

Hunted

He was running and running, crashing through the branches and tripping over the tree roots. The mice and the shrews were rushing out of his way, the heavy footfalls warning them, scuttling under cover amongst the dead leaves and moss of the forest floor. A badger, lolloping slowly along the edge of the trees, turned sharply to hide in the ditch at the far end of the meadow adjoining the wood. And an owl, swooping and soaring low over the bracken, wheeled around and screeched a warning to the other animals, "Skee-at, skee-at."

The man's breath was coming in short sharp bursts. He was bending over as he ran, almost crouching and keeping his head down, clutching his side. He cared not at all as the brambles scratched his coat, legs and face, and the low-lying branches of the smaller trees slapped him as he passed. He was running blindly, dashing hither and thither through the forest. But he was also searching, desperately seeking something, a sign, a small indication.

And then, suddenly, the reason for the man's panic became apparent to the watching stoats and weasels, sitting on their hind-legs, front paws in the air, ready to run if need be. Behind the trees, marching down across the meadow and heading rapidly towards the wood, were five soldiers. They were jogging, holding their guns, great grey coats flapping around their dark boots, chains clinking at their waists. The badger, too frightened to move, crouching stock-still in the ditch between the meadow and the wood, could still hear the crashing sounds of the man's wild, erratic race through the trees.

One of the soldiers gave a quick shout, "Hoy!" He jumped smartly over the ditch, and the others followed, leaping after him, narrowly missing the badger's broad, grey, striped back. At the sound of the soldier's bark, the running sounds in the forest ceased abruptly. The soldiers halted at the edge of the trees. They listened. There was

silence. A soft scurrying sound told the stoats and weasels that the badger had gone to earth. An owl passed screeching overhead. The branches of the trees creaked gently, and the leaves whispered amongst themselves, as they painted the night sky an ever darker velvet blue. The moon had long since set, and a few stars were twinkling overhead. It was the hour before dawn, the dead time of the night, when only the hunted and the hunter are awake.

The man stood, poised for flight, beside a large oak tree. He tried to control his gasping breaths, holding his mouth open and drawing in the air in great silent gulps. His heart was pounding so loudly he thought it affected the entire forest, creating a deep thumping beat, which seemed to vibrate through the trees. As he stood, frozen in time and space, it seemed to him that all the animals were similarly petrified. Nothing moved. Not even a mouse stirred on the leaf-strewn floor. A fox stood at the edge of the clearing, a dead rabbit at its feet, and a deer paused, head lowered, eyes wide, as it listened for danger.

Suddenly the soldiers moved. "This way!" the captain called, and he pushed the bracken aside and started running in great bounding steps towards the centre of the wood. At the same moment, the man saw it. There it was. The sign for which he had been searching. He ran forward, past the petrified deer, and to the side of the clearing. There was a glint of metal, a gleam of gold beneath the leaves. The hunted man scrambled and pulled. A trap door sprang open and, in the nick of time, he slithered inside and pulled it shut behind him. There was a soft click, and the leaves stirred.

The soldiers came crashing into the clearing. Just as they skidded to a halt, right beside the oak tree where the hunted man had stood not a minute earlier, the deer shifted. Quietly, and with slow steps, it turned and moved, coming to stand right over the trap door, and completely covering the flat golden handle once more with leaves and earth. The deer stood there. The soldiers stared at it. They

peered around the clearing and then shone torches into all the dark corners. Finally, holding their torches high, they turned and started searching further along the other side of the trees.

The deer quivered. Hunter or hunted. It knew the score. It took a side. After a while, it turned and leapt effortlessly away, out of the trees and across the meadow. It had saved a man's life.