



TOTO
THE NINJA CAT
AND THE LEGEND OF
THE WILDCAT

DERMOT O'LEARY

ILLUSTRATED BY NICK EAST



HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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CHAPTER 4

With the sound of the rain tapping on the roof of the train, and with the warmth of being all cuddled together, the cats eventually dropped off to sleep. By the time they awoke they had almost finished their journey into the wilds of Scotland. While Catface knew the country well, the rest of the cats were taken aback by its beauty. As the train snaked its way over a viaduct, the cats looked out on to a picturesque loch that stretched as far as the eye could see. On each side



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of the water, the mountains grew steep, turning into snow-lined peaks that looked to the cats as close to the stars as they could imagine.

'I've never seen such a sight,' Socks said, amazed.

'*Bellissimo*. I had no idea Britain was this beautiful,' sighed Silver as he explained the view to Toto.

Catface smiled. 'Quite something, isn't it? I'll never forget the first time I saw Scotland; my mother took me up to meet family as a little baby rat. Now, Glenview shouldn't be far, so let's get ready and keep our wits about us. If these Meowsiders are anything to go by, I can't imagine we'll get the best reception.'

'Exactly,' Toto agreed. 'And please **REMEMBER THAT I'M UNDERCOVER**, so I can't help you if you get into any more trouble. Let's keep our heads down, get through the week and investigate these wildcat sightings. We'll be back safe and sound before you know it.'

Sure enough, as the long locomotive curved around the bend of the hill, the view opened up to reveal a huge glen in the distance, nestled in the shadow of a giant mountain. The train pulled into the station, the doors opened and the motley group of passengers stepped on to the platform.

The Meowsiders looked over at Toto and her friends and gave them a sarcastic wave. Elsewhere there were dogs, cats, foxes, ferrets, a couple of magpies and a pair of cold-looking bearded dragons. Some looked tough, like this wasn't their first time at Glenview. Others looked very scared, like they'd rather be anywhere else.

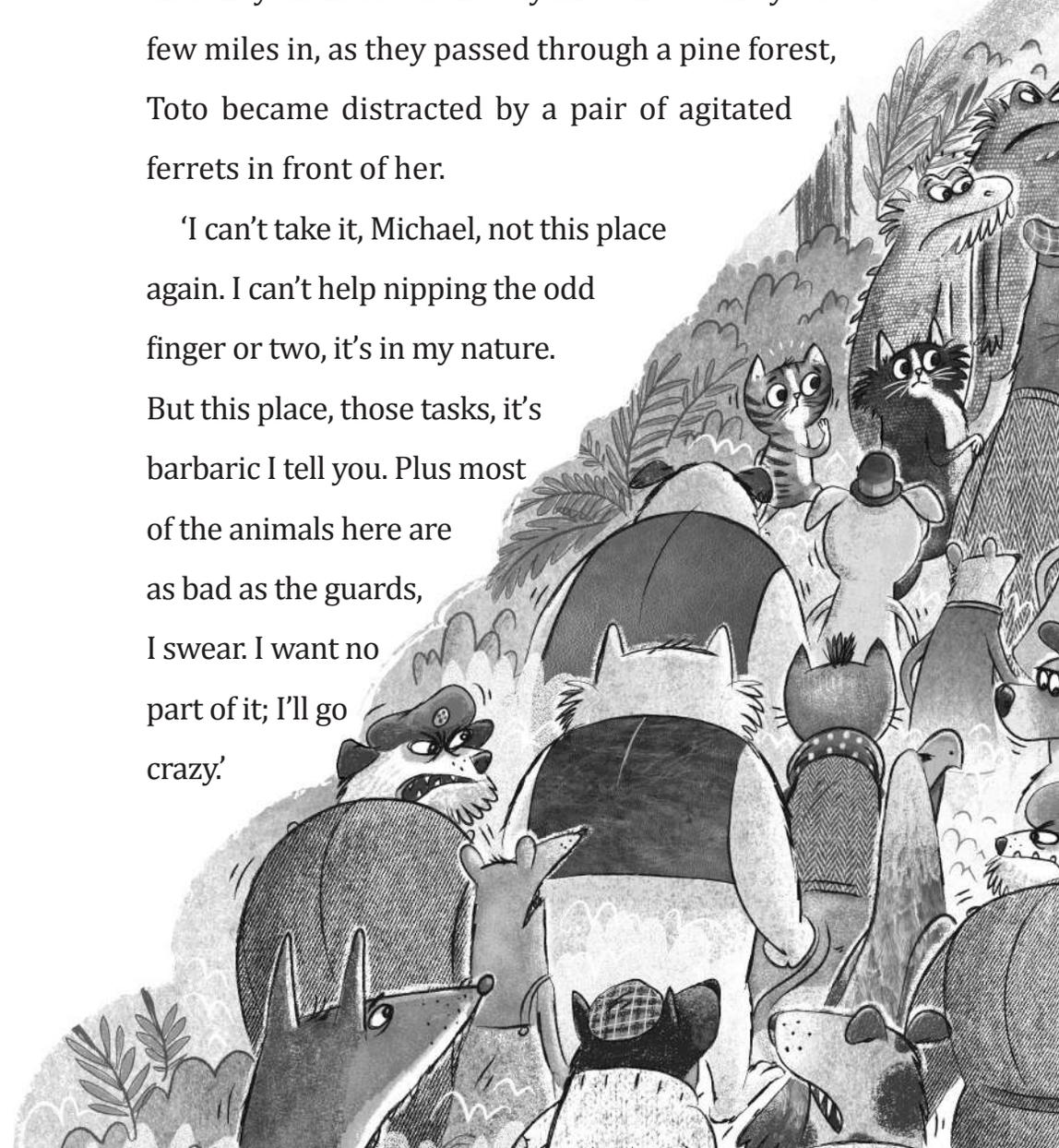
Sergeant Major Gordon appeared at the head of the platform and bellowed in a voice so loud that Toto and the cats could hear every word he said.

