fading fast, they could only hope for a quick end.

But as the triumphant victors were about to land their final blows, Grindel's voice cut across the melee.

"Hold! Stand back from them. Let me through."

The bellowing crowd quietened and parted, and Grindel moved across the blood soaked ground towards them.

Thesa could see how self-confident the badger was— his sleek coat shining in the fading moonlight, his eyes sparkling with triumph.

Casting a downward glance at his own torn and bloody coat, Thesa wrinkled his snout in disgust. Unlike the Preceptor, he was covered in gore. This boar had done little fighting, that much was certain.

Grindel hadn't needed to fight, his minions having done that for him, undertaking their task with a zealotry that had gone far beyond mere duty.

Thesa growled low in his throat, every muscle tense, every thought aimed at killing this evil badger.

Grindel stopped a short distance away from Thesa, feeling the utter contempt radiating from the badger standing before him.

Cherva stood to one side, his eyes narrowing as he studied the black apparition.

"Badger," Grindel said, nodding his head slightly, "you have proved yourself a worthy opponent." Indicating the dead bodies strewn around the small group with a flick of his paw and an acknowledging smile, he continued. "A great fighter indeed. You have killed many of my guards." Glancing to one side, Grindel wrinkled his snout at the badgers pressed around him. "But you can't hope to win against such a force as this. Why fight to the death, when I can offer you an honourable solution?"

"I want no offers from you," Thesa growled.

"That may be true badger, but what about your fighters? Does such valiant defiance hold true for them as well?" Grindel's dark eyes bored into Thesa's. "Go ahead," Grindel continued. "Ask them. Ask them if they want to die right here, right now, knowing that they'll be throwing their lives away for nothing. Go on badger, ask them."

Grindel shook his head and sighed gently, almost inaudibly, when Thesa did not respond.

"See sense, my friend," he advised softly. "It's over. Your work here is finished. You've done all that you can. All that could be expected of you."

Thesa looked around at his remaining fighters, seeing the weariness in their eyes, the defeat in their stance. They had fought well, had suffered heavy losses. They had given everything they had, and now had nothing left to give. Was it really fair to ask more of them? The tired badger turned back to face his enemy.

"You will let us go?" he asked.

The Preceptor nodded and Thesa stared hard at him.

"How do I know that you're telling the truth?" he asked.

"Why should I lie?" Grindel countered. "Your fighters are no threat to me now. Look at them. No, they can go on their way, and as long as they don't return to Badachro Sett I won't trouble them further."

"And me? Am I to be included in this generous offer?" Thesa's disdain suggested that he already knew the answer.

Grindel laughed lightly, wrinkling his snout. "Well friend, you're a little different," he admitted. "You'll always be a threat to me, won't you? Badgers like you don't easily forget. No, if I let you go, you'd eventually grow dissatisfied and try to change things again." The forthright statement was followed by a meaningful pause. Then, "At least, as you are now you would."

"As I am now?" Thesa's stomach churned as he tried to guess the Preceptor's meaning.

Grindel nodded slowly as he held out his paw and slowly extended his claws. The moonlight reflected from their burnished surfaces as he flexed them.

"You're too good with these, my friend," he whispered throatily. "Far too good. However, should you agree—"

Allowing the sentence to hang, Grindel watched Thesa's reaction closely. Would the black badger accept his offer, or would he choose a hero's death? He hoped the former because to lose more of his guards now would mean delaying his follow-up attack on Badachro Sett.

But it was also true that there had been no declawing in Brockenhurst Sett for generations and Grindel wasn't sure how his badgers would react if he carried out his threat.

Another problem for Cherva to solve, he thought.

Whatever the reaction, it would be worth the gamble, it would make an impressive affair. The badger who had the courage to restore such a magnificent punishment would be held in high esteem indeed. It would be a suitable mark of his new authority over Boddaert's Realm, and it would give him the respect that he deserved.

Thesa's mind was a maelstrom of emotion as he considered the Preceptor's offer. If he allowed this depraved badger to de-claw him, his remaining fighters would live. If he didn't, they would surely die right here.

Doing his best to push aside the feeling of utter hopelessness that had suddenly swept over him, Thesa held out a trembling paw.

The pain would be good, he told himself. Its brightness would cleanse him.

His friends had fought valiantly at his side, they had done far more than he could have possibly hoped for. This would be his tribute to them. He would pay homage to their bravery with his pain.

Staring the Preceptor defiantly in the eyes, Thesa slowly nodded his head.

Grindel threw the defeated boar a look of utter disdain and turned away to signal Cherva forward. Then without looking back, he headed for his chambers.

Seeing the look of contempt in the giant badger's eyes as Cherva stalked forward and made ready to carry out the Preceptor's orders, Thesa's heart beat faster.

The badger's sneer bit deep into Thesa's pride, rattling his self-esteem. He looked around at his remaining fighters, seeing them lower their heads to avoid his eyes.

Suddenly a new determination flared in his mind and he struck out.

Chapter 27

Brightness lay on her side beneath the canopy of the slender ash tree that had been her only companion throughout the long lonely moons since Darkburst had left. She smiled a soft, secretive smile and touched her swollen belly lightly, aware that now, no matter where her love went, there would always be a small part of him with her.

Rising slowly, Brightness made her way into the sett, negotiating the short tunnel into the sleeping chamber slowly, for she was heavy with cub. Crossing to the pile of fresh leaves she'd dried over the past few moons, she lay down with a contented sigh. She was tired and closed her eyes, letting her thoughts lull her into a comforting sleep.

Soon the rhythmic sound of her breathing filled the cosy chamber.

As Brightness slept, she began to toss and turn in a restless way, causing the keepsake Darkburst had hung about her neck to sway back and forth across her chest. Then she flicked her head sharply, as though trying to dislodge some annoying insect, and this movement caused the Talisman to swing outwards in a shallow arc, landing on her head with a soft thump. This did not waken her, she merely fluttered her eyelids, then turned her head slightly and fell into a deeper sleep.

As she slumbered, Brightness began dreaming, moaning softly as vivid scenes filled her mind— Darkburst trapped by his leg, fighting off an attacking pack of rats, shrieking in agony as a large yellow-eyed beast tore his flesh. Other rats circling warily in the background, saliva drooling from their leering mouths.

Brightness whickered urgently, her paws quivering and trembling as she ran to help him, throwing herself bodily onto the creatures. But the phantoms were as insubstantial as any mist, and she fell right through them, landing awkwardly on the hard ground, her leg twisting beneath her.

A sharp pain filled her mind and she awoke instantly, heart pounding in her chest, breath pumping through her open mouth.

The images persisted for some time after Brightness woke and it took her a moment to realise that it had been a dream.

Standing up, she gasped as her leg almost collapsed beneath her weight, sending a lancing pain down to the tips of her claws. When she examined her leg she could see nothing wrong, no reason for it to hurt like it did, and in the end, decided that it must be cramp.

Taking a moment to allow the last vestiges of her dream to slip away, she tested her leg once more, and finding that the cramp had subsided, headed for the surface.

Brightness decided to hunt up some food, hoping that it would take her mind off the disturbing dream that still circled at the edges of her mind.

*

Darkburst collapsed to the ground, unable to run any further.

He breathed a little easier when he realised that the rats were not pursuing him. They were obviously still too busy devouring their unexpected meal to bother with him for the moment.

As he rested, thoughts of Brightness teased the edges of his consciousness but he pushed them aside. There was still too much danger around for him to let his mind wander this way.

Lying on his side, he examined his injured leg carefully and what he found horrified him. The loop that had trapped him so painfully had stripped the skin and muscle from the lower part of his leg, leaving the bone beneath exposed. It now shone through the mangled flesh like some obscene smile.

Breath hissing through his teeth, he studied the terrible wound, realising just how badly he'd been injured. Feeling a little light-headed, he closed his eyes and took a few deep breaths to steady his churning stomach.

