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## THE WOODLAND WARRIORS

The woodland was quiet and peaceful. Rabbits fussed over their bunnies and dug holes; squirrels scuttled through the trees gathering acorns; and hedgehogs grubbed around under hedges, as they do. It was really just another day like any other and the creatures of the woodland were glad of that. It was, however, soon to change.

News of something bad about to happen arrived when Eeyargo the fox came rushing into the clearing. "You've all got to leave!" he declared breathlessly. "The wreckers are on their way!" Those close enough who had heard stopped what they were doing and looked at each other, many with doubtful frowns. The reason for this was that Eeyargo was known for being sneaky and not to be trusted.

Concerned that no-one seemed to be taking notice of him, the fox tried again: "Haven't you seen the big sign-thing at the edge of the meadow? It's the same as the one the humans put up where I used to live; and not long after they brought in huge, noisy, smelly machines that rolled along in a line knocking down everything in their path – bushes, trees and hedge rows. They destroyed our homes completely and we had to move somewhere else."

"Why would they do that?" asked Furbag the stoat.

"To put things on," said Eeyargo. "Last time I looked there were lots of them – big, square things; and they were building more. That's what's going to happen here. You've all got to clear out and find new homes, because pretty soon the ones you've got will be gone!"

The warning caused great confusion in the woodland. The only ones not really worried were the birds because they could fly off somewhere else without a problem; at least most could. There were those, however, which had young chicks in the nest that wouldn't be able to fly until their proper feathers had grown. As for other creatures which lived in trees or on the ground, they didn't know what they could do if they lost their homes. Instead of making any decisions right away, many simply remained hopeful that it was just Eeyargo making things up again. "You know what he's like," said Spike the hedgehog. "Maybe nothing will happen."

"I'm not so sure," Louisa the doe murmured thoughtfully. "I went to have a look at the sign-thing Eeyargo talked about and it's like he said – pictures of boxes spread over a big area. It could have been anywhere; but then I noticed some pine trees in the distance behind the boxes, and they are the same as the ones deep in our woodland. I'm sorry to say it, but I believe we are all in more trouble than we might imagine."

A meeting was called to discuss the problem, and all the woodland folk gathered in the clearing. "We need a plan of action," said Furbag, quite unnecessarily really because that was obvious.

"What about a show of force?" suggested Scobie the hare, rising up on his back legs and beating his chest with his front paws to demonstrate how fearsome he could be. "When the huge, noisy, smelly machines come we could stand in front of them to stop them rolling across the meadow into our woodland."

The idea sounded like it might work and everyone agreed to be a part of it. Because they could fly long distances very quickly, the birds were given the job of keeping a lookout for the arrival of the big machines. Days went by without any news. Some thought that Eeyargo had just been tricking them, which was typical of him. Then again, maybe the humans had changed their minds about coming after all. Both of these possibilities were dashed when Foster the starling swooped down and screeched: "They're here! The machines! The machines!"

The woodland was instantly abuzz with activity. Creatures stopped whatever they were doing and rushed to assemble near the meadow. Before long the machines could be seen rolling, rolling, rolling towards them. Forming a line facing the back of the sign-thing, they waited. Tension grew as the machines passed the sign; then they stopped. A human person climbed down from one of the noisy, smelly things, walked forward a few paces and stared at the line of creatures. Only for a moment, though. With a bit of a snort, he turned on his heel and went back to his machine, calling out to the rest of his kind.

None of the animals, of course, knew human-speak, so they had no clue what he had said; Louisa, however, was hopeful. "Maybe they've seen us and realised that people live here, and they will go away and leave us in peace."

"You're dreaming," sneered Eeyargo. "All they care about is clearing the land to build their boxes. Better get ready to run for it."

"No," declared Spike, rippling his bristles, "Prepare to defend our homes."

"Too right," agreed Scobie, beating his chest again. "All for one and one for all. We stand."