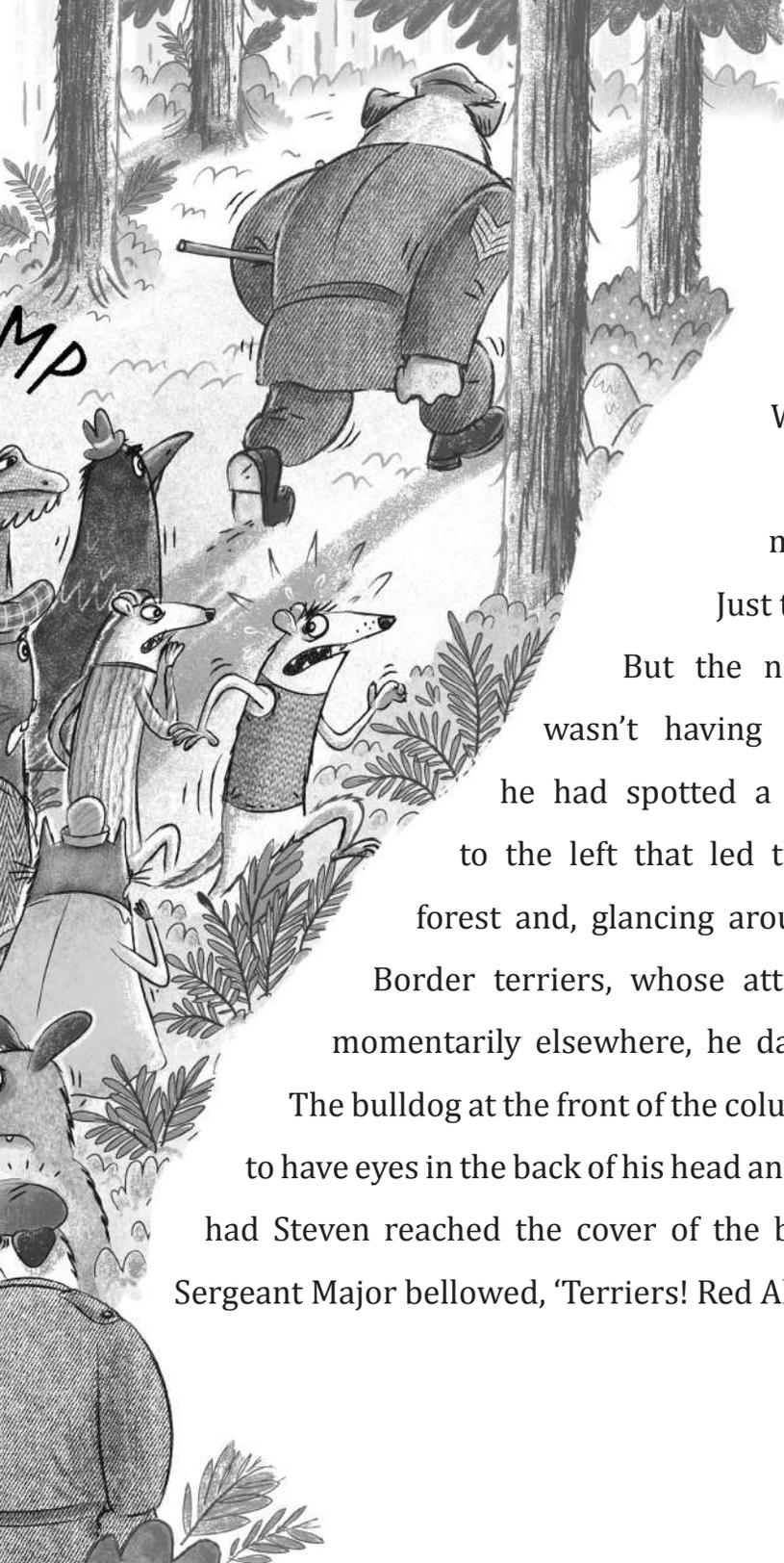
'Glenview is a ten-mile march. Fall into two lines and follow me. Anyone trying to escape will be dealt with swiftly and without mercy. Quiiiiick march!'