Next he tried licking the encrusted surface but that proved much too painful. If only his mother were here, she would know what to do, how to treat the mangled flesh.

The unexpected thought distressed Darkburst and he quickly pushed it from his mind, laying quietly, eyes unfocussed, trying to come to terms with what had happened to him.

After a long rest and a few mouthfuls of grass, Darkburst decided his only choice was to press on back to Brockenhurst Sett, so gathering his strength he struggled to his feet and resumed his journey, hobbling along on three legs as best he could.

He made slow progress and cursed frequently, knowing he had to get back to Grindel and the safety of Brockenhurst Forest as quickly as he could if he was to stand any chance of surviving the dreadful injury he'd received.

Taking his direction from the stars, Darkburst limped through the remainder of the moon and half of the next sun without stopping, and when he finally collapsed beneath a thicket, unable to stagger one more step, he felt as though he was about to die. His leg throbbled with such intensity that he could scarcely think of anything else.

Darkburst rested where he lay for two more moons before struggling onwards once again, stopping often to assuage his growing thirst.

On the third moon he tried eating a shiny fat worm, but vomited so violently that his abused senses made the stars spin wildly about his head.

As the infection raged through Darkburst's body, he became ever more delirious, his thoughts wandering off in all directions. Twice he became convinced that he had backtracked in his delirium and retraced his footsteps, only to lose himself again.

It was becoming more and more difficult for him to keep his mind on the task of getting back to Brockenhurst Valley, and in his rare moments of lucidity, he began to wonder if he would reach it before he died.

Another moon passed, and another sun— another moon— and on and on, until he fell down the side of a small rise, screaming in agony as he landed on his injured leg.

Rolling over, he staggered to his feet, laughing aloud when he looked down and saw the ridiculous appendage that had attached itself to his body.

Twice the size of a normal leg, the bare skin stretched to bursting point and tinted a soft green, it appeared to share in his mirth with its bloody grin.

He poked at it with a claw, chuckling when the skin split even further open, aware, somewhere in the back of his mind, that he was not acting rationally but not really caring.

Darkburst was extremely weak now and just about able to keep on his feet. A small memory encroached upon his mind and he grabbed at it frantically, urging it to grow, to replace the constant nagging pain of his injury.

And suddenly there it was, full and grand in its splendour— an image of Brightness as he'd last seen her, standing by her sett beneath the slender ash tree.

Darkburst shook his head, realising that he had to haul himself back from the edge of this madness. He needed food, something he could keep down.

Then another memory came, this one more powerful. It was of his mother and how she had used a special fungus when badgers came to her complaining of weakness. He wondered if something similar might sit more easily in his stomach.

Looking around, Darkburst spotted the remains of an old tree stump on the top of the rise. Gritting his teeth, he began struggling up the steep slope. He knew that where there was rotting wood, there would be fungi of one sort or another.

Finally topping the rise, Darkburst rested for a moment before setting out along the brow of the low hill, closing his eyes as the ground blurred in and out of focus.

Staggering his way along the ridge, breathing heavily at every step, he headed towards the hollow and the tree stump.

A thin branch had somehow managed to sprout on the stump, growing from the rotting mass, just below the point where it had been shorn off by a lightning strike. It pointed forlornly at the sky, like a single brown claw reaching for the moon.

Darkburst had almost reached his objective when the ground beneath his feet became waterlogged. He struggled on, his eyes fixed on the stump ahead, his feet pulling from the muddy morass with soft plops. But he unexpectedly found himself being sucked further and further into the clinging mire and stopping only made matters worse because he began sinking, the cold mud invading the soft under-fur of his belly, dragging him deeper.

Finally grasping what was happening, Darkburst began shouting for help, hoping against hope that some badger might be near enough to hear him.

As he continued his desperate struggles, his unanswered cries echoed across the quiet meadow, emphasising just how alone he was.

He'd sunk up to his chest now, and each time he moved, he sank a little bit further. Even so, the desperate youngster found it impossible not to struggle, adding to his demise.

Then, just as he gave up hope of his shouts ever being heard, two badgers appeared at the edge of the waterlogged hollow.

"Thank Homer you've come! Help me get out of here," Darkburst shouted.

His entreaties drew little response from the pair, who just stood watching him silently.

"Quickly," Darkburst pleaded, "I'm sinking deeper all the time. Don't just stand there, do something to help me!"

With a cold shock, Darkburst suddenly realised that the badgers had no intention of rescuing him from his plight and became increasingly desperate as he slipped ever deeper into the mire.

"What is it? What do you want? Why won't you help me?" he shouted, voice cracking with desperation.

"Why should we?" one of the badgers answered, his lips twisted into an ugly grin. "If we did that, then we'd only have to kill you afterwards. Far better that you drown right there, it'll save us a lot of trouble."

Darkburst was shocked. How could they watch him die like this, without raising a claw to help?

They were going to stand there and watch him drown!

With that realisation came an overwhelming sadness that he would never see his beloved Brightness again, nor spend another winter cycle snug beneath the ash tree, safe in her small sett.

Lowering his head Darkburst gave up his struggles and closed his eyes.

Then something nudged him under his jaw and glancing down, he saw the Circle of Claws floating on the surface of the thick mud. Biting through the grass cord, Darkburst ripped the enigmatic object from around his neck and lobbed it onto the ground in front of the two badgers.

"Then at least take this to Grindel," he shouted at them. "He's been waiting for it. Tell him that Darkburst found it in the forest beside the big lake."

One of the badgers picked up the stone and examined it carefully, turning it over and over between his paws. Then he passed the object to his companion and walked nearer to the edge of the mud pit.

"Did you say your name is Darkburst?" he queried.

When Darkburst nodded, yes, the badger unexpectedly burst into activity.

Collecting dry twigs and leaves from around the edge of the mire, he placed these on top of the mud. Then with his companion holding onto his tail, the boar slowly edged his way out towards Darkburst.

"Here take hold of this in your teeth," he said, holding out a stout branch.

Once Darkburst had a firm grip, the two badgers began pulling him out, and even though the mud was reluctant to let him go, the young boar was slowly dragged back onto solid land.

"I'm Rooten," the nearest badger said. "This is Comfrey. We're guards from Brockenhurst Sett. We were patrolling around the meadow here when we heard your shouts."

Comfrey studied the muddy boar suspiciously. "And you say your name is Darkburst?" he asked.

Darkburst nodded his head urgently. "Yes, that's my name."

Why did they doubt him, he wondered. And why had they been prepared to let him die in the mud pit?

His mind was a whirl of confusing questions.

Comfrey beckoned his companion to one side, then keeping a wary eye on the bedraggled and mud splattered boar, whispered in an undertone.

"But this can't possibly be the Darkburst that the Preceptor was talking about. Look at his fur."

Rooten nodded his agreement. "Yes I know," he whispered back. "Did you see what happened back there? His coat turned white when he took this thing from around his neck. It's unbelievable."

Poking the stone with an extended claw, the bewildered badger slowly shook his head, concern lining his snout.

"I don't like this, not one little bit. There was no talk of this Darkburst having such powers. If this is really the same Darkburst we could be in great danger. Who knows what he'll do to us after the way we treated him."

As the two guards talked in heated whispers, Darkburst started to remove the mud from around his wound. His leg smelt terrible, like decaying flesh that had been left too long in the sun.

He cleaned his leg with long licks of his tongue, then turned his attention to the wound itself, but had only been working at this task for a few moments when he paused, his eyes widening in surprise. Lowering his leg, he stared at it, then urgently parted the coarse outer hairs with a trembling claw, peering closely at the soft undercoat beneath. His heart skipped a beat and his breath faltered.

His coat had turned a pure white!

Darkburst's mind raced as he scrabbled about on his flanks, checking everywhere he could reach. Yes there was no mistake, his fur was now a brilliant white colour.

Darkburst knew that he'd been born an albino, but it was still a thorough shock to realise that somehow he'd reverted to that original state.

