

Chapter Seven

Levi lunged with his sword towards Deepdale's exposed belly. Instinctively, the ranger swept up his own weapon to parry and the wooden blades clashed. A loud *THWACK* resounded over the ridge. Undaunted by the ranger's tight defence Levi immediately spun lightly on the balls of his feet, sweeping his weapon round in a wide arc. His blade whooshed through the air and Levi grunted in satisfaction as it found its mark on Deepdale's shoulder.

'Yow! Better, lad – much better.' Deepdale rubbed his hurt, his eyes bunched in pain.

Levi didn't think he'd struck his friend so hard and he stepped forward, his brow creased in concern. 'You okay?' he asked, lowering his sword. Quick as a striking adder, Deepdale lashed out, smiting Levi's arm with the flat of his blade. Levi hollered loudly, pain blazing across his arm. 'Watcha do –?'

'Never, ever drop your guard near your enemy, lad,' interrupted Deepdale, wagging his sword at him. 'Not until you know he can't hurt you.' The fox stepped up and patted Levi's shoulder. 'And that'll be the final lesson of today. Let's get us some lunch.'

Deepdale led Levi to where their packs waited in the lee of a large boulder. A week had passed since the ranger had urged Levi to conquer his fear. The improvement had been just short of miraculous. Levi had risen to the challenge and finally transferred his weapon control and agility skills to the combat arena. The result had astonished Deepdale, who now had the bruises to attest for it. The week had also brought a change to the weather, and bright spring sunshine had given way to showers as storm clouds swept in from the east.

The pair slumped down with their backs against the boulder, their

legs in the wind-snarled grass at the plateau's rim. They opened their packs and ate, looking out over the valley. Below them, feathery treetops swayed under the steel grey clouds.

Deepdale's whiskers twitched as he sniffed the scented updraft from the valley.

'Ah, spring. You know, it's now I miss me old home more'n ever.'

Levi leaned back, his shoulder brushing that of the ranger. He idly fingered the edge of his kilt 'Yeah – it's funny, but I'm starting to feel that maybe *this* is my home, after all.'

Rasse swept back the heavy door curtain and stepped down into the dim interior of his cramped cottage. He snatched his cap off and squinted into the room. A narrow shaft of light angled down from a ragged tear in the thatch above. The only other light came from the few flickering flames in the central fire-pit. Beyond it, Whip Fointiw hunched over a broom, flicking flurries of dust that rose and swirled in the light-beam. Rasse growled.

'Where's Jilli?' His boots thudded dully on the floorboards as he crossed to warm his paws over the fire-pit.

Whip stopped his sweeping and clutched the broom to his chest. 'She ain't 'ere Mester Rankwolf, sir,' he said, not daring to look up at the fierce polecat.

Rasse swept his cape off and tossed it onto a chair. 'I can see she ain't here you blatherin' idiot – the question were "where's Jilly," – where?'

Before the frightened Whip could reply, the curtain swept open and a slightly built polecat maiden entered. Rasse dismissed Whip with a sweep of his paw. 'Don't fret you soft lummox, 'ere she is.'

Jilli Dunbar was small for a polecat, standing only a little taller than her weasel housekeeper. The same large, brown almond-eyes that had originally attracted Rasse to this young maiden now blinked at him. 'Oh

hullo, Rasse,' she said, her voice soft and lilting. She plucked her paws from her deep, frock coat pockets. A scattering of corn seeds rattled on the floorboards. 'I've been feeding my chickens, so I have.'

Rasse's jaw hardened. 'Forget them bloomin' chickens. Where's me studs – me cap studs.' He held up his cap to show a ragged tear where once had been a shiny gold stud. 'Blinkin' briar whipped this one off. Where are they?'

Jilli shrugged as she nervously peered around the room. Behind Rasse, Whip sheepishly patted his bulging frock coat pocket, then quickly resumed his sweeping, the wiry swish of the broom filling the sudden silence. Rasse growled. 'Well?'

'They were on that shelf,' Jilli said, nodding to her right.'

'I don't wanna know where they *were*, where are they *now*?'

'Sure but I've no idea.' Jilli stepped towards the stony-faced militia leader, a golden torq around her neck shimmering in the firelight. 'Come now, we'll look together.'

'There's no time.'

'Ah, sure but there i –'

THWACK.

Rasse caught Jilli with a vicious back-slap across her cheek that snapped her head back. He leaned over her as she held both paws to her face, her eyes brimming.

'I-SAID-NO-TIME.' He spun round and swept his cape off the chair. Then he stormed out, growling in disgust.

