

Chapter Six

The tall watchtower stood amidst a moonlit clearing surrounded by thorn bushes and tall razor-edged grasses. The structure, one of a line of towers stretching back to Skenmarris, stood at the edge of the Wormwich marshes and was the village's front-line defence against attack from the south.

Four sturdy legs cross-braced with planks supported the tower giving it a commanding position over the nearby marsh. The legs enclosed a squat cabin, also of rough-hewn timber. Torches mounted either side of a low door flamed brightly illuminating an encircling wooden stockade. Outside the stockade wall, a campfire ejected sparks up into the star-flecked sky.

Two male polecats crouched by the fire. One, dressed simply in smock and leather leggings, stirred the contents of a battered pot hung from a timber tripod. An unlit clay pipe drooped from the corner of its mouth. Opposite him, the other 'cat, its lank fur grey with age, prodded the fire with a stick.

'Is it ready yet, Rooter,' it rasped, coughing at the effort and sending gobs of spit hissing into the fire. Its partner glanced up in disgust.

'No it ain't,' he said, making the pipe whistle wetly. 'An' as you didn't do owt to help make it I doesn't see as you're entitled to any, anyroad.'

The old timer curled his lips back to reveal a few isolated yellow teeth. Then, tossing the stick into the flames, he scuttled closer to Rooter. 'Nah, you doesn't mean it Roots me old mate – you ain't gonna see your old Smooch go hungry, are you?'

Rooter's whiskers twitched madly and, wrinkling his snout in disgust, he snatched the ladle from the pot and batted the wizened creature away. 'Gerraht! You stinkin' critter. Yer can have the scrapings

from the bottom – just keep yer smelly carcass away from me.’

Smooch began to whine pathetically but Rooter swiftly held up a paw, silencing him.

‘Husht!’

‘Wha –’

‘Husssht!’

A stillness descended over the clearing, punctuated only by the occasional crack from the fire. Rooter’s sharp ears twitched this way and that. He’d detected the rustle of furtive movement in the nearby bushes and stared at the clearing’s edge, every sense focusing on the sedge grass screen. Then a loud whistle pierced the calm.

PEE-WIT.

‘That’s it – that’s the signal.’

Rooter tossed the ladle back into the bowl and leapt towards the cabin as another ‘cat – clad in leather armour and bearing a spear – appeared from the doorway. It opened its mouth to speak.

‘Don’t worry, sunshine, I heard,’ said Rooter, cutting him off. He snatched the torches from their wall sconces and ran back to where Smooch waited by the fire. He thrust one of the torches into the old creature’s paw. ‘Here,’ he said adopting a sympathetic tone. ‘Make yourself useful and you can earn your supper – c’mon.’ So saying, he scuttled off towards the source of the sound, with a stooping Smooch hobbling crookedly behind.

As the pair neared the clearing’s edge, the sedge grass wall silently parted and their torchlight reflected off a wet snout-tip and two cruel-looking eyes. Both Rooter and Smooch stood back inviting the newcomer to the clearing. The wet snout cautiously sniffed at the air. The eyes peered left and right. Then a mink warrior cautiously emerged, crawling from the grass on all fours. It stood, brushing thorny twigs from his jerkin as Smooch stared unashamedly at the creature’s forelegs. Shaved into its fur were intricate swirling patterns, running from shoulder to paw.

‘Rasse Rankwolf?’ said the mink, its voice heavily accented. It wore three magpie feathers knotted into the fur on its flat head. They bobbed as he spoke. Rooter turned and gestured towards the cabin.

‘Nah, not me, chum. This way, I’ll take yer to him.’ He was about to head off when a further rustling in the grass behind made him stop. He spun back as Smooch emitted a loud gasp.

‘Bloomin’ ada, Root – whassat?’

Another creature had entered the clearing. It was far stockier than the mink, with a large head and small cat-eyes angled down towards a snub nose. Rooter elbowed Smooch in the ribs.

