

Chapter Five

Levi stood resolute, arms crossed with his hands tucked under his armpits. Grim determination etched his young features. 'But I don't want to use a sword ... I don't want to fight.'

He and Deepdale faced each other amidst a haze of bluebells in a glade not far from Barkstripe's lodge. The westering sun lay hidden by the tree canopy having long since crossed the clearing. Despite the lateness of the day the air remained warm and heavy with the musty scent of decaying herbage. Deepdale sighed. He was standing with feet planted firmly apart, and in one paw he gripped a wooden short-sword.

'Look, lad. I'm not askin' you to fight, I'm offering to teach you a skill. And besides,' he added tapping his own sword hilt, 'simply being able to use one of these is often enough to prevent trouble.'

Levi shook his head, his mouth crimped shut. Deepdale sighed again, this time more audibly. He stepped forward, offering Levi the wooden sword again. 'Look, just humour me awhile, will yer. Now here!' He shook the sword at Levi. 'Can you dance?'

Suddenly confused by the ranger's change of tack, Levi gaped dumbly at him and slowly accepted the weapon. Deepdale nodded and, with a wheesk, drew his own sword. Disturbed by the sudden noise, a jay erupted from a nearby oak, its warning call a harsh kaa-a as it raced over their heads.

'Now,' began the ranger, 'using one of these is nothing to do with brute force – though some would have you believe it.' He raised the sword high, keeping the blade parallel with the ground. He twirled around gracefully on one foot and sliced the weapon down in a wide arc as his body completed the circle. The fox's move had left him opposite Levi once more. 'It's to do with balance, awareness and discipline. Now, let's see you do it.'

Levi nodded slowly. He spun the sword once in his hand and adopted the same feet-apart stance. Hesitantly, he raised the weapon

up, copying Deepdale, and began his move. Eyeing his blade carefully to ensure it remained in the correct position, he performed an awkward rotation and completed the exercise with a clumsy wobble, frantically stabbing the sword out in mid-air to maintain his balance. Levi glanced nervously towards the ranger but it was clear to see that Deepdale was delighted.

‘Excellent,’ announced the ranger, skipping over to pat an astonished Levi on the back. ‘We’ve a bit o’ work t’ do on that, but training’s even more worthwhile when there’s room for improvement. Ready for more?’

Side by side, the pair whirled and spun the remainder of the afternoon away, their increasingly elegant pirouettes accompanied by a variety of sword strokes, sweeps and thrusts. The shadows were lengthening and crows flocking overhead, bound for their roosts, when Deepdale finally called a halt. ‘I don’t know about you lad, but I’m just about ready for some of Missus Alder-side’s good home cooking.’

A thrill fluttered in Levi’s stomach. He felt he’d done more than simply exercised that afternoon. He no longer feared the strange fox and, for the first time since arriving in the village, he no longer felt an outcast. He slapped Deepdale’s back fondly as the two pushed their way into the trees.

‘Me too, I’m famished,’ he announced, smiling. ‘I wonder what we’ll be having.’

‘Truffle stew and herby dumplings!’

Levi laughed gleefully, ‘Yeah – chased by brambly scones and rowan jelly.’

Together they weaved their way through the trees until they reached the path. Ahead, Barkstripe’s lodge was no more than a murky shape amidst the darkening woodland. Above its dull brown thatch milky threads of smoke spiralled upward. Levi glanced quickly across at the fox. ‘Who taught you to fight? Was it your dad?’ The ranger paused for a moment before replying.

‘No lad. My father were a woodcutter – wanted me to do the same. But I’d got more of me granpap’s blood in me, I guess. He were a ranger, y’see – a good’n by all accounts. No, I taught myself, mainly. So I left me father to his woodcutting and set out to carve me own path, so to speak. Me mum were sorry to see me go, but she understood. It were like she’d always known it would happen.’

Levi struggled then to remember his own mum’s face. He could barely recall her features; just the pattern of a dress, or cut of a coat. Sometimes occasional flowery scents carried on a breeze to remind him of her perfume. He swallowed. ‘Did it make you sad? To leave them, I mean.’

Deepdale turned towards the boy. He pawed at his braids, as his voice took on a dreamy tone. ‘Not really lad. We weren’t that close. Besides, sometimes you have to move on an’ only you know when. There’s always someone as says they know best, but there comes a point when you have t’ steer your own course. And make your own mistakes, too, right enough. You learn from mistakes.’ Deepdale stared off into the shadows. The fire appeared to have gone from his eyes.

‘But there was someone, right?’ said Levi. ‘Someone close, I mean.’ He nodded towards the fox’s braids. ‘And she gave you those?’

