

Chapter Eight

Levi lay on his mattress staring up at the roof beams as his nervous fingers toyed with the edge of his blanket. Behind him, the voices of Deepdale and his uncle were a dull rumble, interrupted only by the occasional crunch of a log settling in the fire-pit.

Poppy was awake, too. She noted her brother's unease. 'Try to get your sleep – you'll need it for tomorrow.'

'I'm tryin',' Levi replied, quickly.

'Not with your eyes open you're not.'

Levi inhaled sharply, ready to snap back a retort but he paused, allowing his anger to fade. 'You don't understand – you saw the way Cob treated me tonight.' He leaned closer to his sister, lowering his voice. 'You heard her. "You want more flapjack, Levi? Have some more cordial, Levi. Can I jump through hoops for you, Levi?". Don't you see? She thinks I'm not comin' back.'

Poppy grabbed her brother's arm, disturbed by his gloomy mood. 'Don't even think that!' she said, trying to keep her voice low. 'If Cob treated you different it's 'cause she views you differently now, can't you see it?' Then, exasperated by her brother's puzzled look, she threw up her hands in annoyance. 'Oh, for goodness sake, why are you always the last one to see what's plain in front of you? She respects you – we all do. You've done really well, Levi.'

Levi laid back and turned his gaze upward again. 'Then why am I so scared?'

'I don't know. Deepdale said you seemed pretty fired up on the hill earlier.'

'I was – guess it was the thrill of the moment.' Levi rolled towards his sister again, his face suddenly lit with excitement. 'My sword, Pop,

you should see it – it made me feel invincible up there.'

Poppy craned her head back. Seymour and Deepdale leaned over Barkstripe's table as they chatted quietly. A tallow lantern flickered on the table top, casting deep shadows onto Seymour's face and adding severity to his already grim expression. She turned back to Levi.

'Look, you'll be okay. Just stay close to Deepdale – he'll see you're safe. Besides, you're only going to spy on that cowardly Rankwolf creature. What can possibly go wrong?'

Levi hugged his blanket to him and rolled over to face the dying embers in the fire-pit. Poppy seemed unable to understand. It was that same question that was robbing him of sleep.

Shielded by a dense hawthorn hedge, Deepdale watched Rasse lead a dozen of his chosen troops across the ford and onto the road heading west. The marching polecats jabbered and laughed gleefully as they splashed through the shallows. The rain that had begun the day before had persisted through the night, stopping only as dawn fed grey tendrils into the plum-coloured sky. It was then that Levi and the ranger had breakfasted.

Cob had prepared a feast for them, and fat trout glistening with butter awaited them when they rose from their beds.

'Make the most of this, young Levi,' Deepdale had declared as they sat for their meal, fussed over by Cob. 'It'll be cold fare from here on – no fires you see.'

All through the meal Levi felt as though he had a flock of fluttering sparrows trapped in his stomach and he doubted whether he'd be able to keep his breakfast down anyway. As he'd miserably chewed the fish he'd glanced repeatedly at his sword, trying to gain strength from it.

Levi followed Deepdale's gaze, peering through the hedge as the polecats disappeared from view. He stroked a hand over his breastplate,

following the curve of hardened leather. Yesterday it had been tough and protective yet now it seemed thinner, more vulnerable. He swallowed hard to calm his nerves just as Deepdale interrupted his thoughts.

‘Okay, boys. That should be enough of a lead. Let’s move out.’ The fox pushed himself up from his crouching position and stepped out onto the path. The ranger’s cloak was already dirty and threadbare, its hem ragged. A broad leather belt round his waist secured his long brush, preventing it from catching on branches and giving them away to their enemy.

Deepdale’s two friends had arrived with the dawn. Both stoats, they now followed Levi onto the path. One, the slenderest of the pair patted Levi’s back.

‘Don’t thee worry none, owd lad, me’n Nipper ‘ere’ll see thee reet.’

Levi turned and nodded his thanks. The stoat, who had introduced himself as Lapblud Slimfitch when he and Nipper had arrived, possessed a willowy body similar to the polecats, but stood about a head shorter. A plaited leather sword belt secured his padded jerkin and from the belt, two scabbards draped down over a tan coloured kilt.

Levi glanced beyond Lapblud to Nipper who smiled at him, wrinkles creasing the corner of his eyes. Levi smiled back. An unlit clay pipe drooped from Nipper’s mouth. Usually lit, it had stained the creature’s snout with a dark yellow smudge. Deepdale, who referred to the old stoat as Splitlug on account of the creature’s ragged right ear, had declared him to be a deadly shot with both slingshot and bow, both of which he now carried.