Whip stopped his sweeping. Propping his broom against a chair he scampered to the sobbing polecat. He paused then timidly placed a paw on her shoulder. 'C'mon, Missi. Things ain't that bad,' he said, steering Jilli over to a chair and gently easing her down into it.

Jilli glanced up at her friend through glassy eyes. 'Sure but you don't understand, Whip. He's leaving for a couple of days – and I do hate it when we row before he goes away.'

Whip shuffled to the fire-pit, crouched and tossed a log onto the fire.

As the flames began to lick around the wood he picked up a small pan and returned to the sobbing maiden.

‘Don’t worry none, Missi. ‘How’s about I make us a nice fennel tea an’ you can tell old Whip all about it? Maybe tell me ‘bout Mester Rasse’s little trip, eh? Seems such a long time since we’ve had one of our chats.’

Whip handed Jilli a handkerchief with which she could mop her eyes. Then, trembling with anticipation, the young weasel stepped outside to fill the pan with water.

Poppy picked her way over the sodden yard to where Seymour sat on a sawhorse beneath the outstretched limbs of the oak tree. He was sharpening his sword. ‘Aha, so that’s where you’re hiding,’ she said. She offered a small tray of cakes. ‘Here, try one of these. I made ‘em.’

Seymour placed the whetstone onto the sawhorse and took a cake. ‘Don’t mind if I do. Did Berrysap show you?’

Poppy nodded. ‘Uh huh.’ She watched her uncle eat and smiled as she saw him nod his approval at her baking. Grey light beamed down onto them through branches of the oak while, high above, a dove purred its gentle song.

‘You’re getting along famously with the Aldersides aren’t you?’ said Seymour, teasing a crumb from the corner of his mouth.

Poppy nodded. ‘And Whitespike has been teaching me to use the crossbow,’ she said. ‘Said a few more lessons an’ I’ll be as good as he is.’

Seymour nodded sagely. He popped the last piece of cake into his mouth then resumed his task, dragging the whetstone down the blade’s edge with a harsh rasp that echoed through the trees. Poppy watched him a moment, chewing her lip. Eventually she asked the question that was on her mind.

‘Do you really think there will be war, Uncle?’

Seymour stopped and looked Poppy in the eye as he framed his

answer. He was about to respond when he saw Levi and Deepdale enter the yard. ‘Ah, the warriors have returned.’

Once through the gate Levi ran to greet his uncle and sister. His eyes widened as he spotted the cakes. ‘Ooh, one for me?’ Before Poppy had chance to reply Levi snatched one off the tray and popped it into his mouth. ‘Deepdale has some more bruises to show you,’ he said, mumbling round the cake and showering them with crumbs. Deepdale approached them, snickering.

‘Lad’s right – he’s done well – I’m right proud.’

Seymour leaned his sword against the sawhorse and patted Deepdale’s shoulder. ‘And it’s all down to you, my friend,’ he said, blinking his thanks. Deepdale shrugged off the compliment.

‘Where’s the chief?’

‘He, Cob, Bullyrag and one or two of the other elders have gone into the woods – to the standing stone. They’ve been spending some time there of late.’

Poppy leaned forward to offer Deepdale a cake, which he eagerly accepted, his eyes suddenly like saucers. ‘Aye,’ she said. ‘Whitespike told me his parents get some comfort from it. The standing stone is thought to mark the grave of an unknown warrior – one of the ancients. They go there to pray.’

Deepdale shook his head, angrily. ‘They should be lookin’ to them few loyal warriors they’ve got that’re alive,’ he growled. ‘It’s in them they must seek strength now. Though it does seem they’ve finally understood what’s happening here. The mink may be on the warpath, and our own militia ... well ...’ He left his own fears unsaid and looked towards the darkening sky.

A chill breeze swept the open space of the yard as a patterning of raindrops fell through the scented air and bounced on trembling fern leaves.

‘Oh no, my cakes,’ squealed Poppy. Shielding the tray with one arm she darted back to the lodge. Seymour gathered up his things.

‘Don’t be too swift to condemn them, Deepdale. Their indecision stems from a reluctance to accept what’s happening – and who can blame them after what they’ve been through already.’

Deepdale slapped the tree, where rainwater was already snaking down the furrowed bark. ‘Aye, but don’t yer see? Their reluctance has left the village defenceless.’

‘We’ve time to correct that.’

‘Time may be the thing we don’t have.’

Before Seymour could reply, a bedraggled Whip Fointiw scuttled into the yard, wheezing loudly, his coat-tails flapping against his legs.

‘Mester Deepdale, Mester Deepdale,’ he cried excitedly. ‘I’ve been and got some news for you.’