TRAMP
TRA

A platoon of uniformed and dangerous-looking Border terriers fell into line next to the new recruits and they all made their way into the countryside. A few miles in, as they passed through a pine forest, Toto became distracted by a pair of agitated ferrets in front of her.

'I can't take it, Michael, not this place again. I can't help nipping the odd finger or two, it's in my nature. But this place, those tasks, it's barbaric I tell you. Plus most of the animals here are as bad as the guards, I swear. I want no part of it; I'll go crazy.'





‘Don’t
be daft,
Steven.

We’ll get out
of here in a
month or so.

Just take it easy.’

But the nervy ferret
wasn’t having any of it;
he had spotted a small path
to the left that led through the
forest and, glancing around for the
Border terriers, whose attention was
momentarily elsewhere, he darted for it.
The bulldog at the front of the column seemed
to have eyes in the back of his head and no sooner
had Steven reached the cover of the bracken the
Sergeant Major bellowed, ‘Terriers! Red Alert!’

The platoon of Border terriers sprang into action and disappeared into the undergrowth to make chase, barking loudly. Nobody could see what happened, but the loud yelps made it clear that the poor unfortunate ferret hadn't made it far. Within minutes he was brought back, covered in bruises, and dumped at the feet of his concerned partner.

Sergeant Major Gordon looked over the animals before him and boomed, 'Let this pathetic specimen be an example to the lot of you. You will serve your time, you will be rehabilitated and you will obey the rules of the camp. Anyone who refuses to do so ... Well, you see the penalty. Now, if no one else wishes to escape?' The crowd stayed silent. 'Excellent. FORWARD MARCH,' he yelled.

'I think this week might be a little harder than Larry led us to believe,' Silver whispered to his sister.

'It's OK, brother. If we stick together, we'll make it

out of here just fine.'

But underneath, Toto was worried. The poor ferret had taken a beating, and knowing Catface and her two brothers, there was no way they would stay out of trouble. Plus there was something else the ferret had said that troubled her: 'Most of the animals here are as bad as the guards ...' It was



an odd thing to say. Could the camp really be that bad?

A few miles later they finally made it through the forest and out into a valley banked by steep green hills. There ahead of them was Glenview. The camp

was made up of lots of tented structures and in the centre was a huge parade ground, which was where the march finally ended.

'Line up, line up, stand to attention for the officers,' Sergeant Major Gordon barked fiercely as the tired column of animals came to a halt.