Deepdale paused as he regarded Levi, thoughtfully. ‘Aye lad, that’s right.’

Something in the ranger’s voice stopped Levi from asking more questions and the pair walked on in silence until they neared the hall’s gate. Once there Deepdale suddenly perked up.

‘C’mon, lad,’ he said, skipping the last few yards to the door. ‘Let’s get some grub. Me belly’s flappin’ against me bloomin’ backbone.’

For several days Levi accompanied Deepdale to the woodland clearing where they performed increasingly intricate manoeuvres with swords and spears.

‘I want that there weapon to become a part of yer body,’ Deepdale said one particularly fine morning. ‘Until strikin’, thrustin’ an’ parryin’ become as natural as – click-in’ them lily-white fingers o’ yours.’

At Levi’s request Deepdale had taught him exercises using a weapon in each hand, and the young boy learned to strike fast and hard; to thrust, spin, parry and jab, then jab again as he had seen his uncle do up on the ridge. The unlikely pair drilled from sunrise to sunset until one day, as they sat having lunch at the clearing’s edge, Deepdale made a shocking announcement.

The pair were leaning against the furrowed bark of an old oak tree with the mid-day sun warming their legs. Cloth-bound lunches, prepared by Cob that morning, lay open in their laps.

‘I dunno if I dare, mate,’ began the ranger, ‘but I reckon it’s time we did some sparring. What d’you say?’

Levi almost spat out his corn bread. ‘What? Fight?’

‘Aye. Shouldn’t be a problem – I think you’re ready. An’ you won’t progress any until we do.’

Levi glanced down at Deepdale’s sword, then over to his own wooden one laying in the grass. Deepdale laughed, chuckling in his own wheezy, rasping manner.

‘Oh, don’t fret – we’ll both be using wooden swords, I’ll give you a sportin’ chance.’

By the time they returned to Barkstripe’s lodge that evening, the badger family and Seymour and Poppy were about to begin their evening meal. Cob rose wiping her hands on her apron.

‘Oh I am sorry,’ she said. ‘T’was getting late an’ I wasn’t sure when you’d be back.’

Deepdale hung his cloak on a peg by the door, then held up a paw signalling for her to sit. 'Don't you worry none Missus Aldersides, I'll get ours.' With whiskers twitching eagerly he loped over to where a large round pot steamed over the fire.

Deepdale returned to the cooking pot twice during the meal and, as always, was the last to finish. Once he'd eaten the final morsel he took a long swig of cordial, then swiped the back of a paw across his mouth. "Struth, don't know how you do it Missus A.' He sat back and withdrew a wooden needle from the hem of his jerkin and began to pick at his teeth as the other's looked on. Levi frowned. An unusual quiet had descended over the table.

After a few moments Deepdale slowly returned the needle and stood up. He placed one paw on Levi's shoulder causing the boy to blink up in surprise.

'Right then, I have an announcement,' declared the fox. 'Levi here has done really well in step one of his training. Next comes true swordsmanship.'

With paw-claps, thumps on the table top and cries of 'good lad' and 'well done, Levi' the small assembly congratulated Levi on his achievement. As the praises abated Deepdale signalled to Whitespike, who nodded and withdrew behind the willow screen. Seymour leaned over and patted Levi's back.

'Well done, lad.'

Levi did indeed feel proud of himself. He was just about to describe to his uncle some of the manoeuvres he'd learned when Whitespike returned, burdened by a large hessian bag. He dumped it heavily on the table. Levi glanced around at the smiling faces then stared expectantly at the bag. He was certain he was the only one present who had no idea of the contents.

Barkstripe levered himself up using his quarterstaff and leaned over, grabbing the bag in a large grey paw. He smiled down at Levi.

‘This ‘ere’s a special moment, lad. I well remember when your uncle received his – bits and pieces.’

‘And they’ve served me well since then,’ added Seymour, smiling.

The old badger chief pulled open the bag. Levi saw that inside was a jumble of light brown leather. Treated and reinforced to a tough finish, its polished surfaces reflected a dull yellow glow from the overhead rush lights. Several small buckles rattled loudly as Barkstripe carefully lifted the uppermost piece clear. Levi gasped. It was a beautifully crafted leather breastplate.

Too flummoxed to speak, Levi stared dumbly as the two young badgers delved deeper, pulling other items out into view. When they had finished, similarly styled greaves, vambraces and a leather kilt lay alongside the body armour on the table.

Deepdale stepped up and hoisted the breastplate. ‘C’mon lad, let’s try it for size.’ Then, aided by Seymour, the fox strapped the item onto Levi’s chest as the lad stared dumbly, totally overwhelmed by the evening’s sudden turn of events. With the breastplate in place they continued, first buckling the felt-backed greaves onto his ankles and then the vambraces to his wrists.

