

Chapter Four

Levi's body stiffened as the sound echoed through the manor. Beneath the table he balled his hands tightly, gripping the rough material of his smock. *When will this nightmare end?*

The four characters seated at the table stared hesitantly at one another before Barkstripe pushed himself upright using his quarterstaff. 'Who the blazes?'

Another loud tattoo reverberated around the hall.

'ALL RIGHT, I'M COMIN'.' Barkstripe shuffled to the door, pausing a moment before slowly pulling it open. The old badger scuttled backwards as a shadowy figure, partly illuminated by lamplight, roughly hurled a tightly bound bundle to the floor, sending a flurry of dust swirling into the air.

Levi glanced from the doorway to the raggedy heap on the floorboards, which he now saw was a tightly bound figure. The creature began to groan. The shadowy figure stepped inside.

'Sorry about the intrusion, your Lordship, but I found this scallywag lurking on the borders.'

Seymour leapt up and advanced towards the door.

'Deepdale?'

The newcomer turned from addressing the old badger and peered into the gloom. Recognition lit its broad, russet features.

'Heavens above, it's Hawkeye! And there I was thinking you'd deserted us.'

Levi turned his gaze from the groaning captive to the visitor and his pulse quickened in his throat. Backlit by the door light was a fox. But not just any fox. This one was striking in travel-worn buckskins, a fancy rawhide jerkin and high leather boots. He was huge, too. Levi guessed

him to be slightly bigger than Poppy – a little less than five feet tall.

The fox advanced immediately on Seymour, its muddy brown cloak and shaggy, white-tipped tail sweeping the floor. With its tail switching, it skipped over the prisoner and embraced the man warmly.

‘Ah, there may be hope for Caellfyon yet, eh? You’ve been away too long, old friend. You couldn’t ‘ave come at a better time.’ The fox then glanced towards the table. Seeing the young male cub, it raised a russet paw to its forehead in salute. ‘Nice dagger, Whitespike. I see you’ve come of age at last.’

It was then the fox turned its tousled face towards Levi. Levi blinked in surprise at the sudden attention. Long red hair laced with grey and tightly plaited with small wooden beads draped either side of the animal’s face. Deep-set amber eyes shone like beacons, holding Levi’s gaze for a long moment. Eventually, the fox nodded and turned away. Levi breathed deeply, realising as he did that he’d been holding his breath.

Barkstripe and Seymour looked questioningly towards the captive. ‘Ah yes,’ said Deepdale, giving the prone creature a swift kick. ‘I’ve been watching this vermin for several days. Down in the Wormwich marshes. Thought he was up to no good from the off, so I followed him. Sure enough he was spying yon side the watchtower. Name’s Bluffjack. And that’s all I’ve been able to get out of him so far. Real tight-lipped he is.’ Deepdale aimed another kick at the moaning figure. ‘Git-up you sly critter, it’s time to take the stage.’

Barkstripe held up a paw. ‘Steady on, Deepdale. I’ll have no violence here. There may be turmoil in Caellfyon, but this is a peaceful village.’

Deepdale looked on as the bound figure struggled to stand. ‘Oh, right – but ...’

‘But no cruelty. Interrogate him, aye, but we stay civilised here.’

A glint shone in Deepdale’s eyes and he grabbed the ropes binding the wretched figure.

‘Very well, your Lordship, I’ll only do as much as I have to t’ get the

rapscallion warblin'.'

Barkstripe nodded slowly as he tried to interpret the fox's veiled assurance. Now on its feet, the prisoner swayed pathetically between them. It was clad in a thick, fur kilt. Above this, an assortment of claws decorating its fleece jacket clattered as the creature moved. It peered up at the badger chief, its ebony eyes blinking rapidly. Drooping whiskers switched left and right.

'I voss not spy-ing, lord.'

Levi grimaced at the captive's harsh dialect. This was undoubtedly the strangest creature he had seen so far. Although similar to the polecats, it possessed sharper features and lacked the 'cat's defining eye stripe. The badger chief levelled the end of his quarterstaff at the creature's chest.

