

6.

“You know, I think they plan this all out ahead of time,” Seedwings grumbled, trudging in the rear on their way home. “How could he know what Mom told us?”

“Oh, give it a rest, Seeds,” Basso said. “He gave us a lot of things to think about.”

“Yeah, but we wanted to know—”

“He couldn’t tell us *everything*,” Perly said. “He told us more than he usually does.”

“And there weren’t as many riddles this time.”

“But—”

“Aw, button it up, Seeds. What’s the use grumbling about it?”

“Basso’s right,” Perly said. “We’d better hurry, or we’ll be late for night-meal!” She and Basso quickened their pace.

Seedwings scowled, watching their diminishing forms. “Hurry up, Seeds!” Perly called over her shoulder.

They passed the Overland Road, the dark crossed twigs rising up from the black dirt like strange knobby teeth.

Seedwings stopped. He was tired of always being told what he couldn't do, where he couldn't go. He peered up the tangled path. There was little to see now, because it had grown much darker during their visit with Mr. Barleynubs. But wait! Up ahead, on the right—a gleam of something! What was it? He hesitated. No time to check with the others—especially Perly, who'd only come back and drag him along if she had to. The gleam beckoned. He had to see what it was. He took his first steps up the path.

Farther up the Safe Road, Basso was saying, "Why do you think Mom and Dad never told us all that about the magic bread? I didn't get all of it. He can sure go on for a long time."

"C'mon, hurry up!" Perly puffed, "we can talk about this stuff later!"

"Anyway, I bet Seeds didn't get *half* of what was going on," Basso continued. "How 'bout it, Seeds...? Well?"

He turned around. The path was empty. "Perly!" he boomed. "Seeds is gone!" His voice thundered up and down the Safe Road.

"What? No!" Perly exclaimed. "He was just there! I heard you talking to him!" She peered back down a suddenly threatening Safe Road, her mind darting here and there, the rats, dangers, her mother—what could possibly have gone wrong? "Basso, I swear, I'll—Seeds!" she called.

"Perly, no!" Basso whispered. "I forgot too, just now! We're not supposed to yell out like this, not even on the Safe Roads, because—"

"Oh, no!" Perly exclaimed. Their eyes met. "He's gone up the Overland Road!"

"What'll we do?"

"We have to go after him! No, wait! Basso! You run home and get Mom!"

"Mom? She'll kill us!"

"Do as I say!" Perly hissed. "We're all in trouble anyway! Or worse," she muttered, glancing at Basso's scampering form before scurrying down the way she had come. She reached the crossed twigs in a few seconds, took a breath, and plunged in. He *had* to have gone this way. It was quite dark. She could see nothing for certain, feel nothing except a sense of dread overtaking her. She paused, trembling, her nose alert, her ears singing as the blood rushed through them.

“Seeds!” she croaked, her voice flat against the dead air. She crept forward, her heart pounding. Now the path glowed with an eerie silver light. At last she saw the small grey form, edging slowly but purposefully ahead. A wave of relief mixed with anger rushed over her. “Seeds!” she hissed. “Get back here!” She took a step forward, but a dark silent curtain dropped from the sky, reeling her back.

The gleam had turned out to be a mushroom cap. Seedwings sniffed, a tiny scornful sound. This road didn't seem different at all from the Safe Road. Maybe Mom and Dad weren't hiding anything. Maybe they just said some roads were safe and some weren't, so he wouldn't go down them. It wasn't fair. He was always being told what to do. They all told him. Perly especially, but lately even Basso.

He crept forward. The darkness lifted a bit. There was an opening ahead. Was that the Overland? What did it look like? He didn't care what Perly said, he had to see. *Then* he'd have something to tell them!

He tiptoed toward the dim light. His eyes widened. He found himself staring out over the widest field of grass he had ever seen. It stretched away in three directions, lit by a magic silver light. He followed the light upward. A giant white circle made him blink. Was that the moon? Mom had said something about it once, when he was little. He couldn't remember what she'd said, only that her shoulders had made that funny shivering motion. The moon was so beautiful! He stepped forward into the light.

The ground whirled away. An eye, an eye, an eye, he shouted silently, not yet feeling the stun of the claw. An eye, an eye, an eye, I am an eye— only an eye, bright and black, staring out at a world suddenly giving way—and then roaring, roaring sounds, a thin cry, sudden release, confusion of soft things flapping, roaring, pulsing, large animal sounds, his heart, ground and grass rushing up suddenly and jarring, darkening, blackness, black, the eye still open, seeing nothing, the shouting near and fading away too—an eye, an eye am I, an eye. An eye. An eye.

