

THE JOURNEY

A Story of the
Free Narnian Resistance

By John Burkitt

Dedicated to C.S. Lewis, and published on the 50th
anniversary of “The Last Battle,” issued September 4th,
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GETTING BY

IT WAS A TYPICAL DAY IN OCCUPIED NARNIA; snowy and bitterly cold. It had been like that for as long as most folk remembered. Smoke curled from the chimneys of a dozen scattered dwellings, an archipelago of warm islands in a vast sea of cold.

Old Malcolm got out his hatchet and pike to hack away the ice blocking the spillway of his dam, and had barely stepped outside the door when Mrs. Beaver came chasing after him with a wool muffler. “Put this on, or you’ll be catching your death!”

“Thank you, Rosie.”

While Mr. Beaver struggled to wrap the muffler about his neck with cold paws, he heard rapidly approaching steps in the snow and a gravelly voice calling, “Oy, you there!”

Mr. Beaver looked about, startled by the arrival of a large wolf. Then he shrugged. “Oh, it’s just you, Thor.”

“Busy as usual?” Thor asked in a pretence at casual conversation. “So am I. A constable’s life is a busy one, chasing down mischief makers and solving crimes...”

“...frightening children...stirring up trouble.”

Thor showed a little fang. “Very cheeky, Mr. Beaver. But I don’t deserve a hard time. I don’t go about stirring up trouble, but when it comes stirring up me, I nip it in the bud.” He snapped his jaws as if to make his point clear.

“And I’m causing you trouble?” Malcolm said, paws on his hips. “Work’s piling up and I don’t have time to stir up my own soup.”

“No, but there’s a certain old badger in these parts who’s asking for a comeuppance. I’d rather have the problem go away. You know me, Malcolm. I don’t stick my nose into people’s lives unless I have to. And nobody likes it when the district gets involved. Pushy folks, those, and not as patient as I am. If they get the idea this stake needs some royal attention, you’re not going to be happy, I’m not going to be happy, and your badger friend will certainly not be happy. So if you get a chance to say something to the right people, you’d better say it, and soon.”

After Thor left, Rose slipped her arm about Malcolm's shoulder. "What are we going to do? We have to warn Chester."

"Aye, Rosie, but not right now. Not while one of 'them' might see. Thor might be fishing for clues, but I'm not taking the bait."

LIVING BY WITS AND PRAYERS

THE OLD HARE NAMED DAISY LONGSHANKS was usually called "Momma Longshanks" by the locals because of her work for the less fortunate. She did not fully appreciate the irony of her name—there had been no daisies in Narnia during her lifetime—but she did appreciate the faint sound of digging beneath her feet.

A wooden trap door budged a corner of the rag rug, and Daisy threw it back to let the door open freely. Chester Diggins emerged from the hole, clutching a lantern in one paw and a small spade in the other. The old badger looked exhausted.

"My dear, I shall need help getting the sacks of earth out."

Daisy's son Oswald, who served as the local vicar, quickly stepped forward to help Chester heave the large, heavy burlap bags of earth up and onto the floor. There were four of them, all of them might as well be poison if the occupiers found them. As they were dragged across the floor by Oswald and Chester, Momma Longshanks

sprinkled "nose-be-gone," an odd concoction of sawdust, charcoal and herbs on the floor to absorb the pungent odor of damp earth. And then, icy outside or not, the windows and door were opened to ventilate the room.

When the old badger came back in, trying to walk straight despite the crick in his spine, Daisy went to him, put her arms about him and held him tightly. "What would we do without you, Chess? You are tired and hungry. Tell me you'll stay for dinner?"

He smiled. "If it's not too much trouble."

"Garn!" she said, kissing his cheek. "No trouble at all. Just be sure to wash those paws."

The kindly hare had a hoard of supplies hidden beneath her house. The supplies gave hope to the locals who got near-starvation rations from the occupiers. Hoarding goods, especially if they were imported or stolen, meant torture, prison or death. Demand was high, and Momma Longshanks had to make more room in the cellar, a very risky thing to do.