At the front of the parade ground was a large hut with a covered wooden porch. Standing to await the arrival of the column were two portly, imposing-looking animals in khaki regimental dress. They were obviously the commanding officers. One a cat and one a rat, they both cut impressive figures.

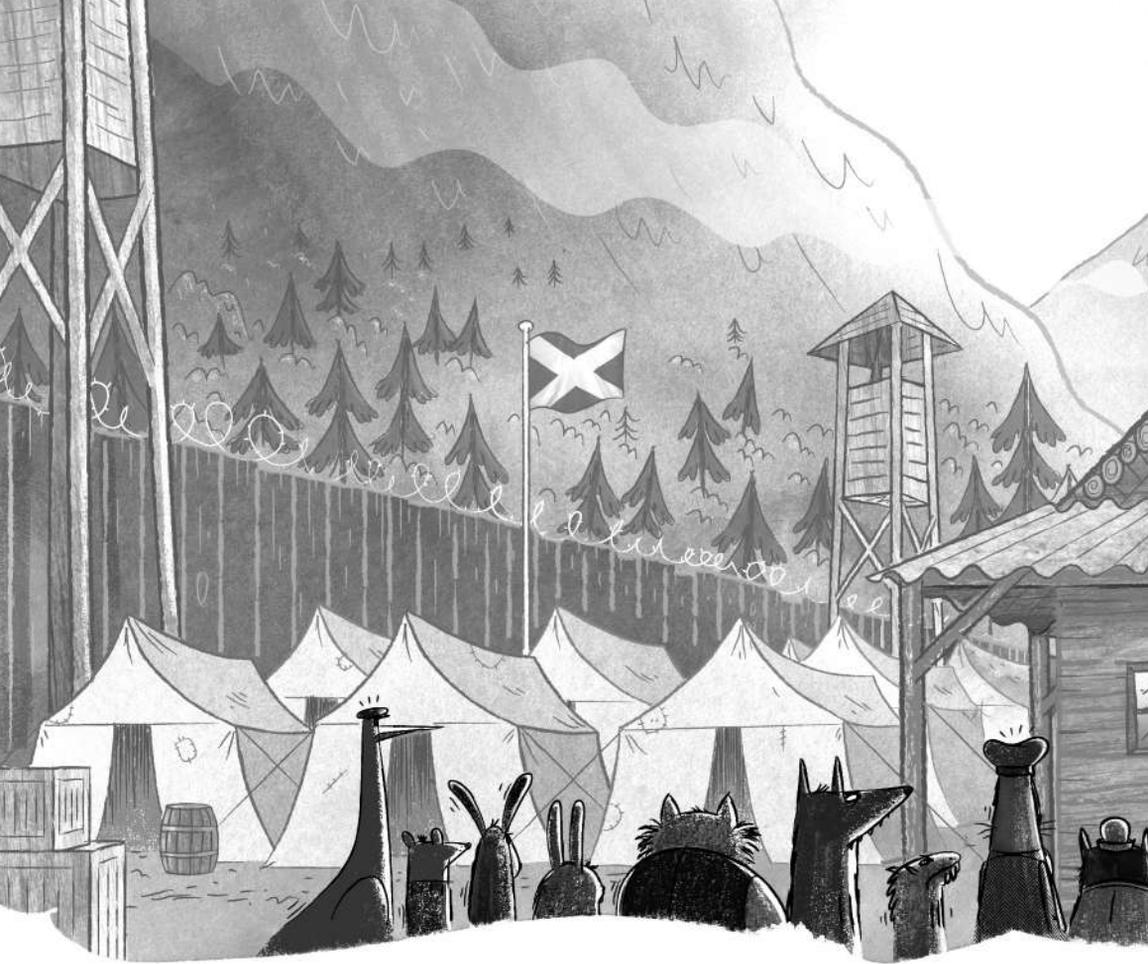
'Good evening,' the tall cat began in a broad Scots accent. **'WELCOME TO GLENVIEW CORRECTIONAL CAMP FOR NAUGHTY ANIMALS.'** My name is General Munro. You've all been sent here by your owners or the animal courts for being the naughtiest animals in the country.'

‘He’s got that right,’ Toto heard Harry the Meowsider laugh under his breath.