Knowing the polecat’s course, Deepdale led his small band over the ridge, pushing them hard throughout the day as they headed west, keeping to the militia’s right flank. Eventually, with their shadows lengthening behind them, they descended onto the levels bordering the marsh and approached the path from the north. Once there, Lapblud – chosen by Deepdale for his tracking abilities – picked up the polecat’s spoor with ease.

‘Ee, the clumsy beggars’ve left a trail a furlong wide. Could track ‘em in’t dark.’

Deepdale stepped up and gently patted Lapblud’s shoulder. ‘Aye, sure you can old friend – but you won’t have to. Look.’ He pointed ahead.

As the others gazed past the ranger’s outstretched paw, a twist of smoke corkscrewed into the air from beyond a haze of scrub. Behind it the pale sun slipped below the horizon.

‘Seems our friends have stopped for the night,’ added the ranger. ‘We’ll do the same, come on.’ Deepdale then led them south, away from the path, until they reached a patch of higher ground edged by large boulders. There, Deepdale unslung his bedroll and tossed it onto the ground.

‘This’ll do. Boulders will shield us from their camp and deflect any noise we might make. But still no fire.’

Nipper pulled the pipe from his mouth and held it up, his eyebrows raised questioningly. Deepdale checked the direction of the wind then nodded to the stoat. ‘Aye. Wind’ll carry the smoke east.’

Nipper nodded his thanks. Then he sat on a rock and proceeded to fill his pipe. Levi chose a rock nearby and slumped down. He reached to loosen his sword belt, but Deepdale swiftly held out a paw, stopping him. ‘Whoa, lad. That stay’s on ‘til you’re safely back home. You’re on patrol now.’

As clouds of fragrant tobacco smoke from Nipper’s pipe filled the air Laplud wandered over and perched on the edge of Levi’s rock. He slid his dagger from its sheath and began to clean his claws. ‘Keep thy blade close, m’duck. If yon ‘cats’re worth their salt they’ll send scouts out t’neet.’ He sniffed and spat into the grass. ‘Knowin’ the useless guttersnipes though, they prob’ly won’t.’ Levi nodded and dug into his pack for some of the sweet scones Cob had packed for him.

Deepdale had chosen well. Their campsite was well drained and the ground only slightly damp, unlike the sodden land around it. But without a fire the night was cheerless and Levi shivered miserably in

his bedroll as he listened to frogs croaking noisily on the nearby marsh. Sometimes, the faint sound of laughter carried on a breeze from the polecat's camp. Levi tried to imagine their fire warming his own, chilled body. Gradually, it was tiredness that overcame the cold. His shivering eased and the sounds faded.

Levi woke to a cold, grey dawn. As the fog of sleep cleared he saw Deepdale leaning over him. The ranger gently nudged Levi's bedroll. 'C'mon, lad. Get yourself a bite and we'll be on the move.'

Already, Lapblud and Nipper were securing their packs ready to move out. Levi snatched a hurried breakfast then he, too, made fast his own pack. Deepdale collected a handful of dead branches and swept the ground where they'd lain.

'No sense our announcing to folk we've been.' He tossed the branches under a nearby thorn bush then led the others back towards the path. Once there Lapblud took the lead, adopting a stooping posture as he followed the trail, his whiskers twitching excitedly.

Deepdale dropped back to join Nipper at the rear. 'We'll soon be onto them again, Splitlug my old mate. Then we'll see what they're up to.'

Nipper plucked the now cold pipe from his jaws.

'Aye, 'appen we may,' he said, before replacing the pipe once more.

They reached the site of the polecat's camp about half an hour later, just as the sun was about to disappear into the low, dense cloud cover. Lapblud squatted and held a paw over the ashes.

'Half a mark, I reckon,' he said, referring to the time as measured by candle-clocks in Caellfyon. Deepdale stepped forward.

'Good. Looks like they broke camp as we did. We'll try and keep a league or so between us and them.'

The polecats had chosen a position right on the edge of the marsh, and beyond the campsite rose a wall of tall reed grass. There, the path

continued westwards along a causeway, creating a narrow gap in the reeds. Deepdale turned towards Levi and Nipper, his hand on his sword.

‘Right lads,’ he began, his voice little more than a whisper. ‘Silent now. Sounds carry like the blazes in this ‘ere marsh, and there’s birds aplenty who’ll give us away if we make a racket. And watch your footin’. Either side of the path is stinkin’ swamp. Follow me.’