How had this happened? He tried to reason it out but could make no sense of it.

Closing his eyes, he nipped his skin with his front teeth, just in case he was hallucinating but when he opened his eyes again his fur was still a pure white colour.

Maybe it was the result of his nearly drowning in the mud? No that didn't make any sense at all— his coat hadn't changed colour on his other brushes with death.

Whatever the cause of his present predicament, Darkburst could see now why the two guards were treating him so suspiciously.

Comfrey came back to talk to him, seemingly ill at ease to be standing so close.

The guard nodded at the wound on Darkburst's leg. "What's wrong with you? Can you walk?"

Darkburst nodded. "I think so. If you help me."

The trio set out along the winding path towards Brockenhurst Sett, the two guards supporting the injured youngster, even though they were reluctant to touch him, afraid that having contact with him might somehow taint them.

Darkburst limped along the pathway between the two guards, his spirits rising considerably when they finally reached the outskirts of Brockenhurst Sett.

He stopped to take it all in, giving the guards a moments panic before they realised that all he was doing was taking a brief rest.

It was a bright, clear sky; the moonlight shimmering down between the trees, reflecting back from the damp bark in a hundred thousand tiny sparkles. The grass heads nodded at him, welcoming him back, undulating away from him in silver-green wavelets as the gentle breeze caressed them.

Darkburst's heart soared as he finally stepped in beneath the moon-speckled canopy of the trees. He was home again at last, safe in the embrace of the forest that he knew so well. Now things would be alright.

As these thoughts flooded the sick badger's mind, the outline of the trees began to waver and shimmer at the edges of his vision. Then slowly, from somewhere deep inside him, a darkness arose.

He staggered slightly, the bright moonlight blinking out as his world was unexpectedly filled with a whirling blackness.

Comfrey swore loudly as the strange badger they were supporting collapsed into an untidy heap between them. Leaning over the inert form, he put his ear to the badger's chest and listened carefully. Shaking his head, he looked up at his companion and wrinkled his snout.

"What's the matter with him?" Rooten asked, even though he knew the answer.

"He's dying," Comfrey responded. "We may as well leave him here and take what he gave us back to the Preceptor. There's no sense in dragging him all the way back to the sett when he'll be dead long before we arrive."

*

In the chambers below Fire Rock, Grindel was pacing back and forth with angry strides.

"Where is he?" he growled.

Cherva shook his head, favouring the ragged slash that extended down the length of his snout with his paw.

"I don't know Preceptor. After he did this to me, he ran off towards the sett entrance, killing two of my guards on the way."

Cherva's voice shook with indignation and he took a deep breath to steady it.

"I have every spare guard searching the sett right now. They have orders to kill the boar on sight."

"NO!"

Grindel's voice rebounded from the smooth walls of the strangely shaped chamber.

"I want him alive. I have plans for that particular boar. He is not to be killed."

As Cherva left the chamber to carry out his orders, Grindel sat back on his haunches, thinking about the satisfaction he would have putting this Thesa to death.

Declawing was too easy for him.

Grindel smiled slowly as he came to a decision. He would bury him alive under rocks.

Yes, that would show all the badgers in Boddaert's Realm that treachery would be repaid a thousand-fold.

Grindel picked over a pile of fat worms collected for him earlier, choosing the most succulent. Eating, he made plans for the completion of his takeover of Boddaert's Realm.

Once he had killed the remaining badgers at Badachro Sett, nothing stood in his way to becoming the most powerful boar in Badgerdom!

Chapter 28

Without a second thought, the two guards abandoned Darkburst to his fate and hurried back to Brockenhurst Sett, happy in the knowledge that they would be well rewarded for their work in bringing back the curious stone that the strange boar had carried about his neck.

As they hurried along the moon dappled pathways, Comfrey and Rooten nodded at the occasional badgers they met along the way, glad to hear the news that the attackers from Badachro had been beaten. Perhaps now things would get a little better.

There had been talk of new tunnels being dug to cater for the greater numbers living there, but so far these plans had been put to one side. Already rumours were circulating that fighters would soon be sent out to finish off any survivors that might still be living in Badachro Sett, and after that, so the gossip went, the Preceptor would take over the remaining setts in Boddaert's Realm one by one, until every badger lived under his domain.

The two guards were excited, seeing the opportunities these plans presented for advancement. As they hurried along, Rooten and Comfrey discussed whether to volunteer to join the fighting forces. Such a move might bring many returns.

It was Rooten's first duty with Comfrey, and they'd certainly struck lucky. Cherva would recompense them well for what they had done.

When the two friends finally reached the sett, they made their way to the Great Chamber. Comfrey handed the stone to the guard at the entrance, requesting an audience with the Preceptor. They were told to wait.

As they did so, Rooten looked about at the roomy chambers, wrinkling his snout, wondering what it would be like to wield such power. He nodded to himself, a half-smile forming on his lips. Well this might be the start of finding out. If he was lucky and fought well when the time came, he might even be given a sett of his own to run. Now that was a thought!

The guard returned and ushered them through a short tunnel into the Great Chamber. Comfrey and Rooten crossed the large expanse of floor, stopping before the most powerful badger in Boddaert's Realm.

The ever-present giant, Cherva, stood at the Preceptor's side, staring at them intently. His snout had a fresh scar running down one side, still outlined in congealed blood. His right eye was closed and sunken, as though the socket was empty.

The pair jumped when the Preceptor's gravelly voice boomed out at them. "Where did you find this?" he growled, prodding the stone with his paw.

Rooten glanced at Comfrey but his friend had been terrified into silence by the Preceptor's presence.

Rooten coughed uneasily and licked his dry lips. "From a badger drowning in the marsh, Preceptor. Out beyond the hawthorn stand, across Low Meadow."

Grindel turned the object over and studied the reverse side. It was a duplicate of the first. The delicate outlines of the claws easily discernible against the darker background of the stone.

His heart beat faster as he took in the significance of what he was examining, but he hardly dared let himself hope.

No, not yet. He needed further proof!

He glowered at the frightened badgers standing before him.

"Who was this badger?" he snarled.

Comfrey moved uncomfortably under the Preceptor's glare, keeping his eyes cast to the floor. "He said his name was Darkburst, Preceptor."

Grindel smiled and nodded his head. So the young badger had succeeded after all, but he'd never doubted that he would. Then a wrinkle distorted his snout as a sudden thought clouded his mind.

Why then hadn't Darkburst come to present this remarkable stone to his benefactor himself?

"Where is this badger?" Grindel snapped, a tight fear gripping his heart.

Rooten flinched at the Preceptor's tone and looked to Comfrey for support, but finding none there, he noisily swallowed his fear.

"We left him on the forest path, Preceptor," he answered nervously, sensing at once that they had made a terrible mistake. He hurried on, tripping over his words. "The boar was dying, Preceptor. We saw no sense in dragging him all the way back here."

"You left him to die?" It was an accusation, not a question.

The almost tearful Rooten nodded miserably.

Grindel's shouts reverberated around the Great Chamber. "Guards," he yelled at the top of his voice. "Get in here right now and take these two idiots out of my sight."

Two guards quickly appeared at the entrance, but as they crossed the chamber and began dragging the unfortunate pair out, Grindel stopped them. "No, wait. Better still, confine them to a chamber. I'll take them to the marsh in Low Meadow later and throw them in."

Having sent the two guards to their fate, Grindel dismissed them from his mind without further thought, turning his attention to Cherva.

"Get a message to Soffen," he instructed. "Tell her that I want to see her here, right away. Quickly now, it may already be too late."

Cherva pushed his way past the two burly guards, who were still dragging the pair of terrified badgers from the chamber, heading off towards the lower levels of the sett where Soffen had her tiny sleeping space.

As he hurried along the tunnels, Cherva replayed the scene he'd just witnessed in his mind's eye, trying to work out what significance the stone might have. From the way that Grindel had handled it the object had significant importance.