Perly struggled to her feet. “Seeds!” she cried, heedless of the danger. The shadow had taken him. “Seeds!” She dashed toward the uncertain light.

The sight from the clearing seared her mind: the large winged form, sharp shiny claws glinting in the moonlight, a tiny, frail, and precious tail snaking between them—and then deep, pulsing sounds echoing and sharpening into thudding barks, the large groundward form all motion, plunging, leaping, smashing into the winged form. A narrow cry.

She saw the tiny ball then, frozen an instant in the stark moon-circle, frozen and framed, the thin tail dangling, the form spinning toward earth.

“Seeds!” she shrieked again, sprinting toward the spot where the tailed ball had disappeared into the grass. The two huge shadows had spun away, sky and ground, locked in a distancing chase. She stumbled and scrambled forward.

The form was still, so still. She cried out. The eye stared at her, black and unblinking, a tiny moon trapped in it. “No,” she rasped, tugging at the form. A whisker trembled, twitched. “Alive,” she breathed, and began to drag Seedwings across the field to safety. Where were the others?

On and on she struggled, dragging him now with hand, now with mouth. She expected any moment to see the winged shadow. Where were they all? This was endless, Seeds both so heavy and so small, the black eye unblinking, shining up at her.

At last, she reached the entrance to the covered part of the Overland Road. She dragged her brother’s still form inside the cover and pitched herself next to him, gasping for breath. Then she felt hands lifting her, lifting Seedwings, too—mouse hands, many many helpful hands—and she saw her mother’s twisted, anguished face. Mrs. Starbloom was there, too, and other adult mice she recognized only vaguely. Where was Basso?

Quickly and silently, these mice carried the two of them down the Overland Road, past the crossed twigs to the Safe Road, and so back to a strangely changed home. All through that jostling ride, Perly could see her mother’s face, the expression frozen, the look anxious, but even now not breaking silence, not until they had reached the safety of their home.

They brought Seedwings in and placed him on his leaf-mat bed. They set Perly down on a dried mushroom-stool beside him. Then she realized that she hadn’t stopped, couldn’t stop trembling. Someone in that room grown close with mice threw a shawl over her shoulders and rubbed them a moment. She looked up; it was Mrs. Starbloom. “Please go and fetch Father Trillium, quickly,” Mrs. Starbloom said to one of the others. Perly’s eyes followed the mouse as it hurried off, past the doorway where Basso, looking suddenly small, skulked, then returned her gaze to the bed, then over Seedwings’ small still body to the far side of the bed, where her mother wrung her hands. Still her mother said nothing. Perly could hardly bear it.

Her mother rose slowly, that terrible twisted expression never leaving her face. Mrs. Mosstops gazed down at her youngest only an instant before reaching out and laying a hand across his cheek, stroking it.

The small form vented a long, thin sigh. The black eye closed. The spell was broken. Mrs. Mosstops's face softened but slightly. Perly felt herself crying then, felt the hands on her shoulders tighten. She struggled with herself. She knew she must be brave, brave and silent like the bigger mice around her. She shook herself free of the comforting hands and stood, facing her mother.

"Mother, I'm sorry," she began. Her mother looked at her blankly. Suddenly, the words tumbled out, all wrong, all wrong, a gushing confession of everything that had happened, Mr. Barleynubs, the power, the rats, the danger, and First and Last and the Road and Seeds and she had told him, hadn't she, not even to look up a road you can't go down, but he *had* looked up, and he *had* gone down, and she hadn't made it back in time to stop him, and then the shadow and the sounds and Seeds falling—

An abrupt commotion. Father Trillium's large white form swept into the room, his brilliant purple-and-red stole trailing carelessly from his neck. Motion filled the room, now—large, loud, adult motion that brushed aside Perly's confession in mid-sentence. Numbly she sat down, small again, mouselet still, watching and not doing.

Father Trillium bent over Seedwings, his low voice the only sound in the close room. He placed a hand on the little mouse's head and with the other made a crossing sign. Then he turned to Mrs. Mosstops, and although Perly couldn't see what was being discussed through Father Trillium's broad back, she could hear at last the soft voice of her mother, knew that at long last the terrible expression had eased.

Father Trillium turned around, his face solemn, his normally twinkly black eyes gone serious, hooded over. "Let us pray," he said.