

**Kaidron
the
Warrior**

Kaidron the Warrior

Birch Tree Publishing

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Chapter 1: The Beginning

Shanka and Lamnar stuffed mouthfuls of shrew flesh into their mouth, watching the bodies of three slain squirrels being prepared for skinning. Lamnar and his band of ten score rats wore the skins of their enemies. Shanka found it was an effective way to instill fear, or respect as Shanka would say it, will make any beasts think carefully on challenging him or his rat army.

The wolf was a barbaric sight. His fur what was dark grey and white. He was caught in a fire in his cub days and most of the skin on his stomach, chest and front limbs was horribly scarred. No fur could grow on those portions. His burned flesh gave off a foul odor. Over the burns was a crisscross of ugly scars. War wounds from his many seasons of fighting. He was missing his left ear. His eyes were the color of honey.

He had fought his way to the top. Despite his evil and ruthless inclinations, he was a beast of some honor. He respected fellow fighters. Whenever he crossed paths with other warriors, be they mice, squirrels or ferrets, he would challenge them to one-on-one combat. He had never lost, but a few of the nasty scars across his body were from his duels.

He smirked as the skinning began. The squirrels were young and had courage. They had stood up to the rat horde without fear. But it was pointless in the end. Nothing was going to stop him on his trek south from his homelands in the northeast corner of the cold Borderlands.

He swiveled his yellow eyes toward the sounds of three approaching beasts. Shanka's highly sensitive nose told him that it was Ralf, Crayga and Volcram, his son, nephew and niece. They walked up to him and kneeled.

"What's your report?" he snapped. They were late.

"Father, there is a magnificent building four days' fast march southeast of here," Ralf told him.

Shanka nodded once.

“What of the land?”

“Lush and the weather is pleasant,” Volcram said. “We could make a good life there.”

Shanka said nothing. They had spent several seasons wandering on a southwesterly path. Now it was springtime, and they were on the flatlands, near the sea. He watched the distant shimmering of the ocean.

“You may have something there. Nothing to lose, at any rate. Tell no one of your discovery until I tell you.”

Chapter 2 The Tale

The cat looked out over his small piece of land. It was far removed from the life he knew as a kitten. Now, he was a farmer, resting after a long day of work.

He smiled. Then he spotted the tiny figure moving in his direction.

He squinted his eyes. He sighed. It was his daughter, Helana. Her ears were plastered against her ginger head. Thomas, son of Vaga, brother of Tranco, for that is who the cat was, shook his head in disappointment and irritation. She had promised to behave.

He stood and went out to meet her. Thomas had been sitting on the front step of the newly completed farmhouse in which he, his mate Sancram and their brood of six kittens lived. But their young ones were hardly kittens anymore.

Thomas met Helena near the entrance of the barn.

“Helena, what happened? Why are you not at the river helping your mother and siblings catch fish and forage?”

“Mum sent me home. Said I was misbehaving.”

Thomas was not surprised by this.

He looked upon the eldest of his four daughters. She was by far the most beautiful of the lot. Emerald eyes, sleek striped white and ginger fur. She was also the most wild.

“What happened, Helena?”

“It was an accident, I swear.”

“It’s always an accident with you, dear,” Thomas sighed. “Just tell me what happened.”

Helena sighed and fiddled with a loose thread on her tunic.

“I started out helping Kai with the shrimp net.”

Kaidron, or Kai as we usually called him, was the second youngest of the group and youngest son.

“The fool got it caught on a willow branch,” Helena said, scuffing her paw on the dirt path. “I told him to get out of the way, so I could get it down, but he kept trying to get it down himself. He is such a runt he couldn’t reach. I pulled it down, but he was standing too close and the net bumped into him and he fell into the water. Mum fished him out. She’s blaming me for it. I didn’t mean to! She sent me home, said I should learn to be more careful. Not be so impatient.”

“I agree with your mother on this one, Helena. You have been getting into a lot of trouble lately. You are nearly full grown. You need to learn to be more responsible.”

“How can I when I’m trapped here? I want to see the world. I want to experience life. I can’t be happy here. I heard what you and mum were talking about the time I forgot Nelga in the woods. I’m like your father. I have a wild spirit.”

Thomas said nothing. He had known for quite some time that Helena couldn’t lead the farmer’s life that he had chosen. She was like her grandfather Vaga, although she was not accustomed to violence. She had his warrior spirit. Something that Thomas had feared when he first started his family with Sancram. He feared he would produce another Tranco.

His elder sister was cruel and would from time to time be consumed by fits of insanity. He didn't want that for his young ones.

"What are you thinking about, dad?" Helena asked.

"Do you know you look exactly like your grandmother, my mother? Named after her too."

"I know I was named after her."

"She was a stealthy warrior. The Bow and arrow is her specialty. She died on our way south from the frozen north, where I was born. On our way to York."

"I didn't know you were from the northlands. You never talk about your past."

Thomas turned away.

"I suppose it's prime time you know the entire story. It's not a happy tale. Death, slavery, imprisonment. All at the paws of my father."

"Mum said he was a mighty warrior. That he died many seasons before I was born."

"She was correct about my father," Thomas said. "Vaga, King of the Thousand Eyes. Once a mighty warrior, no one could stand up to him for long. In the end, though, he was as meek as the rest of us. He was already sick and dying when she murdered him."

"Who?" Helena asked.

Thomas noticed a change come over his eldest daughter. She had never been so attentive to his words before.

"Tranco, my older sister."

"I didn't know that you had a sister. What happened to her?"

"She slowly lost her mind and was defeated in combat by a mouse known as Kaidron the Warrior."

"You've spoken of him before. We named Kai after him."

“Yes, now for the reason I brought up my family. I keep you here to keep you safe. I don’t want your life to end as Tranco’s and my father did. Along with many others. Your mother and I have done everything in our power to teach you and your brothers and sisters to embrace peace and simple living. Your siblings have all embraced that life, but not you Gen.”

Helena scowled.

“Are you saying I am turning into a crazy despot?”

“No, far from it, Helena. What I am saying is you possess too much of a warrior spirit to remain on this farm for much longer. You, I now see, belong in the outside world. Your mother and I will discuss what your future may hold. Until then, I want you to remain in your room.”

That evening, Helena sat on her bunk. She shared the room with her three sisters, Melnec, Malda, and Nelda. Helena’s two brothers, Thomas, her elder sibling, and Kai, shared the room across the hall.

Her siblings had heard about what was going on with her. Helena had stationed Malda outside the kitchen door at the bottom of the stairs. The others sat in the room with her. After half an hour, Malda reported to Helena.

“Helena, Helena, they’re talking about sending you to Kaidron the Warrior!”

Helena’s heart skipped a beat.

“Really, they want me to be trained by the warrior mouse himself?”

“That’s what it sounds like,” Melnec said. “I couldn’t hear what they were saying clearly.”

Helena jumped to her paws and looked out the window, which faced the west, over the fields. In the distance, across the River Ouse, was a green haze, Yorkshire Woods. She was giddy with excitement. Finally, she could strike out on her own.

“Are you sure that’s what you heard, Malda?” Melnec asked.

"I heard them mention Kaidron and Blackwell. It was muffled through the door. They were talking in low tones."

"That's because we know our young ones," came their mother's voice.

Malda and the others whirled around to find their parents standing in the doorway. Thomas chuckled at them.

"Malda heard correctly, Helena. We are sending you to Blackwell Abbey to be trained by Kaidron the Warrior," he said. "He will instill some discipline in you, I am sure. Your brother Thomas will go with you."

"What about the rest of us?" Malda asked.

"In a season's time we will collect them. Kaidron, you and Nelga weren't born at the time of our last visit to the abbey," Thomas said. "The rest of you were too young to remember. It will be good to see old friends again. Prepare yourselves Helena and Thomas. You leave tomorrow." Helena felt a mixture of happiness and sadness. She always had felt trapped on the farm that had been passed down through her mother's family for generations. Still, she would be sad to leave it. At least part of her would.

The original farmhouse had been recently demolished by her father, after completion of the current one two seasons earlier. It had been built after Sancramm's ancestors settled in the area over 200 seasons earlier. The barn was built by Sancramm's paternal grandfather in his young days.

She looked about the room. It was on the second floor of the cottage. Across the hall was her brothers' room. Downstairs was the kitchen and cozy eating area, a sitting room with a massive fireplace and their parents' room.

Helena peeked inside her haversack. She had put in a warm traveling cloak, an extra tunic, a packet of medicinal herbs, flint, two flasks of water, and a few small mementos. There was plenty of space for rations, which her mother was preparing.

"I must find some kind of weapon," she said to herself.

Of course, it would be nothing as impressive as Kaidron's sword. She had heard stories about it from her parents. She wished she could remember him. The Blackwellers hadn't been in the area in many seasons since they had completed the abbey.

"It sure didn't take them long to build it," she thought.

Young Thomas walked into the room.

"Did they ever say why they want me to go with you?" he asked.

"No, but I can guess. They don't me to hoof it alone. They want you to monitor me."

"Hoof it?" he laughed. "Where did you pick that up? Oh, let me guess, you've been hanging out with those coyotes."

"Yah, they are our neighbors. They don't cause any problems."

The coyote tribe, which numbered about 70, lived several miles to the west of their farm. The coyotes, while similar in body structure, were on average larger and taller than foxes, but overall sleeker. Their coat ranged in coloring from mottled tan, white and grey to yellowish. They also lacked the bush-like tails of foxes. The topside of their tails had short, stiff fur, while the undersides had long, fluffy, usually white fur. They came from the far southwest lands. They had fled a great plague, just as the robed mice who had founded Blackwell had, Helena's father had told her. They spoke with a strange, slightly drawling accent and were given to speaking in slang terms and idioms. The coyotes weren't a bad lot, but it had taken Thomas and Sancramm several seasons to gain their trust. The canines were skittish and suspicious by nature.

Now they were relatively friendly, but the coyotes preferred to keep to themselves. Except for one, a young female named Marla.

Marla was the daughter of the chieftain and Helena's close friend. Her only friend outside of her siblings.

"I'm going to miss Marla. That's for sure," Helena said.

"You know, something has been bothering me," Thomas told her.

"What?"

"If the Blackwellers and our parents are such good friends, why haven't we paid them a visit or them pay us a visit since you and I were babes?"

Helena thought this over for a few moments.

"You're right. Was there a falling out? Or were they just using mum and dad for the access to the quarry?"

"We don't know what happened. That's one reason we are sending the two of you." Their mother came bustling into the room. She had two good sized cloth tied bags. One in each paw.

"We haven't been able to go visit them because of our responsibilities here. We don't know why they have not visited us these last several seasons. Last time they were here, they had yet to get material to build their bell tower."

Sancramm handed her two nearly grown kittens the rations. They each got two apples, four oat and strawberry scones, a half loaf of corn bread, a recipe given to her by the coyotes, a wedge of acorn cheese, a shank of dried trout, and a couple carrots.

"It's a full day's journey. You won't go through all those rations, but it never hurts to plan for the unexpected. You both have at least two full canteens of water, right?"

"Yes, mum," Helena and Thomas said in unison.

"Mum, why are you sending Helena with me?" Helana asked.

“If something happens, I don’t want you to be alone. You are a strong cat, Helena, but the outside world can be a dangerous place. I want someone trustworthy by your side. Not that you aren’t trustworthy Helena.”

“Do you think Kaidron would train me?” Thomas asked.

“If you want to, and he is willing. We are sending Helena because she is obviously no longer happy here. She needs to learn to control her impulses.”

Helena walked up to the window.

“I’ll miss this place,” she said. “But, I’m glad to be leaving.”

Sancramm came up behind her daughter and hugged her.

“I’ll miss you, Helena.” She turned to her eldest son and hugged him. “I’ll miss you too.”

When their mother left, Thomas joined Helena at the window.

The setting sun filled the sky with colors. Red, orange, and yellow on the horizon. A slight wind ruffled the oat fields like a mother ruffling her kitten’s fur.

Thomas sighed.

“I never thought I would leave this place. Don’t know if I really want to.”

“Oh, come on, Thomas! Adventure and excitement!
That’s what awaits us outside of this farm.”

Helena sprung up onto Melnec’s bed. She thrust out one of her paws as if she was thrusting with a sword.

“We can learn from the best swords beast in the land.
And afterward, we can go where we please.”

She jumped across the room onto her own bed.

“We can sail down the River Ouse to the ocean. Or maybe travel up north. Or south. The sky’s the limit. We’ll be free, can’t you see?”

Chapter 3 The Quest

Morning found Helena and Thomas trying to escape the weepy embrace of their mother. Nelga was crying. The others stood back. Kai had his tunic pulled up over his nose and was snickering at them from under it.

Finally, Sancramm stepped back, sniffing. Their father approached them. He was carrying two stout yew staves. He handed one to each of them.

“Those should come in handy,” he said. He hugged them both. “You two take care of yourselves. We’ll see you in a season’s time.”

Helena and Thomas hugged their siblings and jokingly hugged each other. Everyone chuckled at this.

They waved goodbye, walking backwards until they could no longer see their family. Helena was the first to turn around to face the green haze of Yorkshire Woods in the distance.

Thomas followed suit a few moments later.

They walked in silence. Neither knowing what to talk about.

This went on for the first mile. Helena swung her pack around and felt around inside.

“I almost forgot. Dad gave me a medal he received from the badger at the abbey. Belle or something like that. Aha!”

She handed her brother a shiny object. It was beautifully crafted silver. It was in the shape of a cross, intricately carved with a wavy design along the edges. “Have you thought about how we are going to cross the river?” Thomas asked.

“I was thinking about it, but I don’t know. I’ve never been to the part of the river we will be crossing.”

Their parents had directed them to keep a southeast course.

They would have to cross the River Ouse. After trekking through the woods, they would eventually hit a clearing. Blackwell was in that clearing. “I think that will be the only tough part of our journey,” she said.

“That and convincing the Blackwellers we are friends. They haven’t had many good dealings with our kind. How will they know we are telling the truth about who our parents are?”

“Wow, it’s beautiful. Amazing handy work.”

He handed it back to Helena, who stowed it in her haversack once again.

They reached the river at midday. The section they arrived at was very wide and looked rather deep. They looked for a better crossing point. They had traveled several miles north before they found a fording spot.

“Careful Helena, mum says that pikes like to hang out in spots like this because creatures use it to cross.”

Helena swished her staff through the water, parting the reeds, looking for pike. They didn’t see any.

They crossed as quickly and quietly as they could.

The water lapped at their shoulders in the deepest section, which lasted for several yards. They held their packs above their heads and emerged from the river unscathed.

They stopped for a late lunch on the opposite bank, laying their tunics out to dry in the sun.

Helena sipped at her water and munched on some of her cornbread and acorn cheese. She looked at the tree line several paces from where they sat on the rock-strewn river bank.

“We should be at the abbey by tomorrow noon,” Helena said.

“I can’t wait to meet Kaidron.”

“Same here.”

Thomas stood, sniffing the air.

“What is it?” Helena asked, setting her food aside.

“Rain is coming.”

“Oh, yah, you’re right.”

Helena pointed to a front of dark, billowing clouds which was coming their way fast.

CRACK.

Lightning struck the ground in the distance. The wind picked up.

“Helena, we should find cover.”

“You’re probably right.”

They packed up their food and put their tunics back on.

They searched for a place to shelter the coming storm.

They found a large oak with a hollow beneath it. They dived into the cramped space and none too soon. At first the rain came down in large drops, but soon it was pelting down in sheets.

The pair had slept in shifts. Helena was taking the first watch.

After four hours, she woke her brother. The storm had not let up for a moment. Now, the river was swollen, and it caught debris.

“Good thing we crossed before stopping for lunch,” Thomas commented.

Helena curled up to get some sleep. After a while, she ended up dropping off. Thomas sat at the entrance. He could barely see the river, which was only twenty feet away.

Over the next hour, the river continued to swell, carrying with it increasing amounts of debris. The water had gone from clear to brown in color from the silt being stirred up and pushed down the river.

Now and then, lightning would light up the sky and then there would be a rumble of thunder. The lightning strikes were very close now. Thomas could only count to two between the flash and the rumble.

He thought of his family. They would be worried sick about them. He was considering returning to the farm after the storm passed, just to assure them of his and Helena’s safety.

Then they would make their way to Blackwell.

He was contemplating this when he heard the sound. He couldn't tell what it was at first. It was too far away, and it didn't repeat itself immediately. Thomas was about to dismiss it as his imagination when he heard it again, but this time it was much closer. It was the cry of a creature in distress. He poked his head out of the hole. He could see a light-colored beast coming towards him in the middle of the rushing river.

He shook Helena.

"What is it?"

"There's a creature in the river. We have to see if we can help it. Come on!"

Helena shouldered her haversack and grabbed the two cat staves. Thomas had already rushed out into the storm. She followed. She saw the distressed creature. To their horror, they recognized it. It was Marla, of the coyote tribe.

The two cats ran down the bank after her.

"Marla! Marla!" Thomas shouted.

The young coyote saw them and tried to get to the bank. The current was too strong, and she was clinging to an elm branch. She was too exhausted to swim on her own.

"Help me, help me please!" she screamed, choking on river water.

The cats raced to keep up with her.

"What do we do?" Helena asked her brother.

Thomas's mind was racing. Up ahead he saw their only chance. A huge log stuck out into the river. He snatched one of the staves from Helena and put on an extra burst of speed. Helena guessed what he was up to and did likewise. They arrived at the giant log with enough time to catch their friend as she went by.

Thomas was the tallest, so he stood as far out on the log as he could. Helena held his foot paws while clinging to the log with her extended claws. He stretched out with the staff for Marla.

She was half drowned but saw the cat ahead. She gathered the remains of her strength and reached for him.

