

Boddaert's Magic Fire Rock

Peter Barns

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

to Sheree
-for her help and inspiration-

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

and Simone
-for the endless cups of coffee-

Chapter 1

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

Brock narrowed his eyes and the boar dipped his head.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

Brock was the only survivor.

*

Brock suddenly realised that the Custodian had spoken to him.

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

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

He left the question hanging.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

Chapter 2

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Discussion about the cub would have to wait until later.

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

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

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

"Come on," Soffen shouted.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

Chapter 3

Grey was worried.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Please . . . Please help me."

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"Where is she?" she asked.

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"ENOUGH!"

Soffen jumped as the old Custodian reared up at her.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

"I left him there," he said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"What have you given him Soffen?"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

But Soffen knew that had never happened.

Chapter 4

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

"That was a special case."

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

"Enough!"

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

Looking at it, Grey's thoughts roamed.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

*

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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