The food not only made life possible, it gave hope to the people. A little black market Calormene cane sugar and flour from Archenland meant a birthday cake for a furling, a bright spot in a world where there were no spring meadows to romp in and no Christmas presents to open. Keeping hope alive with such symbols was the only thing that staved off despair and utter defeat.

CAT AND MOUSE

MALCOLM SHOWED UP AT MOMMA Longshanks' cottage just as Oswald was helping Chester put the last of the four bags on a small wagon. The hare did not make any sudden movement except that his ears turned to listen.

“Hi ho!” said the beaver. “Does Momma still need that leak fixed in the roof?”

“We hate to trouble you, Malcolm. But yes.”

“I just happened to be in the area and thought I'd pop in,” the beaver said, forming his left paw into a fist and putting it into his right palm. He did it so fast that no one unaware of its meaning would have even noticed it.

“That's terribly kind,” Chester said, scratching his left ear.

Chester and Oswald scattered a layer of hay over the bags of earth, then headed in the house very casually with the beaver trailing behind. And after the last of them entered the Longshanks dwelling and the door was securely closed against the cold and uninvited guests

with sharp ears, Chester took off his scarf and hung it on the wall. “What’s wrong, Malcolm?”

“Thor was by my place this morning. He was hinting about that he was closing in on you and if you didn’t walk a very straight line he’d be paying you a visit.”

Chester drew in a deep breath, held it for a moment, then let it out in a long sigh. “Perhaps spring is not far off...for me.”

“Not a bit of it,” Mr. Beaver said with a determined smack of his paw on the table. “We still have those boxes from the Chelsea job. We should fill them, says I. Then we’ll move them at dusk.”

“But...HE...is about then.”

“Precisely. If he wants to see something, we should give him an eyeful. I need you two, Rufus Hedgely, and all the lads you can muster. Then meet me at my place and be discreet about it...but not too discreet.”

They met in front of the blacksmith’s shop. It was a shame to lose a perfectly good “spider hole” in such a strategic location. After all, when you needed to

disappear, the sooner the better. But it couldn't be helped.

The trap door was held up by Chester himself as one by one prominent members of Free Narnia came in twos and threes as if they happened to be passing by. Many of them were holding small wooden boxes, and they discretely handed them to Malcolm who reached up from the hole to take them. It was done in a way that did not attract too much attention, but not so carefully that a pair of hazel eyes gleaming with triumph didn't spot them.

Thor smiled in triumph. "Put me out here in the sticks, would they? Dump me in this little burg? I'll show them. I'll show them all!"

The next morning, Thor was conspicuously absent. His wife Ursula made his usual rounds, carrying a small package by its cords in her teeth. She thought to be silent and discrete and that folk would merely see a wolf coming and try to make themselves scarce. Rufus Hedgely the fox was bold enough to come up and inquire about her husband's health.

“Kind of you to ask,” she said, sitting down the package, “but he is down with a cold. He’ll be his old sweet self tomorrow.”

Rufus watched her take the package and trot away, shaking his head as she made her way to the home of Faun Tumnus. “That boy’s nothing but trouble,” the fox muttered. No wolf ever left the faun’s home with a package, and it was common knowledge he was on the payroll of the White Witch, though nobody had a clear idea just what he did.

Tumnus was a most unlikely collaborator, very quiet and soft spoken and for all anyone could tell very fond of children. He rarely got to indulge his interest for mothers would tell their furlings never to accept gifts from him or be seen speaking to him. And so Tumnus contented himself with sitting alone by the fire reading his books and playing distinctly mournful music on his pipes.

When Ursula passed the Longshanks home, Momma, in a characteristic act of kindness, not only asked about Thor but offered to bring him a steaming hot cup of “oh be joyful” to help him get back on his feet.

Ursula's ears laid back for a second and her tail twitched. "Oh, you mustn't! I mean...he's already taken something else and it wouldn't do to mix herbs." She coughed.