She got her left paw around the staff, letting go of the branch. The branch continued down the river. Marla grabbed onto the staff with her right paw. Thomas was pulling her to the safety of the log when Helena gave a scream. He turned to look upstream. A log was heading directly for them.

Thomas knew he had to act fast. He pulled Marla to the log before the other log hit. It struck with tremendous force, knocking their log loose. It took their log with it on its way downstream. The three young ones clung desperately to the slick wood. Marla sobbed in despair.

All they could do was cling to the trunk and hope they would end up somewhere safe. The storm continued. Mother Nature neither cares for nor cares not for the lives of a few young ones.

Sancramm stood at the window. Clutched tightly in her paws was Thomas's small blanket from his kitten days. The storm was still going in all its fury. Thomas came up behind her. He placed his paw on her shoulder.

"They're smart cats. I'm sure that they found a safe place to sit it out. Come to bed. You've been standing here all night."

"It's just hard. Hard for a mother to let her young ones go off on their own. To just let them learn on their own and fight their own battles."

"You prepared them well, Sancramm. Don't worry. We'll soon see their smiling faces again."

"You're right, I'm sure. I'll be along. I just want to stay a few more minutes."

Chapter 4 After the Storm

Helena awoke to someone prodding her with a long, pointy object. She let out a yowl and grabbed a hold of the end nearest her. There was a frightened squeak and the sound of small paws running away.

Helena slowly sat up. She looked about her. It wasn't raining anymore, and the sun was shining brightly overhead. Thomas and Marla were lying on the bank of a still swollen river a short distance farther down.

She found that she still had the offending object in her paw. It was a thin elm stick. She looked around for its owner. There was no one in sight. Just a single set of tiny paw prints. She tossed the branch into the river and got to her paws.

Her brother was nearest, so she checked him first. He was just unconscious. Next she checked on Marla. She was awake. Helena kneeled next to her friend.

"Marla, are you alright?"

"I thought I was going to die in that river."

"Hey, so did I, but here we are, safe and sound."

She helped her friend into a sitting position.

"Come on up. I still have my haversack. Let's see if any food survived. I'm sure the water did, at least. I wouldn't drink the river water. Too silty."

The mention of water caused Marla to shudder.

"Please, I have enough water to last me ten seasons."

They looked at each other for a moment. Then they broke out laughing. It was a healing laugh after the ordeal they had just lived through.

"Wha's so funny?" Thomas asked, sitting up rubbing his head.

"I have a bump the size of a mountain on my head."

"Let me look," Helena said.

While she was looking at the bump, Marla pulled off her torn and battered kirtle. Her smock wasn't in much better shape.

She sighed. It was her favorite kirtle, her dark green one. She thought it set off her dusty yellow and grey fur. She folded it up and set it aside. She would have to ask her grandmother to make her a new one.

Helena opened the pack and emptied it. The flasks were intact, and so were the apples and carrots. Everything else was all mashed together.

After finishing administering a compress with a few of the herbs she had brought along on her brother's head, Helena examined the remains of her possessions. Her tunic and cloak could be washed.

The dried flowers and leaves her father had given her. The drawing Marla had given her when he was just a season old. She felt like crying. Her brother put his arm around her shoulders.

"They were just things, Helena. You still have the memories connected to those things. That's what really matters. I'm sure that dad and Kai would be honored just knowing you thought enough of their simple gifts and of them to bring them on your long journey." Helena wiped at her misty eyes and sniffed.

"Thanks, Thomas."

She gently placed the mementos in the river and watched as it took them away. They were parts of her old life. She was starting her new life now. She would treasure her memories, but it was time to let go of items of the past.

She turned her attention to the mementos that had survived. A small rock that was pink and looked like a rose, a few shiny pebbles, the medal, and a tiny silver dagger. She put all but the dagger back in the haversack. Using the dagger, she cut up one apple into three. Each got one slice.

"We need to ration our supplies. Who knows when we will find more," she said. "Plus, we aren't alone."

Helena pointed to the tracks that were heading in a northwesterly direction.

“Whoever it was poking me with a stick and then ran off when I woke up.”

Marla sniffed the tracks. She shook her head.

“I can’t tell what creature made these. Obviously it was a tiny creature that made them, based on the size of the tracks.”

Marla followed the tracks for a few yards. They disappeared into the tufts of short grass on the dunes on the other side of the bank, sand from the river. She returned and sat down next to her two friends.

Helena brought up an issue that had been bothering her.

“Marla, how did you end up in the river?”

“I was fishing in my logboat a few miles upstream from our village when the storm approached. As soon as I saw the clouds, I headed for home, but the storm came on fast. I was near my home when it hit. I saw the faces of the elders as I was swept by. There was nothing I or any of them could do.”

“Don’t worry, Marla. We’ll find Blackwell. Then you can head home. It’s a straight shot to my family’s farm and then onto your village,” Helena said.

“Hey, Helena,” Thomas tapped her on the shoulder.

“Look at that.”

Up to that point, Helena had been too preoccupied to notice much of her surroundings. What she saw astounded her.

It was the ocean, shimmering in the midday sun, only a mile away. The storm had taken them to the dunes by the ocean.

“Wow, I’ve never dreamed it would be so beautiful,” she said.

With a laugh, Helena trotted off toward it. The other two young ones followed her, but Thomas had some misgivings.

“I don’t know about this, you two. Shouldn’t we figure out how to get food and how to get to the abbey?”

The two females ignored him and ran on. Once he got his paws into the lapping shallows, Thomas forgot all his previous worries. The crusty beach sand differed from the silty riverbanks he was used to.

The water tickled his footpads, and the wet sand was cool and soothing. He picked up one of his paws. The breaking of the suction caused strange sucking sounds.

Helena and Marla had found a tide pool full of tiny fish, sea plants, and creatures they had never seen before. Thomas ran over to join them, marveling at the wide assortment of life and color in the small pool.

“That looks like a spider!” Thomas exclaimed, pointing to a black armored creature with eight legs and two pincer claws. Marla knew what it was.

“It’s a crab. Don’t get your paw too close. Those pincers are strong.”

“What are those things? They look like mum’s pincushion,” Helena said. She pointed to several black, spiky, round creatures grouped in one corner.

Marla shook her head.

“I’ve seen nothing like them,” she said.
“They are like underwater hedgepigs.”

Thomas straightened up.

“I think we should...”

He squinted his eyes.

“What’s wrong, Thomas,” his sister asked.

He pointed up the beach.

“Don’t you see it? There’s a dark splotch up there.”

“Maybe it’s a rock or a piece of driftwood,” Helena suggested after looking for herself. She saw it but couldn’t tell what it was.

Marla ran up a rocky outcrop just to their right. She sniffed the breeze. Helena and Thomas joined her. The shape was more visible. It was too large to be a piece of driftwood.

"I smell rats. A heavy stench of rats," Marla told them.
"There are a few other smells mixed in. Dirty sea water. I think it's a wrecked ship."

"Maybe that's where that small creature came from," Helena said.

"Maybe, maybe not," Thomas said.

"Do you think we should investigate?" Helena asked.
"They might have food."

"If they are rats, they'll be sea rats," Marla said. "They would as soon as kill us as look at us."

"Marla's right," Thomas said. "We'd best stay away from them. Let's go back to the river. Dad said that at some point a path that runs by the abbey crosses the river."

"Wait, there's movement by the ship," Helena said.

They all watched closely. Marla couldn't see much. Her eyesight was no match for the cats, but her sense of smell was much better than theirs. She sniffed.

"The scent of the other beasts is much clearer now. Mice."

"There are two creatures by the ship," Helena said. "I can't tell what they are."

"I'll look," Marla volunteered. "My coat blends right into the sand."

Slowly, Marla made her way up the beach. The two cats could barely make her out. Several minutes passed before Marla came back and reported her findings.

"The ship is wrecked. There are two very young mice there. A male and a female, both barely out of their infancy."

They look harmless enough. No rats in sight. When I got closer, I could smell additional things. Death and lots of it. I would say the two mice are the only survivors.”

Helena jumped down from the outcrop.

“Come on. Let’s see if they need help.”

“Helena, wait,” Marla called. “They’ll just be frightened of us. Two wildcats and a coyote. They’ll think I’m a fox. Every beast does. They’ll scream and run off. Best just to let them be.”

“But Marla, they are two infants on their own. They won’t last long here. They might not have any food at all. We must do something. We’ll just have to be careful. How about I approach alone? Then they won’t feel cornered.”

Helena took off for the ship. She approached cautiously. There were two young mice. They looked to be only four or five seasons old, babes. She looked at the ship closely. It was a recent wreck. Water was still dripping from the planking. The ship was high above the tide line. There were lines of portholes on the ship’s side. Oar holes. It was definitely a sea rat ship. Helena’s mother had told her tales of the horrors of what sea rats did to good creatures.

The two mice, dressed in rags and emaciated, were moving in and out of the ship’s hull through a large hole in the bow. They were piling food on the beach, eating portions of it as they did so. Helena made her move.

She walked the last several yards so that she would be immediately seen by the two mice. When they spotted her, they rushed into the ship. Helena poked her head in through the hole.

“Hello? It’s alright, I won’t hurt you. My name is Helena. I’m from the flatlands east of Yorkshire Woods.”

There was a scrabbling noise from the far end of the dark interior of the ship. Helena was hit directly on her nose by a small piece of wood.

“Go ‘way, kitty. You no capture us anna make us row,” came a squeak from the darkness.

“I’m not here to capture you. I’m here to see if you need help. Are the two of you alone? Where are your parents?”

“Paren’s dead when boat crash inna rocks.”

“I’m sorry to hear that, dear. Please come out. I promise I won’t hurt you. I’m a friendly cat.”

She heard noises coming toward her, so she stepped to the side. Two tiny baby mice came out of the ship, blinking in the light. She kneeled in front of them.

“That’s better. What’re your names?”

“I Wally,” the male said.

“I be Polly,” the female said.

“Those are fine names. My full name is Helena, but you can call me Helly.”

“Yer a big cat,” Wally told her, jumping in the air, trying to touch the top of her head.

Polly giggled and stroked Helena’s upper arm.

“Yer soft Helly.”

“Thank you, Polly. Do you want to meet my friends?”

“The big cat, the fox?” Polly asked.

“Yes, how do you know who I came here with?”

Polly snickered and put her paws over her mouth.

“I poka you wid a stick.”

“Hah, I knew I saw you, you little imp!”

Polly laughed uproariously as Helena tickled her. They all went to bring Thomas and Marla to the ship.

Thomas took to the two mice immediately. Marla was more standoffish, but not unfriendly, chuckling quietly at their antics.

"Thisa our food," Wally exclaimed when they returned to the ship. "We getted it outa the galley."

"It's a good stock, Wally," Helena said. "Can we have a little of it? Most of our food was ruined in the storm."

"OK, you our frens now," Polly said, sitting on the sand near the food. "We share wid you."

The three friends dug in. Oat biscuits, dried fish, apples and variety of food items were at their disposal, but in difference to their new friends, they only ate what they needed. As they ate, Helena asked the two mice questions.

"How did you end up on the ship?"

"Da rats raided our 'ome. Took us'n our mum'n dad," Wally told her. "We live on rat ship."

"Did they make you row?" Helena asked.

"No, we too small," Polly said. "Dey, make us work in galley. But, no let us eat food."

Thomas saw red. The thought of any beast treating anyone in that way, much less babes, infuriated him.

"We on'y 'llowed to eat scraps," Wally continued.

"What happened to the ship, rats and the oarslaves?" Helena asked. "A storm, many days ago, smashed on some rocks unner the sea," Polly told them. "We safe in galley, but udders were washed over da side an' drown."

"And the oarslaves?" Helena pressed.

Polly cried. Thomas put his paw around her shoulders.

"Dey drown. When we washed onna shore, we look," Wally said. "Dey were drowned in dere chains. We unlocked dem. We put dem inna sea to wash 'way."

Helena hugged the small mouse.

"I'm sorry about your parents, Wally. You were very kind to unlock their chains. You freed them."

“Wadda, we do now?” he asked, scrubbing at his eyes.

“You come with us,” Helena said. “There’s no sense in you two staying here on this beach until your food runs out.

We are headed to Blackwell Abbey. I am sure that they would provide you young ones with a home.”

Helena and Thomas and the three strange but welcome companions finally started their journey down the river to find the path to Blackwell. They had put as much food into Helena’s haversack as they could. Marla made two more packs from pieces of the sail and straps of leather, and they filled them full of rations.

“On to Blackwell!” Wally shouted.

They returned to the river and turned inland, traveling until the sun set. For most of the day’s trip, the two mice were skipping and scampering about in front of the three older creatures. From time to time, one or both young mice would run up to them and show them something they had found. A shell, a colorful pebble, a flower.

The two mice seemed to have an unending supply of energy.

“It must be from their lives combined on the ship,” Marla remarked. “They are making up for lost time. I would go mad if I was confined like that. My kind wouldn’t make good oarslaves I expect.”

Wally and Polly skipped stones on the gently flowing river as the other three set up camp. Marla gathered wood for a fire.

They had stopped at the edge of the dunes. In front of them stretched grassy flatlands dotted with woody shrubs.

Marla returned with dry sticks, and soon a small fire was crackling. The young mice came over and sat by it.

“Warm fire. We no know to make it, so we cold at night,” Wally told Thomas, who was heating six oatcakes by the fire. He placed slices of chive and leek cheese on the cakes.

Soon the cheese had melted, and they each took an oatcake. Thomas broke the sixth one in half and handed the two mice each a piece.

“We need to fatten you up a little.”

“Wha’ you fatten us for?” Wally asked, squinting at Thomas.

“You gorra eat us up?”

Thomas gave him a horrified look, but then he realized he was joking. He pounced on the small mouse, tickling him.

“Why you little scamp!”

The other three laughed.

After they finished eating, they bunked down for the night. Marla dug them each out a small hole in the sand to curl up in. Helena draped her traveling cloak over the two dozing mice. It was decided that she would take the first watch.

It was almost completely dark now. Countless stars shone overhead. As she lay in her hole, Helena traced patterns in the sky. She saw what looked like a billowing mist, or maybe a plume of smoke, but it sparkled.

“My grandfather used to tell us stories,” Marla whispered.

“Each of the stars is part of what he called a constellation.

The constellations form beasts, warriors, healers and scholars of old. He said that when they died, their images were put into the night sky in honor of their great deeds.”

Marla raised her paw and pointed out a series of stars.

“Landis the Powerful One, Share Brae the Weaselcleaver, Orkney the Scrivener, they are all there. My grandfather was forever staring up at the skies. He told all us young ones of the adventures of the heroes who now live in the stars.

All those warriors and wise beasts, lived long ago, before we moved to Yorkshire Wood country.

“Now, those times are over. The times when my family were skilled warriors are gone. Even the strongest warrior is powerless against the plague. We fled. I will never know the life my forefathers did.”

Marla fell silent. Helena and Thomas felt she wanted to be left to her own thoughts. Helena felt sad for her friend. It was at that moment that she realized how little she knew about the coyotes.

She listened to the soft snores of her companions. She snuggled down into the sand, still warm from the day’s heat. Several hours later, she woke her brother to relieve her.

Across the river, two pairs of sharp eyes peered at them, waiting for the hour before dawn. At that hour, their forces would be ready and they would strike.

The eyes had been watching the small group of young ones since they had returned to the river bank. One creature sniggered.

“S’foodss.”

Just before dawn, two scores of creatures silently circled the five young ones. Marla heard and saw nothing. She was not to be blamed for this. The invading creatures blended in perfectly with the surroundings.

They silently dug themselves down into the sand, leaving their heads above the surface.

The creatures drooled in anticipation.

Chapter 5 The Rat Horde

Shanka was in a foul mood. The cause sat at his paws. Ralf, the young wolf’s ears drooped. He couldn’t look his father in the eye as Shanka spoke to him.

“You disobeyed a direct order, Ralf.”

Ralf wished he could disappear. He looked furtively to his right and to his left. His cousins were on his right.

His father's top lieutenants were to his left. He knew that most of the rest of the horde was behind him.

His father stared at him from his perch on an old oak stump. For the past three days, since he and his horde had moved to the area, he had used it as a throne. He had even draped it with several mice and squirrel pelts.

"I'm sorry, father."

"Tell me what you are sorry for? Disobeying orders, being weak of heart, or are you sorry for your current mutinous thoughts?"

"I am sorry that I am not the son you wanted. I couldn't kill those mice and moles. It would have been wrong and dishonorable. They were unarmed and weak. I saw no glory in slaughtering them for nothing."

"You need to learn to follow orders, young wolf. Your mother isn't here to coddle you anymore. This is the real world. It's harsh, it's lonely," Shanka grabbed Ralf by the throat.

"And guess what, muh boy, you will do as I say. If I say jump, you will jump. If I say die, oh yes, you will die. This is my horde. All these beasts here know their place. It's time you learned yours. Shamrock!"

"Here sah!" a pudgy rat captain stepped forward.

"My son, Ralf is yours to command. Teach him respect. You can assign him any task you please. For the time being, he is not my son, just another common horde's beast."

Shanka shoved Ralf towards the rat, who cackled. Shamrock helped the young wolf up.

"Come up wid ya, young Ralf. I got plen'y for you to do!"

The horde broke up into smaller groups and went about their daily business. Shanka cradled his chin in one of his paws. His son was a worry to him. How was he one day going to lead the horde if he could not fulfill a simple task?

Volcram approached him, saluting respectfully.

“With all due respect, sir, why do you tolerate Ralf? He has routinely disobeyed you since we began this journey. Why would you think he would ever change his behavior? How can you trust him?”

Shanka glared at his niece.

“What would you have me do? Put you in line for leadership of the horde?”