‘Some of you have been sentenced to a week here, others six months, but rest assured all animals will, if they play by the rules, come out of here well-adjusted members of animal society. However, if you don’t play by the rules ...’

At that, the cat stepped back and his rat companion stepped forward with an even sterner look on his face and continued, ‘Then I promise you a world of pain you will not want to endure. My name is Drummond, and this week will involve **THREE TASKS** you must complete as teams. The first of these will be explained tomorrow. If you want to go home, you have to pass the tasks. Dinner will now be served in the mess tent. We hope you *enjoy* it. Sergeant Major Gordon, over to you.’

The two officers disappeared back into their hut



and Gordon barked, ‘When you fall out, make your way to your tents; the numbers are posted on the notice board. Dinner is over in thirty minutes’ time, and breakfast will be served immediately after our 5 a.m. roll call.’

‘Ouch,’ whispered Silver. ‘Bang goes my catnap.’



'FALL OUT!'

The whole camp scattered, the new recruits running to the notice board as quickly as possible to see where they were billeted and bagsy the best beds.

'I say, you don't suppose they'll have comfy beds and ***FLUFFY PILLOWS***, maybe a hot-water bottle, do you?

And cocoa. I must have cocoa before bed,' said Catface as they followed the crowd. 'Also, I do like to insist on my own bathroom. Do you think that will be possible?'

'Catface, my old mate, I very much doubt it.' Socks frowned.

Sure enough, there were **DRAUGHTY TENTS, LEAKY TENTS AND HOLEY TENTS**. Tent number twenty-three was all of those things, and that was the one Toto and her friends found themselves in. In truth it should hardly have been called a tent; it was just moth-eaten canvas over a metal frame, with a wooden door.

'Well, I've stayed at the Ritz, but never the Pitz!' laughed Catface.

They left their belongings on the beds and made their way back to the mess hall for dinner. Sergeant Major Gordon bumped into them as they crossed the parade ground. 'I do hope you are enjoying our hospitality,' he growled menacingly. 'Nothing is too

good for the budgie-hater of Croydon and her friends. I hope all our tasks are to your liking this week.' With that, he walked off whistling to himself.

'Blimey, sis, Larry could have given you an easier cover story. This guy's really got it in for you,' said Silver. 'So what's the plan?'

'I guess he's a big budgie fan!' answered Toto. 'Don't worry, it's nothing I can't handle. The plan? We'll wait for Larry's contact to reach out to me, but in the meantime the best way for us to see if Felis of Grampia does exist is to scour the local hills, lochs and so forth. For now, we **STICK TOGETHER** and take part in all the tasks, no matter how hard they are, but keep your eyes peeled for ways to get away from the rest of the crowd, OK?' The gang murmured their agreement. 'Right, let's eat.'

'Woo hoo!' said Catface and Silver with a high-five.

Dinner was, as promised, VERY basic and not at

all a 'woo hoo' affair: porridge. It was a cold stodge that, to Silver's horror, was made with water and salt. ('I've never heard of such a thing; not a drop of milk or cream in sight. It's inhumane, I tell you.') But he still ate it, and went back for seconds.

After such a long day, with full bellies and mindful of their early start, the cats all hit the sack and were fast asleep within minutes.

Toto stirred after a couple of hours. It was pitch black outside and all was still, but a slight movement at the foot of her bed had woken her.

Toto could sense a moving figure – the smell and the shape of the shadow she could just about make out suggested it was Catface. *He probably needs the toilet or, more likely, wants to see if he can steal some better food from the mess tent*, she thought.