'If that be, and thee ain't a spy, then thee'll go free. Though why a mink such as thee should be north o' the river is beyond me. Best thing is for thee to co-operate with the ranger.' The badger turned to Deepdale. 'Take him to the stockade. He'll be secure enough there.'

Deepdale turned to push the hapless creature towards the door but the way was now blocked, for Rasse Rankwolf and his stooping number two, Vare, had returned. Behind them, golden light flickered on spear tips as more militia-'cats crowded the doorway craning their necks for a view of the proceedings. Vare's lips curled back in a snarl.

'Told you I saw 'im, boss – didn't I say the ranger was sneaking round. And look, he's got ...' Rasse swept a paw out and, with an audible slap, silenced the smaller polecat. As Vare stood nursing his sore cheek Rasse strode purposefully into the room towards the tall fox ranger.

'Evenin'. I heard you'd gone and caught us a spy. Well done.' He touched the edge of his cap and bowed his head slightly in mock respect. 'Well,' he added quickly, puffing out his chest and adopting an officious tone of voice, 'as head of the village militia I'll teck the prisoner for questioning.'

Rasse glanced sidelong at the mink. Levi felt sure the captive had

relaxed slightly since the polecat's intrusion. With its head bowed in a fawning manner it made as if to speak. Suddenly, Rasse's eyes blazed and he cuffed the helpless creature with a vicious uppercut.

'Keep your filthy mouth shut, swine!'

Deepdale pulled his prisoner away from the polecat, placing himself between them. 'Well now as if that wasn't brave of you, Rankwolf. Striking a hog-tied prisoner,' he said, conveniently forgetting his own misconduct. 'And there was I thinking all along you were nowt but a coward. Shows just how wrong you can be.'

Rasse swung back towards the fox and hissed furiously through clenched jaws. Barkstripe stepped quickly between them and struck the floor with his ferrule-tipped quarterstaff. The noise rang through the hall, silencing all present. Poppy and the female badgers appeared from behind the willow screen to stand together, nervously watching the drama taking place. Poppy glanced uncertainly towards her brother. He signalled for her to stay still.

'Rasse,' began Barkstripe, 'I've already instructed Deepdale here to question the captive. But as thar's here I need thee to double the guard at the Wormwich tower. Seems there's enemy activity on the marsh.'

The polecat lieutenant growled his displeasure and called back to his squad bunched in the doorway. 'C'mon, boys, you heard Chief Aldersides. Looks as if we're needed for the defence of this here realm.' The gathered troopers sniggered, while some muttered darkly as they began to withdraw. Levi was about to breathe a sigh of relief when suddenly Rasse spun back and regarded him bitterly from the doorway. The polecat's eyes narrowed, chilling Levi's blood. Nodding curtly, the polecat turned and, once again, stepped into the night.

Deepdale was unmoved. Instead, he chuckled gleefully and pushed the bound mink towards the door. 'Alrighty, now – as the floor show's finished we'll get on with the matters in hand. The stockade you said, Chief?'

Barkstripe nodded wearily then gently closed the door behind the

departing fox. Seymour stepped forward, took the old badger by the elbow and led him back to the table.

‘I’m sorry, Barkstripe, but what I’ve seen so far is extremely disturbing. It’s obvious to me that your position here is under serious and immediate threat.’

The old badger held up a paw as he slumped onto the bench. ‘Enough, Hawkeye. We’ve had more’n enough excitement for one evening. Let’s eat.’ He called over his shoulder to his wife. ‘Any sign of that grub yet, my dear?’

Cob approached the table rubbing her paws on her apron. Taking her place next to her husband she gently wiped the back of one paw across his brow. The old badger chief leaned into her. He closed his eyes as Cob continued to caress her troubled husband’s forehead. Behind them, the fire spat and cracked as flames consumed the tinder-dry pine kindling. Berrysap appeared from behind the screen, laden with split logs. She dumped them noisily on the hearth, stomped across to the table and sat next to her father.