Deepdale led them along the slender causeway, flanked by curtains of waving, feather-tipped reeds. The ground, no longer firm, had become a rotting carpet of slick, leathery leaves that sucked at their shoes as they passed. The air was heavy with the sickly-sweet odour of decay, reminding Levi of rotten fruit.

Half way through the morning – or what Levi judged to be such for it was difficult to tell without the sun to guide him – Deepdale called a halt and consulted with Lapblud. Together, they leaned over the path, whispering.

‘What is it?’ Levi asked Nipper.

The gruff stoat squinted towards the ranger. ‘Dunno.’ He rubbed his grizzled jaw, thoughtfully. ‘Unless ‘cats’ve left the trail.’

Nipper had guessed well, and Deepdale returned announcing that Rasse and his followers had indeed left the trail, heading south towards the river. ‘Lapblud tells me you know this area well,’ added the ranger, addressing Nipper. ‘Where’re they headed?’

The stoat sniffed and chewed on the stem of his pipe before replying. ‘Nowt ‘tween here an’ yon river. But it ain’t no more’n a dribble there – dead easy t’cross.’

‘Go on, Nipp,’ pushed Lapblud, returning to the group. ‘What else?’

‘Yon side’s jus’ marsh – except for a patch o’ high ground.’

‘What’s there, anything?’ asked Deepdale, his interest suddenly aroused.

Nipper sniffed and shook his head. ‘Used to be a hermit’s shack – old boy catched eels an’ sold ‘em for beer money.’

‘And what’s round it?’ asked Levi, drawing an approving nod from

the ranger.

‘Nothin’ – nowt but black bog.’

‘There must be a path,’ said Deepdale.

‘Aye.’

‘And black bog you say. Reeds?’

Nipper shook his head, grimly. ‘Nowt.’

Deepdale sighed and turned to the others, his own expression suddenly drawn. ‘We’ve no choice, lads. I’ll wager that patch of ground is where the meeting’s to be held, so we have to follow. But careful now, they’ve been crafty as there’s little cover by the sound of it.’ He glanced towards Levi and smiled grimly. ‘This is where it gets dangerous.’

As Nipper and Lapblud took the opportunity to swig from their flasks, Deepdale trudged over to Levi. ‘Loosen your sword, lad,’ he said gently. ‘They tend to stiffen up in the damp.’

Levi’s stomach rolled over. The fluttering sparrows had returned.

Berrysap reached up, paused shyly, then gingerly rapped a paw onto the lintel of Rasse’s cottage. The darkened interior was silent. She waited, hearing nothing but the wind sighing through the tall beeches causing them to sway majestically overhead. As she turned to leave, a slight figure stepped into view from behind the cottage.

‘Oh, why now – you gave me a start, so you did,’ breathed Jilli, the petite polecat clutching her chest as she stepped back a pace.

Berrysap blinked, unsure now what to say. Told of the polecat maiden’s plight by Whip that morning, she’d determined to visit, to lend whatever support she could. But, no longer confident, she stammered foolishly, searching for words. Jilli came to her aid.

‘Why now, it’s Berrysap, isn’t it. Would you come in?’

The young polecat held out a slim paw, inviting Berrysap into the cottage. Berry nodded dumbly and stepped into the gloomy room,

followed closely by a smiling Jilli. ‘Cordial?’ offered the polecat, wiping her hands on the front of her coat. She reached for some beakers from a shelf as Berrysap held up a bottle.

‘Ah – here, I’ve brought some for you.’

Jilli padded over to the table and sat on a bench. She gestured for the badger to join her. ‘Well now, and isn’t this fine?’ She accepted the offered bottle and poured. The liquid appeared dark and thick in the room’s half-light. ‘So now, to what do I owe this unexpected pleasure?’

Berry suddenly remembered her mother’s comments regarding Poppy’s request. ‘I’ve a favour to ask of you, Jilli,’ she said, relieved at being able to delay any mention of Whip’s fears.

The polecat-maid blinked in surprise. ‘Well now, it isn’t often anyone comes to me for anything. I’d be delighted to help – if I can, of course.’

‘It’s Poppy as needs some help actually.’

‘The outlander girl,’ said Jilli, her eyes widening in surprise.

‘Well, yes – but we don’t call her that.’

‘They were here before,’ said Jilli. ‘Many years ago – outlanders, that is.’

It was Berry’s turn to look surprised as Jilli’s unexpected comment interrupted her thoughts. ‘Oh, that’s nonsense,’ she said, quickly. ‘Or rather it’s old maid’s stories, no more than myth,’ she added gently, not wishing to cause the young polecat offence.