"Seems he's not the only one under the weather." Momma poured her a hot cup of tea and put some herbs and a tiny amount of brandy in it. "You haven't taken anything yet, have you?"

"Well no, but..."

"Then I insist. Try this."

Ursula sniffed it suspiciously, for she knew how she and her husband were regarded by the townsfolk. But even the merest whiff of the vapors helped and she downed it quickly. "Oh yes, that does open up the passages!" Then she looked into Mrs. Longshanks' eyes. "You're a fine lady. You really deserve better."

The old hare put her paw over her chest. "When you're free in here, that's what really matters. It's you and Thor that deserve better."

The she wolf averted her eyes in shame. She started for the door, stopped for a moment, then looked back around. "I just..."

"Yes dear?"

"I just wanted to say..." Her ears lay flat. "...I really think it was Chester Diggins that gave him the cold. Colds are very dangerous things, and if you love

that badger, you'd better have him well by tomorrow morning."

Momma Longshanks nodded slowly. "Yes, dear. Thank you."

BURIED TREASURE

NOBODY WAS THE LEAST BIT SURPRISED early the next morning when Thor suddenly showed up able-bodied and accompanied by Chief Inspector Loki.

Loki was a typical officer in the secret police, very uptight and terse. His eyes gave away no hint of what was lurking inside, and he made no pretense at being chatty or friendly.

Everyone saw the two wolves pass by out of windows and doors headed to the Diggins' House. Not one of them was afraid Chester would ever reveal a secret, but they were all afraid he would never die in bed with his loved ones about. Folk like him rarely did.

The old badger was kneeling before an old battle-scarred Narnian flag, his paws clasped and his head bowed as he murmured in a trembling voice:

*The Lord is a lantern to my feet
A guide in darkest times
He lights the path before me*

*He walks the road beside me
He calms the fear within me
He spreads his love around me
Each step I walk along the way
I shall never walk alone until I rest in him
Amen*

When he heard the sudden hard pounding on the door, he took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, then went to answer it.

The two wolves pushed in quickly. “We have something we want you to identify,” the Chief Inspector said politely but with a cold gleam in his eye.

“Isn’t it a bit early to be conducting business?” the badger said, unapologetic for the lion banner spread in plain view.

“It’s never too early for the Queen’s business.”

Chester was barely given time to grab a cap and scarf before he was herded outside.

Faces peered out of windows and doors opened a slight crack and then closed again as silently as possible. Still the trio knew they were being watched.

“Mr. Diggins, do you know what the penalty is for hoarding?”

“Being sent to the bailey?”

“For small cases, yes. When it’s a lot of food, enough for a large group, the size of the hoard determines the method of execution. For truly large stashes, it is a very slow and unpleasant death. We call it ‘The Four Horrors’. Understatement of the year, sir. I saw it once and I had nightmares for a week.” He drew closer and added softly, “Matter of fact, a little information goes a long way to mitigating punishment. And a full list of names just might spare your neck.”

Thor, Loki and the hapless badger stopped in front of the black smithy. Thor looked into Chester's eyes for a moment, hoping to savor the look of terror, but the badger met his glance with equal intensity. Returning to the business at hand, the wolf sniffed a bit, and began to dig. The snow had been carefully swept with brooms to make it smooth and trackless and a snowfall overnight had hidden every last trace of the treasure below. Still the constable knew exactly where to look and within moments he had revealed the doorway.

“Didn’t I tell you, Chief Inspector?”

“Indeed you did, Thor. Excellent work. Now Mr. Diggins, open the door.”

The badger lifted the large wooden door slowly and painfully. He was getting too old for such exertions. He understood they were playing mind games with him and he was careful to look suitably worried. "It isn't what you think it is," he said, panting heavily.

"Surely you can do better than that, Mr. Diggins. Open a box and show us."

The aroma of bread, flour, meat and herbs wafted strongly from below. Thor licked his chops just thinking about the share he was sure to get as his reward.