‘Give over – it’s one of them foreign coypu fellers, they’ve allied wiv the mink.’ Then Rooter addressed the newcomer. ‘Sorry, matey – I weren’t expecting you.’

The coypu chuckled as it straightened the scarlet sash at its waist. ‘Aya, si – an it’s-a good, eh?’ he said, revealing a pair of orange buckteeth. He chuckled some more, his soup-strainer whiskers twitching in the torchlight.

The mink stepped forward and placed a paw on his own chest. ‘Muskvik Mustelsson,’ he said, introducing himself. ‘And him, he Sedgobo Bobis.’

Rooter turned back and headed towards the watchtower. ‘Aye an’ that’s all very nice, I’m sure.’

The two visitors followed Rooter as Smooch shambled behind staring sullenly at the coypu’s wide back. The smoking torches cast highlights onto the sharpened stakes of the outer stockade as the party approached. Rooter called to the waiting guard.

‘Got two guests here – better warn the boss.’

The polecat sentry brought its spear up in a slovenly salute, turned and stooped into the cabin. Rooter approached the entrance, replaced his torch in the wall sconce and stepped aside, inviting the visitors to enter. Meanwhile, Smooch scuttled back to his place by the steaming pot, where he sat and leaned towards the rim drooling in anticipation.

The gloomy one room structure was cramped, smoky and rank with the smell of tallow and unwashed polecats. Candles flickered in wall brackets while two crooked stubs leaked wax onto a table in the room's centre. Several polecats shuffled to the rear of the room, urged back by Rasse. The polecat leader was resplendent in a freshly buffed scarlet jerkin.

'Come on lads, make room there,' he said. 'Vare, get them bloomin' dice off that table. It's not like you win owt, anyhow.' A noise from the door made him turn. Seeing Rotter and the newcomers he instinctively raised his cap in welcome. 'Ah, there yer are, an' I see we have one of our southern amigos, too, eh?'

Rooter had barely announced the two visitors when the coypu barged towards the table, pushing him and the mink to one side. This triggered a muttering from the back of the room.

'By, you can see who's boss can't you,' whispered one polecat trooper to another.

Rasse was untroubled and snatched a roll of brown parchment from a shelf, which he tossed onto the table and proceeded to unroll. As he uncoiled it the guttering candles cast flickering shadows over a map of Caellfyon. The estuary and Wormwich marshes were clearly visible on the map's southern edge. A little to the north the village of Skenmarris had been circled in red.

The militia leader swiftly speared the edge of the parchment with his dagger, bringing a flurry of dust from the low ceiling. As he swept the mess off the map with one paw, he signalled to one of the other polecats to make fast the other corners. Finally satisfied the document was secured, he turned to the coypu who was already leaning over the table placing a pair of wire-rimmed spectacles onto the tip of his snout.

'Ah, righty-o then,' began Rasse. 'This war council is hereby in

session. Vare, get the cider out.'

Deepdale stood outside Barkstripe's lodge leaning his back against a large oak, watching idly as several moths fluttered crazily around the lantern above the door. He remained there several minutes until, sensing the time to be right, he glanced up at the thin slice of moon high above him in the cold clear sky, where it appeared to be ensnared within the overhead branches. Grunting slightly with the effort, he pushed himself away from the tree and pulled up the hood of his dusty cloak, obscuring his features. Then, with a casual glance behind him, he stepped purposefully towards the gate.

At the clearing, the fox turned left. Shadows pressed in from both sides as he wandered down the dark woodland path, past Bullyrag's cabin and on to where the path forked. There he loitered, listening to the *pink*ing sound of bats as they sought their tiny prey high in the tree canopy. His ears twitched as he tensed at the sound of a footfall down the path to his right. He stepped back into the shadows, one paw reaching for his sword hilt beneath the folds of his cloak, the other poised to sweep the cloak aside.