‘That loathsome Rankwolf,’ she said to no one in particular. ‘Acts like he owns the place. Well, if he wants it why not give it him? Why don’t we move somewhere where there ain’t any horrid polecats?’

Barkstripe sat up abruptly, brushing Cob’s paw away.

‘We’re goin’ nowhere,’ he growled, perhaps a little louder than he’d intended. He paused a moment, then gently patted Berrysap’s paw before continuing, his voice softer. ‘It was before thee were born, my dear, but I remember only too well them mink invaders striking inland, south o’ the river. They’d been occupyin’ a narrow strip at the mouth o’ the estuary for some years. We knew it’d only be a matter of time afore greed drove them to seek more land. Your granddad were chief when they did. Withy Lea was our village, as thee knows. Beautiful place it were. Clean river, broad water meadows, and oh, the flowers in summer ... yer should have seen ‘em ...’

Barkstripe’s voice trailed off slightly as he stared into space.

'Then them swine swept in, killing, burning and taking slaves, as they do. It was your granddad that led us over the marsh and to this place. Then he died ... of a broken heart some said. Withy Lea were taken an' became Sigstad.' He spat the name out as a curse. 'We settled here – and we're not moving.' As if to emphasise the point he hauled himself to his feet and rapped the floor with his staff.

'Right then, as it's a while afore we eat – let's drink,' He glanced down at Whitespike. The young cub nodded respectfully, then rose and disappeared behind the willow screen.

The badger family sat with Seymour and the two children at the long trestle table. Bright orange tongues of flame flickered upward from the fire-pit casting a glow on the small assembly. Whitespike's drinks-laden tray lay before him on the table top. At a nod from his father, he hefted the ornate jug and began to pour thick, golden liquor into a circle of beakers. The sweet scent of honey filled the air.

'Aah!' sighed Barkstripe, rubbing his ample middle. 'Mead. A personal favourite.'

Cob elbowed him. 'I thought beer was that.'

'And I thought it was Rosehip Wine,' added Berrysap with a giggle.

Seymour sniffed his beaker's contents appreciatively. 'Well, I'm with you on this one. The mead does smell delightful. Pure nectar.'

As Seymour drank, Poppy shyly leaned towards him.

'Uncle Seymour – why do they call you Hawkeye?' To her right Levi stared absently into his lap, his mead untouched before him.

'Well, that's simple, Poppy. When I first visited Caellfyon, and Barkstripe and his family kindly took me in,' Seymour nodded respectfully towards the chief, 'they considered I ought to have a new name. A Caellfyon name. Hawkeye is simply their interpretation of Seymour – see-more. See?'

Satisfied with her uncle's explanation, Poppy nodded slowly and leaned back. She glanced at Levi, noting his dark expression. She nudged his elbow.

'What's the matter with you, misery?' she asked, keeping her voice low.

Levi glared at her. 'What's the matter? Have you entirely lost your memory or are you just brain-dead? Am I the only one to remember exactly what's gone on today, Pop? I mean, sorry but my brain's frazzled and I just don't feel like partying.'

Poppy tried to reassure him. 'Look, we're with friends now. They're lovely people.'

'Yeah, these maybe lovely, but haven't you heard anything tonight?' He swept one arm out towards the door. 'There's enemies out there – burning, killing, slave plucking enemies. Crikey, Pop, there's even some as ain't sure what side they're on. You saw the way that Rasse creature looked at me.' Levi's voice rose slightly. 'He's got it in for me, little sister. Don't know why but he has.'

Before Poppy had chance to reply, the door opened cautiously, and Deepdale's russet head appeared.

'Any chance of some rations, Chief? This here fox is wasting away.'

'Of course, lad. I were goin' t' send for thee.'