‘One more piece,’ said Whitespike. He hauled the hide kilt off the table and led a bemused Levi behind the willow screen.

Once Levi stepped back into the hall it was to rapturous applause. Levi couldn’t remember ever feeling so proud. His investiture into the scouts came close, but this new-found sense of achievement gave tonight’s accolade an edge. He looked around the hall at his friends – for that was how he now viewed them. Poppy had been right – these were good people. He turned his gaze to-wards Deepdale. As their eyes met, the fox nodded respectfully. Levi nodded back.

‘Every inch a warrior,’ announced the ranger.

And he was right. Clad in his armour, Levi did appear soldierly – except there was something missing. Levi glanced down, his hand drifting involuntarily to his left thigh. Deepdale stepped up to adjust

one of the breast-plate straps. ‘Don’t worry, boy, you’ll get that once you’ve qualified for it. Barkstripe here has already made arrangements. And right envious I am, too – it’s a beauty. All you have to do now is learn how to use one – and I suggest you get your head down – for we start tomorrow.’

‘Does all this mean I’m going to war?’ asked Levi, stress lines furrowing his brow.

Deepdale held the boy’s troubled gaze as he considered his reply. ‘Let’s put it this way, lad. Only a bloomin’ idiot chooses to go to war, and none of us ‘ere are fools – but if war comes to you, then you’ll be ready to meet it.’

What followed was a torturous week of frustration, pain and barely concealed anger. Levi appeared to have for-gotten all his carefully rehearsed manoeuvres, and Deep-dale’s unchecked strikes repeatedly found their mark, with each one ending in a scarlet blaze of agony. Each evening Levi hobbled to the lodge in silence, his throbbing body marbled by angry bruises.

‘It’s no good, Pop, I’ll never be any good at this,’ Levi admitted later as the children lay on their rush mat-tresses chatting into the night. The nearby fire had reduced to a pile of glowing embers that cast an orange blush over them. Poppy sighed.

‘Well you won’t now, silly – because once again you’ve admitted defeat.’

‘You don’t understand, even Deepdale seems to be fed up with me.’

‘I’m not surprised. But are you sure? He seems so carefree, I can’t imagine him being fed up about any-thing.’

‘Well no, I’m not sure, but ...’ Levi’s voice trailed off into silence as his thoughts took over. The remains of a log settled into the ash-pile

throwing a spray of sparks into the air. Levi rolled over and tugged his blanket up to his chin.

‘I just wish I knew, that’s all,’ he said.

He would not have long to wait for his answer.

‘C’mon, Levi, parry me – parry, boy!’ Deepdale stood opposite his student, legs apart. In one paw, he carried his wooden training sword, now heavily notched. A buckler was strapped to his other wrist. His sword was continually moving as the half-crouching fox waved it this way and that in a constant snaking motion. Levi stood several paces in front of him, his own wooden sword and dagger hanging limply by his sides. His body was a picture of defeat.

‘I’m trying,’ he said, his voice wavering with frustration.

‘You’re not, lad.’

‘I AM.’

There followed a few moments silence between them. Levi knew his performance that morning had been even worse than ever. Perhaps it was due to his doubts of the previous evening; had he indeed talked himself into defeat as Poppy had predicted? Or maybe it was down to the change of training location for, rather than their usual woodland clearing, Deepdale had led his apprentice warrior up onto the ridge overlooking the village. The sharp breeze lifted goose-bumps on Levi’s arms. He hadn’t ventured onto the hill since his arrival in the village almost two weeks earlier.

The ranger dropped his sword onto the path and stepped up to Levi, placing a paw on the boy’s sloping shoulder. ‘Let’s sit down.’ He led Levi to the edge of the path and together they sat on a clump of windswept sedge grass. ‘Now, what’s the problem, d’you reckon?’

Levi shrugged. He sat, shoulders hunched, his posture a study of despair.

Deepdale regarded his young student a moment then pointed to the panorama arrayed before them, the same landscape Levi had viewed on the evening of their arrival in the village. The fox swept his arm wide. 'What d'you see? Tell me.' Levi looked up, his face drawn, his eyes dull and lifeless.

'Woods, fields, a river. Hills in the distance.'

'Shall I tell you what I see? I see a beautiful land – a land like no other ... but a land under threat. Aye, Levi. All this is at risk. Look here.' Deepdale twisted round to face west. Levi followed his line of sight. Daylight afforded him a clearer view than previously and he now saw a broad estuary lay at the southern horizon. He followed the narrowing ribbon of water westward, to where it ended in a dark, forbidding curve.