Cherva entered Soffen's small chamber and looked about. It felt cold and empty, as though it hadn't been occupied for some time.

Cherva felt a shudder run along his spine.

Hurrying from the chamber, he searched the small living spaces spread out along the tunnel, questioning every badger living there, but got the same slow shake of the head.

No, they hadn't seen the Healer for quite some time, and didn't know where she might be.

Cherva's search became more and more frantic as he ran from chamber to chamber, his heart pounding in his chest as he realised that she had disappeared. Gathering some guards together he sent them out to scour the sett, pacing back and forth in agitation.

Where had the sow got to? She had to be here somewhere. No badger could have left the sett without his knowledge.

Cherva hurried from the lower levels, breathing a sigh of relief when he finally re-entered the upper tunnels. Here the air was fresh and breathable and a badger could move without gagging at every step.

He made his way to his sleeping chambers, worrying how best to tell Grindel that he couldn't find the Healer.

*

Brokin tried to open his eyes but they were stuck together with gunk. Trying again, he managed to open them part way. Groaning softly, he ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth.

Slowly his eyesight returned to normal and the rocky floor shimmered into view.

He was lying on his side with his head twisted back at an awkward angle. It pounded as though . . . as though some badger was jumping up and down on it. It felt like it was being hit with a big branch. No . . . wait . . . something had hit him . . . the rock.

Suddenly it all came rushing back— the fight with the guards, the collapse of the stone pile above the entrance, the flying rock that had struck him on the head. No wonder he felt so bad.

How long had he been lying here? His stiffness told him, a long time.

He tried to sit up, but stopped when the floor began to swim in and out of focus. He rested for awhile and finally, after the pounding in his head had eased a little, he managed to stumble to his feet and look around.

Brokin was alone in the vent tunnel, which meant that none of his fighters had managed to make it in with him.

He didn't waste time worrying what might have happened to his friends. What was, was, and nothing he could do was going to change that now.

Shaking the dust from his coat, Brokin winced and leant against the wall to let his eyesight catch up with his movements. Gradually things stopped rolling back and forth and he was able to move without it feeling as though his head was about to fall off.

Raising a paw he examined the wound, wincing at the sharp pain that lanced down his neck. He could feel the dried blood matting his fur, the long jagged cut left by the rock. He wondered once again how long he had been unconscious, but there was no way of telling in the darkness of the tunnel.

Finally feeling a lot steadier on his feet, he set out along the tunnel, hoping he still had time to complete his plan.

*

Brokin looked down into the Great Chamber from his high perch in the air vent.

Dare he jump? No, it was too far. If he jumped from this height, he might seriously injure himself.

Somehow he had to find a way down. He had no choice, he couldn't return through the vent tunnel because the entrance was blocked with stones and it would be impossible to dig his way out.

Looking over the edge of the high drop, he tried to work out if there was the remotest chance of finding a descent into the chamber below, but before he could, Brokin heard voices approaching.

Ducking back into the tunnel, he watched carefully from his hiding place as Grindel and Cherva entered the Great Chamber.

Unexpectedly the giant taproot trembled and both badgers looked towards the roof.

"That's some storm building up out there," Cherva observed above the noise of the crashing thunder penetrating the sett with hollow rumbles.

Brokin realised that the storm must be directly overhead for its anger to permeate this deeply into the sett.

With the next peal of thunder, a fine layer of dust drifted down from the roof as the walls of the Great Chamber shook in response.

"I've sent three badgers to fetch Darkburst as you instructed. They should be back soon," Cherva told Grindel when the thunder had quietened a little.

"Well I hope it's not too late," the Preceptor replied angrily. "How could those two idiots have been so stupid as to leave him out there like that?" Grindel slapped his paw on the ground, the sound reverberating from the walls with a sharp thwack. "And now this storm. I want those two to die slowly, Cherva. Very, very slowly. Do you understand?" Cherva nodded as the Preceptor continued. "I want them to suffer a great deal before they die!"

"As you wish Preceptor," Cherva agreed. "But what is it . . ."

The large badger suddenly faltered to a stop, an uneasy silence following when he realised that he might have overstepped the mark.

"What?" Grindel growled, sensing his guard's discomfort.

"Forgive me Preceptor," Cherva apologised in his most ingratiating tone, "but I was wondering why this badger is so important to you?"

Grindel stared at his second-in-command, and for a long moment the air was heavy with a heavy tension.

Then he wrinkled his snout and relaxed a little, nodding his head slightly. "Well I suppose there's no harm in you knowing now, Cherva," he admitted. "I'll need your help anyway, so it's for the best that you know what's going on."

Grindel paused, unconsciously sucking air through his teeth as he considered his next words.

"You'll have heard of Boddaert's Magic," he said, waiting for Cherva's slight nod before continuing. "The badger, Darkburst, was bringing that to me, at least an important part of it."

Cherva did his best not to react to this news, but his eyes let him down and the Preceptor chuckled.

"Yes my friend, Boddaert's Magic." Grindel stared off into the distance for a moment before focussing his attention on Cherva again. "Just one more piece of the puzzle to find and I'll have all the power that I'll need." Curling the claws of one foot into the ground, Grindel smiled broadly. "Just think Cherva, I'm almost ready to put my final plans into action at last."

The Preceptor's eyes lit with an inner energy that Cherva had never seen before and the large badger felt a shiver run along his back.

"I'm on the verge of total domination Cherva. Total power. I just need the last piece of the puzzle."

The Preceptor's hoarse whispers floated up to Brokin in the air vent and he shifted uneasily, aware that he had to do something to stop this evil badger before it was too late.

Cherva nodded slowly at the Preceptor's words, savouring the power that would come to him once Grindel had Boddaert's Magic in his possession. His heart beat faster as he contemplated his future.

"And the last piece of the puzzle?" he asked in a husky voice. "Do you know where that is Preceptor?"

"No, but Darkburst will," Grindel answered with certainty.

Once again the Great Chamber trembled with the force of the thunder crashing overhead, the giant taproot creaking a protest as the winds above roared in from the north.

"I'm going to prepare for Darkburst's arrival. Bring him straight to me when he gets here. And the Healer, I want her here too, I'll need her skills when Darkburst arrives. From what those two idiot guards told me, he's probably in a bad way."

Chuckling throatily the Preceptor allowed a slight sneer to touch his lips as he turned away. Then he swung his head back when Cherva mumbled something under his breath.

"What was that?" he growled suspiciously.

Cherva licked his lips nervously. "I said the Healer is missing Preceptor. The guards are scouring the sett for her now."

Grindel wrinkled his snout and stared hard at the floor, the large artery in his neck throbbing in time to his quickening heart-rate. Walking towards the entrance tunnel he stopped and glared back at Cherva for a moment.

"Don't ever make the mistake of taking my generosity as a weakness Cherva," he growled, "That would be a big mistake. Find her and quickly."

There was a long pause, during which the two badgers stared at each other, then Grindel abruptly turned and left the chamber.

With the Preceptor's words still ringing in his ears, Cherva watched as Grindel disappeared from sight. Heaving a sigh of relief that the badger had taken Soffen's disappearance so well, Cherva followed him from the Great Chamber.

He would extend the search for the Healer.

Finding himself alone in the Great Chamber, Brokin eased his head out of the air vent to take a look around.

Another clap of thunder rent the air, this time shaking the ground so violently that a large piece of rock fell from the roof, hitting the floor with a dull thud. Another thunderclap and Brokin shuddered when the taproot moved back and forth, as the tree's old trunk was battered by the force of the storm raging above.

From behind Brokin came a loud rumble. Part of the vent tunnel was collapsing and he realised that had to get out of the narrow passageway quickly or be buried alive.

Swinging himself out over the edge of the drop, Brokin dug the claws of his back feet into the wall and began easing himself down, trying to ignore the fluttering in his belly as he glanced towards the floor, so far below him.