Trembling, Chester climbed down into the room, selected a box, brought it to the door and slowly opened the lid.

Loki sniffed the contents. Then the hackles rose on his neck and shoulders. "Creek gravel?? Are you toying with me?? Out of my way, old fool!"

The wolf plunged down into the hole and began to dig through the pile of boxes opening one after another. The angry growls from below left no doubt all was not well.

"I saw them!" Thor stammered. "I saw them sneaking these boxes in!"

"Is this meant to be a jape?? Did Baldur put you up to this??"

"Chief Inspector, I swear to you...I SWEAR..."

“Why?” Chester asked, “Why are you dumping out all the gravel? We’re going to have to box it up all over again!”

Loki stuck his head out of the entrance, fire in his eyes and his racing breath making clouds in the cold air. “You’d better have a good explanation for this, Mr. Diggins!”

Chester glanced at the mess spilled all over the floor. “I don’t know why a blacksmith needs gravel. All I know is he paid a few lads five farthings each to help him move these boxes. For five farthings, I don’t ask questions, sir.”

“You’re not supposed to ask questions,” Loki said through gritted teeth. “That’s Thor’s job. And he’s going to be doing it for a very long time before he gets promoted.”

As soon as Loki loped off without so much as a by-your-leave, Thor glared harshly at Chester. “You’re going to pay back that five farthings with interest before I’m done with you, stripe-dog. I don’t know when and I don’t know how, but mark my words, I’ll take it out of your hide!”

AN AX TO GRIND

RUFUS HEDGELY HAD THE NAGGING FEELING he was being watched. Foxes call it a “tickly ear.” Finally he opened his front door to look outside to see if all was well.

That’s when he first saw “it.” A large crate full of supplies. There were cartwheel tracks leading up to his door and impressions of wolf paws.

At first the strangeness of it made him curious, and then it made him queasy. He glanced about and saw Henry Stoatworth staring at him from a window before ducking back and closing the shutters.

He called Violet to help him and between the two of them they labored to move the box indoors out of sight.

“What’s in there?” Violet asked.

“I don’t know. I’m afraid to look.”

Rufus got a pry bar and opened the crate. What he saw inside made his heart sink. Boxes and boxes of

rations of all sorts. Meat and flour and jam and tins of tea.

“Where did this come from?” Violet asked in a panic. She had reason to be afraid.

“I don’t know! But we must be rid of it quickly!”

“How, love?”

“I don’t know. But we can’t leave it here, and we can’t be seen taking it to Momma Longshanks.”

Of course the damage was already done. There were still tracks all the way up the street, and then there was still Henry. Like most stoats, he was a good fellow but prone to overreact and jump to conclusions. And if Henry thought he was a collaborator getting payoffs from the White Witch, the foxes’ life would be over. Faun Tumnus was known to be on the White Witch’s pay and he was tolerated by the community, but then Tumnus never worked his way up in the Free Narnia resistance movement. He was not privy to secrets of life and death.

Rufus got his scarf and cap and headed at once for the home of his friend and operative Mr. Beaver. Old Malcolm would believe him! After all each had saved the other’s life on more than one occasion. Perhaps the beaver could save him again.

The note on the door of the empty lodge had made Rufus' heart race with anxiety. "Back shortly, supply run." Both of them gone at once! Of all the rum luck! Rufus had wasted a trip, but far worse he had wasted time, something he had precious little of. It would have been better to head for Mother Longshanks, but now it was too late.

Most of Rufus' adult life, he'd been resigned to the possibility of a midnight knock at the door from the White Witch's secret police. Every night he asked Aslan for the strength to take the higher path, to resist prison, torture and death with nobility and keep his secrets to the end. Now he was afraid of his own people. The irony made him bitter. "All that work, all those risks Lord! And for what? To be hated and reviled? And what of his wife and furlings?"

As he walked dejected down the main street of town, his scarf wound tightly around his throat and his cap pulled down low, an otter stepped out of a side street and quickly placed a paw on his shoulder.