'And that's where the threat'll be coming from,' continued the fox. 'The Wormwich marsh.' He jabbed his sword towards the estuary. 'South of that lies land now occupied by stinkin' mink invaders, though they've been there nigh on a hundred summers now. Trouble is more are coming, almost daily.' His voice took on a grave tone as he nodded towards the village below, a picture of tranquillity surrounded by fertile fields and bountiful woodlands. 'Their need for land is great, Levi. And their eyes are on that.'

A cold gust chilled Levi's shoulders making him shudder. Suddenly he feared for the poor badgers – his friends. Levi recalled the lonely grave in Bullyrag's garden, and another chill swept through him.

'And, aside from all that,' continued Deepdale, 'we now have an enemy within.'

Levi glanced up sharply. 'You mean Rasse?'

'Can't be sure, but I wouldn't mind bettin' a few pegs on it.' He reached up and fingered his loose neck-lace of brightly coloured stones – Caellfyon's currency.

'But why don't we just get rid of him? For good, I mean.'

Deepdale gave a wheezy chuckle. 'Why? 'Cause he's in charge of the militia, that's why. We'd definitely have a rebellion on our hands then. Besides, we haven't any proof – but I've me suspicions, believe me.' Deepdale flipped open a small bag that he wore on his sword belt. He withdrew a short wooden pipe and a leather pouch.

'Barkstripe's hold on the feller has never been tight,' he said as he began to stuff coarse tobacco into his pipe bowl. 'Rasse has sought to challenge the chief at every toss and turn. Now, him and his filthy beggars are openly hostile.'

Deepdale produced a flint and proceeded to ignite the bowl's contents, dragging deeply until the tobacco glowed red and the air around him was thick with smoke. 'No lad, 'tis only a matter of time until we have rebellion to contend with, as well as the threat from the south.' He withdrew his pipe and stabbed the stem towards Levi. 'That's where you come in. You didn't think I were spendin' all me time trainin' you for the sheer joy of it?'

Levi shook his head. 'No,' he croaked, his mouth suddenly dry. 'That's what I'm afraid –'

No sooner had the word left Levi's lips when, with an audible pop, Deepdale snatched the smoking pipe from his mouth.

'An' that's your problem, lad. Fear. You can't fight me, Levi, while you're struggling with that fear o' yours at the same time. You never will.'

A buzzard called out a plaintive pee-oo as it circled on the thermals high overhead. Levi glanced up at it. The mournful sound was in keeping with his mood. Deepdale tapped out the spent tobacco from his pipe and stuffed it into his bag. Then he stood and reached down for Levi's hand. 'Pick up your sword. That'll do for to-day.'

Sudden doubt snagged in Levi's stomach. Had Deepdale given him up altogether? Was he indeed a lost cause?

Deepdale sensed his concern. 'Have yourself a rest, lad,' he said, his voice softening. 'We'll resume tomorrow – but mark what I've said.'

You need to beat that fear.’ He paused a moment as he regarded the troubled boy. ‘Here’s summat else for you to consider. In giving you these fighting skills I’m not learnin’ you how to die. I’m showing you how not to. Think on that.’

Levi shouldered their lunch packs and followed Deepdale along the path leading to the village. Ahead of him, the fox began the steep descent from the ridge. In-stead of following immediately, Levi halted and turned to survey the scene around him. As he did so the sun broke from behind a cloud, illuminating the landscape. A multitude of colours now lay before him, every shade and tone represented in a stunning, multi-coloured patch-work.

Levi’s heart jittered as a thrill ran through him. He spun the wooden sword in his hand, turned and stepped off the ridge. ‘Maybe this is a land worth fighting for,’ he said, softly.

Perched on a log in a well-lit glade not far from Barkstripe’s lodge Poppy squinted towards the distant ridge, shading her eyes from the mid-morning glare. All around her shimmering sun-spars poured into the open space through breaks in the tree canopy as, beneath the surrounding trees, verdant undergrowth steamed in the rising temperature, giving the appearance of an iridescent curtain. She could no longer make out the two figures she’d been watching for the past hour and guessed Deepdale had called a meal-break. She wondered how the ranger remained so lean, the amount of food he could pack away at a sitting.

Now she was comfortable with the bizarre nature of Caellfyon and its inhabitants she had gradually warmed to Deepdale. She knew well that Levi had, too. Proud of her brother’s new-found skills, her feelings were mixed with fear for his safety. Her stomach knotted as dark thoughts rose in her mind, threatening to overwhelm her. She

turned her attention to the leaf-strewn ground at her feet. Sadly, since the fox's appearance with the hap-less mink spy an air of impending menace had enveloped the village. This was not helped by the frequent secretive meetings attended by Seymour and the village elders. And Deepdale, too, when he wasn't conducting sword training. Nothing was being said of a looming conflict yet she felt its approach with each new dawn.