Seymour leapt to his feet and strode towards the door. 'Come in, my friend. With all the drama, I'm afraid I haven't formerly introduced you.' He clutched the fox's shoulder and led him to the table. 'Levi, Poppy, this here is Deepdale Besmer, son of Longsnuff – ranger from, ah ...'

'Wickstane,' assisted the fox.

'That's right, Wickstane, a coastal town far to the west.'

Deepdale perched onto the bench next to Levi who continued to stare sullenly into his lap, earning himself another nudge from his sister. As Whitespike politely poured the ranger a cup of mead Barkstripe enquired of the suspect spy.

'He ain't said much, your Lordship. Real sly one that. I'm sure he

knows far more'n he's letting on. What I do know is there's definitely increased mink activity down on yon Upskilde border.'

As Deepdale continued to explain his suspicions, Cob and Berrysap left the table and busied themselves by the fire. The warm, yeasty aroma of fresh bread was already filling the room.

Poppy peered sidelong at her brother, chewing his lip while staring down at the table. His face appeared pinched, dark shadows under his eyes. She watched him for several seconds, considering. Then she stood and tugged at his arm.

'Come on, Levi, we'll help Cob.'

Levi stiffened on the seat and made to shake off Poppy's grip. He glanced at the others, realising they were making a scene. Sighing audibly, he pushed himself to his feet and sullenly followed his sister to where the old badger-wife was slicing a large round bread loaf by the fire. She cut the loaf horizontally, producing thick, steaming slices. A stack of these was already teetering on the edge of the hearth. Cob put the new helpers to work.

'Here y'are my dears, ye can take these over to the table for me.'

Levi balanced the slices on his forearms and gingerly carried them to the table. He leaned close to Seymour.

'Where's the plates?' he whispered.

'They are the plates you numbskull. Deal them out.'

Levi had just finished laying a slice at each place setting when Cob arrived at the table bearing a huge steaming tureen. She set it down and Barkstripe peered inside, his snout twitching excitedly. The badger chief sat back, rubbing his belly.

'Aah, cob-nut dumplings in chestnut gravy, my favourite.'

Levi and Poppy returned to their places and stared open-mouthed as the badger-wife ladled out great dollops of stew onto each of the waiting bread slices. The children watched spellbound as thick, brown gravy dribbled over the crusts onto the table. Seymour leaned over to the children.

‘You eat the stew as the gravy soaks into the bread-plates – then you eat the plates.’

Poppy brightened.

‘No washing up!’

Deepdale smeared his last chunk of bread around the table and, with his paw dripping gravy, stuffed the piece into his mouth.

‘Phwar! Any more an’ I’d split me vest.’ He stood, wiping his paws on the hem of his cloak. ‘Oh well, suppose I’d better return to less savoury matters. Thank you Missus Aldersides.’ He straightened his vest and headed for the door. Levi jumped from his seat.

‘Here, I’ll show you out.’ He hurried past the fox and yanked the door open, leaving Seymour and Poppy gawking in disbelief. Outside, impenetrable darkness pressed in on the perimeter of lamplight. A strange piping birdcall echoed through the trees.

‘Why, thank you, Levi.’ Deepdale nodded gratefully and stepped out. Levi returned to his seat to find Poppy smiling knowingly at him.

‘What?’

Poppy quickly leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek.

‘Nothing.’

Levi glanced across the table, to where Berrysap was also smiling at him. He felt the colour rise up his neck. He flopped down onto the bench and glared at his sister. ‘Doesn’t mean I like it here,’ he whispered.

Barkstripe hauled himself to his feet.

‘Right then,’ he said, addressing Seymour, ‘I reckon we need to continue our talk.’ As he began to shuffle towards the dais at the end of the hall, the front door crashed open. Cold, night air swept in chilling the gathering and guttering the lamplights. As everyone spun round to see the cause of the commotion, Deepdale burst into the hall. His jerkin was smeared with blood.

'The poor critter won't be doing much singing now, he said after pausing a moment to control his emotions, 'because while I were in here filling me selfish belly, someone's slashed his throat.'

