

CHAPTER NINE

Spurred on by the thrill of the chase, a hastily prepared mob of militia ‘cats and mink warriors leapt towards the sedge-covered hummock, screaming excitedly. As they disappeared into the night Bucko Norrezali reached out and grasped Rasse’s throat with a speed that belied the coypu general’s size.

‘Muerte! An’ wha’ treachery is this-a, eh?’ He clenched his powerful paw cruelly causing Rasse to gag for air.

‘Arrch – ain’t none, sir. No treachery … must have bin follered.’ The polecat’s eyes widened in terror as the general produced a dagger. The blade flashed coldly as it whipped upward towards Rasse’s twitching nose.

‘An’ if I slit-a your steenkin’ snout you sniff these things-a little better, eh?’

Rasse’s whiskers drooped as he tried to crane his head back from the waving blade. Sable swaggered between them, his beady mink eyes switching from the coypu to the struggling polecat. A multitude of claws decorated his leather cap. A steel grey peregrine feather mounted on the side added height to his stocky form. He calmly laid a paw on Bucko’s shoulder.

‘Halt, Norrezali. He likely speak truth. Rankwolf, he careless is all. My troop they catch the spies – we skin one tonight for sport. Others we sell ya? Split profit err, fifty-fifty huh?’

General Norrezali nodded slowly as he considered the mink’s proposal. The tension in his shoulders eased and he began to lower the dagger. ‘Si, bueno, we do it, but sixty-forty, I think.’

Rasse exhaled with relief as he felt the grip loosen around his throat. But the general had not quite finished with him. The dagger glinted like a

leaping salmon as the coypu whipped his paw upwards, ending in a feint *snick* as the blade-tip caught Rasse's nose. Rasse squealed in horror and clutched up with both paws as a thin red line oozed down his snout. The coypu released him and wagged a claw at his face.

'Aya, an' maybe its-a remind you of-a your stupidity eh? You don't-a be so dumb no more. You do an' its-a you we be skinnin' – comprehend si?'

Rasse's eyes darted nervously between Norrezali and the mink chieftain as he grasped his bleeding face. Behind him the handful of polecats remaining on the island muttered dangerously. Sensing their mood an equal number of mink warriors closed on them, their spears levelled. An uncomfortable hush gripped the island as the two sides faced-off. A burning timber cracked loudly in the heat of the fire, sending sparks skywards. Rasse turned to his troops, one bloody paw massaging his snout.

'Don't fret none, boys – jus' a misconfabulation, that be all.'

Sable stepped beside him, one paw patting Rasse's jerkin in an effort to cool the trooper's anger. But the mink chief's small eyes remained cold, glinting like ebony beads.

'Ya, nothin' to worry about, eh? Good trackers, we mink are. Seize the filthy scum quickly we do – an' regret they spy on Sable Denbrok they do, for sure!'

Levi dragged his sword from its scabbard as a silent inrush of shadows swarmed at him from out of the night. Beside him Deepdale's blade hissed coldly as the ranger swung it to and fro, connecting with a wretched mink who screamed pitifully before splashing face down into the mire.

Levi's eyes darted left, right and left again, his blood whoosh-whoosh-

whooshing loudly in his ears as all around him erupted into chaos. He clutched his sword hilt tightly, his body suddenly paralysed with terror. Somewhere behind him, Lapblud grunted as he swung his weapon and another squeal fractured the night. A swift movement to Levi's left alerted him and he instinctively swept his sword down defensively, connecting with an incoming spear with a loud thwack!

'TO YOUR RIGHT!' screamed Deepdale, his warning finally freeing Levi's frozen limbs. In an instant the boy twisted around, drawing his dagger with his free hand as a mink leapt at him. The creature's face was inches from his own, its rancid breath hot on Levi's face as the two struggled, splashing ankle deep in the bog. Spitting and snarling, the mink thrust forward and Levi gasped as a sharp blow caught his chest. Fighting for breath, he stumbled back to give himself room to strike. He thrust his sword out, but the mink was ready and swiftly jerked its weapon up to parry the blow. With a dull clang, Levi's sword skated off the other's blade, pitching him off balance.