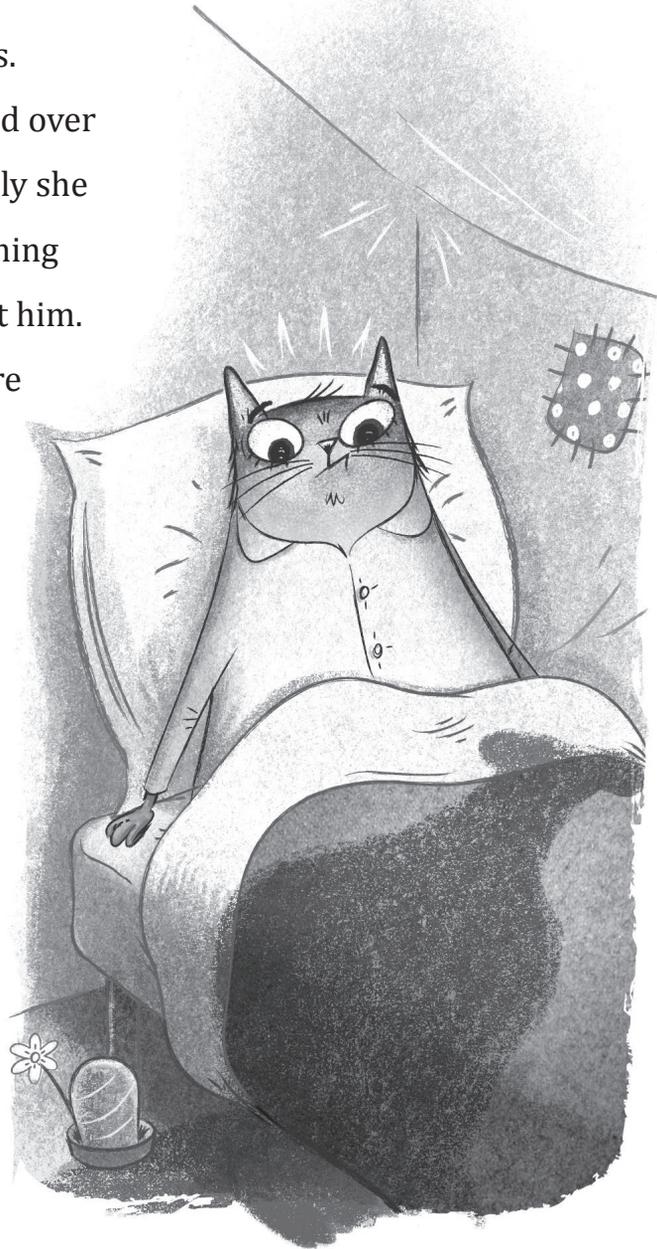
'Catface, what's up?' Toto whispered, wiping the

sleep from her eyes.

The shadow loomed over her and immediately she could sense something was different about him.

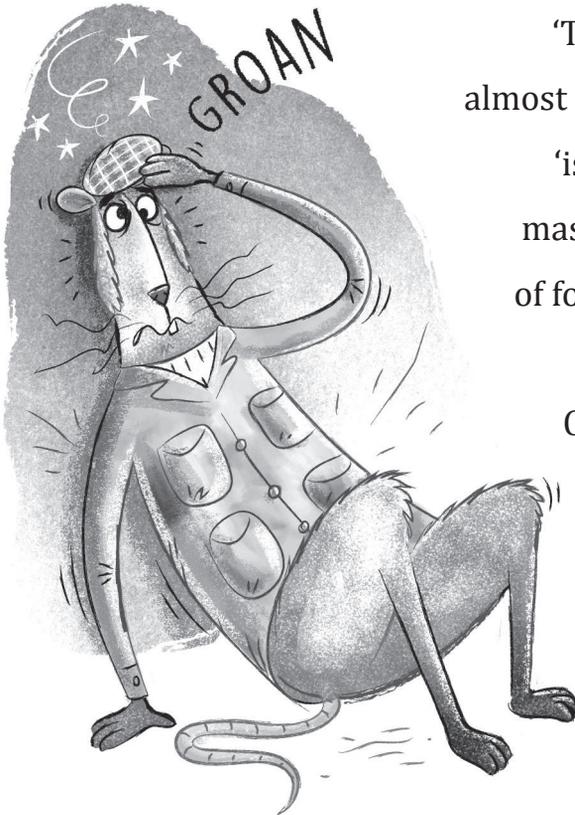
She turned to where Catface's bed was, and to her horror she could hear his snores. So, who was this? An attacker?

She sprang out of bed, spun the figure round and in a second had him pinned to the floor.



'What in Nessie's name are you doing?' he hissed in a loud whisper. 'Retract your claws, **RETRACT YOUR CLAWS!** You've gone and crushed my hat!'

The stranger was a rat who looked almost identical to Catface, dressed in a waxed jacket and flat cap. Toto could now tell he was neither a threat nor a danger, but who was he?