“No, my lord, I know my place. I am just wary about the future. The horde will not follow a weakling. How am I and my brother going to follow a weakling? If you were to appoint him as leader, it would force me to follow him. He would hold our lives in his paws. I don’t want to die from a misdirected order.

It would force us to mutiny, I am thinking. I don’t want to kill one of my kin. It is dishonorable to even think of, but when backed into a corner, one must defend oneself. Don’t you agree, Uncle?”

“You are quite wise for one of your seasons, Volcram. I should keep my eye on you.”

“Thank you, Uncle.”

Hearing some clattering behind, Juka looked around her. It was Ralf.

The young wolf was scrambling to pick up the chopped wood he had dropped. Shamrock had stripped the black-furred wolf of his finery. His bronze breast plate with its chain mail backing, his forest green kilt, silver hilted short sword, round shield. They were all gone.

Instead, he was wearing one outfit more akin to what the common horde of beasts did, a thick leather vest over an old brown tunic and a spear.

Every time he picked up one of the hefty pieces of wood, another would slip from his paws. Horde rats stopped to help him. They didn’t want to feel the wrath of their master by not assisting his son.

Shanka sprung up and was upon the hapless rats. He struck out at them. Dust rose as Shanka knocked rats to the ground. Those who were still standing ran and hid behind trees and in shrubs. Those on the ground trembled as Shanka growled.

“When I said Ralf was to be treated as a regular hordes beast, I meant it! If I see any of you lot of scum suckers treat him special, you’ll feel my blade! Now, get about your business!”

Rats scurried in all directions. Shanka lifted his son up by his scruff and stared directly into Ralf’s golden eyes.

“That goes for you too, Ralf. Believe me, I will have no mercy for you. Get back to work.”

Shanka let his son go and stalked off, disappearing into the woods. Picking himself up, Ralf gathered the wood from the ground and scurried off.

Shanka sat on his haunches next to a stream. His yellow eyes scoured the creek bed. Minnows darted back and forth. A small cloud of sand spurted up and drifted away. A crawdad emerged from under a rock in another cloud of sand. Shanka looked up as a large black dragonfly zipped by. He sighed. Ralf was not the son he envisioned having. Shanka could sense that Ralf wanted to obey him, wanted to make him proud, but he just had the skill necessary to do so.

Shanka figured it was his fault. He let his mate Eurota, Ralf’s mother have too much power over him. But what choice did he have? Shanka was busy leading his horde and ruling the borderlands. There was no time to be a nursemaid. He didn’t know how to either. Compassion was best left to his enemies. It made things easier for him.

He made his way back to the camp. He didn’t enter it. Instead he climbed into a tall maple at the edge of the camp. He often did this, secretly watching his horde go about their day’s work.

The camp had been set up in a clearing in the woods. The trees surrounding the camp were elms and maples, with a few oaks and alders mixed in.

Some horde beasts were off foraging and hunting. Those in or around the camp were chopping wood from a felled tree on one edge of the camp, others were mending armor, weapons and tents, others were taking stock of food and drink.

Shanka reflected on the last several seasons since he and his horde had arrived in the area local beasts called Yorkshire Wood.

He had started the journey just after slaying his younger brother, Vox, the father of Crayga and Volcram. Vox had been his second in command, but Vox had become greedy. Vox wanted control of the horde. After a failed attempt on Shanka's life, Shanka had killed Vox with his bare paws, along with 20 of his supporting horde rats. He had considered killing his niece and nephew, but Ralf had pleaded for their lives.

Since the two wolves were just a season out of infancy, he had spared them. He still didn't know if he had done the right thing. Beasts had a nasty habit of hanging onto grudges in Shanka's experience.

Shanka spotted Ralf. He was helping to chop wood. Shamrock was standing nearby, leaning on his spear and sipping at a flagon of beer. On his face expressed amusement. He was enjoying being the taskmaster of the leader's son.

Ralf had a sour look on his face. He was accustomed to not being expected to perform the day-to-day tasks that the rest of the horde were expected to do. That included his two cousins. Ralf typically spent his days practicing his sword techniques, which even Lupus had to admit he was excellent in.

Shanka's eyes shifted to the commotion coming from the south edge of the camp. His horde scouts were back.

They approached Shanka's stump throne. There were five of them. Two of them carried three pelts, two moles and a mouse.

The group of rats deposited the pelts next to the stump. The leader of the horde scouts was a tall, slender female rat named Menclan. She pulled something from the pack she always had concealed beneath her blood red cloak.

She placed the green-brown bundle next to the pelts and then sat down. The other rats followed suit. Shanka dropped out of the tree and onto the stump. All the rats except Menclan jumped in surprise. Menclan stood, bowed, and then returned to her previous sitting position. In her early middle seasons, Menclan was a pretty, mottled brown and black rat with dark brown eyes. She had been with Shanka since he took over from his father in his young seasons, and she was his most trusted general and advisor. She was soft spoken, but the horde knew her to be both a brilliant and ruthless tactician.

Shanka got right to the point of his interest.

“What’s the green bundle you brought in?”

Menclan picked up and shook out what proved to be a robe.

“The mouse was wearing it, sire,” she said. “There were four beasts: the mouse wearing this unusual garb, the two moles, plus a second mouse wearing an identical robe to this one. They appeared to be gathering medicinal herbs.”

Menclan produced another bundle from her pack. She opened it to reveal a collection of fresh herbs. She continued.

“The second mouse jumped in a fast-flowing stream and escape. We followed the stream quite a way but found nothing. There was a large waterfall downstream from where the mouse went in, along with some rapids. Not much of a chance of anyone surviving a fall from that height.”

“What about the rest of your mission?” Shanka asked.

“We went back west to that path we crossed a few weeks back and followed it south. About a day’s march south we found a large abbey made of sandstone. It is surrounded by a wall. There’s a large main gate and three smaller gates, one in each of the north, south and west walls. The beasts we met in the woods were undoubtedly residents of this building. We ran into them on our way back here.”

Shanka took the robe from her and examined it. There was blood on it from the fight with his creatures. There was nothing exceptional about it.

“Did you see what the defenses were at this abbey? How many beasts were there? What kind were they?”

“We couldn’t see much else besides the walls. They were incredibly high. There was no way to know what lies within. We could only see the top few stories of the abbey itself. But, those who run abbeys are peace loving.”

Menclan examined her leader’s face.

“You knew that there was an abbey in this area, didn’t you?” she asked.

Shanka nodded once.

“Ralf, Crayga and Volcram happened upon it a while back. I made them keep silent about it. All I knew was that it was in the woods somewhere in the midlands, a grand building of grey sandstone surrounded by a high wall.”

“What do you plan on doing with this abbey? I assume something. No leader would hold on to information for so long if that leader doesn’t see some use for it.”

Shanka smirked and let out what could have been a chuckle.

“You know me well, Menclan. I see this abbey as the Promised Land. This area is a paradise. Warm sun, plentiful plant life and birds. If we can find a place where we can set up and be secure, we’d be able to rule over these lands indefinitely.”

“Now I regret killing those creatures,” Menclan said. “They could have told us anything we wanted to know. I beg your forgiveness for my lack of judgment, sire.”

Menclan bowed her head. Lupus put his paw under her chin and raised her face even to his, so he was looking into her eyes.

“Just think before you act next time. You are the one beast in this horde I would never expect to make such a foolish mistake, Menclan.”

“You are right to chastise me, sire. I won’t let it happen again.”

“I know you won’t. I dismiss you and your scouts. Rest up and get some food. I may send you back out tomorrow.”

The five rats bowed and mingled with the other horde of beasts. Shanka saw great things for himself and his horde at this abbey. Surely it had fields and orchards within its walls. That would mean a stable source of food. The creatures within would also provide an excellent source of slaves.

He’d had his fill of the rough life. It was time for him to get a taste of the simple life.

Stella, formerly of Vinderhall, and Abbess Wilma looked out over Yorkshire Wood. The last rays of sunlight peaked over the treetops. Evening had brought with it a breeze. It ruffled the trees, creating a soft, wishing sound as the leaves brushed against each other.

The Abbess sighed. Stella studied the mouse’s thin face. She didn’t need to ask what was on her mind, for it was on her own.

Brother John, Old Sumner, Burrum and young Allister, all were missing. The four abbey beasts had gone out to gather medicinal herbs for the infirmary. Brother Angus, the abbey’s elderly infirmary keeper, had led the expedition.

The two moles, Sumner and his son Burrum, were both born and raised in Yorkshire. They were helping John find new sources of herbs that they could gather and bring seeds back to the abbey to plant on the grounds.

They were hours overdue. Most everyone at the abbey knew that there was a horde of vermin present in the woods somewhere north of the abbey. Because of this, they had been forced to halt all trips to the red sandstone quarry to collect building materials for their abbey. The building was nearly complete. Just some work on the attics remained. They could not start construction on the bell tower.

"I never should have sent them out into the woods," Abbess Wilma said. "I knew the danger, but I sent them anyway. They weren't supposed to go far from the abbey."

"It's not your fault, Abbess," Stella said. "We needed those herbs. I'm sure they are alright. They probably just found someplace to hole up for the night."

The old badger pulled her light cloak tighter around her aging shoulders. Not even she could believe that.

The two friends turned at the sound of someone climbing the wall stairs. It was Kaidron. The former warrior was grey from ears to tail but was still as powerfully built as he had ever been. He was carrying a tray with food and drink on it. He set it on the battlement.

"I didn't see the two of you at dinner. I thought you might be hungry."

Abbess Wilma took one beaker from the tray. She sipped at the hot mint tea.

"Thank you, Kaidron. Any sign of the messenger you sent to St. James's?"

"Not yet, but there's no need to worry about him yet."

Kaidron had sent Channlain the squirrel to retrieve the family of his old friend Granger the Thief. Granger had gone to the gates to the Emerald Forest the previous spring. His wife, Helgar, their son Granger, his wife Sema, and their young daughter Nelly all lived in St. James's Church. Allister was their elder daughter.

Stella picked up her beaker of tea and her bowl of stew. The stew was steaming hot and filled with potatoes, celery, carrots, onions, radishes, and a few herbs and spices. Stella blew on it before eating a spoonful.

“Do you think we should send out a search party?” she asked.

“It’s too dangerous at night,” Kaidron told her. “We’ll send a group out first thing in the morning. I’ll lead it myself.”

The Abbess set her beaker down on the battlement next to the tray. Looking out over the woods north of Blackwell, her thoughts traveled back over her time in Yorkshire Wood. She was a young mouse when she arrived in Yorkshire with the other Overhedge brothers and sisters. They had sworn her in as a sister mere days before they were struck by the plague that drove them from Overhedge.

They had arrived during a time of war. It had been especially hard on her. The plague had taken her older sister, Sister Margo. Wilma had been forced to leave her behind to escape death. What she found in Yorkshire was the opposite of what she had wanted war. Now the war was over. Peace had prevailed for many seasons.

This was her fifth season as abbess, and she was Abbess Lucy’s successor. She felt she had to continue Lucy’s legacy of both kindness and strength.

“I want a sentry posted on each wall just in case they come back during the night,” she said. “Also, if there is a horde of vermin in the area, no doubt they will happen upon us, eventually. It’s a mercy they haven’t already.”

“What are we to do if they end up on our doorstep?” Stella asked. “There are few of fighting age here anymore. Lady Nicola, Skippysteve, Foremole Rattan, Granger and many others have gone to their much-deserved rest. Lady Grapps has the squirrel tribe somewhere down south. They were supposed to be back two seasons ago. We are cut off from the otter clans. We cannot defend against a horde.”

Kaidron's brow creased. He had thought of the same thing.

"Kaidron, I hate to ask this of you, but if..." The Abbess began.

"It's alright," Kaidron said. "I know what you are going to say, Abbess. It pains me, but if the vermin do come to Blackwell, I will take up my sword again. What kind of abbey dweller would I be if I was unwilling to defend my home and friends?"

"I just hope it doesn't come to that," Stella said. "I've seen enough death and destruction in my lifetime."

The Abbess hoped for the same thing, but something inside her knew that eventually, the horde would find them or they would have to actively seek out the horde. They couldn't remain in the state of limbo they were currently in for long.

"Peace sure is fleeting," The Abbess thought.

Chapter 6 Captured

Helena was awakened by the weight of a heavy rope net being thrown over her head. She saw three more nets envelope her brother and friends.

Wally and Polly screamed in fright as a net landed on them. Polly wiggled free through the spaces between the ropes, but both arms immediately grabbed her by cool, dry claws.

Polly bit and kicked out at the creature holding her, but to no avail. Her paws were tied behind her back, and she was stuffed into a coarse burlap sack.

Helena tried to cut her way through the net with her claws. The dark creatures surrounding them noticed this and pounced on her, beating her mercilessly on her head, paws, and back with stout poles and whips.

"Youse no 'scapee, cat," one of them hissed. "Less git dem to camp, quikie!"

The creatures stuffed Wally into another sack and wrapped the other three up in the nets so they couldn't move their arms.

“Youse, run now!” one creature shouted, shoving Thomas forward. They began their trek through the dunes and into scrublands. Helena, Thomas, and Marla were forced to run. The nets had been adjusted so they could move their legs freely, but their arms were secured tightly to their bodies. This position made running very difficult.

If they fell, which happened any time they tripped since they couldn’t keep their balance without use of their arms, the creatures would kick and beat them with their whips.

Helena tried to figure out who were the creatures that had captured them, but it was too dark out and the creatures appeared to have trailing plants draped over their bodies. Also, their accent wasn’t one that she recognized.

She was surprised that the creatures could see where they were going at all. Aside from four lanterns filled with buzzing fireflies, there were no other light sources. Cats were known for their exceptional night vision, but she could still just barely make out the shapes of the creatures that surrounded her.

They traveled for what seemed to be an eternity. Polly and Wally had stopped struggling and crying in the sacks some time earlier. Helena saw the first tinges of color on the east horizon. Morning will be here soon. It didn’t cheer her in the least.

Finally, they arrived at their destination, a small, grassy clearing surrounded by rock outcrops. Helena, Thomas and Marla were released from the nets and forced into a cage. The two infant mice were tied to stakes on the other side of the clearing, next to a large flat-topped stone. They lay motionless on the grass; they had both passed out while in the sacks.

It was only now that the three friends could get a look at their captors. They were brownish-grey lizards whose bodies were covered with sharp spines. Their midriffs were flattened and circular. Their legs were long and thin.

The lizards removed the plants they had disguised themselves with and went about their daily business. Many more lizards arrived at the clearing and crowded around the cage. Others tried to get near the mice, but the two lizards left to guard them warned them off.

“Youse all kep ‘way. Cramm two special for Arnett,” one of them said.

The lizards surrounding the cage poked at the three young beasts inside with sticks and muttered to one another.

“Eeze goods.”

“Fatta dem up. Fine foods.”

Others licked their scaly lips. They all had a row of small pointy teeth on their upper and lower jaws.

“They want to eat us?” Thomas said, shocked.

“How could they eat another creature?”

“It’s not easy,” Marla muttered.

“They mentioned some beast called Arnett,” Helena said.

“Their leader, do you think?”

“Most likely,” Marla responded, trying to dodge stick prods.

“They are going to eat us?” Thomas repeated.

Helena ignored him.

“We are probably safe for a while. No doubt they will try fattening us up. They won’t do anything to us until their leader shows up.”

“Another one of these strange lizards, do you think?” Marla asked. “My grandfather used to tell tales about cannibal lizards of the deserts. They were said to be covered in spines. But, they were said to live in the far south.”

Maybe these are the same lizards,” Helena said. “The plague forced your family out of the southlands, it could have done the same to them.”

“What are we going to do to escape?” Thomas asked.

“We’ll just have to wait,” Helena said. “There’s nothing we can do with all these lizards around the cage. And we have to consider what we are going to do about Wally and Polly. Ouch!”

“Stoppa talk cat,” hissed the lizard, who had poked her in the face.

Marla’s short temper snapped after a young lizard who had singled her out had poked her too many times. Marla charged the cage bars, ripping the stick out of the lizard’s claws. She struck him over his head, breaking the stick in two.

The lizard hissed in anger and pain. The other lizards surged the cage, trying to get at the coyote. They swung their canes, battering all three creatures relentlessly. Several lizards tried to open the cage and get Marla, but a loud noise like a spoon hitting a brass pot lid emanated from the rocks on the other side of the clearing caused them to freeze.

They skittered away from the cage and gathered in groups around the edges of the clearing. The sound came a few more times before the source of the noise appeared. A spiked lizard was carrying a brass plate on a cord and a brass mallet. Behind the lizard with the gong was a small procession of ten more lizards. They were the same species as the other lizards, but they had orange and black stripes painted on their backs.

The lizards lined up in a semicircle around the back of the flat boulder Wally and Polly were tied next to. They opened their mouths and let out a long, dirge-like call.

Slowly, another much larger lizard walked into the clearing. It was massive, at least three times as long as Thomas was tall. It was striped orange and black, from its wide triangular head and chunky front and back legs to its thick tail. Its scales reflected the sunlight dully and looked like small pebbles.

The giant lizard slid up onto the flat rock and briefly sniffed at the two young mice at its claws.

“Ow maneee?” it hissed.

One of the group who had captured Helena and her friends stepped forward.

“Male, female cats, a foxa, male female mice, Lor’ Arnett.”

“Catses,” Arnett hissed. “Big, fat, lotsa meats. Fatta dem up for some daysss. Dey maka good foodssss. Neva etted cat ‘fore.”

The lizard closed his eyes and appeared to fall asleep.

Two pairs of lizards walked up to the cage. They placed two large pots against the bars. They were filled with some chunky stew. Helena stuck her paw into one pot and tasted it.

“It’s some kind of vegetable stew. It’s not bad.”

Thomas, who had finally emerged from his shocked state, also tasted some.