Raindrops pearly on Deepdale’s face as mouthed his thanks towards the rolling storm clouds. He straightened his coat, strode over and gently placed a paw on the weasel’s shoulder.

‘C’mon then, Whip, let’s hear it.’

The confident glow of a new day was just cresting the eastern horizon when Levi clambered over the final few rocks up onto the ridge. The climb in dawn’s half-light had been hard and Levi’s forehead glistened with sweat from the effort. All he knew was that he was to meet Deepdale at sunrise. As his head crested the plateau he saw his teacher was already waiting for him.

The fox ranger was sitting cross-legged on the ridge-path, facing the sunrise, surrounded by a milky haze of pipe smoke. ‘Wondered when you’d make it,’ he said without turning.

Levi stepped up onto the level and wandered towards Deepdale, blowing heavily. ‘You’re lucky I made it at all this early. What’s this all about? Training isn’t for an hour or so yet.’

Deepdale knocked the ash out of his pipe and sprang to his feet in

one easy movement, his square-toed boots scuffing the path. ‘Training’s over, lad. Come here.’

It was then that Levi saw a long package lay by Deepdale’s feet. It reminded him of the one his uncle had fetched from under the farmhouse floor. Deepdale carefully inspected the pipe’s bowl, returned the pipe to his pocket and finally leaned over to casually scoop up the bundle. He began to unwrap it. Levi stared, transfixed, his pulse quickening. A fresh breeze whipped the hair on the back of his head and, with it came the fruity scent of damp vegetation from the valley below.

Finally, Deepdale withdrew a gleaming new sword from the wrappings. Levi’s breath caught in his throat and he felt as though his heart would take flight. It was a beautiful weapon.

‘Come, Levi. Come and get your sword,’ he said, holding it out in both paws.

Levi timidly stepped forward. He wanted to take it but somehow it was too beautiful, too perfect. Deepdale shook it gently. ‘Don’t be scared. No other has borne this m’ boy – it’s yours – been forged for you, and you’ve earned it.’

Levi reached out and took the weapon in his hand, his fingers folding around the soft, leather-bound grip. After using his wooden training sword, the weight was shocking, but its fine balance offset this. Levi spun his wrist, flicking the blade through the air with ease. Then, with increasing confidence, he performed some of the manoeuvres he’d learned from the ranger.

Once Levi had finished, Deepdale beckoned him to sit and, together, they made for their usual boulder-seat. There he explained the outcome of his meeting with the young weasel.

‘Young Whip placed himself in great danger to get us a lead on Rasse. And at last he’s learned that tomorrow the ‘cat and his lieutenants are off to Wormwich marsh.’

Levi shrugged. ‘But there’s watchtowers along there – surely it’s his job to patrol them.’

‘Aye, lad, but he usually goes once each moon. His most recent trip were only a few days since. And this time there’s definite rumour of a meeting.’ Deepdale glanced west to where the marsh lay bleak and cold on the horizon. ‘And who would that treacherous cur be meeting out there, I wonder?’ He turned to Levi who was now admiring the runic engravings on his blade. ‘Anyhow, we’re going to find out. Tomorrow, me, you and some friends I’ve sent for are going stalking – and the prey is ‘cat.’

Levi’s jaw dropped. He knew his training had a purpose, but he’d been trying not to think of that, shunning the thought to the back of his mind like a half forgotten nightmare. Now he’d been assigned a mission – one that would take him to the doorstep of their hated enemy: the ferocious mink invaders. Deepdale stood and held out a paw, interrupting his thoughts.

‘Come on, lad. Sun’s nearly up.’

Levi shook his head slightly, and frowned in bewilderment at the ranger. Deepdale sighed.

‘Don’t they teach you anything back where you’re from? Offer your sword to the sun, lad. Swear fealty to the land from which it were forged.’

Levi stood slowly and, with his mind racing to conjure suitable words for the occasion, he turned to face the rapidly rising sun, excitement swelling his chest. By then the sun was a flat-bottomed orb on the horizon, its edges simmering in the clear morning sky. Levi held the weapon in both hands, extending it straight out eastward. Then, as he raised it slowly, hoisting it high above his head, the sun flashed spars of white light off the blade.

‘I give this sword, and the arm that wields it in service to the land of Caelfyon,’ proclaimed Levi feeling rather self-conscious.

‘Bravo, laddie,’ declared Deepdale. ‘Couldn’t have put it better meself.’

But Levi was not finished. Ignoring Deepdale’s praises, he leaned back, drew a deep breath and shouted:

'TM READY!'

The swift cool breeze plucked his voice and carried it west, on towards the hostile marsh.