Jilli smiled, knowingly, her eyes glinting. ‘Oh, sure now. If you wish to believe that. But let me tell you it’s more than myth on Wincia. But we’ll not worry about that. How does Poppy think I can help?’

‘She wishes to learn of herbs,’ said Berry before adding quickly ‘they’ve forgot such things in her homeland. She wants the knowledge to take back with her. When she goes.’

Jilli leaned forward and laid a paw on Berry’s sleeve. ‘Well you just tell Poppy that Jilli will be delighted.’ She sat back, brushing an imaginary crease from her coat. ‘Now, is there anything else I can help with?’

Barrysap took a swift sip of her drink while she collected her thoughts. Then, remembering her own mother's words – the ones that said honesty was the best policy – she began. 'Whip was talking to my father,' she said, timidly. 'Said he no longer feels safe around Rasse 'cause of his tantrums – said he's apt t' be ...' here she paused, searching for the right word. 'Nasty to you,' she said, eventually. 'So, I was wondering, is there anything I can do to help, like?'

Jilli sipped her cordial while she peered at the young badger over the top of her cup. 'Let's see now – you mean you're wondering how Jilli can stay with such a nasty brute, is that it?'

Berrysap blinked in surprise. 'Well, no I – that is if – well...'

'Can't leave him, miss.'

Gripped with an unforeseen compassion for this young polecat maiden Berry suddenly reached forward, clutching Jilli's paw. 'But why? Surely you know he's rotten through and through.'

Jilli snatched her own paw away. 'Now and don't you be sayin' them things, young badger. You don't underst –'

'But it's you as don't understand – can't you see what he's doing – he's plotting. Plotting against my father. Against the village.' Berry sat back, stunned. She'd not meant to reveal her knowledge of Rasse's intentions and was gripped by nausea at what she'd just said.

Jilli pushed herself off the bench and batted a paw onto the table top. 'No!' She glared angrily down at the young badger and paused, breathing deeply. She sat down again, slowly. 'No, Berry,' she added, adopting a kinder tone. 'Rasse loves this village, so he does.'

'But how can –'

'You must understand,' said Jilli, holding up a paw to interrupt the young badger. 'The poor lad has been travellin' all his life. Son of a tinker, so he was. Continually journeying from place to place as his father mended pots an' pans. Unable to make friends, and ridiculed wherever he went. Only once his father died was Rasse free of that yoke. He came here and settled – so aye, this is the first place he's been able

to call home, so it is. He loves the place.'

'But why ...?' Berrysap was confused. If the militia leader truly loved the village, then what was he up to?

'Besides,' continued Jilli, 'Rasse has plans for us here. He's promised me a better house. One with a larger garden, where I can grow vegetables and fruit and ... oh, and I'll have more chickens and – Berry? What's the matter?'

Berrysap sat rigid, her mouth open. Now she understood. There was only one way that Rasse could fulfil such an ambitious pledge. She had to get home. She had to tell her father. And fast.

Levi inched his way through thick mud, following Deepdale over the bog. Several yards behind him Lapblud brought up the rear. They had all agreed Nipper would remain on the causeway to prevent their entrapment by watching for any late arrivals.

The polecats' trail had led them through the marsh to the river which, as Nipper had declared, was no more than a stream at that point. A rotten tree trunk conveniently spanned the dirty brown water showing where the 'cats had crossed. Over this, Deepdale had led his small band onto the bog beyond.

Stinking black sludge smeared Levi's armour and kilt, as he dragged his bare legs through the icy cold mire. Either side of him dark pools glinted between tussocks of spiny sedge grass while overhead, bruise coloured clouds pressed down, dreary and oppressive. Deepdale stopped and half turned.

'Keep you hood up now, lad. Can't be having that shiny fizzog o' yours giving the game away.'

Levi nodded and yanked at his hood. 'How far now?'

'Not far. Up beyond this rise I reckon – I can smell 'em from 'ere.'

Deepdale led them up to the knoll, which was no more than a slight

fold in the ground. There, they spread out and surveyed the scene before them. Barely fifty yards ahead lay a tiny island within the foul smelling bog. The remains of a simple hovel smouldered in the centre, its timbers blackened, its thatch scattered over the ground. By this ruin, their quarry squatted around a fire, leaning in to gain what warmth they could.

Lapblud spat angrily. ‘Swines! What’ve they done t’ the poor old hermit?’ He reached for his sword hilt.