"Rufus, Free Narnia has some questions to ask you."

"Of course, Nettle. Lead on."

THE HOG AND ACORN

ANXIOUS TO CLEAR UP THE MUDDLE AS quickly as possible, Rufus followed Nettle through the heavy oak door of the Hog and Acorn Inn. He had spent many pleasant evenings there having a pint with the lads. Only the atmosphere was very different and the door shut behind him with the ominous clicking of a lock and a quick sweep of the room showed all the windows were locked and barred.. Angry eyes looked at him from all over the room.

“My friends,” Rufus said in a trembling voice. “I’m here to answer whatever questions you would put to me.”

“There’s only one question!” Henry Stoa worth shouted, pointing at the fox. “Should we cut your throat in the backroom or hang you from the lamp post as a warning to others??”

“You’re mad!” the fox shouted. “You’re stark raving mad!”

“How could you??” Henry shouted. “We trusted you with our lives! I have a little girl at home that needs a father! They might come for me, and all because of you!”

“Surely you don’t believe him??” The fox glanced about anxiously. “Come on, fellows! I’ve been with you all my life! Your furlings played with mine! Every time I had two of anything, I shared one with the less fortunate!”

“Who were you going to share the box with??” asked one of the otters. “Those were rations! Who did without so you could eat like a king??”

“Willie! I swear to you...I SWEAR....”

Rufus made a dash for the side door but was stopped by a large dog and otter placed there for just such an event. Held so fast he could scarcely struggle, Rufus shrieked, “Aslan! Help me, Aslan!”

“Blasphemy!” the dog shouted, backhanding him. “I say do it now!”

“No!” shouted Willie Otter. “We need to get some names out of him! He couldn’t do that alone!”

“He’ll just lie!” shouted one of the talking squirrels. “He’ll lie to save his skin!”

“This is insanity!” Rufus shouted. “You are all going insane!”

The dog backhanded him again, brutally. “Shut up, you backstabber!”

Malcolm Beaver pushed through the crowd. He grabbed one of the chairs up, smashed it down on the ground, and picked up a chair leg as a club. Running up to Rufus, he clubbed the dog on the side of the face...hard...sending him into a whimpering puddle of misery in the floor. “Hit him again and I’ll kill ye! I’ll kill ye!”

The otter promptly let go stepped back. “What are you doing, Malcolm??”

“This was supposed to be a meeting, not a lynch mob!”

“Who’s side are you on??”

“I’m on Aslan’s side!” Malcolm thundered, waving his club. “Rufus is right! You’ve all gone mad! You never gave him a chance to speak his peace! I’d be dead if it weren’t for him! Willie, are you forgetting what he did for you last year? Have you ALL forgotten? Have you all become like HER? When Free Narnia gets as bad as the occupation, that’s when I pack up and leave!”

In the ensuing moment of silence, they could clearly hear the fox stammer, “Malcolm, see that my wife and children are all right. Tell them I love them.”

The beaver's chin began to quiver. He dropped the club and embraced the fox, weeping softly. "Oh look, you're bleeding! What will I ever tell Violet?"

It was at this emotionally charged moment that Chester stepped through the door with Vicar and Momma Longshanks and a hysterical Violet. The vixen shrieked and plunged through the crowd to cling protectively to her husband.

"How now! What's all this??" the badger cried, going to the podium. "Judge, jury and executioner, are you? Well Ursula was having an attack of conscience, and she let slip to Momma that her husband was going to frame Rufus Hedgely with a box of rations. I'm glad to see you didn't let it go to your head."

"I only said what I saw!" Henry pled. "I was only doing my duty!"

"You said cut his throat or hang him from the lamp post!" Malcolm shouted back. "Is that your duty??"

Chester pounded on the podium. "Order, order!" Then he looked about the crowd, his eyes boring into each of them like red hot coals. "No matter what your feelings are about what happened here today, if we don't leave this place together in solidarity, the White Witch has already won. Rufus, my old friend, be big. Bigger and more generous than you've ever been before. And

each of you be big enough to look him in the eye and apologize to him. May Aslan have mercy on us for the fools we are.”