“Yeah, it’s definitely edible. Nothing like mum’s though. Do they really expect us to eat this so they can eat us?”

One lizard tapped on one pot with his cane and then pointed to the three friends. He hissed menacingly at them. None of the prisoners moved a muscle. The lizard poked at them through the bars. They easily dodged him.

“You must do better than that if you want us to eat for you,” Marla told him.

He smiled evilly.

Turning his back to the cage, he signaled to the two lizards guarding Polly and Wally. One of them threw a wooden bucket full of water over their heads. Wally sat up and squeaked in fright at the sight of the hideous lizards surrounding him and his sister, who were also awake. Polly cried.

The two lizards produced spears which they then poised over the infant mice’s trembling bodies.

Arnett, who had apparently not been asleep and had been watching the proceedings, spoke.

“Youse will etta food alla up. No do dis, we killa babbees ‘ere ‘n’ now,” he said.

The two lizards threatening Polly and Wally hissed meaningfully at Helena and her companions. Helena dipped her paw into one pot and ate. Thomas and Marla did likewise. They finished the two pots. Another two were brought. One was filled with stew, the other with water. Polly and Wally were also forced to eat a pot of stew.

They finished the third batch of stew, and they took away the empty pot. They didn't return with another one. Helena didn't think it would be long before they brought them more. She didn't know how she was going to eat it when they did. She was completely stuffed.

The trio huddled in the middle of the cage and whispered to one another.

"How are we going to escape?" Thomas asked. "Those lizards are everywhere!"

"Plus, they have the two mice as hostages," Marla continued.

"It's hopeless," Thomas said, slouching down. "We're going to die here. Mum and dad won't know that we're dead until fall comes and then they won't even know what became of us."

"Stop that kind of thinking," Helena snapped at him. "It won't do us any good. We have to find a way. We must wait until night, though. How long do you think it will be until then?"

Thomas looked at the sky.

"Umm, maybe about twelve hours," He said. "What are you thinking?"

Helena shook her head.

"I'm not some brilliant planner. I've never been in this position before. What am I supposed to do? Don't you two have any thoughts?"

"My grandpa calls it playing possum," Marla spoke up.

Thomas looked at her quizzically.

“Playing possum? What’s that mean?” he asked, scratching his ear.

“It means we draw them in and make them make a mistake,” Marla said. “Then we attack, so to speak. They will open the cage for us. We will then go grab the mice and then we’re outta here.”

Ralf was roughly kicked awake. He had worked nearly until he dropped the day before. His paws were covered in splinters and scratches. He had finally fallen into bed at approximately midnight. The sun was just barely peaking over the east horizon.

The young wolf rolled over to face his molester. It was Shamrock. The rat captain smiled crookedly at Ralf.

“Upsidaisy, young ‘un. Time for another fun filled day wid yer ole Uncle Shamrock,” Shamrock cackled. “I got a good ‘un fer you today. You’ll love it.”

Groaning, Ralf got to his paws. He was in no hurry to start another day of forced labor.

“It’s not so bad, I guess,” he thought. “I don’t have to deal with father, Volcram or Crayga.”

Things were always tedious with them. He always had to watch what he did or what he said around them. Regular horde beasts had to as well, but it wasn’t as bad as it was for those among the ruling class. At least, that was how it felt for Ralf. He could relax amongst the horde, where he was only expected to follow orders. He wasn’t expected to decide or to lead.

Ralf grabbed an apple and munched on it as Shamrock lead him to where he would perform that day’s tasks.

Today he was to be fashioning the pelts of their most recent victims into cloaks, tunics, and tent coverings. Among the recent victims were of course the mouse and the two moles, but there was also an otter, a vole and three squirrels.

He sat amongst the old female rats that were usually in charge of the pelts. The skins had been dried on the low-hanging boughs of some trees. The eldest of the rats pulled the otter pelt down first.

“Dis one will make a good tent cover.”

She tossed it to one of the other rats. Then she pulled down one squirrel and threw it at the rat sitting next to Ralf.

“Ruppa will ‘elp you make da scurl into tunics for the young ‘uns.”

Ralf turned to look at the brown rat, Ruppa. Ruppa smiled at him, showing her toothless gums. She cackled.

“Liddle Ralf, did you tink I was dead? I was yer nurse maid when you were naught but a pup. Was yer mama’s assistant before dat.”

Ralf searched his memory for her but came up with nothing. She laughed again.

“Don’t trouble yerself none, young ‘un. Now, ‘old on ter dat end o’ de scurl. I will trace out de tunics. A scurl dis size makes tree tunics.”

Ruppa cut the pelt into three pieces long way along the length of the skin. She then directed Ralf to remove the extra fur by scraping a sharp rock along the surface.

It took him the entire day to complete the three tunics. Ralf’s paws ached. Ruppa had moved on to making a mole skin into light body armor.

“Not bad, Ralf,” Ruppa said. “You migh’ make a gud seam’tress yet.”

The female rats laughed heartily at this. Capt. Shamrock strolled up to the group.

“Wha’s so funny, grannies? Not making things too easy fer the young wolf, are yeh?”

“Oh, not at all, Cap’in,” Shamrock told him.

“We were only making a small joke. You ‘ere fer ‘im?”

“Yes, ‘is many talents are ‘bout to expand.”

Ralf followed Shamrock over to the edge of camp. The sun was nearly set. Horde rats all around him were eating and bedding down for the night. A few were preparing for sentry duty. He didn’t see his father or cousins anywhere.

Shamrock led the wolf to where Menclan sat with her four tracker rats.

“Gotta new recruit for yeh, sister,” he said. Shamrock was in fact Menclan’s elder brother. “Don’ go easy on ‘im. ‘Is lordship’s pers’nal orders.”

Menclan nodded once, and Shamrock left. She looked doubtful but knew better than to voice an objection.

“I ‘spose you, like all wolves, ‘ave a good sense o’ smell. That’ll be good for the work we’re about to do. Keep close and keep silent.”

Ralf nodded his understanding.

The group headed west until they hit a dirt path. Menclan turned to Ralf. She pointed at the path.

“Go, tell me what you smell.”

Ralf walked out onto the path and sniffed the air a few times. Then he breathed in deeply, twice. He looked north up the path. Menclan noticed the puzzled look on his face.

“What is it?” she asked.

Ralf sniffed at the air again.

“Something...something foul. I’ve smelled nothing like it before. I don’t know what it is.”

“How strong is the scent?”

“Not far. Do you want to check it out?”

“Your father sent us out here to find out what types of beasts use this path. We need to know who our enemies are. Lead on, Ralf.”

Ralf leads them up the path. After a few minutes of travel, it became apparent that the smell was coming from the lands west of the path. He informed Menclan of this. She nodded in the direction he showed her.

“Then let’s go,” she said.

They made their way through the trees in a northwesterly direction. The trees thinned out as they traveled. Eventually the forest gave way to rocky scrublands. In the dimming light, Ralf and the rats could see rocky outcrops scattered around the plains.

“The scent is definitely coming from this area,” Ralf whispered.

Menclan nodded. She could smell it now. They were very close to the source.

“Lizards,” she said. “Lots of them.”

No wonder he didn’t recognize the scent. Ralf had never encountered a lizard before.

“There’s another scent,” Ralf told her. He was just now detecting a few fresh scents. “There are other beasts among the lizards, or very close to them. Mice...and two more beasts that I have never encountered. One could be a fox, but I am not sure. It’s different somehow.”

The six beasts crept up to where they believed the lizards to be. Ralf’s nose didn’t lie. The camp sat amongst a cluster of rock outcrops.

In the dim light coming from firefly lanterns, they could see the forms of lizards all around the camp. In the center of the settlement was a cage with a cluster of shapes in the middle. To one side of the camp was another large shape. None of them could make out what it was exactly, and Ralf couldn’t tell what it was by its smell.

Ralf turned to Menclan.

“What should we do now?”

“Let’s try to get some more information on this lot and then report to your father. There are far too many for us to deal with.”

They hunkered down to watch the camp.

Chapter 7 The Chase

The sun was finally below the west horizon. The only light came from the lizards’ firefly lanterns scattered around the camp. Marla turned to her friends. She nodded, and they nodded back. It was time to put their plan in motion.

Helena lay down in the center of the cage. Marla and Thomas hunched down on either side of the door. Helena started groaning and writhing on the ground. The other two started yelling at the top of their lungs.

“Help, help, she’s sick! I think she’s contagious!”

“Help us, we don’t want to get sick too!”

Several lizards waddled up to the cage.

“Watsa matter? Shaddap tha’ noise!”

“She’s sick!” Thomas cried. “She’s gonna die and then we’re gonna die!”

“Lemme see dis.”

Like they had planned, the lizard and three others entered the cage to investigate. Marla and Thomas made their move. They dashed out of the cage, bowling over the three lizards who were standing just outside the door. They paused briefly to arm themselves with two of the lizards’ spears. Thomas followed Marla across the clearing. He could hear his sister dealing with the lizards back in the cage.

By now the other lizards had heard the commotion and many were coming out of their burrows to see what was going on. Marla and Thomas just kept running. They didn't have much time.

It had been decided that Marla would go straight for the mice, since she was the fastest runner. Thomas would provide her with cover; keep the lizards off her back. They would sweep along to the south and meet up with Helena once they had the mice.

Marla arrived at the mice's position in mere seconds. Thomas deflected the attacks of two lizards. He was stunned by his seemingly natural ability with weapons. Marla sliced through the ropes, securing Polly and Wally to the stake. They latched onto her middle.

"P'ease, get us 'way from da monster," Wally sniffed.

There was a menacing hiss, just a few paw lengths from Marla's head. She turned just in time to see Arnett coming at her, mouth agape. Something whipped by Marla's nose, clipping off the tips of a few whiskers. There was a crack, and Arnett hissed in pain, pulling his head back and up.

It was Thomas. He had hit the giant lizard across the snout with his spear, breaking it in half.

"Hurry, Marla!" he shouted.

Lizards were running towards the two from the back. Marla grabbed the two mice and slung them over either shoulder. There was an opening to the south, so she took it. Thomas turned his attention to Arnett once again. The lizard had recovered from the blow and looked as if he was preparing to strike, but he was moving sluggishly.

The young wildcat gathered all of his strength and thrust down with the broken shaft of the spear. The force of his thrust skewered the lizard's right front paw, pinning it to the ground. Arnett let out a sound somewhere between a hiss and an agonized scream.

Thomas took off after Marla. Suddenly, Helena was at his side. She shook a lizard loose from her claws. Her paws, forearms, and tunic front were covered in blood. She took out another lizard that got too close. They were several body lengths behind Marla and the mice. She was nearly to the rock cliffs on the south edge of the clearing. She dodged to her left, avoiding a lizard. The lizard fell flat on his stomach.

Thomas picked up his pace. The lizards were closing in on the coyote and her charges. Burdened as she was with the infant mice, she couldn't fight off the lizards' advances. Helena hurried after him. Thomas pounced on two lizards that were about to grab Marla from behind. Without thinking, he extended his claws and latched onto them. One in each paw.

His needle-like claws sliced through their scaly skin like butter. He threw them brutally to either side, ripping open their wounds. Helena took out another lizard, her paw balled up in a tight fist.

The trio made it to the cliffs. The cats boosted the coyote up. Marla pushed the two mice up onto the top of the cliff and scrambled up after them. She reached down and pulled Helena up. Thomas was busy fending off the group of lizards who were closing in on him with a spear he had picked up. He swung it from side to side, not letting the lizards get too close. They hissed.

He felt a paw grab him by the scruff of his neck and begin lifting him off the ground.

"Come on, Thomas! We have to go!" his sister yelled in his ear.

He turned to face the rocks and clawed his way up. Marla grabbed on to him and helped up the last few inches of the cliff. He looked down at the lizards below. A few were trying to follow them up the cliff face, while the others were splitting up into two groups. One went to the right, the other to the left. They were circling around to find an easier ascent. They would be at the small group's location in moments.

“Let’s get out of here,” Helena said to the others.

Helena grabbed up Wally from Marla and led the way south, away from the lizard camp and the rock cliffs. They ran as fast as their legs would take them. As they got farther and farther away from the camp, it got darker and darker. Soon, they could barely see the ground in front of them.

They ran into a cluster of large rocks and boulders. Without warning, Helena, who was leading the group with Wally on her back, ran slap-bang into a dark figure. The dark figure yipped in alarm, and the three creatures toppled down a gentle incline. Five more dark figures jumped out from the surrounding rocks.

Marla sniffed the air.

“Rats!”

The five rats surrounded Marla and Thomas. Thomas sprung forward and bowled over one rat. The rat just to his left ran at him with a spear. Pulling from some previously unknown store of knowledge, he dodged agilely to the side and slashed out horizontally with his claws. The rat cried out and fell to the side.

By this time, Helena had picked herself up. Marla kicked a rat to the side and joined Marla.

“Let’s go, Thomas! Now!” Helena shouted to her brother.

Thomas batted a second rat to the side and grabbed them by the paws. He pulled them along with him, past the small group of rats. The lizards had made it to the top of the cliff and clashed with the rats, killing another. The remaining rats scattered. The lizards continued their chase after their prisoners. The older trio ran as fast as they could while carrying the mice. They were managing to keep a good distance between themselves and the lizard army.

“I see a stream!” Helena shouted, pointing to the east.

The water of the stream twinkled in the starlight. It was at that point that they realized that they had a new addition to their small party, a dark furred young wolf. His tongue was lolling as

he ran doggedly beside them. He didn't appear to realize they were there. Helena considered her options. She couldn't fight him. It would slow them down and get them caught by the lizards again.

He had done nothing to them and wasn't hindering their escape. He could have been with the rats, but it seemed that they were just caught up by the lizards, just as she and her group was. She decided to just let him be.

They made it to the stream moments later. It was more than just a stream; it was more like a small river. A fast-flowing river. Helena looked at her brother and Marla, and they all nodded. They flung themselves into it, holding on tightly to each other's paws. Helena saw the wolf had done the same, but he had picked up an elm branch. They did their best to stay afloat and to keep the two mice heads above water. Thomas looked back at the bank. The lizards were running along the western bank after them, but they were not fast moving. The five young ones were quickly out pacing them.

How long the five creatures, plus the wolf, were in the stream, they didn't know. They went over a small waterfall and landed in a relatively calm pool. Coughing and spitting, the group climbed up on the eastern bank. The wolf continued with his elm branch down the stream and disappeared from sight. Helena, Thomas, Marla, and the two baby mice lay down on the muddy bank to rest after their ordeal. Before they knew it, they were asleep.

Thomas snapped back to wakefulness. At first he couldn't remember the circumstances that brought him to be lying partially submerged in bank mud, but the memories of the previous night's ordeal came back to him all at once. As he rose off the bank, the mud made a sucking, squelching sound. He brushed off some mud and then shook the others awake.

"Come on, sleeping here was foolish. Those lizards could still catch up with us."

Helena and Marla pulled the baby mice to their paws. The mice thought the squelching noises were hysterical. The cats and coyote looked about them at the surrounding area. They were in an old forest. The morning sun shone down onto the floor in beams through the thick foliage of the ancient elms, oaks and willows. Helena looked down stream.

“It’s flowing north,” she said. “I’m sure that is where that river, River Ouse, is. I remember dad saying that the path that runs north to south past Blackwell crosses River Ouse somewhere north of the Abbey. I say we follow this stream north and then follow the river east to the path.”

“It’s as good a plan as any,” Marla said. “Let’s go.”

Before they left the pool below the waterfall, they covered their tracks and marks they had left in the mud. With Polly perched on Helena’s shoulders and Wally on Thomas’s, the small group set off upstream, sticking to the knee height shallows to avoid leaving prints. The sun was just reaching the western horizon when the friends reached River Ouse. They lay down under a rock outcrop along the river. Their stomachs were growling, but their need for sleep was more urgent. Moments after settling down, they were blind to the world.

Ralf shook his fur free of water. He finally dragged himself out of the stream. He vowed to never go into the water again. He straightened up and took stock of his surroundings. He had made it to the end of the stream where it met up with a river. Ralf assumed the river was the one he had crossed the evening before.

Ralf climbed into an oak and looked around. He knew the horde was not far off. He spotted the faint smoke columns from campfires to the north and slightly east of his position. He jumped down and crossed the river. As he walked, he shuddered, but not from the cold of the river water. He was thinking of what his father would do once he returned to camp empty pawed and minus Menclan and her trackers, which he assumed had been killed by the spiked lizards.

Chapter 8 Kaidron Meets the Wild Cats

As the morning sun peaked over the horizon, Kaidron the Warrior was standing at the open front gate of the Abbey with a small group of Abbey dwellers. His sword was strapped to his still strong back. Abbess Wilma, Stella, Helgar, Sema and infant Nelly were among the larger group who were standing just inside the gate facing Kaidron, Granger the Thief's son, Brother Davey and Susan, a young female red squirrel. They were going out to search for the four missing Abbey beasts.

Brother Davey was a young watervole who had grown up in the forests north of the Abbey. Susan was from the area north of Blackwell. Kaidron himself had found her as a tiny orphan in the remains of her family's drey. They had been killed by marauding spiked lizards. Luckily for Susan, she had a habit of wandering off without her parents' permission to explore the woods and had not been home at the time of the attack. Both would be useful when searching the vast forest of Yorkshire Wood.

"We will report in at sunset," Kaidron told the Abbess, "regardless of the result. We won't stop searching until we find them."

Sema clasped his and her husband's paws.

"You bring my Allister home," she said.

"Ome," Nelly mimicked, clutching her mother's skirt with both paws.

Granger kissed his wife and daughter.

"I will," he told them.

Kaidron put his paw on the younger mouse's shoulder.

"We should get going."

He nodded to Abbess Wilma, who nodded back. She turned to the larger group standing behind her and spread her arms wide.