If he fell now-

As that thought entered his head, Brokin's claws began to slip through the packed earthen wall, and before he could do anything to stop himself, he was slithering down the sheer drop at an ever-increasing rate, his claws gouging long grooves into the hard surface.

Chapter 29

After rolling a large rock into place across the shallow chamber opening, the guards departed, leaving Rooten and Comfrey in total darkness, their hopes of a reward dashed completely.

"This is all your fault." Comfrey complained bitterly. "I should never have listened to you in the first place. I told you that we should leave that stupid badger to die. But would you listen—"

The pair had been unceremoniously dragged from the Great Chamber and taken to the lowest regions of the sett where they had been imprisoned in the small chamber. They knew that the guards would be back before the moon's end to carry out the Preceptor's orders and that they had but a short time left to live.

"It's as much your fault as mine," Rooten snapped back. "If you hadn't frozen like some frightened cub up there . . . if you'd only supported me . . . well things might have turned out differently, that's all I'm saying."

Snorting his anger at his friend's behaviour, Rooten took a deep shuddering breath and tried to calm his thrumming nerves. Being treated so roughly by the guards had left him shaken.

"Anyway," he continued, "it was you that suggested we leave that poor badger to die in the forest, not me. So it's hardly my fault is it? I told you we should try and get him back here."

Comfrey didn't answer the criticism. He was too busy trying to make out what the gentle rustling noise he'd just heard was.

"And another thing. What about that—"

Rooten's whining voice was abruptly cut short by Comfrey's ringing scream and he thought he was about to die of shock. His heart pounded away in his chest with such force that he could feel every beat.

"What's the matter with you?" Comfrey shouted, still trembling from the shock he'd received.

"S-s-something just t-touched me," Comfrey stammered in an urgent whisper. "There's something else in here with us."

Rooten was about to berate his friend for being even stupider than usual, when something brushed the tip of his ear, and there was no possibility that it had been Comfrey because his friend was standing on his other side.

That was when Rooten screamed too . . . even louder than Comfrey had, his heart rate reaching such a rate that it fluttered uncontrollably for a moment.

He tried to speak but could only stammer a half-strangled, "Ah . . . ah . . . hah . . . ahhhh . . ."

Rooten's groans of terror grew in direct proportion to his fertile imagination, which quickly pictured all kinds of horrors loose in the chamber with them. Hastily backing away from the unseen danger lurking in the darkness, he finally fetched up against a rock wall and could back away no further.

"It's all right. Don't be frightened. I won't hurt you," a quiet voice said.

The voice floated to them out of the darkness, and though they couldn't see the badger who had spoken, the voice sounded friendly enough.

They both sighed and relaxed a little.

"You're a badger!" Rooten said, stating the obvious, his voice rising in an indignant squeak. "Why didn't you say you were here straight away, instead of frightening the life out of us like that? By Homer, you almost scared me to death!"

"Well, I didn't want to frighten you," the voice explained reasonably.

"Didn't want to frighten me?" Rooten exploded. "Didn't want to frighten me? What did you think touching me like that would do then? Soothe my beleaguered nerves?"

"I'm sorry," was the soft reply. "I just assumed that you knew I was here."

"Well I would have scented you straight away, if Rooten hadn't been complaining so much and it wasn't so damp and stuffy down here," Comfrey complained self-righteously.

"Yes of course you would," Rooten responded sarcastically.

"What are you doing here anyway? Are they going to kill you too?" Comfrey asked the stranger in a quiet voice, trying to steer the conversation away from his embarrassing behaviour.

"I slipped in here to hide when I heard you coming. I thought you'd walk right passed the chamber. Instead you were pushed in here and the chamber blocked off. I didn't for a moment expect to be trapped here with you two." There followed a short, bitter laugh.

"Who are you hiding from?" Comfrey responded. "And what are—"

"Be quiet for a moment Comfrey and let him speak," Rooten admonished his friend.

Comfrey mouthed a few unintelligible words, then lapsed into a sulky silence.

"Now," Rooten took over, "why not start by telling us your name?"

"Thesa," was the reply.

"Yes I thought as much," Rooten mused. "You're the badger that escaped after the battle, aren't you."

"Yes," Thesa said. "I've been hiding down here, wondering what to do. I've been trying to find a way out but there's been so many badgers coming and going that I couldn't take the chance on moving about the upper tunnels. Anyway I was exploring along here when I heard you coming."

"You mean to say that you've been hiding down here ever since the battle finished?"

An uneasy silence fell across the chamber as Rooten's question brought back memories of the terrible debacle that Thesa and his fighters had suffered.

*

"What's that?" Comfrey's urgent whisper brought Thesa back to the present. "I can feel something ruffling my fur."

"It's a draught!" Rooten exclaimed.

"Yes, I can feel it too," Thesa agreed. "It's coming from behind us. Come on."

The three badgers stumbled their way across the small chamber, following the current of air that Comfrey had felt.

Rooten bumped into Thesa when the boar unexpectedly stopped. Thesa cursed softly and Rooten backed off.

"Look, over there. Can you see it?" Comfrey's voice squealed with excitement.

"What?" Rooten mumbled, still shaken by the smell of blood that hovered over Thesa.

"Look, straight ahead, it's an opening. Can't you see the light shining through?"

When the trio neared the small point of light the air became fresher.

"Comfrey's right. Look, it is a hole!" Rooten shouted excitedly. "Maybe we can use it to get out."

Thesa shook his head, then, realising that the others couldn't see, said, "No, it's much too small."

"Wait." Rooten ran his paw around the small opening. "Maybe . . . Yes, there's a jumble of stones covering it. If we move them, I think we might be able to make a hole big enough to squeeze through. Come on, help me dig."

Some time later, while they were resting, Thesa heard a gentle, almost tentative cough, followed by Rooten's low voice.

"Tell me something, Thesa," he said. "Why did you decide to fight to the end like you did, and not take up the Preceptor's offer?"

Thesa considered the question for a time, not really sure himself why he'd chosen to gamble his life so recklessly.

"I don't know," he finally replied. "It just seemed to be the right thing to do at the time."

Comfrey picked at a small flint that had become lodged between the pads of his foot and snorted. "You know, I wouldn't admit this to many badgers, but I admire you for what you did up there. Attacking Cherva that way." He chuckled delightedly. "The look on his face. It was really something to see!"

Rooten grunted his agreement in the darkness. "You certainly took me by surprise. I didn't know a badger could move that fast. And the way you killed those two guards when you ran into the sett."

"What happened to the others after I left?" Thesa asked, not sure that he really wanted to know the answer.

"Oh the Preceptor eventually let them go," Comfrey answered. "After de-clawing them first that is. He said it was a fair punishment in the circumstances."

Thesa shuddered at the pain that his friends must have suffered because of his refusal to submit.

"What about Cherva?" he asked in a subdued tone.

"You really hurt him," Rooten answered with a chuckle. "And a good thing too. I never have liked that boar. Always telling us what to do. It's about time he was put in his place."

"Yes," agreed Comfrey. "His snout was really torn. Ripped right down its length. I heard that he even lost one of his eyes."

"Come on then, let's get back to work," Thesa ordered, not comfortable with the fact that he felt so pleased at inflicting such injuries on a fellow badger— even one as sadistic as Cherva.

The chamber was quickly filled with soft grunts and the chinking of stone on stone as they worked.

*

"Thesa . Thesa, look out!"

Thesa looked up at the urgent shout, just in time to see a large stone dislodge itself from above him.

The stone struck his head and Thesa staggered, his legs turning shaky.

He should have been concentrating on what he was doing, instead of letting his mind wander back to the battle, he realised.

That last thought snapped out, and he slumped to the floor, twitched once, then lay quite still.

Rooten shook the dust from his coat, bending over Thesa's inert body.

"Is he alright?" Comfrey asked.

"Quickly, help me get this stone out of the way," Rooten responded.

Together, the two badgers rolled the stone aside, glancing at each other nervously when they spotted the blood oozing from Thesa's ear.