Seymour turned sharply to Barkstripe. The badger chief leaned heavily against his staff and groaned.

Levi swallowed hard as he gingerly rubbed his own throat. He knew little of this strange land's troubled politics, and cared even less. But there was one thing he was sure of. He had already met the murderer, and he wore a cap of coloured beads.

With a squeal of delight and a crash of disturbed foliage two young badgers ripped through the snarl of shrubbery to crash in a heap onto the woodland path, shade-dappled beneath an overhanging birch tree. Berrysap and Whitespike picked themselves up and giggled uncontrollably. Poppy appeared out of the woods, skipping over a twist of bramble.

'That was fun,' she gasped, dropping her hands on her knees to catch her breath.

Berrysap wandered over and brushed leaves from the young girl's hair. 'I told you this was a good place.' Whitespike stepped up beside his sister.

'I don't reckon we've convinced Levi yet,' he said jerking a paw towards the trees, from where the loamy scent of leaf mould carried on the breeze. There, shaded by the tree canopy and veiled by branches, Levi slowly picked his way through the undergrowth towards them. Poppy bit her lip.

'Yeah, I thought he'd have come round by now. I mean, we've been here nearly a week and he's still so' She paused, reflectively. 'Preoccupied. I think I'll always worry about him.'

'What's he doin'?' said Berrysap, peering into the gloom.

'If I know my brother, he's brooding on something or other.'

Whitespike stepped purposefully into the woodland's gloom. 'Leave him to me. We'll take him to see old Bullyrag, that'll give him something to think about.' He placed a paw either side of his mouth and shouted. 'C'mon, Levi, we're goin' visiting.'

Once they were together the four youngsters followed the path into the clearing by Barkstripe's lodge, and continued on until they came to a long, low building on their left. Like the badger chief's this had a steeply raked thatched roof marbled with moss and littered with dead leaves. Whitespike led them off the path into a yard bordered by dense yew hedges. Levi trailed behind the others, scuffing his heels on the path.

Once inside the yard Levi saw that what he'd assumed to be one building was really two separate structures, one a house and the other an open fronted workshop. A ramshackle lean-to connected the two. In the workshop a wooden bench and an old scarred sawhorse stood in a litter of wood shavings, and a confusion of wattle hurdles leaned against the walls. The door to the house was open. Whitespike stepped up and leaned inside.

'Bullyrag, you there?'

'Course I'm 'ere young fuf-feller,' announced a gravelly voice from behind them, 'I'm always here.'

The group spun round. Approaching them was the largest badger Levi had yet seen. He was as wide as he was tall, with rugby player's legs and forearms like a wrestler.

The old badger cast a quick glance at the children. His eyes were level with Levi's own. 'What's this, young Whitespike? A social call is it?' he said as he sidestepped around Whitespike and ambled into the gloom. 'Thy'll be wuh-wanting biscuits then. Sit thyselves down on yon bench

and I'll ber-be right out.'

Whitespike led the children over to where a wooden bench overlooked the wide garden. The four slumped onto the seat, Levi occupying one end, with Poppy next to him. Berrysap leaned towards them. 'Bullyrag Hoarhide is the oldest in the village. Ancient he is.'

While they waited for the old badger to return the children studied their new surroundings. Levi followed Poppy's gaze to where a lonely gravestone slanted at the garden's edge beneath the overhanging limbs of an oak tree. Carved wind-chimes hung from one of the branches clattering forlornly in the breeze. A small bank of cowslips fluttered gaily on the grave, providing the sombre scene with a flash of gold.

Berrysap saw the focus of their attention. 'Bullyrag's mum,' she said. 'Died shortly after folk arrived here from Withy Lea. They'd all been forced to escape over the marshes, with packs of mink snapping and snarling at their heels. His dad had already died in the battle for the village and folks reckon it were all too much for his mum. Poor Bullyrag buried her there, then he built this place. To be close to her.' She glanced towards the house. 'Ssh! He's coming.'