So stand they did; not for long, though. The machines moved forward again, skirted the sign thing and kept coming. Almost at the line of creatures they still didn't stop. The show of force hadn't worked and the human people didn't seem to care if they ran right over the poor, defenceless animals. First to break were the mice which scuttled backwards, followed closely by the squirrels. The birds tried swooping on the machines, squawking and pecking them with their beaks; but the wreckers took no notice. More creatures deserted the line and the machines kept coming.

Suddenly a kind-of braying moo had everyone turning to see McAndy the stag approaching. He was really strong-looking and muscular with an impressive array of antlers sprouting from his head. He wasn't alone either. Trooping behind was a group of younger deer sporting smaller antlers than McAndy's. "Ready, boys," the head of the herd grated, "Prepare to attack." Then he pawed the ground three times and roared: "**CHARGE!**"

The line of creatures split. It had to as the deer came thundering through, heads down, antlers ready to repel the invaders. They met the challenge full on. Thuds and clangs rang out from antlers striking metal; but it was like hitting the machines with a feather. They simply kept rolling, pushing the brave deer backwards until McAndy barked: "'We're done, lads. Retreat.'" The herd of deer turned tail and ran, as did everyone else. The battle was lost. All the woodland animals could do now was return to their homes and make ready to leave.

Meanwhile, the machines continued rolling on; scraping the ground before them; knocking over everything in their path. Some animals stayed behind to watch, many with tears in their eyes. They had eventually seen enough and were about to leave when something unexpected occurred. Suddenly the terrible noise the machines had been making began to fade. One by one they stopped. The drivers climbed out and gathered in the same spot where they sat and began talking and eating.

Those who had seen this reported back to the others. "At least that gives us time," said Furbag, "But for what, I have no idea. After they've finished eating they'll just start up again."

"Hey," mumbled Flash the tortoise through a mouthful of leaves. "You're all forgetting about Poppy."

It seemed everyone had. The only reason Flash remembered was because he was quite old; but not as ancient as Old Poppy. She was a weasel and she had missed most of the ruckus because she had been snoozing. It was what she usually did, being about all she could manage

lately. Even Eeyargo's earlier noisy shouting had failed to wake her. She hadn't always been old and tired, though. There had been a time when she was quite famous for doing lots of really energetic, often incredible things; but those days were long gone; so she thought. Poppy's eyes opened a fraction when she felt a prodding in her side. "Wake up, sleepy head," droned Furbag. "It's time to do your unbelievable stuff like Flash said you used to."

"Go away," murmured Poppy sleepily. "I'm tired, and I don't do that anymore."

The tortoise had been slow getting there, but Flash finally arrived. He lumbered close and also gave Poppy a nudge with his nose. "You've got to help us," he urged. "We've tried everything else. You're our last hope."

Reluctantly, Poppy agreed. "But only to try," she warned. "I'm not sure I can still do the super-hero act anymore. Now, where are these infernal machines?"

Although no-one knew what infernal meant, they escorted the old weasel to the collection of what the humans called bulldozers which had been sitting idle. It seemed the drivers had finished eating and were climbing back into their machines. Poppy approached. She stood for a moment, then rose to stand unsteadily on her hind legs. "Watch this," said Flash almost breathlessly. "You're going to see something amazing. First she'll spin around really fast, so fast you won't be able to see her. Then, when she stops, plain old Poppy will have changed into Wonder Weasel. She'll be huge and fearsome."

Poppy began her change routine. Faster and faster she spun to the point where she seemed to have become invisible. At last she stopped. Unfortunately, she hadn't grown any bigger and had begun to sway and totter. Eventually overcome by a bout of dizziness, she fell over.

So much for that. The machines were starting up again, making noise and chuffing out black smoke. Forming into a line they began to advance. "Quick!" Furbag shouted to a gathering of bystanders. "Come and help get Poppy out of the way before the machines run over her!"