"Let's go back to the abbey. There is much work to be done today. Breakfast needs to be started."

The main group said their goodbyes to the quartet and followed the Abbess back inside the walls. Kaidron turned to his companions and then stepped out front of them, facing north.

“No time to waste.”

All four were armed. Kaidron with his sword, Susan with a powerful bow made of yew and a quiver of goose-feathered arrows, Granger with a long dagger and sling and slingstones, and Brother Davey with a staff and sling and stones.

The group started off up the path. The once beautiful Yorkshire Woods had taken on a sinister tone. It was as if there was something demonic lurking just inside the darkness of the tree cover. Susan looked at the wall of trees suspiciously. She hadn't been in the woods since Kaidron had found her the previous summer. She had been just a season and a half out of her dizziness when her parents were killed. She had seen the spiked lizards; her parents were already dead when she arrived. Her mum and dad were lying on their stomachs next to each other.

The lizards were standing in a circle around them.

She remembered her father had told her about them not long before his death. They had come up from the south, along with him and his family and the brothers and sisters of Overhedge. The lizards were known as horny toads. Why they were called toads when they were lizards was more than he could explain. Their leader was a different species of lizard. Her father had never seen him, but he had heard about him. He was a creature known as a gila monster, a giant with orange and black knob-like scales.

But it was what she learned about that monstrous lizard, that dreadful day that terrified her the most. She had seen him; he was much slower than his followers. Bushes and small trees cracked as he trod over them. The horny toads parted to let him through. He sniffed at her parents and then said something in a low tone to his minions. One lizard responded. Whatever he said, it made the monster furious.

With a speed that surprised Susan, the lizard whipped his head around and took the offender in his mouth and flipped over onto his back. He chewed on the horny toad briefly and then spit him out. The smaller lizard got to his feet. He didn't seem terribly hurt, just a few scratches from the monster's teeth.

Then he fell to all fours, vomiting. He began to shake, and his body seized and contorted into horrifying positions. After several moments, the lizard lay still, dead. The gila monster bared his fangs in an evil smile. Yellow slimy fluid slid down his teeth and dripped out of his mouth. It was then that the young squirrel realized that the giant lizard was venomous. Susan shuddered.

"Are you alright, Susan?" Brother Davey asked.

"Yes, I'm fine. Just...thinking about something."

They had passed the northwest corner of the Abbey and were surrounded by trees on either side. They had talked to Sister Ottris, who worked in the Infirmary with Allister and Brother John. She told them they were planning on travelling up to the River Ouse and work their way back. Kaidron knew they had left the Abbey by way of the path, so it had been decided they would start their search at the ford where the river and the path crossed some distance up the path. It would take them a few hours to walk there.

"Keep an eye out for anything out of the ordinary," Kaidron said. "It could be a clue."

They walked on for some time in silence. Granger was too worried about his daughter to be much of a conversationalist, Brother Davey was quiet to begin with, Kaidron was concentrating on signs of danger and Susan was preoccupied with her own thoughts. This didn't go unnoticed by the Warrior mouse. Kaidron had become quite attached to the young squirrel maid and felt a fatherly protectiveness towards her.

"Are you alright?" he asked.

"Yes, I was thinking about my parents and the last time I saw them. Do you think we will run into those lizards?"

Kaidron shook his head.

“Who knows? There is always that danger. Those lizards have forced us to halt construction on the Abbey.”

“Do you think that the lizards who killed my parents killed our friends?”

“I don’t know.”

“There’s something I told no one about that day, the day my parents died.”

“What was that?”

“It was too horrible to talk about. It scared me to think of it...I saw the lizards’ leader. It wasn’t a horny toad like they were. It was a monster. My father described a giant lizard from his homeland. It was called a gila monster. What I saw was a gila monster. It was orange and black with knobby scales and a thick tail and triangular head. I saw it kill one of its minions that day. The gila monster was venomous, like an adder.”

Kaidron scowled.

“I’m sorry I said nothing about it before. I wasn’t sure that it wasn’t just a nightmare for a long time.”

“It’s alright, Susan,” Kaidron said, putting a strong paw on her shoulder. “Whenever you’re ready to talk about it, I will be here to listen. But, how ‘bout we don’t jump to conclusions about what happened to our friends. They could just have been waylaid. Maybe they found an extra abundance of herbs and have their paws full gathering them.”

“Right, so it will be good that we came looking for them. They might need help to carry their stuff,” Susan said, trying to smile.

“Right,” Kaidron nodded.

Kaidron and Granger passed a look. They weren't terribly hopeful. The moles and mice were only supposed to be gone for a day. It had been nearly three now. Their chances of being unharmed were small. All four of them had good heads on their shoulders and wouldn't stay out later than they said they would. They wouldn't want to cause others to worry. Something had to have happened to them to keep them from returning.

They reached the ford across River Yorkshire. They had found no signs of their friends. None of them were surprised. The heavy storm from two evenings before would have washed any paw prints away. The ford was also a mess. Rubbish from further up the river was scattered along the banks and water plants had been flattened and uprooted. They split up into two groups. Kaidron and Susan went to the west, Granger and Brother Davey went to the east. They agreed to walk in either direction until noon and then return to the path. Susan would then return to the Abbey to report on any findings.

Kaidron and Susan had been walking about an hour when Susan's sharp eyes caught the glint of something in the flattened grass just up the bank from the river on the opposite side from them. She climbed up into a tall weeping willow and jumped into an elm on the other side. She parted the grass on the bank and picked something up from the dirt beneath it. She sprung back to Kaidron's side after making her way back to the willow. She pulled out a small object from her belt pouch.

It was a pair of wire-rimmed crystal glasses. One lens was missing, and the other was cracked all the way across. Kaidron took the delicate object from the squirrel maid.

"Brother John has a pair just like these," he said matter-of-factly. He scowled and looked downstream and then across the stream.

"Do you think they were caught up in the storm?"

"It's a strong possibility. Let's continue downriver."

They continued in silence, keeping an eye out for any more signs of the missing abbey dwellers. Susan sprung up into the trees. She reasoned she could get a better view of anymore clues or of her friends from there. After some time, they heard the roar of a massive waterfall. It wasn't long before they found it. It was as tall as the outer walls of the Abbey. Susan made her way to the pool below by springing from tree to tree while Kaidron climbed down the steep hill just to the side of the falls. She was waiting for him at the bottom. They continued.

Kaidron smelled it first, the pungent smell of death. He turned to Susan who was lollygagging behind him, playing in the trees as a young squirrel will do on a warm day.

"Susan, stay where you are," but it was too late. She had smelled it.

The color drained from her pretty face, and her bottom lip quivered. Her thoughts flashed back to the day her parents died. It had smelled like that. Blood had a metallic smell to it, like a rusty hinge or nail.

"What's d-d-dead," she managed.

"I don't know. It's from farther downstream. You stay here, I'll check it out."

Kaidron hurried along the bank. Susan swallowed. Her throat was dry, and her lips felt cracked and raw.

"No," she thought. "I can't let this get the better of me. Kaidron is strong. He doesn't let this bother him. I have always wanted to be like him."

She took a deep breath and dropped to the bank. She walked resolutely down the river. The smell became stronger as she walked. Just ahead, she spotted Kaidron. He was kneeled on the bank. There was a shape just on the other side of him. Susan covered her nose with a paw and quickened her pace. Her knees collapsed beneath her once she realized what the form was. It was the skinless corpse of a large mole.

Kaidron turned to look at her. Even he looked disturbed, but there was a fire of rage in his eyes.

"I told you to stay back there, Susan."

"I'm sorry. Is that Burrum?"

Kaidron raised his paw. A leather crafted belt was clutched in his fist. It was Burrum's belt. He had spent a season carving images of abbey life into it. Susan felt tears flowing down her face.

"It can't be...who would do such a thing?"

Kaidron said nothing. He got up and found a long dead branch on the bank. He trimmed the twigs off it and cut it into two lengths. He handed one piece to Susan.

"We will bury him here."

"Cou-couldn't we take him back to the Abbey?"

"It would upset the brothers and sisters to see this. We'll do our best for him here."

They found a soft patch under a young oak and began to dig. It took them some time, but eventually they had made a nice deep resting place for their young friend. Using ropes Susan fashioned out of long grass, they moved the skinned mole and lowered him into the hole. They placed the leather belt on Burrum's body and filled in the remaining space with soil, placing a stone cairn of river rocks on top. Susan picked a bouquet of irises that were growing on the bank and placed them on the cairn. She looked at Kaidron. His face was stone. She looked back at the mound of stones. The squirrel maid composed a short poem in honor of her friend:

"Back to the soil, whence you came,

"Now our lives will never be the same.

"Find peace in the sunny pastures,

"We will be together again when it is our turns."

She paused.

“Well, pastures and turns almost rhyme.”

Kaidron placed a gentle paw on her shoulder and smiled.

“I’m sure Burrum is honored by what you said...Let’s keep going. The others may still be around here and alive.”

Susan nodded, and they started off downstream.

She was dubious that they would find any of their friends still alive. The river didn’t skin her friend. Only another beast could do something like that. She just hoped he had been dead before he had been skinned.

Marla was the first to awaken. She was extremely thirsty, so she went to the riverbank and drank deeply for several seconds. When she pulled her muzzle out of the shallows, she spotted some water cress growing just a paw length to the right of her. She gathered it and returned to her friends. After she woke them, they gorged themselves on the tangy plant. The cats and mice drank at the river before the entire group headed upstream.

Wally and Polly even found the energy to pick up a twig each and use them to combat imaginary lizards. Helena marveled at how fast they could recover and even face the creatures that had so scared them the night before with bravado.

They had been walking for an hour, had even found a pear tree with luscious ripe fruit along the way, when Polly had run some distance ahead of them. No one thought anything of it. She had been sternly instructed to stay on the bank and not to go into the water or stray inland. They could also hear her batting at the shrubbery with her stick, hurling insults at her lizard foes. Then suddenly she let out a frightened squeak and ran back to the primary group. Marla caught the scared mouse in her arms.

“What’s the matter?”

Thomas caught Wally up in his paws and kept him close as they gathered around Polly and Marla. Polly pointed back the way she had come.

“Th-th-there’s a mon’ser in da water! It reached fo’ me!”

“Marla, stay with the mice,” Helena said. “Thomas, let’s check it out.”

Helena and her brother headed up stream slowly, keeping to the undergrowth. They followed Polly’s paw prints. They found what had scared the mouse soon enough. It was only a short distance from where they had been. The wildcats hurried out of the bushes.

“Marla, come quick! It’s alright!” Thomas shouted as he and his sister dragged the poor creature out of the shallows.

It was a pretty mouse maid. She was clad in a torn and bloody green robe. Her paws were bare and rubbed raw from the river rocks lining the riverbed. She was barely alive and fading fast. Helena did a quick examination of the mouse’s body. She had suffered a horrible wound to her narrow chest. The wildcat clasped her wet paw. The mouse looked up at her weakly.

Marla gasped as she arrived at her friends’ sides. The young mice hid behind her. Not sure what to make of the mouse lying on the bank. The mouse maid coughed.

“I’m Allister...from Blackwell...”

“What happened to you, Allister?” Helena asked.

“Rats...we were attacked...I jumped in river...others...you have to save them...*cough*...”

“I’ll try,” Helena promised.

“Two moles...one Brother...five rats...stabbed me...my father...will be worried...tell...”

“I’ll tell him we found you,” tears welled up in Helena’s eyes, “We’ll take you back to the Abbey.”

Allister coughed one last time and then laid still; her eyes clouded over. Helena and her friends said nothing for some time. Silent tears ran down Thomas’s striped face. Finally, Helena stood up and gathered the tall bank grass.

“We can use this to make a sling. Come on, we need to get to the Abbey quickly.”

They spent the next hour weaving the grass into a sling. Once it was finished, they carefully loaded Allister into it. Helena and Thomas took on carrying it. Marla managed the baby mice, who now were no longer interested in their games. Even they were affected by the somber mood of the little procession. None of the friends said a word.

Susan had taken to the trees again, but she was more serious. The somber mood after finding her friend had not diminished. Kaidron's face was expressionless. Susan had a harder time hiding her emotions. She was feeling a mixture of sadness and anger. How could anyone do that to another living creature? She couldn't imagine what type of beast that was.

They hadn't walked far when the squirrel's keen ears picked up movement from up ahead. There was a small group of creatures coming towards them along the bank. Susan saw that Kaidron had noticed it, too. The warrior mouse jumped into the cover of a laural bush and laid in wait. Susan concealed herself in the darkness of the branches of a large oak tree. They waited, but not for long. They soon saw the group of animals who had been coming towards them.

Susan felt a thrill of fear. The group comprised two young wildcats and a creature that looked like a large fox. She, of course, had never seen a wildcat before and had only heard stories of them. These stories were not favorable of the cats, deservedly or not. She looked down at where Kaidron had hidden himself. He was no longer visible. She didn't know if he was still there or had moved. She looked back to the procession and her blood turned cold before it boiled. Aster was lying on a stretcher, being carried by the two wildcats. She got out her bow and selected an arrow. She pointed it at the female cat who was leading the group.

"This is for Burrum," she thought.

Before she could lose the arrow, she saw Kaidron waving at her. He motioned for her to wait. He had moved to a point further up the bank.

He ducked under a holly bush and jumped out in front of the group. The male cat jumped slightly in surprise. The baby mice who were with the fox squeaked in fright, the fox remained motionless and the female cat's tail puffed up.

When Kaidron had seen the pair of cats, his mind went back to the war. The female was the spitting image of Taska. The male looked like Thomas. It was as if he had gone back to that time.

"Who are you and have you done to that young mouse?" he asked in an authoritative voice.

The female's hackles rose.

"Are you accusing us of killing her? We did not. We were taking her back to her home. She didn't want her family to worry about her."

Kaidron calmed down somewhat.

"What are your names? Where are you from?"

It was then that they saw the mouse's sword and realized who he was.

"You-you're Kaidron the Warrior! We were coming to the Abbey to be taught by you but got caught in the storm and washed down river. Our parents thought we could learn to be more responsible if you were to instruct us in warrior craft and discipline."

"Yes, I'm Kaidron. You still haven't explained who you are... unless...are you part of Thomas's and Sancramm's brood?"

"Yes, we are," Helena said. "My name is Helena, and this is my brother Thomas."

It all made sense.

"I remember you," Kaidron said, smiling a little. "It's been a long time since I've seen you two."

Helena motioned to Marla and the mice.

“This is Marla. She is one of the coyote tribe that live up the river from us. During the night of the storm, she was caught in the river. We saw her, and we all got caught in it as we tried to help her. The mice are Wally and Polly, survivors of a pirate ship that ran aground that same night.”

They placed the sling with Allister on the ground as Kiadron joined them. He looked sadly down at the fallen mouse. From up in her tree, Susan was crying. Allister was a good friend of hers. She jumped down and joined the group at their beckoning. He introduced her.

“What happened to her?” Kaidron asked.

“We found her dying in the shallows just downriver,” Thomas said. “She said that a group of five rats attacked her. They stabbed her and she jumped in the river to escape. There was nothing we could do for her. She didn’t want her family to worry about her and said she was from Blackwell. We were taking her home.”

“At least she didn’t die alone,” Susan sniffed. “She was with three others, an older mouse and two moles. We found one mole; he was dead. We buried him. Did you see the other two?”

“No, we didn’t see anyone else,” Thomas said.

“Let’s head back to the Abbey,” Kaidron said. “Granger and Brother should be back by the ford by now. It’s about noon.”

The group returned to the ford. They arrived before the other two Abbey beasts. They sat on the bank, Susan and the baby mice dipping their paws in the cool water. The others had weaved another grass mat to place over Allister. They had just finished when Granger and Brother Davey arrived. They looked exhausted and were covered in dust. Their paws were caked with mud. They had quizzical looks on their faces. Kaidron did a quick introduction of his new friends before getting into more serious matters.

He led Granger over to the mat covered form and lifted up the cover. Granger's legs gave out from under him once he saw his daughter.

"No..." he rasped.

Tears were running freely down his face.

He clasped his daughter's paw, managing to speak.

"What happened?"

Helena told the mouse how they had found her and what Allister had said before she died. Kaidron added in the information he had gathered from the body of Burrum. Kaidron and Davey briefly discussed whether to retrieve the young mole to bring back to the Abbey. He left him for the time being.

The beasts who killed their friends could still be in the area, along with the lizards who had captured Helena and her brother and friends.

Granger stood and grabbed the front end of the stretcher his daughter was lying on. His face was pale and had a hollow look to them.

"Let's get going. Best to get these young 'uns to safety."

Kaidron picked up the other end of the stretcher, leaving Brother Davey and Susan to lead the way back to the Abbey.

Menclan was the only one of her trackers to make it back to camp. She was also without Ralf. He was being punished by his father by being made to work as a lowly horde's beast, but that didn't excuse her from making sure he returned safely. She dreaded the meeting she was about to have with Shanka, but there was no way around it. She found him on his stump, eating a roasted bird. It looked to be a dove.

Shanka put the bird down and looked the female rat over. She had a scattering of minor cuts and scratches along her body and a black eye.

"What happened? Where is Ralf?"

“We did some scouting, as you ordered. We came upon a horde of strange lizards. I have never seen their kind before. They were brown, with spines all over their body. They appeared to be led by a massive orange and black striped lizard. Anyway, we had just arrived when two wildcats, a strange fox and two baby mice ran right into us. They had been prisoners of the lizards. One cat slew Marvill, but they were more concerned with escaping than fighting with us. I ordered a retreat, but the lizards were already on us. They killed my three rats. I don’t know the fate of your son, my lord. He took off in the same direction as the cats and fox.”

“Did you try finding him later?”