The shame and remorse of the hour brought more than a few tears to the folk. One by one they came and patted Rufus on the shoulder or took his paw. Henry waited to be the last, not from arrogance but dread.

When at last the stoat stood before the fox and got a close look at his battered, bleeding face, he started to speak. “Rufus, I...” is all that came out. He buried his face in his paws. “I cant say it! I am not worthy of your forgiveness!”

Rufus gently embraced him. “Speak of it no more, Henry. It’s water under the bridge.”

DISAPPEARING ACT

A STRANGE SORT OF MAGIC WAS commonplace in Free Narnia. Members of the resistance could disappear at a moment's notice.

Rufus and Violet Hedgely sat with their furlings before the warm fire. "All right," Rufus said, "let's see how quick you can be."

His mate looked about. "Oh Rufus, you were going to tell me something a moment ago before I interrupted you. Do you remember what it was?"

He turned to Violet and said, "Dear, the Beavers were planning to come by tomorrow for dinner. You know how many times I've asked them."

"And they finally accepted?" Violet said. "Goodness knows, we've been there twice. But they are such homebodies. I guess that's just what beavers do."

"Anyhow, they always like fried food. But I'm not sure if you should fix them fried fish or if they would want something else for a nice change? I mean every time you ask Rose or Malcolm what they'd like to have,

it's always the same answer. 'Oh whatever you fix is fine with...'"

Violet looked around quickly. "Cover! Cover!"

Frantically, Russ and Belle clawed their way across the room. Russ threw back a small rug and opened a trap door, then jumped in. Belle took a corner of the rug and went about the door so that as it lowered the rug fell neatly down into place behind her.

A few moments passed, then Rufus said, "It's all right. You can come up now..."

Nothing happened.

"Didn't you hear your father?" Violet asked. She raised her voice. "Get up here RIGHT NOW."

Nothing happened.

"Are you all right??" Rufus went to the rug and banged on the floor three times with his foot. "Children, are you all right?? Answer me!"

Nothing happened.

"Willow! Willow!"

The trap door slowly creaked open and the two fox furlings headed out.

"Come here, you two!" Rufus said, spreading his arms. Russ and Belle mobbed him, getting a big hug and kiss. "Oh I'm so proud of you! You're getting so fast I couldn't count to ten!"

Like resistance family furlings all over Narnia, they knew to stay hidden and perfectly quiet no matter what they heard until they got the signal. Even if it was the heart wrenching sounds of torture or death of a loved one.

Violet said, “I’m not saying it is going to happen, or even that it’s probably going to happen someday. But we have to talk when it’s safe because when it’s not safe there’s no time to talk. Russ, if we’re taken away, what do you do?”

“We go to stay with Malcolm, but only after night.”

“And Belle, what are the safety rules?”

“Never go off to play alone. And never tell strangers where your family is.”

Violet knelt by Rufus and the children, folding them all into one large hug. She tried to burn the way they looked, felt, smelled and sounded into her mind so that the moment could last forever. Sometimes memories were all you got to keep.

Chester Diggins was stirring the pot of beans over his fire, adding salt, herbs and a few precious pieces of meat. His diet had become rather simple since Emily

died, as he had very limited cooking skills. It wasn't his diet he minded as much as the loneliness. His son had a family of his own, and he was afraid to spend too much time at the house of his best friends the Longshanks because of their work in Free Narnia. He also had to be careful not to be too obvious with Rufus and Violet, though he loved children dearly and was delighted to be "Grandpa Chess" to Russ and Belle.

He felt a rush of hope when someone knocked on the door. "A visitor!" he muttered. "Thank Aslan!" But when Chester opened the door and saw the large wolf standing there, his joy crumbled. "Oh, it's you, Thor. Won't you come in?"