The mink snarled in delight and snatched at Levi's scalp as the boy stumbled face down towards the pool. In one swift movement it dragged him up and wrenched his head back painfully to expose his throat. Levi's eyes bulged in dread as the creature readied its weapon for the killing strike. All around him, agonising screams filled the night and the black pools were a boiling turmoil of thrashing bodies, hacking, slashing, clawing and biting.

Levi gaped up at the cruel features of the mink as it spat into his face. He scrunched his eyes closed against the hot spittle and instantly felt his anger flare within him. Bracing his legs squarely, he thrust up with his dagger. The mink stiffened and its snarling jaw flopped open. Levi stared in gooseflesh horror as the creature's eyes rolled back to their whites. Then, with a bubbling sigh, it slipped down into the pool.

Someone snatched roughly at the hood of his cloak.

'C'mon, quick!' The voice was Deepdale's. 'We've held 'em awhile – but they'll be back – let's go.'

With one final glance at the body sprawled face down in the pool, Levi staggered onto the trail and followed the ranger towards the river. Behind them, renewed shouts rang out over the bog as their enemies regrouped. Deepdale called to him over his shoulder.

'We've won a brief respite – they'll be on us again in no time.'

Ahead, Lapblud stumbled on, wheezing raggedly. 'We're at the bridge, loves – mind tha feet.' With his black-tipped tail flicking, the stoat skittered over the log, wobbling slightly as he fought to keep balance on the slick, uneven surface. Levi and Deepdale slowed on their approach. Behind them, the pack closed in snarling wickedly, inflamed by the desire to avenge their fallen comrades. A spear thudded into a tussock by Levi's foot as another splashed harmlessly into the river a few yards ahead. With the sounds of pursuit perilously close, Levi checked his footing before following Deepdale onto the log. He knew the enemy could be only feet away and that to stop now meant certain death. That thought had not left his mind when a grasping paw clutched at his cloak and he screamed in terror as his attacker dragged him backwards off the bridge.

Levi fought desperately to keep his feet, half turning to face his foe, when something zipped by his ear, splitting the air like a bullwhip. Instantly, a choking squeal behind told of the missile finding its mark and Levi's cloak was free. He steadied himself and leapt back onto the log, sparing just enough time to glance ahead. There, on the other bank partly hidden by reeds, the old stoat Nipper drew his bow, released, and another scream fractured the night. Two more arrows buzzed by as Levi tottered over the log, each one finding a target among the snapping creatures

bunched closely on the trail. Nipper's skills quickly dowsed the hunters' fire and the snarling creatures hung back, none eager to approach the log-bridge, and a certain arrow in the throat.

Once Deepdale, Levi and Lapblud were behind him, Nipper slowly backed away from the river, the white goose feathers of a readied arrow drawn back to his torn lug. In this way he covered their retreat and, with the firmer footing speeding their escape, they scurried eastward down the narrow causeway.

The mink and polecat warriors continued their chase well into the night, but heavy losses and the unlikely prospect of finding their enemy in the concealing marsh under the added cover of darkness eventually sapped their spirit. So it was that, as a pale pink dawn crested the eastern horizon, the weary hunters sloshed back to their camp, and their leaders' fury.

The sun was barely above the swaying treetops when Poppy trudged along the narrow path towards the lodge shared by Jilli and her hostile partner. Her desired satisfaction at being given a role to play had not yet materialised. Nor would it, she realised, until Levi's safe return. Although once comfortable in the knowledge her brother was simply on a scouting mission, she'd woken in the night, a deep disquiet enfolding her mind. Something had gone horribly wrong, of that she was sure, and she was unable to shake herself from the dark and disturbing notions that draped across her mind like a banner.

With Jilli's lodge now visible through the trees ahead, the path narrowed noticeably. Here it was edged with waving fronds of cow parsley. Clouds of hoverflies hung above the plants, yawning to the side like

miniature helicopters as Poppy absently held her hands out, gently caressing the frothy white flower heads as she passed by. As she neared the lodge she saw Jilli was already in her garden, watering plants in one of the well-tended beds. The pretty, young polecat looked up as Poppy neared the open gate.