Rooten sat back on his haunches, hardly hearing his friend's words as he watched the red pool of blood growing beside the black badger's head.

They could both see that the boar had been seriously injured.

"Come on, leave him there. We can't do anything for him now."

"But—"

"Look," Comfrey berated his friend, "it's not our fault, is it? If he'd been more careful, this wouldn't have happened to him, would it. Come on, the guards might have heard all the noise. Let's get out of here while we can."

With one last glance at Thesa, Rooten tutted, shook his head, then followed Comfrey, squeezing his way through the hole that the falling stones had uncovered.

*

Thesa groaned and eased himself to his feet, standing in the centre of the small chamber, swaying back and forth, still unsteady. His head pounded and his ear was soaked in blood. It felt as though it had been half-torn from his head.

He shook his coat, choking on the dust that rose from his matted fur. The echoes of his coughing bounced back at him, overlapping with such complexity that he was disorientated by the sounds.

As the echoes subsided, Thesa realised that they had been coming from the hole that he and the other two badgers had cleared. It sounded as though there were twenty coughing badgers waiting for him through the small opening.

Instantly Thesa grasped the fact that there was probably a large chamber on the other side of the opening. Tapping a stone against the rock wall, he tried to judge the size of the cavern from the pitch of the vibrations echoing back to him.

Yes, it was big.

Thesa stopped tapping and turned his head to listen.

What was that noise? A whisper? No, something else—

Then he had it—the echo of lapping water. There was water in the other chamber!

Poking his head into the opening, Thesa could just make out a diffused radiance at the other end of a short, narrow crack in the rock. Shaking his head in confusion, he wrinkled his snout. He was too deep underground for any light to penetrate. Something strange was at work here.

What could cause such a glow?

Thesa was wary, in truth a little frightened. For some reason the shimmering light brought with it cubhood memories of times spent alone in his sleeping chamber, when he'd been too frightened to stretch out his paw from his bed of leaves, in case some hidden monster might grab it.

Shaking his head, Thesa dismissed these adolescent feelings and smiled at his foolishness.

The hole that had been cleared at the back of the chamber was small but so was Thesa, and he had little difficulty in squeezing his way through it.

Pushing through the crack, Thesa found himself on a narrow ledge. Far beneath him was a large pool of water, and he could see no way off the ledge, other than by jumping into the water below.

His two companions must have done just that, he reasoned, otherwise they would still be waiting on the ledge for him.

Thesa looked down, making up his mind that he had no intention of doing the same thing. The surface of the liquid pulsed with an eerie glow, looking anything but inviting.

He studied the pool intently, his attention caught by the colours swirling across its surface. He'd seen such colours only once before—in a bright sunlit sky, following a heavy storm.

Beneath these colours, deep down in the water, a movement caught his eye, and he stared hard, trying to make it out.

Whatever was there, it was too far away for him to be certain what he was looking at, but never-the-less he stood transfixed, staring wide eyed at what appeared to him, to be a miniature moon.

Thesa's heart pounded and his mouth dried when the shimmering orb slowly rose to the surface of the pool, turning on its axis as it came. He glanced away from the frightening sight for a moment, trying to break the hypnotic spell that was holding him there, and as he did so, caught sight of two shapes floating on the far side of the pool.

His eyes narrowed in recognition— Comfrey and Rooten! The two badgers were obviously dead.

Badgers were good swimmers, so what had killed them? Why had they drowned? It wasn't that far a jump from the ledge to the pool.

Thesa shuddered, wrinkling his snout as one of the floating bodies slowly sank below the surface, leaving no trace, other than a gentle ripple.

Had the monsters from his cubhood dreams pulled it down into the nadir? Were they even now devouring the body in the cold depths?

Thesa turned away, checking again to see if he could find a way off the ledge. Finding none, he turned back towards the hole.

Better to wait in the chamber beyond for the guards to return, than take the chance of ending up like his two dead companions.

"Thesa," the soft whisper came from nowhere and everywhere.

Thesa stopped dead in his tracks, hunching his shoulders, as though expecting a blow to land across his back.

When the voice addressed him again, his skin puckered and his limbs trembled.

"Thesa turn around and look at me," it ordered.

Thesa did not want to look, but found himself turning anyway, reluctantly, with eyes tight shut, afraid of what he would see.

"Don't be afraid Thesa," the voice reassured him. "We mean you no harm."

Thesa opened his eyes and gasped, his breath catching in the back of his throat.

As he took in the scene, the blood in his veins pounded so hard that his ears sang, and a heavy weight filled his stomach, as though he'd over-eaten. Even the tip of his stubby tail began to tremble uncontrollably.

The surface of the pool had turned a brilliant blue: the colour of a hot sun-cycle sky. The spinning orb had risen from the water and was now hanging near the roof of the cavern, casting a strong light into every crevice.

Eyes wide, Thesa felt his jaw sag, but could do little to stop it as the orb slowly revolved before him. He could just make out faint marks on its surface, which grew ever more prominent, curling and merging until they became the face of a badger.

When the face was complete, the sphere stopped rotating, coming to a gentle rest. The countenance of a particularly attractive badger was looking out from the orb at him.

She smiled a warm greeting, much as his mother had when she'd been particularly pleased with something that he'd done as a cub.

The apparition spoke, her voice coming from the rocks around him, from the depths of the pool, from deep inside his own being.

"We need your help Thesa."

Her voice was compelling and melodious. It caressed his fears, just as his mother's touch had done when he was growing up.

"We had hoped that these two would be strong enough. It was their misfortune that they were not."

There was no regret in her voice as she spoke these words, her eyes looking towards the pool. Thesa followed with his own eyes and was just in time to see the second body slip into the depths.

The powerful stare refixed itself on Thesa once more. "You are a strong, resilient boar Thesa. You have proved that in battle. Are you also a moral one?"

The unblinking eyes—the colour of the blackest sky—pierced his mind.

"We have favoured you Thesa. Like one of our own. Now it is your turn to favour us."

Thesa stumbled backwards, his mind a jumble of incoherent thoughts. This was magic far beyond his comprehension and it terrified him so much that he could scarcely breathe. His heart fluttered wildly, like a tremulous bird trapped in his chest.

Twice he tried to answer, but could not form the words, his tongue was rigid with fear.

"Don't be afraid," the sonorous voice assuaged his fears. "My name is Soffen, I won't harm you."

The orb turned a little, allowing a new face to appear.

"And behold, this is Brock . . . and here, Grey . . . and here, Skelda."

The sphere continued to rotate, and Thesa saw the faces of many other badgers. As each one passed, it studied him intently, as though trying to unravel his psyche.

"Listen to me carefully," the one called Soffen urged as her face stopped before him once again. "You must leave here now. Search out your Yang, Thesa. Skelda will help guide you."

"My Yang?" Thesa was confused.

"Yes Thesa, your sun. You must find your sun, and together with your moon, they will forge a new beginning from the flames of the old."

Thesa shook his head, bewildered by what the apparition was saying. A sharp sorrow unexpectedly touched his heart and he felt close to panic.

"I don't understand," he muttered. "What is it that you want me to do?"

"You must help us Thesa."

The sphere turned until the one called Skelda looked down on him. "You must help me Thesa. I have done much wrong, made many mistakes, have yearned for things that I should not have yearned for. It is too late for me to put these wrongs right, but you can, if you have a mind too. All Badgerdom is threatened by the forces that I have unleashed."

Come immerse yourself in us," Soffen's voice said as her face came into view once more.

"You want me to throw myself into the pool?"

Thesa gasped at the thought, a raw fear gripping his mind. The very idea locked his body into immobility.

The sphere suddenly dimmed and dropped towards the water, where it disappeared beneath the surface. The only sign now that it had existed was the swirling kaleidoscope of colours left floating on the water.

Thesa looked over the edge of the narrow ledge, staring at the colours far below him, his mind and body fused rigid with terror, trying to convince himself that it had just been a dream, an hallucination, the results of the bang on his head from the falling rock.