He didn't have long to wait as, a moment later, a polecat sentry moseyed into view, a spear slung untidily over one shoulder. Deepdale stepped away from the shadows, his darkened form barely more than a shadow itself. The polecat grunted in alarm and snatched clumsily at the shaft of its spear.

'Don't go injurin' yourself,' said Deepdale, wearily. 'If I wanted yer dead, you'd be laid out by now, your unseeing eyes staring at yonder moon.'

The sentry relaxed slightly and proceeded to pass by the ranger, peering at him cautiously from the corner of his eye. The 'cat's paws remained ready on its spear.

‘Besides,’ continued Deepdale, ‘what’re doing here?’

‘Whassit look like?’ replied the ‘cat scornfully, a smirk twisting it’s features. ‘I’m guarding this ‘ere village aren’t I?’

Deepdale launched himself at the sentry, crossing the path in one long stride. ‘Well you won’t do it from the inside, you soft cur.’ He shoved the polecat roughly in the back. It tottered untidily down the path, struggling to keep its feet. The creature turned and snarled, stabbing the air menacingly with its spear. Deepdale was unmoved.

‘Now git! At least to someplace useful.’

‘I don’t take orders from you,’ spat the sentry. ‘I answer to Rasse Rankwolf.’

‘You keep tellin’ yourself that, pal. Now, disappear.’

With one more snarl of defiance, the polecat turned and continued along the path, muttering angrily. Deepdale watched him through narrowed eyes until the creature turned left at the clearing, heading for the ford. A moment later it was lost from view, swallowed by the night. Only then did the ranger relax his grip on his sword. He withdrew once again into the shadows, and there he waited.

From the depths of the woodland a pitiful shriek, hastily cut short, signalled the end of one short life and a successful hunt and survival for another. Deepdale’s ears pricked and he reached up with both paws and eased back his hood. It was not the death-cry that now had his senses tuned, but something much closer. The ranger was not even sure it had been a noise – it may simply have been the breeze riffling through the undergrowth. He sniffed the air, and waited.

‘Is it safe, Mester Deepdale?’

Deepdale stepped back defensively, glancing down at the grass beyond the tips of his square-toed boots.

‘Is that you, Whip?’

‘Aye, Mester, is it safe?’

‘It is now, c’mon.’

The grass parted slightly. Then a small russet coloured weasel

skipped out onto the path, its stubby tail flicking left and right beneath the hem of its frock coat. It blinked up at the ranger then quickly peered up and down the path, its eyes constantly on the move. Deepdale held up a reassuring paw.

‘Relax for goodness sake, Whip – you’re making me twitchy just watching you.’

‘I can’t Mester, if I’m seen wi’yer I’m dead meat.’ The weasel dragged the edge of one paw across its throat to emphasise the point. ‘Rasse will have me and he’ll slit me gizzard, so help me. He really will, sir.’

Deepdale sighed. ‘Okay, then. Better make your report and be swift about it. What’s the rascal up to?’

‘Dunno, sir.’

‘Dunno! What d’you mean, dunno?’ snapped Deepdale, leaning threateningly over the now trembling weasel. ‘You still work for the blighter’s lady-friend don’t yer?’

Whip pawed nervously at the lapels of his coat, his eyes blinking more rapidly than ever. ‘Miss Jilli, aye, sir. But she ain’t saying nowt. Reckon Mester Rasse ain’t been a nasty swine to her lately. Y’see, she yaps more when he’s been a brute, so she does.’

Deepdale sighed once again and dug one paw into his small belt pouch, withdrawing a brightly polished stone. ‘Well let’s hope he bullies her some soon, eh Whip? Here’s a peg for you, now go back and be there when he does.’

Quick as a flash, the weasel snatched the stone from Deepdale’s grasp and stuffed it into its pocket. ‘Thank you greatly, sir. You can count on me.’ With that, he spun round and skipped back into the undergrowth, leaving the ranger alone on the footpath.

Deepdale tugged his hood back up and turned back towards his lodgings.