‘It’s too late for that,’ said Deepdale. ‘Our job is to lie low and wait.’

The shadows deepened around them as they continued their vigil among the dank tussocks. On the island there grew an air of expectation as the polecats’ level of activity increased. While some busied themselves lighting rush torches, others stripped timbers from the hovel to bank up the fire. Two ‘cats simply stood silent, watching the reed-beds to the south.

Deepdale touched Levi’s shoulder. ‘Stay alert, something’s about to happen.’ Sure enough, once the grey skies had deepened to black, leaving a pale narrow strip on the horizon to their right, the assembly before them began to jabber excitedly.

‘There, look!’ whispered Deepdale, pointing.

Levi watched as several dark faced figures entered the island from the south. Their appearance reminded him of Deepdale’s captive spy. The newcomers approached the fire. Some wore armour while others bore elaborate headdresses of feathers and beads. All were armed with swords and short spears, each spear tipped with a wicked, leaf-shaped blade.

Deepdale turned his gaze towards the fire as the assembled polecats made way for one of the newcomers. ‘If only we had Nipper and his bow right now.’

‘Why?’ asked Levi.

‘That’n there’s none other than Sable Denbrok – the mink leader.’

Levi squinted to where the figure, wearing a leather kilt, fur

outwards, now squatted by the fire. Its feather covered jerkin shimmered pink and blue in the firelight.

Lapblud spat, again. ‘Stinkin’ mink scumbags!’

‘Aye, but not only mink,’ declared Deepdale as two rat-like coypu approached the fire, dwarfing the polecats and forcing them aside. Both of the stocky creatures wore a scarlet sash around their ample middles. ‘Unless I’m mistook, and I don’t reckon I am, that there’s Bucko Nerezalli on the right – big-shot coypu general. Chap with him is Rogue Neba – now *there’s* an evil swine if ever there was one.’

Levi eased himself to one side, relieving the cold cramp in his thighs. ‘What’re they then?’

‘They’ve been living in southern Upskilde some years since. Swarmed in from somewhere far to the south. No doubt attracted by the riches of this land in the same way the mink were.’

‘Yes, but what’re they doing here? At the meeting, I mean.’

‘I did hear they’d formed a foul alliance with the mink – but I were never sure – not ‘til now, that is.’

‘Aye,’ chipped in Lapblud, ‘and yon alliance just got fouler. Look.’

Deepdale and Levi followed Lapblud’s gaze as Rasse stepped into view. He approached the fire and bowed before the assembled visitors, lifting his paw to his cap in salute.

Deepdale nodded grimly. ‘Well we can’t get no closer to hear what evil’s being cooked up there – but it’s clear where Rankwolf’s loyalties are – and that can only be bad for our friends back at Skenmarris. So lads, I reckon we can skedaddle now. Our mission ‘ere is done.’ Inwardly Levi breathed a sigh of relief.

As the ranger slowly began to push himself down off the hillock a group of mink warriors splashed out of the bog and onto the island from the right. They ran to Sable Denbrok, blathering excitedly in their strange, guttural language. Deepdale sneaked a second look in time to see several warriors jab their spears towards his position. Without hesitation he scuttled backwards, gesturing to the others to follow.

‘C’mon, we’ve been discovered. Scouts must have picked up our trail. I just hope Splitlug’s alright.’

There was no time for secrecy now. Already, angry cries rose from the island as figures splashed hurriedly towards their position. Deepdale stepped back from the trail, urging Levi and Lapblud on. ‘I’ll bring up the rear – you go, hurry!’

He ran after them, stooping low, the tails of his cloak dragging in the mire. Ahead of him, Levi splashed on through the swamp, no longer aware of the biting cold, his bare legs thrashing through the razor-edged tussocks. Something surged into a pool to his left, but he didn’t bother to look. Behind him, Deepdale shouted a warning.

‘Spears!’

Levi felt something whip past his cloak and a spear bored into the ground ahead of him. He quickly checked his pace and switched direction to avoid it, splashing to his knees in a frigid pool. Clinging mud sucked at his feet as he tried to leap through the water, his ragged breathing chafing his lungs. All the time the sound of pursuit grew ever closer. Another spear zipped into the pool only feet from where he fought to free himself. Then Deepdale was there. He roughly grabbed Levi’s arm, tugging him free. Levi staggered back onto the trail, struggling to keep his footing in the darkness.

A harsh rasp splintered the night as Deepdale drew his weapon.
‘Draw your sword, boy, they’re on us.’