*

His fall seemed to last forever, then he hit the water with a resounding splash that knocked the breath from his body.

As Thesa sank beneath the surface, the cold liquid washed the scab from the wound on his head and the water turned a translucent red. Swirling tentacles of fresh blood spread out around him, like the caresses of windswept grasses.

Striking upwards, his muscles straining with the effort, Thesa reached the surface, gasping for breath, the numbing coldness of the water sucking the air from his lungs and stinging his eyes.

He began a desperate swim for the edge of the pool, his feet paddling furiously, long bubbles of air following each paw as it stroked through the water.

Behind him the line of blood twisted away, its end lacing down into the depths, where it melded with the slowly turning orb. Unaware that his lifeblood was giving power to the forces beneath him, was in fact draining the very essence from his body, Thesa paddled on, his eyes fixed on the edge of the pool, which seemed to shift in and out of focus in time with his waning breath.

Thesa was perhaps halfway towards his objective when an unexpected lethargy suddenly gripped him: a total weakness that he could not shake off.

His head began to pound as fresh gouts of blood flowed from his wound, curling downwards into the black depths, to be sucked up by the esprit below.

Thesa was weakening fast and he began to doubt that he could make it to the edge of the pool.

"Keep swimming Thesa." The voice floated up from the nadir below. "Just a little further. It's not far. We will help you. Be brave. Fight the Black Guardian's promises, they are false."

Thesa's paw suddenly scraped against rock and he realised that he'd reached the side of the pool. Scrambling his way out of the water he shook his coat, splattering spots of phosphorescent light against the wall of the cavern as he did so. He had made it. He was alive!

"Quickly, you must go to the tunnel ahead of you." A different voice this time, but no less demanding. "Hurry there's not much time left, the storm gathers apace."

Thesa entered the tunnel, the shimmering light emanating from his still sodden fur reflecting dully from the walls around him. The ground beneath his feet trembled, and far above his head, he sensed, rather than heard, the loud clash of thunder as the wrathful clouds ripped their way through the sky.

Following the whispered directions in his head, Thesa stumbled his way along the tunnel. Dizzy from his wounds, he realised how weak he was, but found the strength from somewhere to stagger on.

He was walking along a tunnel that smelt outlandish, with walls that were smoother than they had any right to be. He stopped for a moment to peer closely at the concave surfaces.

No badger had dug this tunnel, some other entity had created it.

Was this perhaps the entrance to some dark netherworld, he wondered.

Chapter 30

Brokin took a number of quick shallow breaths, trying not to cry aloud at the pain.

He had slithered down the wall from the vent tunnel at an alarming rate, slamming into the ground with a breath-taking thump that had knocked him unconscious again.

Groaning softly, he wondered how long he'd lain there, and whether he actually had the strength to carry on with his plan. It would be so easy to just give in: find some badger to take him to the Preceptor and throw himself on his mercy.

Fortunately, apart from a sprained hock and bruised ribs, he seemed to be alright. Standing up, he shook his head, feeling so weary, so depressed. He'd had such grand plans: he'd been going to save Badachro Sett, but all he'd managed to do so far, was to nearly kill himself!

A noise from the entrance tunnel brought his mind back to the present, and he scurried behind the taproot, crouching low, so the badgers now entering the Great Chamber would not see him.

Cherva appeared, followed closely by two badgers, dragging a third between them. This boar had a pure-white coat and was dropped unceremoniously onto the floor.

Brokin could see that the boar was almost dead. Could this be the badger called Darkburst that the Preceptor had been showing such an interest in?

At that moment The Preceptor himself entered the Great Chamber and dismissed the guards.

When they had departed he turned to Cherva. "Is he still alive?" he growled.

"Barely."

"Where's Soffen? I told you that I need her here for her healing powers."

"She is nowhere to be found Preceptor."

Brokin heard footsteps approaching. When they stopped, he chanced a quick look around the taproot.

Grindel was bent over the unconscious boar, shaking him urgently. "Wake up badger! Wake up!"

There was no response from the prone figure.

"Shall I fetch some water?" Cherva asked.

"No," Grindel snapped back angrily. "Pick him up and follow me. Quickly, we haven't much time."

Flipping the smaller boar onto his broad back, Cherva followed Grindel into a low tunnel, the badger he carried scraping along the roof.

"Be careful with him, you idiot!" Grindel's voice floated back down the tunnel towards Brokin.

Once the trio were on their way, Brokin cautiously followed at a safe distance.

After travelling for some considerable time, they entered a side tunnel, the like of which Brokin had never seen before.

It was so straight and perfectly formed that he was afraid the others might glance back and see him, so he hung back, waiting until they had disappeared into the distance before setting out again.

Grindel finally led them into a huge, oddly shaped chamber. The roof of this cavern was so far above Brokin's head that he couldn't see it. The walls too were lost in the dimness of distance.

Brokin suddenly felt very frightened and cowed, afraid to venture out into the enormous space.

Grindel and Cherva had faded from sight as they moved across the smooth floor, and all too soon Brokin was left completely alone, a small trembling speck of life, lost in a vastness that threatened to overpower him.

"Is that you Brokin?"

The unexpected voice caught Brokin totally by surprise. All in an instant, he jumped, gasped, felt physically sick, and span around with surprising agility, raising a paw to fend off the expected attack.

But an attack did not materialise and Brokin squinted his eyes, trying to focus on the shadowy figure to one side of the entrance.

He had walked right past the badger in the darkness!

It took a few moments for Brokin to recognise who it was that had spoken, and in that short span, the world seemed to stand still.

Before his brain registered who had addressed him, Brokin had almost convinced himself that it was The Dark Guardian of Blackness himself come to claim him.

But it was his friend, Thesa, his eyes alive with a tranquil inner strength that Brokin had never seen there before. Wearing a serene expression, his fur twinkling with droplets of phosphorescence that sparkled oddly in the gloom, Thesa stood looking out across the vast space.

Brokin noticed at once the deep gash that disfigured his scout's head. It penetrated right down to the bone and was encrusted with half-dried blood.

Thesa appeared unaware of his injury and smiled broadly as he looked at Brokin, nodding his head slightly in acknowledgement.

"Thesa, is that really you?" Brokin's voice was cracked and shaky.

"Yes, it's me Brokin."

"I was following—" Brokin's head dropped and he struggled to breathe as a coldness from nowhere enveloped him, seeming to explore every part of his body before disappearing again.

Thesa appeared not to notice Brokin's sudden discomfort. Instead he stared out across the vast space in front of them again, a determined look in his eyes.

"I must join with him," he said in a flat voice. "Will you help me?"

"Join with him? Who? What do you mean?"

Again the coldness swirled through Brokin's body but this time it seemed to be emanating from Thesa.

Thesa raised his paw and pointed at some distant spot, as though he could see a badger standing there.

"I must join with him," he droned. "The sick one."

Brokin hesitated, feeling as though reality was somehow slipping from his grasp. Then suddenly the coldness was back again, settling around him, biting cold.

Unexpectedly he found himself filled with a new determination.

He'd come here to kill the Preceptor, so why did he hesitate? Many badgers had fought bravely and many had died so that he could accomplish this one task. Well there he was, just a short distance away!

"Stay here Thesa," Brokin ordered in a low voice, "I'll come back for you shortly."

Thesa's paw shot out and he grasped Brokin's tail in an iron grip. "No, Brokin," he insisted. "It is I that must go. You stay here."

Brokin didn't argue, because without knowing why he accepted that what his scout said was the right thing to do.

As Thesa badgers walked out into the wide space, Brokin felt free at last, as though some great pressure had been lifted from his mind. He hadn't realised until this moment just how weighed down he'd been feeling.

Along with these tenuous feelings went a shroud of coldness emanating from the cave deep below Fire Rock, the cave where even now, a beautiful orb span madly, gathering speed as its destiny neared completion.