‘I hope I can count on you, Whip,’ he said softly to himself. ‘Because without you we’ve no idea what the scheming beggar’s up to.’

Rasse levered his dagger out of the map allowing the parchment to spring back, its coils slapping against a stone holding the opposite edge. The close confines of the watchtower cabin was now hot from the press of bodies, and the rank air foul with the stench of tallow, stale tobacco and polecat. Rasse re-sheathed his dagger and clapped his paws, cheerily.

‘Well that’s that sorted,’ he said turning to the thickset coypu. ‘Pleasure dealing with you, Sedgobo me old mate. Vare, pour Mister Bobis here another cider.’

Appearing a little worse for drink himself, Vare wobbled unsteadily to the table, jug in paw, as the coypu held out its horn beaker. Rasse reached over and snatched the jug from his well-oiled second in command. ‘Belay that, I’ll do it meself. You’ll be sloshing more’n you’re pouring.’ He tipped the coypu a measure of the cloudy, amber liquid. ‘Never trust a drink you can see through – that’s my motto.’

Sedgobo tweaked his spectacles from his snout then noisily slugged back the cider. Muskvik the mink stepped up to the table, the white flash of his magpie feathers shining in the candlelight. ‘Before der mink aid polecat allies,’ he said, addressing Rasse. ‘Mein chief – Herr Denbrok – himself he wish to meet you.’

Rasse flinched, his eyes narrowing at this unexpected – and undesirable – news. He stared down at the mink for one tense moment, his cheek twitching violently. Several questions flashed quickly across his mind. Why did Sable Denbrok need a further meeting when, as far as Rasse was concerned, he and the southern tribes had struck an agreement tonight? He swiftly ran through his options. He knew his own militia couldn’t hope to take the badger village alone without suffering grave casualties. Badgers – for all their bumbling easy-going appearance – were ferocious and deadly once provoked. No, it had to be as part of a combined attack force. He had no choice, he needed the mink on-board.

So, if Denbrok wanted a meeting, then a meeting he would have. He smiled thinly.

‘No problem, matey. You just let me know where and when, and Rasse’ll be there.’

The meeting over, Rooter led the two visitors back to the clearing’s edge, passing his campfire along the way. There, Smooch lay on his back snoring as if his throat was full of mud. A gravy coloured sliver of spittle drooled from the edge of his mouth, pooling in his ear.

The mink and coypu stepped into the sedge screen, turning to nod curt thanks to their guide before the grasses swept closed behind them. Then, a rustle, two, and they were gone. Rooter shrugged.

‘Ah well, ta-ta then...sheesh.’

By the time Rooter returned to the smoke-filled cabin Rasse was already encouraging his troops. Each ‘cat held a brimming beaker and the room was buzzing with expectation. Rasse spotted him by the door.

‘Come in Roots, lad. Grab hold o’ this.’ He thrust a beaker into Rooter’s paw and brimmed it with cider. ‘I was just telling the boys, choose yourselves a nice cosy lodge back at the village – no bickering mind, there’s enough to go round. Because pretty soon they’ll all be ours.’

The assembly cheered wildly at the announcement, except maybe Vare Mittgild, who was already swaying unsteadily by the table and probably hearing voices of his own. Rasse held up the jug, hushing the group. ‘One thing though, boys – don’t get tempted by that nice lodge of Mister Aldersides – no, that one’s mine.’

The hurrahs rang loud over the moonlit clearing, the sound quickly swallowed up by the night. The sleeping Smooch was impervious to the high spirits. He grunted, dragged the back of a paw over his slack, wet jaws and rolled towards the dying fire.

Several leagues from the watchtower, as the polecats began their celebration Deepdale trudged towards Barkstripe's lodge, his thick brush dragging dejectedly in the dirt. He stood a moment within the circle of lamplight outside the door. Then, shaking his head slowly, he twisted the large iron door handle and stepped inside.