“Yes, lord. I tracked him and the other beasts to a stream to the east of where we were separated. I lost the trail there. I think he jumped into the water to escape the reptiles. I found the lizards’ tracks for some distance downstream. They appear to have tried to catch up with their prey. I followed the stream to the river just south of us but couldn’t find any trail that was definitively Ralf’s. At the river, I found some tracks. They probably belonged to the cats, fox, and mice. I reported in and grabbed some supplies and more trackers once I reached the river.”

Shanka nodded.

“Very well. Get supplies and a party together. Don’t come back until you have some information, or I send for you. This could be a test for Ralf. A test of his resourcefulness. If he is found dead, then I suppose he failed the test. He couldn’t keep himself alive. If he returns here on his own, it will mean that he has grown up some, become more resourceful. If you find him, it will mean that he will still need more discipline.”

Menclan bowed.

“You are wise, Lord Lupus. I will get ready to leave at once.”

Menclan hurried off. Shanka picked up the dove and looked at it.

He almost hoped that Ralf would be dead so he could set his sights on preparing his nephew for leadership of the horde. Ralf was a disappointment.

“How could I produce a son like that?” he thought.

The scarred wolf watched as Menclan had some cooks put together travelling packs with rations and went amongst his horde to select new trackers. She never took out all of them at once in case something bad happened, like what had happened the night before. She ended up with five young rats, four males, one female. The male, Joro, was her son. Menclan spoke briefly to her selected crew and headed to the southeastern edge of the camp. She saluted to Shanka as she walked by him.

Menclan lead her group to the river and then west along its bank, back towards where the stream met up with it. They would start from there. They reached the stream at about midmorning. Unbeknownst to them, they just missed running into Helena and her group as they walked down the other side of the river. The six rats got to work. They moved their way slowly down the bank. Jerome beckoned his mother over to examine some marks he had found.

Menclan hurried over. Jerome had found a battered old tree limb. There were deep claw marks in the bark. Menclan looked underneath the branch. There was grass rooted under it. The branch was a new addition.

“Some beast was definitely holding onto this branch,” she said. “Probably used as a float in the river, but it could have been any beast.”

As she said this, she pulled a small hunk of black fur from a crack in the bark where it had been caught. She sniffed it. The water had washed any scent from it.

“Hey, boss!” a rat called from just north of them.

Menclan, Jerome, and the rest of the group joined him.

He pointed to the ground. There were clearly visible paw prints in the dirt. They were canine. Too large to be a fox, so it had to be a wolf.

“Let’s follow them,” Menclan said.

There were no more paw prints in the loam and leaf cover of the surrounding forest, but the creature who made the prints could still be easily tracked from the bent twigs and grass and bruised foliage that he had foolishly left behind. Whoever the beast was, he was heading north. Menclan noted the camp was in that direction.

A bedraggled Ralf burst out of the forest and into the clearing where the horde had set up camp. There was an immediate uproar from the horde’s rats at his appearance. He was directed to see his father, who was sitting on his stump, flagged on either side by Crayga and Volcram. Shanka’s expression was unreadable.

“I’m glad you have returned to us. I sent Menclan after you. She is the only one rat in your group to have survived.”

Ralf nodded.

“I expect as much. We were taken by surprise. I also expect Menclan already told you what happened.”

“She did. I would like your version of events though, and I would like to know how you made it back here.”

“I jumped into a stream with a log and floated my way back to the river. From there, I walked back. I left a trail in case Menclan was looking for me. I know you are disappointed that we lost five excellent trackers, and that I did nothing to stop it. I didn’t kill a single beast while they slaughtered us. If I had tried, I would not be standing here. It was a no-win situation.”

“So it was. Use it as a lesson. Go get yourself cleaned up and fed. As soon as Menclan returns, you will go back out with her.”

Ralf dipped his head and walked off towards the cooking fires. Volcram stepped forward once Ralf was out of earshot.

“You let him off easy, what’s going on, uncle?”

“I am having him be the one that spies on Blackwell. It will be there before he decides whether he is with me or against me. I’m sure that the creatures there are peaceful but will defend their home if pressed. He will have to decide whether he will kill those creatures or not. They are not warriors, not in a place like that. He will decide where his loyalty lies.”

Chapter 9 Entering Blackwell Abbey

It was a sullen group that arrived at the Abbey gates at midafternoon. Sema and Helgar were inconsolable once they learned the fate of Allister. The young Abbey mouse was placed in a room in the cellar until a place in the cemetery could be made for her.

The Abbey beasts were friendly to Helena and her group and tried to make them feel welcome, but the death of Allister had affected them all. The cats, coyote and mice were shown to an empty room in the dormitories where they could rest and clean themselves up.

The three older ones washed their faces, paws and foot paws, and the cats combed out their silky fur. Marla was content just to shake out her coat and brush her tail. The three young ones bathed Polly and Wally, much to the mice’s chagrin.

Once everyone was bathed, the group headed downstairs and ended up in Colton Hall, a spacious room just down a short stairway from Kitts Hole. Kitts Hole was far larger than Colton Hall. The kitchen, storerooms and cellar were accessed by a hall off of Colton Hall. Delicious aromas were wafting through that hallway from the kitchen, which was a cacophony of voices and clanking pots and pans. The two mice immediately took off in that direction. Helena, Thomas and Marla stayed in Colton Hall.

They slowly walked around the room. There was a large table with benches and chairs in the center of the room, and an enormous fireplace against one wall. All around them were ledges cut into the sandstone wall. The ledges were padded with cushions and thick rugs. The walls above the highest ledges were adorned with carved woodlanders and images of plants and birds.

As the trio was walking around admiring the carvings, Abbess Wilma entered the room. She said nothing, just let them marvel at the sight.

"I've never seen a room this big," Thomas said. "Mum's and Dad's accounts of Blackwell are definite understatements."

"Yes, this place still leaves me with a sense of awe," the Abbess spoke up.

The mouse joined the young Woodlanders.

"I wanted to thank you for what you did, helping Aster, comforting her, and bringing her home to us. What horror happened in those woods! I'm glad that you young ones are safe and did not encounter the beasts that did that horrible thing to Allister and Burrum, and I assume Brother John and Old Sumner...Ah, Friar Rallam just put the tray on the table, thank you."

The plump shrew placed an earthenware tray brimming with food and drink on the large table in the middle of the room. He chuckled.

"I seem to have two new kitchen helpers," he said.

"Oh, Polly and Wally," Helena said. "They aren't getting in the way, are they?"

"Oh, no, not at all. I've put them to work helping make the apple crumble for dinner tonight."

Tollum paused and turned to Abbess Wilma.

"So, it is true? Burrum was found skinned?"

Wilma nodded once.

"Yes, it is. It has been decided that Burrum will remain where Kaidron and Susan buried him. It would be too upsetting for the other Blackwell to see him as a skinned corpse."

"First strange lizards in the woods and now skinning rats? What will be next? We fought a great war to be free of villainy and death, but it just comes back. What is the point?"

Abbess Wilma clasped his paw.

“The point is to stand up to and stop these creatures who do bad things. I don’t know why these evil creatures keep appearing. It would do them better to be good and live honest lives, but they choose to be nasty and prey on others. But no matter how many times these creatures raise their wretched heads, it is our duty to stop them and provide a safe harbor for other beasts against them. That is why this Abbey was built.”

Rallam nodded solemnly and returned to the kitchen. The three young ones sat at the table and dug in. There were onion, celery and mushroom pasties, wheat rolls with pear preserves, water-cress salad, apple cider and dandelion cordial. Wilma sat with them, but let the hungry trio enjoy the meal on their own. She asked them to tell her their story.

Helena did most of the talking. Wilma rarely interrupted. She wasn’t surprised to hear that Helena and Thomas were the young of Thomas and Sancramm. She had already guessed this.

She expressed her admiration for the trio’s courage and resourcefulness in escaping the lizards and braving the rapids to save Marla. Helena ended her narrative with telling the Abbess of their reason for being away from home, to ask Kaidron the Warrior to train them in the warrior’s way.

“Kaidron has never taken a student. Granger did, his own son, but never Kaidron. Susan, that young squirrel maid that was with Kaidron, is the closest beast he ever had to an apprentice. Over the seasons since the war with your aunt’s horde, he has tried to distance himself from fighting. He will always take up his sword in defense of the Abbey if the need arose, but it is always reluctantly.”

Helena felt defeated. All she had been through looked to be for nothing. She didn’t know what she was going to do next. She had come all this way to be trained, and now it looked like that would not happen.

“Should I just go home?” she thought.

Helena stood up so suddenly the other beasts in the room jumped.

“No,” she said. “I’ve not come this far to give up now!”

Helena flew out of Colton Hall and up the stairs.

She found Kaidron standing on the wall over the main gate.

He greeted her with a nod. He didn’t seem surprised that she had approached him in the manner she had. She was nearly out of breath.

“The Abbess said you were retired and wouldn’t train any beast.”

“She was telling you the truth.”

“Would you pick up your sword at all?”

“Yes, in defense of this Abbey and those within it.”

“Good, there is a horrible evil out there. Cannibal lizards and creatures that would skin the innocent. They wear the skins, you realize. I think I ran into the guilty beasts. Rats and wolves. They are who you will fight. You can’t do it on your own, you know. You will help from skilled beasts.”

Kaidron stared at the horizon and frowned.

“You’re right, Helena,” he sighed. “We don’t have many here at the Abbey that could fight...Very well, young cat, I will train you and your brother. The coyote if she so desires.”

Helena bowed.

“Thank you, Kaidron. We will be diligent students.”

“You are a wise, Helena.”

Chapter 10 Training Begins

Two days had passed since Kaidron had agreed to train the two wildcats and coyote. Marla had postponed her training until she could return to her tribe to let them know she was alive and to contact Thomas and Sancramm so they knew too that their young ones were safe. She promised to return in a few days.

Before she left, Abbess Wilma pulled the coyote aside.

“Marla, it may be wise to have your tribe and the wildcats return with you to the Abbey. Who knows how far the rats will roam. I’m sure your family can defend themselves, but Thomas’s and Helena’s family are alone. It would be safe for them here.”

Marla nodded.

“I had thought of this as well. I will discuss it with Thomas and Sancramm and bring it up with my tribe. The cats would probably come, but I doubt my tribe would. We keep to ourselves.”

“I know. I was friends with a young female coyote in the Southern Lands until the plague drove us all out.”

“My tribe is from the south. I was born here, though. What was the coyote’s name, do you remember?”

“Her name was Molly.”

“My grandmother’s name is Molly. She still lives. She was born with a floppy left ear, other than that she resembles me.”

A smile spread over the Abbess’ greying features.

“She was my friend. I hope you can convince your tribe to join us.”

Marla nodded once again and started off for her home.

Ralf silently walked ahead of the group of tracker rats. He didn’t need them to show him the way. He had been the one to discover the large sandstone building.

Menclan was walking about three yards behind him. The rest followed closely behind her. While she remained silent, her five trackers were muttering to one another. She wasn't surprised by their topic of conversation.

"Can you believe this?" Jerome, Menclan's son and apprentice, said. "Bein' led by that brat?"

The female rat sniggered.

"Tis only cuz 'e be the leader's son. If 'e was a lowly rat, 'e'd be killed."

"Pro'ly by one o' 'is own," another rat chimed in.

"Wot do ya think we're gonna find at this fortress or wotever it be?"

"Oo knows? Sure's 'ell it'll be better dan trekin" round dis jungle or da wastelands."

"Hmmm, Jerome, wot do yah tink will be in the fortress?"

"Dunno, but I 'ope there is a great pond where I can soak me paws, gardens as far as the eye can see and apples, many apples."

"Den we'll have ta keep some Woodlanders 'round. I wunder if dere be any wildcats still 'round dese parts?"

This got Menclans' attention.

"Wildcats, what do you mean wildcats?" she asked, grabbing the tracker rat.

The tracker was known as Lanny.

"Afore I was part o' Shanka' 'orde, I was part o' a small raiding party. De leader was a ferret by de name o' Follo. He was from dese lands, born an' raised. 'E was part of Vega's of the Hundred Eyes horde. 'E was the ruler o' a fortress called Ramden. De Woodlanders overdrew 'is 'orde and destroyed his castle. Follo went nort' after dat. 'E didn't know what became o' de two last cats or most of de oder 'orderbeasts."

“Wildcats!” Ralf exclaimed. “I saw them as I was fleeing the lizard horde. Didn’t stop to talk with them, though. I wouldn’t think they would associate with Woodlanders.”

“I saw them too,” Menclan said. “Saw one kill one of my trackers with its claws alone. They would most likely be the lords of this fortress. The mice and moles we saw could have been the cats’ slaves, but they looked well cared for. Let’s press on. We will find out the truth about this building when we get there.”

She released Lanny and walked on ahead of the others. After several paces, she stopped dead and turned to face Ralf, face pale. She bowed.

“Sorry, sir,” she said, still bowing. “I’m used to leading, I beg your forgiveness.”

“Rise Menclan,” he said. “My father places great trust in you. I feel it is well placed. You have never failed him and know your duties. He was right about having me learn from you. You may walk with me. I know the way though.”

The middle-seasoned rat fell in step with the young wolf. The five other rats followed at a suitable distance. The wolf and rat didn’t speak for some time. Ralf finally broke his silence.

“You think I’m a fool, just like the others. I heard what Jerome said.”

“You did?” Menclan said, rather unsurely.

“Yes, but I don’t care. All the other horde rats say it. I admit, I have done nothing to make the horde think differently than they do. A rat such as you would think that. Shamrock made me feel like a fool. My father, cousins, they all share the same opinion of me.”

Menclan pondered what to say next for a moment.”

“My lord, I will tell you something if I may,” Ralf nodded. “I learned to track from my mother and her brother. They were very hard on me. We come from a long line of trackers and hunters. I had a lot to live up to. I always felt that I was walking on needles. My brother, while a skilled fighter, never had the intelligence for my work. They were very hard on me, and I hated them for it for a long time. It took me a long time to figure out it is the ones who are the hardest on you that care the most.”

Ralf thought about this for a moment. Then he chuckled.

“Even Shamrock?”

“Well, maybe not Shamrock,” Menclan chuckled.

Silent as a wraith, Menclan made her way around the south side of the high, grey sandstone wall. She could see the eaves of a tall building peeking over the top of the wall. There were mice and few hedgehogs and squirrels positioned every so often around the perimeter. They were all scanning the forests and plains that surrounded them. They knew that there was a threat to them nearby. Menclan met up with her trackers and Ralf in a dense part of Yorkshire Woods, far from the eyes of the mice.

“Do ya t’ink dey know we are ‘ere?” a tracker asked. “Dey are on de alert.”

Menclan nodded grimly.

“They may ‘ave found the bodies of those mice and moles from a few days back...Or they knew of the lizards me and Ralf saw.”

“Wot’s our next step?” Jerome asked her.

The female rat motioned to the young wolf.

“What do you want us to do, sire?”

“I say we wait until nightfall and then use a tree I found that is close to the wall to enter the grounds. We still don’t know what type of building this is or what types of creatures live here. This could be a wildcat’s fortress or a resting place for peaceful travelers. We have no way of knowing with the amount of information we have now.”

Menclan nodded.

“This sounds like a sound plan. I think only two of us should go inside. I’ll go.”

“I’ll go,” Menclan said. “It’s my plan. I will share the danger. Menclan and I will go in at midnight. If we aren’t back by the first streaks of dawn, make your way back to the horde and give them what information you can.”

Shhhthunk!

“Good shot!” Susan exclaimed. “A hair’s breadth from a bullseye!”

Thomas smiled widely and held his long bow up proudly. He had never used a bow before, but he had discovered that he had a natural gift for it.

“Thomas, try this!”

Helena tossed a rye bread roll high into the air. In a flash, Thomas had put an arrow to his bowstring and aimed.

Shhthiip!

The roll was jerked out of the sky and hit the ground with a soft bounce. Helena picked it up from where it landed. The arrow had pierced the center of the bread and gone part of the way through, exiting the other side.

“Wow!” Kaidron exclaimed from behind the group of young ones. “Thomas, you are a natural.”

“Thank you, sir,” the young wildcat said. “I did a bit of archery back on the farm. Me and my father chased off a group of ravens one time.”

“I helped too,” Helena spoke up, “but, I was outclassed by him with the bow.”

Kaidron picked up a wood staff and got into a fighting stance.

“Helena, pick up that staff and face me.”

The wildcat did as we bid her. Choosing a strong staff that fit her height, she tested its heft quickly before standing to face the warrior mouse.

“Take the staff in both your paws,” Kaidron instructed. “Make sure that there is an equal distance from the end to your paw, between your paws, and from your other paw to the other end. Then raise your staff horizontally above your head and bend your knees with your paws wide apart.”

Helena followed his instructions and stood still for a few moments.

“Why am I doing this, Kaidron?” she asked.

Kaidron answered by rushing at her and bringing his staff down overhead in a chopping motion. Helena was quick on her feet and saw it coming, so she braced herself with the staff in the position she had been directed to have it in. She could easily deflect Kaidron’s swing.

“Now lower your staff to a ready position, like you were holding a walking stick.”

Helena held the staff in one paw with one end of it on the ground. Kaidron walked a few paces from her and turned to face her again. He gripped his staff in both paws and gazed at the cat.

“Ready, go!” he shouted and rushed forward towards Helena.

Helena raised her staff above her head again in the two-handed position from before, catching Kaidron’s downward chopping staff. They repeated this exercise several more times, each time Kaidron increased the power of his swing.

“Very good, Helena,” he said, putting one end of his staff on the ground. “What you are doing is called a rising block. It is a very simple defense technique. Probably the simplest.”

“Can I practice striking at you?”