*

In the skies high above Fire Rock, the storm seethed and boiled around itself as lightning painted sizzling images on a backdrop of black clouds.

Brockenhurst Forest had been gripped by a storm that shook the mightiest branches like mere blades of grass. Great forks of lightning snaked downwards, their passage picked out in a blinding white light.

Slowly, majestically, the storm's forces built to a crescendo high above the Brockenhurst Mountains, the sheets of rain scouring the vegetation from the land below, stripping all life from its bedrock, driving even the smallest ant from its nest.

Twice more, powerful lightning bolts struck the plateau, hurling great chunks of rock skywards, where the rapacious winds scooped them away.

Standing in the middle of Brockenhurst Forest, alone now and battered beyond recognition, stood a once proud tree, its branches long gone, stripped by the force of the storm. White sapwood wept from its wounds, huge tears shed for a million unborn seedlings.

Deep beneath the ground, where the dying tree's taproot pierced the Great Chamber, the plant writhed in agony, whipping the empty space like an angry snake.

Above ground, the wind worried away at the once great trunk, until finally it snapped with a crack that echoed across the top of the mountains.

At the great tree's weakest point, where Boddaert and his Magi had carved the magical Taproot Chamber, the mighty root parted with such pent-up energy, that huge pieces of rock were sent crashing down into the chamber below, tearing open the very heart of Brockenhurst Sett itself.

And as the once magnificent tree screamed a last, dying protest, the wind rushed into the immense scar it left, scouring away every trace of life.

Chapter 31

As the storm pounded its way into the heart of Brockenhurst Sett, in the chambers below Fire Rock the last elements of Boddaert's Magic came together.

At the same moment, deep beneath the turbulent waters of the pool, four spirits strained against their earthly bonds, causing wisps of multicoloured steam to rise from the surface where they were whipped away by the storm— feathered seed-heads on a summer breeze.

Within the spinning orb, the beings that had once walked the paths of Brockenhurst Forest, sensing the nearness of the Prime Mover, sent out their anima in a frenzied search for union, impatient for the coming bonding and rebirth, their volatile essences adding focus to the forces already gathered high above the Brockenhurst Mountains. Although now bonded together as one, they fought to gain control over each other—the sun over moon, the yin over yang, the good over evil— their energies whipping the storm to even greater heights.

As promised in Brock's prediction, the new coming was dawning, about to rise from the ashes of the old.

In the subterranean bowels of Fire Rock, five badgers held the future of Boddaert's Realm in their paws.

Grindel, the claws of one paw resting on the jagged edge of the plywood box that had become so much a part of his life since he'd discovered it, challenged Thesa with eyes that accused him of committing some despicable act.

Cherva, at his master's side, glared intently at the white badger lying on the floor, wondering what secrets lay there and whether, even now, if he could use them for his own advancement.

Thesa, rock still, unmoving, the air about him shimmering with cold, his black eyes, almost invisible in the darkness, two pin-pricks of light reflecting the phosphates covering his body, content in the knowledge that he was here to fulfil his destiny.

Between them, Darkburst, head thrown back, the white fur on his throat separated into ruffles that exposed the pink skin beneath in thin stripes.

White on Black— Sun on Moon— Yin on Yang.

Across the chamber, muscles tense with latent hostility, Brokin watched the distant tableau, his mind a turmoil of emotions. He had to stop what was about to happen. This knowledge had grown from an ambiguous thought to a certainty as the storm tore the last remnants of The Tree from the ground, shaking the large chamber around them.

Grindel slashed a sharp claw across the opening that he'd already chewed in the side of the plywood box, parting the oil-impregnated paper lining the inside, allowing them all a brief glimpse into their future.

A dull light reflected back at them from the egg-shaped objects packed tightly within the box. One fell out, spinning on the floor in a lazy circle, twinkling in the reflected light from Thesa's fur, before coming to a jerky stop.

"Don't—" Brokin shouted as Grindel made to pick the object up.

Grindel stopped, looking across the chamber at the boar who dared to order him what to do. He growled low in his throat, reaching out again.

This was the Fire Soul, Grindel was certain of it!

His eyes narrowed as he studied each piece of Boddaert's Magic in turn . . .

. . . Darkburst, his white coat stark against the darker floor— the White Coat . . .

. . . the stone brought back from the shores of Migaro Lake— the Circle of Claws . . .

. . . the strangely shaped egg— the Fire Soul.

Grindel's breathing quickened when he realised that he had only to bring these three pieces together to release the energy of Boddaert's Magic and realise his dream, a dream that had become more than life itself.

Here at last was the power that he had sought for so long, his for the taking!

But even as Grindel's paw touched the object, Brokin ran across the chamber, snatching it from his grasp. Roaring in rage, Grindel slashed Brokin with his claws, knocking him off his feet.

The object flew from Brokin's grasp, rolling across the floor until it came to rest at Cherva's feet. The big badger reached down and picked it up, backing across the chamber towards the box of WW II grenades.

This was his chance at last. He held the magic—

Grindel and Brokin fought near the entrance to the chamber, both lost to the depths of their rage, thrusting and parrying with flashing claws as they tried to kill each other.

Thesa smiled, the air from his mouth frosting the fur along his snout. He stepped forward, looking down at Darkburst before extending his paw and touching the white fur on the young badger's injured leg with the tip of

a claw. He nodded as a line of ice encased it, feeling his life force slipping from him. Then he threw himself down on Darkburst's body, covering it completely with his own.

Unaware of the events taking place around him, Cherva held the ring of the strangely shaped egg between his teeth and pulled, his eyes widening as the clip pinged free and fell to the floor. Holding the object between his paws, he sniffed the strange indentations covering its surface, wondering what they were and how they could be made to release their magic.

Unexpectedly a flash of light seared right through Cherva's body, shrapnel shredding Thesa's black fur, covering the body beneath him with a bloody mess. Then the rest of the grenades exploded, blowing Brokin and Grindel along the concrete tunnel, covering them both with tons of debris.

*

Far from Fire Rock, beyond Low Meadow, beneath a slim ash tree, at the edge of an undulating field, a pregnant sow watched the cloudless sky, wondering whether her special boar was also watching the same stars.

She hoped with all her heart that he was, because that would mean they were sharing something, even though they were so far apart.

Sighing gently, Brightness turned back to her lonely burrow.

Perhaps he would come during the next moon-cycle, or maybe the cycle after that.

*

Much farther away, where the shores of Migaro Lake lapped gently at the surrounding fields, an elderly boar stopped his eternal search for food and raised his head for a moment.

Had he heard something or were his old ears finally failing him?

But no, there on the horizon he could see something.

Slikit squinted his eyes from habit, but he needn't have bothered this time because he had no trouble making out the great fireball that had suddenly erupted into the sky, blotting out everything before it.

So strong was the blast that even the boiling storm rolled back in reaction to its hot gases, tamed for once by a stronger force.

Slikit blinked his eyes at the black clouds forming over Brockenhurst Sett and a great sadness filled the old badger's heart, as though he'd unexpectedly lost a close friend. He sat back on his haunches, wondering why he suddenly felt so alone.

Shaking his head against the coldness that had descended on him, Slikit began to grumble his way along the overgrown pathway, his cracked old voice fading as the wind from the west grew in intensity.

About the Author



Peter Barns live in the Highlands of Scotland.
Retired, he now spends his time writing
and refurbishing houses.

Connect with him online

Website: boddaert.co.uk

Blog: boddaert.co.uk

Twitter: twitter.com/peterbarns

Facebook: facebook.com/BoddaertBooks

Smashwords: smashwords.com/profile/view/boddaert

Lulu: lulu.com/spotlight/boddaert

Also available by the same author

7 Days In May

Payback

Fire Rock

Hobart at Home

Hole

Love Is

Cautionary Tales

Twittclass

Tales From The Cottage

Treebook versions

lulu.com/spotlight/boddaert

Ebook versions

smashwords.com/profile/view/boddaert