"Ah, just in time for dinner!" the wolf said, walking to the table. "Do you mind if I dine with you tonight? It's such a cold and lonely evening."

"Of course not," the badger said, his delicate sense of danger throbbing. "There's always room for another."

"I really appreciate it, Chess. I realize in the past I've given you a hard time. Matter of fact, you're a highly respected person in these parts. The kind of person I should be associating with. Things are going to be different from now on. Instead of you being cooped up in this house all alone, I'll be stopping by from time to time to chat and keep an eye on you. You never know

when I may pop in, mate. Yes, I think it's safe to say your lonely days are over and done."

"I'm not that lonely," Chester said, going back to the fire and fetching the kettle. "Would you like a cup of tea?"

"Of course! Nothing like hot tea to get the frost off your whiskers, I always say!" Thor smiled very insincerely. "Two lumps and a bit of cream if you have it."

"I'm out of cream," Chester said, bringing a cup in trembling paws and setting it on the table in front of the wolf. He put a couple of sugar lumps into the tea with all the steadiness he could muster and picked up the spoon. His tremor was getting worse under the two burdens of the wolf's unrelenting glare and forced smile.

"Your paws are trembling," Thor said.

"I'm getting to that age," Chester stammered.

"I suppose getting to that age makes them smell like fresh earth?"

"Do they?"

Why don't you show me what you've been up to, Mr. Diggins?"

"Nothing that would interest you."

"Everything interests me," Thor said, his eyes narrowing. "Especially digging."

Chester took in a deep breath, let it out slowly, then moved his paw from the spoon to the cup handle. After a short pause that seemed to him an eternity, he made a sudden lunge, flinging the hot tea right in Thor's eyes.

While the wolf shrieked and growled, clawing at his face, the badger ran outside, trying to get as far as he could.

Very soon, faster than Chester would have liked, Thor headed out in close pursuit. But after the badger ducked between two buildings into a dead end alley, Thor felt triumphant.

“Now I got you! You'll pay for that!”

The only problem is there was no one to hear his cries. There were no doors and no means of escape. And there was no badger.

Thor bayed to the top of his lungs with frustration, “If it takes forever, I'll get you! Your death will be slow and painful! Do you hear me, Chester?? I'll kill you!”

STALEMATE

CHESTER SHIVERED IN THE CLOSE QUARTERS of the beaver's hidden shelter. It was not the cold that had him trembling. "Well Emily, it's just the two of us," he stammered. "I never took you for granted. At least I don't think I did. But I never really knew what I had until I lost it. What I'd give right now to feel your arms around me, to hear your sweet voice! I'm so alone! Precious Aslan, I am so alone!"

There was a sound and a sudden burst of light like a sunrise. It was Mrs. Beaver with a lantern.

"Rosie!" he shouted, lunging forward and embracing her tightly, tears streaming down his face. "Thank Aslan! I thought I was losing my mind!"

"Oh Chess!" Mrs. Beaver said, patting him and kissing his cheek. "It was a mistake to think you could stand it alone. Even beavers can't stand it alone. I told you that you needed someone here."

"I know. I know."

“When I have to go, Malcolm will come next. Oswald will be happy to take a shift too, I bet. He loves you, Chess.”

“He’s a fine lad,” the badger said, an edge of desperation in his voice. “Do you really think he’ll come?”

“Just try to keep him away another second. He’s been worried out of his mind.” She unwrapped his lunch, including a mug of tea in a covered tin cup. When she lifted the lid its cheerful hot fragrance wafted through the room, making it seem so much less like a prison cell.

“So,” Chester said with a mouthful of food, “How are things outside?”

“Honestly not that well. You know Thor. He’s cut rations in half until you turn up, and it’s putting a drain on the cache.”

“I see,” the badger said with a nod. “I should give myself up.”

“No, dear. Not a bit of it! But we have a plan to get you out of town that will solve everything.”

Late that night, Oswald Longshanks pulled back the rug close to the fire and knocked three times on the trap door. It opened and Chester stuck his head out.