“Striking is far easier than blocking. We will keep working on blocking for the time being. An excellent defense can throw an opponent off balance and open them up for an attack.”

"I see," Helena nodded, "An excellent defense is the best offense."

Kaidron smiled.

"Exactly, and I hope by the end of this day I can teach you how to do this effectively."

"I will take anything you teach me to heart, Kaidron. But staves are different from swords. I was hoping to learn sword fighting techniques."

"In time, I will teach you that, but you must master the staff first. It will help you with building up your strength and balance. Now, resume the rising block position."

Tendrils of orange and pink streaked the sky as the sun made its final appearance for the day. Kaidron and Helena had been sparring with their staves all day. Abbey dwellers of all shapes and sizes had stopped to watch them on and off. It was a rare treat to see their champion in action these days, even if it was just with a staff.

Helena had mastered the rising block and learned how to counterattack with a reverse strike, fake striking Kaidron in the side of his head. She also learned a leg sweep, a downward thrust attack, and a variety of other blocks that would defend against attacks from other angles besides from above.

"Tomorrow we will work on more attack moves and how to work on the various attack techniques we worked on today with these fresh attacks. Also, Thomas," the male wildcat looked over to the warrior mouse from where he was stringing a bow, "I will work with you on these techniques as well once I get Helena started on them. Helena, I want you to teach our more able-bodied Abbey dwellers how to use the staff.

Granger has been teaching them to use a sling and stones"

Thomas gave a smile of excitement.

"Yes, Kaidron," he said happily. "I will be an attentive student."

"I'm sure you will. Now, we have been working hard all day. Let's get some food and a good night's sleep."

As he was walking behind the two wildcats to the Kitts Hole, Susan ran to join Kaidron. She had been instructing Thomas and a few squirrels and mice in archery all day but had kept one of her eyes on Kaidron and Helena.

"Helena is very good."

"Yes, she is."

"Why haven't you ever taught me to fight with a sword? I've asked at least fifty score times."

"Susan," Kaidron sighed. "Violence is something that worms its way into your soul. Once you have looked into the eyes of someone you have killed, you will be changed. I don't want that for you. I've watched beasts I cared deeply about be killed horribly and I know you have too...Your parents, Burrum and Allister. I want better for you than what I have had to go through."

Susan's shoulders slumped and she stopped walking. Kaidron stopped walking.

"But Kaidron, you can't ignore what's going on outside our Abbey. I want to protect our home and our friends."

Kaidron opened his mouth to say something.

"You're teaching Helena. How is she different? How are Thomas and Marla different?"

"Susan, they're..."

"They're what? Vermin? Is that what you were going to say? They are prone to violence already, so what difference does teaching them more violence make? Are you just making them into weapons to use against their own kind, other vermin?"

Kaidron sighed again.

"I don't know, maybe."

Susan shook her head and stepped away from her mentor.

“You know that those two wildcats aren’t like that. You do them a disservice by treating them like that. The senior Thomas is your friend. He would never teach his young ones to be vermin.”

Kaidron closed his eyes and scratched the fur at the back of his head.

“You’re right, you’re right. Very well, Susan. I will teach you tomorrow along with Thomas as long as you are at a point with your archery lessons that you can leave your pupils to practice on their own.”

Susan started walking towards the Kitts Hole again.

“They are doing very well already. I will begin my lessons with you and Thomas tomorrow then.”

The last rays of the sun were disappearing over the tops of Yorkshire Wood. Ralf, Menclan and their tracker rats were all hunkered down in the shrubs near Blackwell’s north wall. Their sharp eyes were tracking and noting the goings on with the guards on the wall tops.

Menclan used a rock to sharpen her claws. Sharper claws made it easier for her to climb trees. She had instructed the young wolf to do the same and to get some rest. She and Ralf were going to be scaling the tree he had found and scouting the Abbey’s grounds. They had both agreed that there would be no plundering or killing while on the grounds. It would tip them off someone was watching them.

Menclan looked to Ralf. His eyes were half closed, but he was still watching the battlements above them. This would be his ultimate test, Menclan figured. If he messed this up, she knew his father would do away with him.

Chapter 11 Marla's First Duel

Marla adjusted the haversack on her shoulders and cleared the branches of shrubs out of her way with her yew staff. The Blackwell had provided her with enough food for three days, but she knew it wouldn't take her that long to reach the wildcats' family farm and her tribe's village. Thinking back on her adventures of the past few days, she figured she couldn't be too prepared.

Walking along in a northwestern direction, she thought about those recent adventures. Shaking her head, she remembered how she had commented to her mother just the day before she was caught up on the river how her life was so humdrum.

Marla had told her she just wanted some adventure in her life.

"I guess I got my wish," Marla thought.

The young coyote hummed to herself as she walked along. The sun glared through the foliage over her head, and the light flickered as she walked. Listening to the pretty trilling of the nearby birds, the young coyote tried to come up with a song to match their tune.

"The forest in spring,

What a pretty thing,

The flowers bloom,

As I try to stay in tune.

"Easily the birds sing aloud,

While they fly by a cloud,

And I struggle along,

To try and think up this song."

"My, my, my, a moosical foxy," came a shrill voice from the surrounding bushes, "I ne'er met one wit' such a nice voice."

Marla about jumped out of her skin at the suddenness of the voice. Quickly, she jumped up onto a low tree branch.

She scanned the surrounding area but saw no beast. She held herself very still, letting the other beast make a move.

“Hah, oo tink ‘iding in te trees will save oo.”

Marla tried to pinpoint the source of the voice, but she was having no luck. Whoever it was, he was not staying in one place and was not making any sound. She sniffed the air. The smell of tree pollen was very strong there. She couldn’t tell what type of beast it was.

“Fortunata, oo shoulda known better tan to come back to dis place.”

Fortunata? Mari thought. Who is that?

“You have mistaken me for someone else, sir. My name is Marla and I am a coyote, not a fox.”

A high-pitched cackle emanated from the bushes to her left.

“Lies, lies. Oo was always the tricky one, Fortunata. Ol’ Vaga ne’er shoulda trusted ya.”

“I don’t know what you are talking about.”

Vaga? She thought. Why is that name familiar?

“Did Tranco send ya affer me? Oo can’t get me!”

Tranco! Marla thought. That was Helena and Thomas’s aunt. He must be a remnant of her army.

“No one sent me,” Marla said. “I was just passing through. I didn’t know you were here. Please, I’ll just be on my way. I didn’t mean to disturb you.”

“Hah!” the creature shrieked. “Oo are a liar! Oo will ne’er leave ‘ere alive!”

Marla took her yew staff in both paws and crouched back against the tree trunk. Her heartbeat quickly in her chest as she strained to concentrate on listening for any sounds the other beast might make. The world around her seemed to slow down.

Then, almost too late, she heard it. Fast, she twisted her head to the side, feeling a sting to her right ear.

Sssshh-chunk!

The sound came from immediately next to the right side of her head. She turned to look quickly to find a small dagger sticking out of the trunk. Her paw went to her ear. The dagger had caught the side of it, slicing a gouge into the outside edge.

Just in time, Marla caught the pungent scent of the beast from above her and brought her staff above her head, deflecting the rusty sword that had been swinging at her head. With significant force, she pushed the attack away from her. He fell back from the tree branch and landed on all fours on the forest floor.

It was an ancient, one-eyed ferret. When he stood back up onto his hind paws, Marla could see that his back was crooked. He smiled wickedly at her, showing toothless black gums.

“Ya fight well, Craddock. I will enjoy dis!”

From under his ratty cloak, he threw a weighted rope up at Marla. She had no choice but to jump to the ground as the rope wrapped around the branch where she had just been standing. She landed on the ground a few paw strides from the ferret. He cackled at her and charged forward.

Marla brought her staff up and deflected his initial strike. The vermin immediately swung his sword back around. Marla jumped backwards, just barely avoiding the slashing blade as it whizzed past her stomach. She brought her staff back up into a defensive position, taking note that there were now two deep gouges into the wood. She realized her weapon wouldn't take more than a few more hits before it was cut to pieces.

I have to get away from this crazy ferret!

Marla thought frantically.

She jumped backwards twice more as the ferret made his attacks. She realized his attacks were clumsy. Whether it was from age or injury, he was not a quick fighter. He had been lucky before when he had the art of surprise on his side.

Now that he was out in the open, she felt she could get the upper paw.

If only I could find a better weapon, she thought. Or take his.

Crack!

Now her one yew staff became two yew sticks as she deflected one last swing from the ferret. Rushing forward, Marla slammed her stick down on the vermin's paw. He yowled in pain and grabbed his paw, dropping his sword. Marla grabbed for it and shoved the ferret backwards. He stumbled and fell onto his side as Marla picked up his sword.

Flicking one of his wrists, he threw his weighted rope at the coyote. As he had hoped, it missed the sword's blade and wrapped around the female's neck; the weight smacking her hard on her left temple. Quickly, he pulled the rope hard, not giving her a chance to use her sword on it.

Marla was momentarily stunned by the weight and was easily pulled down to all fours, dropping the sword. The rope cinched tightly around her neck, cutting off both air and blood flow to her brain. Her ability to think seemed to leave her. The sound of the ferret's nasty cackling laugh brought her back to her current reality, and she saw that he had retrieved his sword and was raising it to strike her down.

Doing the only thing that came to her clouded mind, she sprung forward as hard as she could and pulled at the rope around her neck. The rusty sword sliced through a shoulder strap on her haversack but missed hitting her. She bowled into the ferret's legs, taking him to the ground. The impact with the forest floor knocked the wind out of the elderly vermin. Marla, sitting on his legs, grabbed the sword from his hands and struck him in the head with it to knock him out. It only took her one hit to do the job.

Once he was out cold, Marla sighed in relief and slouched forward. She felt totally exhausted. This was her first hand-to-hand fight. She briefly considered slaying the ferret but felt that it wouldn't be an honorable thing to do. She wanted to fit in with the Blackwell, prove to them she wasn't a vermin. She knew no Blackweller would ever kill any beast in their sleep, vermin or not.

Rising to her paws, she unwound the rope from around her neck. She carefully rubbed her paw over her now tender throat. She found it was painful to swallow. Not wanting the ferret to wake up and attack her again, she wasted no more time and dragged him to a nearby elm tree. She untangled the rest of the rope from beneath his cloak and tied him securely to the trunk.

She quickly mended the strap of her haversack and tucked the rusty sword in her belt. Remembering the ferret's initial attack, she retrieved the dagger from the trunk of the tree and tucked it into her sling stone pouch on her belt.

Seeing the dagger reminded her of the cut on her ear. Touching it with her paw, she found it was still bleeding. She was about to dig her canteen of water out of her pack when she heard the ferret groan and stir.

Deciding that it was best she left his vicinity; she ran off in a northwestern direction, as she had been before being attacked. She didn't stop running until she came to a decent sized stream. The water was clear and reflective, so Marla stopped and look at her ear.

She set her haversack down on the stream bank and peered into the water. The slice was deep. Marla was sure that if not properly set, it would leave a permanent split in her ear. That was not something that she relished. She was quite proud of her perfectly triangular ears. She washed the slice and was deciding on what the best course of action would be to set her ear when she felt a sharp object press into her back.

Oh no, not the ferret again! She thought.

“Who are you? Why are you trespassin’ on my stream?” came a deep voice that definitely did not belong to the ferret. “Put yore paws in the air!”

Marla sighed and raised her paws where the other creature could see them. She just couldn’t catch a break.

“Look, I just stopped to treat my ear. A nasty ol’ ferret attacked me for no reason a ways southeast of here. I’m just trying to get back to my tribe and wildcat neighbors. There is a nasty horde of cannibal lizards and a nasty horde of rats in Yorkshire Wood and I am just trying to warn them. You’d do best to find somewhere to hide. Blackwell possibly if they will take you.”

“Huh, you were attacked by crazy ol’ Ringworm, were ya? Did you kill ‘im?”

“No, I just knocked him out and tied him to a tree. Didn’t seem right to slay an unconscious creature.”

“A fox with a conscience? I never thought I’d see that.”

“I’m not a fox, I’m a coyote.”

“A coyote? Turn around, keep your paws raised.”

Marla carefully turned to face the other beast, keeping her paws in his line of sight. For a split second, she was puzzled. There was no one there, but a soft ‘ahem’ caught her attention and made her look down. A male shrew about the same age as her was standing next to her, haversack a few paw lengths up the bank from her. He had a no nonsense look on his face and still had his short rapier extended in her direction.

“Huh, indeed you are not a fox. My apologies. Still, what are you doin’ here? This stream is part of Gollum territory.”

“I am just passin’ through on the way to my village. That ferret attacked me and sliced my ear. He nearly strangled me. I did not know I was trespassing. I will be on my way peacefully.”

There was a soft rustling from the reeds behind the young shrew, and an older male shrew emerged. He looked a lot like the young shrew.

“Son, you caught a coyote, I see. A rare find in these parts, I must say.”

“You are the first beast I’ve run into that knew I was a coyote on sight,” Marla said. “I always have to correct new acquaintances.”

The elder shrew Wedflak

“I am not surprised, child. I know the coyote tribe northwest of here. Are you one of them?”

“I am. My grandfather is the chieftain. My name is Marla.”

“Well, I’ll be.” The shrew laughed, slapping his thigh. “Ol’ Lanny is yore gran’pappy! A small forest this is.”

He turned to the younger shrew.

“You can lower yore blade, Kallgor. This coyote is a friend.”

“Why have I never met this so-called friend?” Kallgor asked, sheathing his rapier.

“The coyotes are very private beasts. In my younger days we helped them find a site for their village and traded ‘em some log boats for some fine metal. I believe yore rapier was made with some of that metal.”

The elder shrew turned to Marla.

“I’m Sam la Sam. I’m the leader of the Gossom. Come, our hideout is not far from ‘ere. You need to get yore ear looked at.”

It was a short walk to the Gossom’s hideout up the stream. Sam la Sam led her through a cave entrance that was some distance from the stream and concealed by hanging vines.

She followed the two shrews down a winding stone passage, which eventually opened into an enormous cavern. There were shrews of all ages scattered around. Some were tending kitchen fires. Others were tending to drying racks where strips of fish were hung. Still others were milling around small fires, drinking, eating, and laughing. Young shrews ducked and weaved around the other Gollum members as they played their young one games.

Sam La Sam got the attention of a young female shrew who was sitting at a fire with several other young females. They had been working together on a large quilt and sipping a sweet-smelling drink from dainty cups.

The female shrew walked over to the trio, eyeing Marla warily. Marla had been getting that same look from all the adults in the cave. The youngest of the shrews had raced past her to get a closer look at her.

“Uncle Sam La Sam, who is this newcomer?” the young female asked.

“Unice, this is Marla of the Yorkshire coyote tribe,” Sam La Sam responded. “I know you’ve never met ‘em, but you have undoubtedly heard of them. Marla, this is my niece, Wallden.

Marla extended a paw to shake the shrew’s paw, but realized it was covered in blood from her ear, so she just nodded in greeting to Wallden. The shrew curtsied.

“Yes, I ‘ave ‘eard of yore tribe, Marla,” she said. “Yore ear looks dreadful. That’s the reason you summoned me, Uncle, I take it?”

“Yes it is.” Sam La Sam turned to Marla. “Wallden is an excellent healer. She will get ya stitched up. Then we’ll get ya fed.”

Marla thanked the shrew leader and followed Wallden to a side corridor. Wallden had her step into an infirmary just off that corridor.

“Please sit on this bed ‘ere,” she directed, handing the coyote a clean cloth to put on her ear. “Tis still bleedin’ some.”

Marla took the cloth and sat on the bed as directed. She gently put the cloth to her ear, wincing. Even the slight pressure she was putting on the wound stung. She watched and waited without complaint as Wallden gathered medical supplies and placed them on a small, wheeled cart. Once the shrew had all her supplies together, she pushed the cart up next to the bed Marla was sitting in. She then placed a stool in front of the coyote. Before sitting down, Wallden rinsed her paws in a bowl of water and toweled them dry.

The shrew set to work, warning Marla that it might sting and asking that she refrain from biting her.

“That’s the same warning I ‘ave to give our young’uns when I patch up their scrapes and bruises. They’re quite bitey.”

Marla chuckled.

“I’ll do my best.”

Wallden cleaned the caked blood from Marla’s ear first and then dabbed on some ointment onto the cut and the area surrounding it. She explained it would both help numb the injury and keep it from festering.

“I’m going to be putting some stitches in your ear in just a moment. Even with the numbing agent, it will hurt some. Please do your best to bear it.”

“I’ll do my best.”

Wallden threaded a tiny bone needle. It was at this moment that Sam La Sam joined the pair in the Infirmary. The female shrew gently took ahold of Marla’s ear and set to work. To help distract her, Sam La Sam asked her.

“So, what brings you so far from your tribe?”

Marla told him about being swept away from her village in the storm and being saved by her wildcat friends. Sam La Sam stated he knew the cats well and would stop by to chat with the elder Thomas and Sancramm from time to time. Marla told him about her experiences leading up to going to Blackwell and of her current mission.

“I’d ‘eard tell of a rat horde coming into the Yorkshire area, but I ‘adn’t ‘eard of any cannibal lizards. Hmm, I think a trip to the Abbey is in order for my tribe. Tis been a few seasons since our last visit.”

Wallden finished tying off the stitches and put a dressing on the coyote’s ear. Marla stood once Wallden had stepped away with her cart.

“Come Marla, I’ll show you the way to our kitchens,” Sam La Sam said. “They’re always open.”

Marla followed the shrew leader to the main cavern and to one of the kitchen fires. There was a rather fat female shrew in charge of that fire, and she joyfully filled a bowl of shrimp, wild carrot, watercress and a bit of hotroot to give it a kick, or so the shrew cook claimed. The young coyote was handed a sizable chunk of freshly made wheat bread for dipping. There were strawberry scones and a bowl of apples, pears and plums on the nearby table she sat at.