She sighed. If her worst fears were realised she knew everyone would need to play their part to safeguard the village. Levi was being tutored in swordsmanship and she knew the other villagers would also bring their own unique skills to bear when the time came. She felt useless, like a piece left out of a jigsaw. She knew she could potentially contribute, but without direction she was useless.

It was time to speak to Seymour.

Behind her a songbird twittered its joyful call, the notes tinkling as though tree-strung bells were swinging in the breeze. Suddenly buoyed by her new resolve she pushed down on her knees and sprang to her feet. Then, with a new lightness in her step, she skipped out of the clearing and onto the woodland path leading to Skenmarris lodge.

Poppy found Seymour in the great hall of Barkstripe's lodge. She guessed he would be there. Since arriving at Skenmarris and witnessing Rasse's hostility towards the village's chief, he'd continually been at the badger family's side, and was never without his weapons. She stepped into the hall, exchanging the bright spring sunshine for the dim, colourless interior. Although sunless and grim the hall appealed to her senses, particularly the floor-covering's summer-meadow scent and the aromatic odour of wood smoke.

Her uncle was seated opposite Cob Aldersides at the long, rugged table in the hall's centre. Leaving the door open behind her she

wandered across the rush-covered boards towards him, a crease furrowing her brow. Seymour was resting his elbows on the table top, hands outward and apart, as though in mid-clap. Facing him, Cob was busy winding something. It was only when Poppy was half way into the hall that she realised that her uncle was holding a skein of wool, which Cob was rapidly drawing off and expertly winding it into a ball.

‘You’ll be knitting next, Uncle Seymour,’ Poppy said, grinning.

Seymour smiled sheepishly. ‘Cob saw me idle,’ he replied. ‘She figured I could be useful so here I am.’

‘That’s just what I want to talk to you about.’

Cob halted her winding and looked from Poppy to Seymour. ‘Do you wish to be alone?’ she asked. ‘I can always get Berry to help me. It’s not good asking Barkstripe, the soft lummo.’

Seymour shook his head dismissively. ‘No need, Cob. You carry on. What is it Poppy?’

Poppy sat on the bench next to her uncle and spread her hands on the table top. She paused a moment while she gathered her thoughts. Outside, the trilling sound of songbirds continued to resonate through the surrounding woodland, while in the hall a log settled in the dying fire-pit, the sound muted by piles of wood-ash.

‘I could be useful, too,’ she said eventually. Seymour made to offer her the skein. Poppy held up a hand. ‘No, that’s not what I meant.’ She paused once again, biting her lip. ‘Look, I know something is about to happen. Something dreadful. I just feel I could be more useful than I am. Levi’s training hard and I’ve done nothing to help. But I can. If you let me.’ She sat back as Cob nodded, knowingly.

‘The lass is right. If – when there’s trouble, all of us’ll need to play our part.’ Without halting her winding, she half turned to look Poppy in the eye. ‘Do you know ought about herbs, dear?’ she asked. Poppy shrugged.

‘A bit.’

‘We’ll need someone as knows herb-lore when t’ time comes. I know some, o’ course, but the real expert in Skenmarris is Jilli.’ Seymour glanced up sharply. ‘Rasse’s partner.’

‘Aye,’ Cob replied with a sigh. ‘Jilli’s not from round here. ‘She’s a Wincian – Wincia is an island off the west coast, Poppy. Isolated folk there. Strange, but wise in herb-lore ... amongst other things.’

‘And you think she’ll help?’ asked Poppy. ‘Seeing how Rasse is hostile to us, that is.’

Cob smiled graciously. ‘She’s a good sort, Poppy. Always been a friend to us, has Jilli.’ The old badger’s eyes shifted to stare blankly into the shadowed hall. ‘Just not sensible in her choice of partners, that’s all.’

‘That’s settled then,’ said Seymour, turning to Poppy. ‘Is that alright with you?’

Poppy shrugged. ‘S’pose so, if you think it’ll be useful.’

Cob turned back to Poppy, leaning forward slightly as she spoke. ‘Oh, never doubt that, dear. You’ll be sur-prised how valuable you’ll be. When the time comes ... as it will.’

Poppy looked down at the rough surface of the table. She thought she’d be glad to be given a role to play, but for some reason Cob’s words had made her immeasurably sad. In the fire-pit there was a muffled clatter as the log settled further, extinguishing the last of the flames.