“Is it safe?”

“As safe as it gets around here.”

The badger went to the fire and warmed himself, easing his aching back and warming his frozen backside. “Did he take the bait?”

“I think so. After all, your tracks ended at that hole in the ice. And Rufus was out there with a pole probing the ice when Thor saw him. Oh he can cry like a rainstorm. Good old Rufus. He said he wasn’t sure if you offed yourself or if you fell through trying to leave town. But those tears came easy ‘cause he’s going to miss you terribly.”

“Carrying me out backwards was your idea. If I say so myself, it was brilliant.”

“No, it was Momma’s idea.”

Mrs. Longshanks came in with a hot loaf of bread and a bit of wine to set before the badger. Her chin trembled and tears spilled down her face. “It’s like losing Patrick a second time.”

Chester looked up, a sad smile on his face. “No easier on me, dear.”

“And even Thor is going to miss you. It’s the most decent thing I’ve ever heard him say. ‘Momma,’ he said, ‘I’m glad he died free the way he lived. I can’t stay angry with him.’”

“He said that?”

“Yes indeed.”

There was a careful knock at the door...two raps, a pause, then three more. Oswald opened the door and smiled. “Come in!”

It was the Hedgelys, including the furlings. With them was Mr. and Mrs. Beaver and Chestnut Diggins. They mobbed the old badger, holding and kissing him. Russ and Belle had even brought a new scarf and cap for “Grandpa Chess.”

“You took an awful chance coming here!” Chester said.

Rufus said, “Nonsense! Do you think we’d let you go without a proper goodbye?”

Mr. Beaver presented the badger with a walking stick armed with an iron spike to negotiate icy roads.

Chester looked at it. “A fine gift, Malcolm. What I will give you costs a lot less but it comes with as much love and care.” He put a paw on the beaver’s shoulder. “I pass the mantle to you, Chief Malcolm.”

As the beaver lost his composure and began to weep softly, Momma Longshanks put her arms around Chester’s shoulder. “When this mess is over we’ll see each other again.”

Chester shook his head. “Don’t raise my hopes, love. We have to face life as it is.” He raised his wineglass. “So here’s to Aslan’s Country and the eternal

warmth of a never setting sun. May the chain that binds us be unbroken in glory.”

THE FULFILMENT

THOUGH MR. BEAVER WAS NOW CHIEF OF THE Free Narnian Resistance in his town, his mood was somber and he did not feel like rejoicing in the least. He remembered last night's loading of the hay wain as a few last bundles of straw were spread over Chester Diggins, and the whimpering he heard of a poor old soul whose good memories all lay behind him.

As he sat staring at his tea and biscuits without the desire to eat them or the will to throw them away, there was a knock at his door. Two brief taps followed by three heavy raps.

Malcolm opened the door and there was Oswald Longshanks looking remarkably chipper and bright.

“Good news for Chester?” Malcolm asked.

“Good news for Narnia!” the Vicar replied. “Come here Rose. You must hear this together!”

Mrs. Beaver left her stove and slipped her arm about her husband's waist. “What is it, dear?”

“HE...is on the move. HE’S been sighted at The Stone Table.”

“Are you absolutely sure?” Malcolm asked.

“Yes. I am absolutely sure.”

After a moment of stunned silence, the beavers and hare moved forward into a crushing group hug and wept together.

“I thought the winter would never end!” Rose said, overcome.

“The prophesies are coming true in our hearing,” Oswald said. “I only hope Chester turns about and comes home. Lord knows it’s time he got to see the meadow flowers and breathe the fresh air of spring!” Oswald added, “Sorry to run, but I must spread the good news!”

He turned and headed out the door, then paused for a moment.

“Uh oh, visitor coming.”

“Who is it?”

“It’s Tumnus! I wonder what he would want with decent folks like you!” Oswald stared. “He has a small flag. No, it looks like a handkerchief.”

“Well you run along. We’ll handle the faun.”

THE END