Sam La Sam joined her, along with Kallgor and Wallden. They all had a bowl of the soup and a hunk of bread. Kallgor had also brought along four beakers of apple cider for all of them. They all dug into their food. Marla found the soup spicy, but nothing she couldn’t handle, and she thought it was delicious. The cider and scones were also delicious.

“You should stay the night ‘ere,” Sam La Sam told her, swallowing the last of his soup. “Give yore ear a chance to do some ‘earlin.’”

“Yes, I think that would be best. I’m quite tired from my fight with the ferret. He kept referring to me as Craddock. From what he said, it sounds like she was a fox from Tranco’s army.”

“Yes, Ringworm is a remnant of ‘er ole ‘orde,” Sam La Sam said. “‘E’s as old as ‘is is crazy. We’ve made a few attempts to catch ‘im, but ‘e’s a slippery feller.”

“‘E’s a menace to beasts travelling alone, but not so much to us,” Wallden said. “It’d be a good thing when ‘e’s slain or dies o’ old age.”

“I’ll go with you to the wildcat farm and to yore tribe’s village,” Kallgor said. “It will be safer with more than one beast on ‘is own.”

“I’d like to go with you too, if that is acceptable to you, Marla,” Wallden spoke up.

“The more the merrier,” Marla said, finishing her cider. Marla stayed up several more hours talking to the Gossom around a fire pit, telling them of her recent adventures and about her tribe. The tiny shrew babes were especially curious of her. They climbed all over her and stroked her fluffy tail. Eventually, a group of shrew mums shooed the group to their beds.

The young coyote was shown a bed in the infirmary for the night. She, Kallgor and Wallden all made plans to set out immediately after breakfast the following morning. The rest of the Gossom would be packing up and heading to Blackwell.

Chapter 12 The Attack

Crickets and the rustling of leaves in the light breeze were the only sounds that could be heard as Ralf, Menclan and her five tracker rats approached the tall, ancient beech tree that the Abbey dwellers could foolishly remain so close to their outer wall. The bright moon above provided all the light they needed to complete their task.

They had discussed their strategy, and they were going to climb above the top of the wall as high as they could before the branches became too weak to hold their weight. One of them, they had elected Jerome, who was the lightest of the bunch, was going to jump onto the battlement with a rope and secure it to the wall.

At least, that was how Ralf was hoping their exercise went. It was mostly his plan. It would not look good for him if one rat, particularly Jerome, fell to his death.

They carefully and silently climbed the tree, Menclan leading the way and Ralf at the end of the line. The five tracker rats had voted to have him be last. None of them trusted the young wolf’s climbing ability and didn’t want to be knocked off the tree or crushed by the significantly larger beast.

Ralf had felt relief at being behind the rats. He felt far more relaxed if he didn't feel like he had to perfect all the time.

It took them a considerable amount of time to reach the top of the wall. They could not go any higher because the branches were becoming thinner and thinner. The branches they were perched on were just barely able to support them. They stayed still for some time. They needed to be sure their scaling of the tree had not been noticed by the wall guards. Their combined movements had surely caused some movement of the tree itself.

Either they were very lucky, or the guards were not used to their posts as lookouts. The rats knew not, but there was no movement anywhere near their tree. Jerome tied one end of the rope around his waist. Menclan coiled it on top of the end of the branch to prevent it from being caught. The young rat stood at the trunk and took a deep breath. Nodding to his mother, he sprung forward and ran at a dead sprint at the wall, leaping as his paw connected with the last bit of sturdy branch.

He flew in complete silence. All the rats and Ralf in the tree held their breath as Jerome seemed to move in slow motion towards the red sandstone battlement. He reached out with both paws and caught the edge of the parapet with his sharp claws. He pulled himself up onto it and disappeared onto what was surely a walkway out of their sight.

A few moments passed, and Jerome's head popped over the parapet. He grinned and motioned them to come over. Ralf tied the other end of the rope to the trunk of the tree, giving it a tug to make sure it was secure. He gave a nod to Menclan and the others. Menclan grabbed onto the rope with both paws and wrapped her legs around the rope. It didn't take her long to make it to the parapet. Each rat followed her example, leaving Ralf in the tree.

The rope dipped more for him than it had when the rats had used it to cross into the abbey, but he made it to the sandstone walkway without issue. Jerome untied the rope from the parapet and let it drop. They were going to use the small north gate they had seen earlier as their exit. Leaving the rope there would only alert the guards to their presence.

Still saying nothing, Menclan motioned for the rats to form into groups of two and to go in different directions to scout the grounds. Ralf was about to go on his own. He walked behind Menclan and a male rat as they headed towards a staircase leading to the ground below.

The two rats hurried ahead of him, but Ralf heard a slight noise behind him on the battlement and ducked down below it on the staircase. His black fur provided excellent camouflage in the dim light. A good-sized mouse in a green robe walked by, just by his head. Ralf was not noticed. He watched the mouse, who stopped a few paces beyond the staircase. The sentry turned towards where the wolf was standing.

Ralf knew that if he didn't take action right then, he'd be discovered. Having no way to know if he would be seen running down the long flight of sandstone steps, he chose to attack. Before the mouse could turn all the way around, Ralf sprang forward. He grabbed the mouse around the neck and clamped his enormous paw around the smaller beast's muzzle. He pressed down hard on the mouse's windpipe until he stopped struggling. It didn't take long before Ralf could feel his windpipe being crushed beneath his paw.

He stayed with the mouse for some time, making sure he was dead. Throwing the slain mouse over his shoulder, he carried him down the stairs and hid him between a clump of tall bushes and the wall where he wouldn't be found.

Once the sentry was hidden, Ralf crept away from the wall. He had lost sight of the rats but continued on with the plan. He floated like a shadow from tree to tree, from hedge to hedge until he reached the grand abbey building itself.

He couldn't help but marvel at the mice's ingenuity and craftsmanship. The grey sandstone blocks were precision cut, and the stained-glass windows that towered over him were intricate and breathtaking.

He padded silently to a large wood door and reached out to take hold of the ring-style handle when he faintly heard paw steps on stone coming from directly on the other side of the door.

The door opened inward.

Thomas stretched luxuriously. He had just been woken up by a middle-seasoned mouse for his shift on the wall. He walked over to the vanity in a corner of his room and splashed water on his face and whiskers to wake himself up fully.

After he toweled himself dry, he looked at himself in the small mirror. He turned his head this way and that. The young wildcat felt like he looked older now than he did when he and Helena left their farmhouse, despite only a few days having passed by.

The young wildcat hung the towel on a bar attached to the vanity and went up to his door. He could hear multiple other Abbey dwellers stirring around him, either getting ready for their shift on the wall or in the kitchen, perhaps, or returning to their beds after a long shift.

Upon exiting his room, he took a glance at the door leading to Helena's quarters. She would have started her shift four hours earlier and would have four hours left. He planned to join her, and they could be on lookout duty together.

Thomas hurried down the main dormitory staircase to the Kitts Hole, passing Kaidron at the bottom. The warrior mouse had just completed his shift on lookout.

"Anything for me to keep a special lookout for sir?" the young one asked.

"Keep your fine sense of smell tuned in," Kaidron suggested.

"Cats have very sensitive noses, I have found."

Thomas nodded, taking the warrior's advice to heart.

“Have you seen my sister?”

“Yes, she’s on the South Wall, over the gate.”

Thomas wished the mouse of good night and stopped by the continually ran buffet table in Colton Hall. The buffet had been setup to feed those leaving for and coming back from their shifts on the walls. He chose two blueberry scones, an apple, and a wedge of cheddar cheese.

The cat scarfed down the food, and by the time he reached the Abbey’s large front door, all he had was the apple left. Of all the beasts leaving for their shifts, he was the first to approach the door. Being the gentle cat he naturally was, he opened the door and held it open for those who are following along behind him.

Helena yawned widely. She was not used to staying up all night. She found it difficult to keep her eyes open. The gentle swaying of the trees in the distance was quite mesmerizing.

Looking around, she watched as those finished with their shifts on lookout, including Kaidron, descended the stairs to the ground below. It would be several minutes before the next shift would make it up to their posts. She hoped that ginger beer would join her for the rest of her shift.

A small amount of time passed. Helena had no way of knowing how long exactly, but as that time went on, she sensed something was off. She thought hard about it.

What is it? She thought. There’s something wrong, but what is it?

The wildcat turn to look both ways Down the Walls then back towards the Abbey.

Henry, where’s Henry?

Brother Henry was a longtime member of the Blackwell order. He had been walking in circles around the wall since the beginning of his shift. Ella had started her shift at the same time as brother Henry.

You should have passed me already, she muttered to herself.

She scanned the walls as far as she could see. Steff's eyesight was top-notch, and she could make out details really well with the current amount of light being provided by the moon and stars. There were also lanterns that out periodically along the walls. The only portion of the wall she could not see was the portion blocked by The Abbey building itself. From what she could see, no Beast was walking along the walls, walkways, stairs or even across the grounds below.

Her eyes went to the Abbey's main door of the Kitts Hole. The next shift should step out from it at any moment.

What's that? Ella murmured.

There was a large black shadow crushed on the threshold of the main door. She studied it with her eyes. It was too solid to be a shadow; it had to be an intruder.

Helena crouched down behind a pile of rubble, not wanting to tip off the Intruder that he'd been spotted. She carefully scanned the grounds: if there was one Intruder, there surely would be more. As she scanned the grounds, her mind was racing.

What do I do? She thought frantically.

The cat took out her sling and a stone from the pouch on her belt. She put the round Stone in the sling and swing it around her head as her father had taught her. Those long-ago lessons on farm defense springing to her mind.

Suddenly, the grand oak door opened. Ella gasped she could see a familiarly patterned paw and arm holding the door open: it was Thomas!

Thomas's attention was grabbed by movement from the other side of the threshold. Before him stood a large black shadow. It only grew larger as he looked at it. He realized the shadow was an enormous beast. In the blink of an eye, he acted. He knew that the few smaller mice following behind him would have no chance against whatever variety of beast had invaded the Abbey's grounds.

With a yowl, he sprung forward, the only weapon he weapon he had at his disposal extended in front of him, his claws. The other beast stepped back quickly, trying to avoid the wildcat's attack. Thomas just barely caught the shadow on the back of a paw.

Now that they were in proximity and out of the shadow of the Abbey building, Thomas could see that the beast was a rather enormous wolf. He'd never seen a wolf before but based on the description he had been given by his mother, this was most definitely one.

"Get out of the Abbey!" he shouted at the wolf.

The black wolf emitted a low growl as he pulled out a beautifully wrought short sword. Gripping it in his strong paw, he shifted into a fighting stance. Thomas brought his paws up, claws unsheathed, standing his ground. He hoped to just by enough time for other Abbey dwellers to arrive and they could capture or dispatch the wolf.

The wolf threw his head towards the sky and howled a long, piercing cry. As the last note escaped his lips, he sprung forward with his sword at Thomas. It was the cat's natural agility that saved him from being pierced by the blade.

In his peripheral, he could hear other beasts running up from all sides. Friend or foe, he had no way of knowing whose side they were on. The wolf yelped and took a step back from Thomas as two sling stones bounced off first his cheek and then his shoulder.

A young mouse ran up to the wolf from the direction of the north gate, swinging out at the larger beast's head with a sturdy oak staff. He missed by a hair. The wolf responded by slashing his own weapon around.

The middle of the razor-sharp sword sliced through the staff. The tip of the blade sliced through some part of the mouse's body. He cried out and fell to the side, dropping his halves of the staff.

Thomas snarled and leaped forward while the wolf was distracted. He shoved the canine back and slashed at his head with his long, curved claws. The wolf yelped and snarled, clutching the socket of his right eye. Thomas shook the wet, squishy mess from his claws and paw. He had taken the wolf's eye clean out.

With a snarl of rage, the wolf advanced with his sword. It was clear to all able to see him, horde rat or Abbey dweller, that the wolf was an amazing swords beast.

Moonlight sparkled off the blade as the wolf expertly whipped it sideways and then, in the same fluid motion, thrust forward, driving Thomas back. The cat received multiple deep slashes to his paws and wrists as he frantically tried to defend himself.

Thomas was driven backwards at a fast rate. He could hear other beasts quickly approaching their position, but he didn't dare take his eyes off the flashing blade in front of him. He was so focused on the danger in front; he didn't know what hazards could come up behind him.

The wolf thrust forward once again, driving Thomas back still more. The cat had to jump back to avoid the sword's pointed blade. Before he could stop himself, he tripped over a thick pole that had been lying on the ground. He cried out in surprise as he fell backwards, his paws windmilling.

Helena was only three paw rides from the wolf and her brother when Tim fell backwards onto the rack of wooden spikes, where he immediately went limp and motionless. It had been mere moments since she had spotted the wolf at the door to Kitts Hole, but it felt like it had taken her seasons to cross the Abbey grounds and reach her brother. It was too long to take for Thomas.

Her scream of anguish brought the injured wolf's attention to her. He raised his sword in front of him in a defensive stance, blade angled diagonally across his upper body. It was still dripping with blood from the mouse and Thomas. The black wolf bared his teeth and growled.

“I recognize you now, cat,” he said. “You were the beast running from the lizards.”

Helena’s blood was boiling, and her heart was pounding in her ears. Her vision was going red. She didn’t acknowledge that the wolf had spoken. She couldn’t. All there was inside her was a desire to kill the wolf, I need to kill the wolf.

Kaidron the Warrior had heard the shouting from the wall. He immediately grabbed his sword from the standby by his bed and hurried down the stairs to the Kitts Hole. He barely noticed the Abbey Brothers and Sisters who milled around the hall, some corralling curious Gibbons. He, Dax, and several other beasts charged out the open doorway to the Abbey grounds.

He ran into an enormous rat almost as soon as he stepped onto the threshold. The rat flailed out at the warrior mouse with his rusty sword. Kaidron instinctively parried with his own, shearing the rat’s sword in half. One half of the cleaved sword clanged off the cobblestones beneath the rat’s foot paws. Before the rat could turn to face the mouse, Kaidron slashed his sword back around, slicing the rat’s throat.

While Kaidron was dealing with the first rat, Dax and the others continued passing him.

“Tammy, you’uns spurd oot thuraways,” Dax instructed, pointing with her enormous paw. “An’ you’uns goo thur urra way, durve oot all inturders.”

The mice and moles did as she instructed, joining those who had been on guard duty and began searching the grounds. Kaidron and Dax hurried to where they heard a commotion. There was a small group of wall defenders standing between them and the noise. The pair were horrified by what they saw occurring before them. Helena was fighting a large, black wolf with a sword, using just her claws and a sling loaded with a sling stone. She had him on the defensive with her savage and thoughtless attacks. Kaidron could easily recognize the symptoms.

“Everyone gets back,” Kaidron shouted. “She has Tangraff!”

The mice and Dax stepped back. Dax backed into a young rat with a short sword. A well-timed parry with her sturdy dagger deflected the rat. A young mouse Sister named Jenny brought her stout oak staff down on the back of the rat's head, knocking him senseless. Rattan quickly secured his paws behind his back before turning back to Kaidron, Helena, and the wolf.

Kaidron was defending against two rats, trying to keep them off Helena's back. With a few deft movements and blade twirls, Kaidron easily slew both rats. Brother Lanksmere and Brother Hendron, both strong, no-nonsense mice in their middle seasons, had a third rat cornered against the rack of spikes.

The rat was wildly swinging his sword at the pair, who were armed with bows and arrows. Both had an arrow pulled back in their bows, ready to fire. The rat lunged at them with his sword, clipping Brother Hendron's bow with the blade, causing it to snap and strike Hendron on the face and leg. He fell back, senseless. Brother Lanksmere fired his arrow into the rat's chest, slaying him.

Kaidron was wracking his brain for a way to get through to Helena. In most cases the only ways to stop a beast consumed with Tangraff was for them to either die, be close to death, or run out of opponents. The wolf was a skilled and clearly trained fighter. He didn't think an unarmed Helena was going to be victorious in a fight with him in her current stage of training. He had to put an end to it, and fast.

He readied his sword and sprung at the wolf, deflecting a thrust aimed at the wildcat. He drove back the wolf, matching him blow for blow, suffering a minor slash across a shoulder. Helena followed along with Kaidron, the Tangraff still consuming her. She barely acknowledged his presence.

"Helena, look out!" Kaidron shouted.

He had seen it coming a moment before, giving Helena the warning. A lithe female rat pounced out of nowhere at Helena, her sword at the ready.

Helena turned and slashed the rat from face to belly, slaying her. A look of surprise was permanently etched on the rat's face as she lay still on the ground.

The wolf was tiring but was nowhere near beaten. Using some deep reserve of strength, he shoved Kaidron back and turned to run. He made a dead sprint for the small north gate.

The wounded cat and older mouse could not keep up with the naturally fleet of paw wolf. By the time Kaidron and Helena reached the open gate, he was long gone.

Helena slumped down onto all fours and retched. Kaidron wanted to follow the wolf, but realized the wolf had a too far head start on them to make chasing him through the woods at night worth it. He went to Helena's side.

"Come along, we need to get your wounds treated."

"I-I can't...can't let him get away," she gasped.

"There's nothing you can do," Kaidron said, putting her arm over his shoulders, helping her to her hind paws.

"You saw what he did to my brother, he has to pay!"

It puzzled Kaidron. He hadn't seen Thomas in the dimness of the side of Blackwell.

"I didn't see him, Helena."

"That wolf killed him. He fell back onto the spike rack!" she sobbed.

Kaidron took a calming breath as the wildcat sobbed brokenly.

"Then I will make him pay for it." said Kaidron

TO BE CONTINUED.....