The big old badger shuffled across the yard towards them, his oversized shirt billowing as it caught the breeze. He stuffed it untidily into tartan, calf-length trousers with one paw as he balanced a plate laden with biscuits with the other.

'Last of me pup-poppy seed cookies,' he said. 'Figured I'd save 'em for visitors. Don't care for 'em much meself.' He tossed one quickly into his mouth as Whitespike and Berrysap exchanged grins. Bullyrag peered down at the young male cub. 'Anyway, young feller,' he said talking round his biscuit. 'You guh-goin' to introduce us, or do I have to guess their names?' He passed the plate to Berrysap and sat heavily onto an old tree-stump by the bench as Whitespike politely introduced the children. With the introductions over Bullyrag turned to Levi.

'I understand you caused a buh-bit of a rumpus with that upstart Rankwolf.'

Levi shrugged and glanced down at his hands. Poppy sighed impatiently, before speaking up for him.

‘Levi can’t understand why Rasse has such a downer on him. Seems to have hated him from the start.’

Bullyrag muttered something under his breath, leaned forward and surprised Levi by taking his right hand into his gnarled paws. Levi could feel the callouses on the old badger’s pads. Behind him, a blackbird darted into a thorn thicket, chattering madly.

‘I can tell you, young feller-me-lad,’ began Bullyrag forcing Levi to look at him, ‘he’s afraid of you. He’s not exactly the buh-brightest gem in the casket but them polecats are quite sharp fellers at times. Mark what I say now – he sees in you something you maybe ain’t seen yourself. And it’s worried ‘im.’

Levi frowned at the old badger’s words. What on earth could he have that would cause the militia leader to fear him? Bullyrag released Levi’s hand and leaned back.

‘Now then, you young cuh-cubs, how’s that fine mum o’ yours?’

The small group chatted awhile until Bullyrag levered himself to his feet, announcing that hurdles do not make themselves. So, with a wave and thanks for the biscuits, the two badger cubs led the children back onto the path.

Berrysap looked to where cotton wool clouds drifted across the clear spring sky. The sun was high, just beyond the cover of trees.

‘It must be almost lunchtime,’ she said, skipping towards the clearing.

Whitespike rubbed his belly. ‘I hope so. Biscuits are fine for snackin’ but I’m starvin’.’

As the two badgers headed home Poppy hung back, strolling along the path beside her brother. ‘You okay?’ she asked softly.

‘Sure.’

‘You don’t seem it, that’s all.’

Levi chewed his lip while he glanced vaguely towards the shadowed

woods. ‘Oh, it’s – it’s just – well, there’s such a lot to take in, Pop. Not only that but – but something’s up, I just know it. Seymour sensed it as soon as we arrived from the abbey, and every day he and Barkstripe mull over maps and stuff. Muttering. I don’t like it when grown-ups mutter, it usually means there’s a nasty surprise coming. Then there’s Deepdale. He upped and went without a word – a scouting mission by all accounts. Scouting for what, for heaven’s sake?’

Poppy shook her head and the two children walked on in silence, all the way to Barkstripe’s lodge. Whitespike was waiting for them by the door.

‘C’mon in you two,’ he declared, brightly, ‘Deepdale’s back.’

Levi and Poppy stepped out of the sunlight into the shade of the hall. Seymour, Barkstripe and the fox ranger were standing by the trestle table. On it lay a large map, its curling edges held down by beakers. Deepdale looked up as the children entered. The fox’s boots and cloak were even muddier than usual.

‘Aha, Levi,’ he said, stepping away from the others. Levi swallowed as Deepdale approached him. The ranger’s scabbard slapped against his buckskin-clad leg as he walked. ‘Today’s a big day, lad. Today’s the day we begin your trainin’.’

Levi gaped in silence at the grinning fox. Instinctively, he glanced down at Deepdale’s leather-bound sword hilt and felt the colour drain from his face.