The noisy, smelly wreckers rolled on, not caring that they might hurt the group of woodland creatures in their path. Furbag and the others were guiding old Poppy to safety; and just as they were passing a small mound of earth, a head appeared from underground. "What's all this rumbling and shaking?" Doug the mole demanded to know.

"There's the problem," said Scobie, pointing at the machines. "They've come to destroy our homes."

"Just tell them to go away," suggested Doug, as if no-one had thought of it.

"We've tried everything," said the hare, "And it was hopeless. I suppose it doesn't matter to you, seeing as your home's underground."

"Too right it matters," snorted Doug irritably. "All this shuddering is making my tunnels collapse." After a few seconds thought, he asked: "What about Poppy? Can't she do her Wonder Weasel stuff?" The question might have seemed strange because Poppy was right there in front of him; but as everyone knows, moles spend most of their time underground and are pretty much blind so they are unable to see anything.

"She tried and failed," explained Furbag dismally.

"Right, then," said Doug. "This seems like a good job for Multi Mole."

"Multi Mole?" repeated a puzzled Flash. "Who's Multi Mole?"

"I am," declared Doug proudly. "At least I will be in two shakes." Crawling out of his hole, he stood tall on his hind legs just like Poppy had done; then he let out his super-hero call: "Menny Meez!" And with that, he leapt in the air and dived back into his hole.

Except for the machines which kept on coming, everyone else waited. As for Doug and his Multi-Mole stunt it seemed to be a bit of fizzer because nothing had changed; only for a few seconds, though, when a mole sprang out of the hole. "It's Doug," said Furbag, "But he doesn't look any different..." His words died as another mole popped out from underground; then

another, and another. Moles kept appearing, many of them. “They all look like Doug,” said Furbag in surprise.

“That’s because I’ve turned myself into many moles,” explained Doug proudly.

“An interesting trick,” observed Scobie, “But I don’t see how it helps us. No matter how many moles you turn yourself into, you’re all still too small to stop the wreckers. They’ll just roll right over you.”

“They’ll roll alright,” stated Doug with a snigger, “But not for long,” then he called out: “Multi Mole to the rescue!” What happened next was so quick that those nearby could only gasp and watch. One by one, Doug’s look-alikes dived back into the hole.

As before, nothing seemed to happen at first; although, apart from the noise made by the machines there was another strange sound like the buzzing of an electric drill accompanied by a peculiar vibration that could be felt under the feet of the woodland creatures.

Unseen by those on the surface, Doug and his Multi Moles did what they did and dug. Dig, dig they did; this way and that, back and forth; boring tunnels that criss-crossed underneath the meadow. They dug so many that under what appeared to be solid ground was actually a great big cavern; in effect, a very large hole below the surface.

The machine drivers didn’t know this, of course, because the meadow looked as solid as it had been. Then one rolled over the closest mole-hole and it sunk instantly right up to the door of the cab. Other drivers saw, but they weren’t quick enough to stop their machines which also rolled over more holes and sank like the first. It was a sight to behold – six noisy, smelly machines half buried in the ground and going nowhere.

The woodland creatures whooped and cheered; and when Doug crawled out of the ground they all gave him a round of applause. Flash said: “That was absolutely brilliant, Doug, but where are the other moles?”

“You’re looking at them,” said Doug, “Always assuming you aren’t blind like me. Multi Mole’s job is done and I’m back to my normal single self again. With luck the wreckers will give up and go somewhere else. I hope they don’t take too long – I’ve got a lot of underground repair work to do.”

It took the humans a little while, but eventually they managed to pull the machines out of the holes and took them away. The last to go was the sign-thing which was tossed onto the back of a truck which drove off. “Good riddance to that,” said Louisa.

“Too right,” said Eeyargo. “I’m amazed you all stood your ground; and that Doug and his Multi-Mole bit, what a legend he is.”

Needless to say, everyone agreed that Multi Mole would go down in Woodland History alongside Wonder Weasel. Might it be possible though, some wondered, that we may have other super-heroes in our midst that we don’t know about yet? But that, my friends, would have to be another story.