'The name,' he said,
almost reading her mind,
'is Sandy Campbell,
master poacher, head
of food and beverages
for Glenview
Correctional Camp
... and Scottish
attaché for one
Larry the
Ninja Cat.'

‘So you’re my contact! Sorry. But what are you doing sneaking around?’ she asked, picking him off the ground.

‘I didn’t want to blow your cover. And I’m a poacher, so sneaking around is what I do. Plus there’s strange goings-on in this camp. I can’t quite put my forefoot on it, but the animals here don’t appear to be getting any better at all. In fact, you could say **THEY ARE GETTING NAUGHTIER BY THE DAY!** It’s not safe out at night so I like to keep my wits about me. All very odd. Now, let me fill you in on the wildcat – follow me.’

As they opened the tent door, moonlight lit up the rat and Toto could make out his shape. ‘I know I can only see your outline, but you do seem to look an awful lot like Catface,’ Toto said.

‘I should think so ... he’s my cousin!’ answered Sandy. ‘But I won’t wake him to say hello now. Best let him sleep or he’ll disturb the whole camp with

singing, shouting and roaring. Plus he'll eat me out of house and home.'

'Hmm, I see you really do know him!' said Toto with a chuckle.

Sandy's wooden cabin was on the edge of the camp. A couple of times the pair had to jump into a nearby bush to hide from a patrolling terrier, but they made it without getting spotted. Sandy opened the door to a **ROARING PEAT FIRE** with two armchairs in front of it. To the left was a small table and a kitchen where, bubbling away on the hob, there was a saucepan of Toto's favourite: cheesy pasta.

'Larry told me you might be needing that, when the alternative is porridge, porridge and more porridge!' he said, mimicking Sergeant Major Gordon. 'Get settled,' he added, steering Toto to a comfy armchair and fetching her a bowl of the cheesy pasta, 'and I'll

bring you up to speed.'

Toto chowed down on the frankly incredible pasta. ('It's the added haggis! It's my secret ingredient,' Sandy explained. Toto didn't have a clue what haggis was, but it was delicious.) She listened intently to the rat as he told her the whole story. His encounter with Felis, and how over the past few days the **LEGENDARY WILDCAT** had been spotted by locals far and wide. On the tops of mountains, at the foot of waterfalls, on the banks of lochs. The wildcat's intentions might be unclear, but Felis was definitely back.

'But Larry doesn't think he's real,' Toto interjected between mouthfuls.

'Well, Larry is a great ninja, but he's not here, and I know he cares little for our superstitions. Trust me, Toto, I've seen this cat take on a dog and a man – a **HUMAN MAN**, Toto – and win. There's no way it's just some cat tourist or vigilante; the legend is as real

as Nessie ... I'm serious, Toto.' He paused, unsure how to proceed. 'If a real wildcat appears, they would hold a legitimate claim to the animal crown of Scotland. All the wildcat would need to take power is an army, and where better to recruit one than right here at the camp? A ready-made battalion of naughty animals. We could be looking at an animal war – it would be terrible!'

Toto pondered what to do next. This could obviously be ***A LOT MORE SERIOUS*** than Larry had suspected, but she needed proof, and ideally to find Felis for herself.

'Look, I'm here for a week. I have to take part in these tasks and, to be honest, I know I'm going to have to keep an eye on my brothers and Catface; there's no way they'll stay out of trouble. My plan is to try and scout the country for Felis as far as possible, then report my findings to the boss. He'll know what to do.'

Toto licked her bowl of pasta clean, then the new allies shook paws and Sandy escorted Toto back to her quarters, agreeing to meet again the following night.

‘Look out tomorrow, Toto,’ Sandy whispered as they neared her tent. ‘This camp is becoming more and more dangerous. It’s not just Felis you need to be worried about, ninja or not. I can’t quite place why, but there’s something in the air that’s unpredictable ...’ He saw the concern on Toto’s face and tried to reassure her. ‘Ach, it’s probably just the worry of Felis getting to me.’ He waved his arm as if to dismiss his thoughts.

But as Toto entered the tent and quietly slid into bed, she WAS beginning to be more than a little worried. If Felis was back and intent on raising an army, even with her ninja skills there wouldn’t be an awful lot she could do to prevent it!