‘Oh, you must be Poppy, to be sure.’ Jilli stooped and placed the watering can on the ground and wiped her paws down the front of her frock coat. ‘Berry said you’d be along. Herbs isn’t it?’

‘Yes, if you’ve time,’ Poppy replied, forcing a smile. Despite the constant fears for Levi, she found herself instantly warming to the polecat-maid. ‘I’d like to learn how to use herbs to treat ailments – to create infusions, poultices and suchlike.’

‘Ailments?’

‘Well, cuts and bruises and stuff. Wounds and burns as well.’

Jilli held Poppy’s gaze for a moment as she nodded slowly, realisation dawning in her eyes. Poppy saw that Jilli fully understood the reason behind the request.

‘It’ll be really useful to know when I return home,’ she added quickly.

Following a brief pause, Jilli stepped forward, smiling. She clasped Poppy’s shoulder and steered her towards a grassy path that divided two neat flowerbeds. ‘In that case I’ve just the thing. Come.’

Clear of the surrounding shrubbery Poppy could see that the two beds were in fact given over to growing herbs. The assorted plants were neatly arranged within the spokes of four old cartwheels that had been laid onto the loamy soil. She smiled in admiration at the artistry; at the profusion of colours, all coming together perfectly to create a thing of beauty.

Equally beautiful was the smell that hung in the confines of the overhanging trees. There was lemon, mint, ginger, aniseed – all with an

aromatic undertone of spice. Most of the assembled plants were under a foot tall, but behind the beds two rows of towering fennel enclosed the garden, separating it from the surrounding woodland. The plants' fernlike leaves flicked and swayed in the breeze, while its feather tops attracted the attention of swarms of dancing hoverflies, midges and bees.

'So,' began Jilli, smiling, 'wounds and burns eh? Let's see now.' She stepped carefully onto the right hand bed and crouched near one of the cartwheels. 'For those we can use the likes of garlic.' She stroked the long, leathery leaves of one of the plants. 'Though we must be careful, it can do as much harm as good, so it can.' Remaining crouched she half turned and waved a paw over a dense expanse of lawn over which a profusion of small white flowers lay like snowflakes after a brief, winter flurry. 'But chamomile, now. You can't go wrong with this – it's truly a gift from the gods. So useful, in so many ways.'

Poppy remained on the grassy path. After a few moments she too squatted to be on a level with the young polecat. There she remained for several minutes while Jilli continued to wax lyrical about her herbs and their multitude of uses. Jilli's enthusiasm was infectious and very soon Poppy began to relax. She realised, with a growing sense of purpose, the knowledge she was about to gain would be invaluable to the villagers should the need arise. This helped to quell her fears for Levi – though not entirely. They continued to knot her stomach, regardless, and she wouldn't be happy until he returned safely.

After about five minutes, Jilli stood, prompting Poppy to do the same. 'Well, you see we have chamomile,' said Jilli, pointing to the snowflake lawn. 'And we have honey.' Here she turned her attention to a pair of white painted hives half hidden among the swaying fennel. 'So how about we start by trying both of those in a lovely cup of tea indoors and there we'll

start your training properly, so we shall.'

Reaching for Poppy's arm, she led her back down the path, and on towards the lodge, where a pair of buff coloured chickens scatted for scraps in the doorway.

The sun had almost peaked by the time Deepdale led his weary band out of the marsh. The sullen cloud cover had finally drifted westward during the night and a harsh sun beat down unchecked, sapping them of what little energy remained. Levi tottered out of the reeds and immediately flopped onto the soft turf.

'Can't – go – on,' he said, unbuckling his thick cloak.

Deepdale stooped over him, his own shoulders heaving as he struggled for breath. 'We must, lad. Gotta get to the village – gotta warn 'em.'

'Lad's reet,' declared Nipper, dropping to sit cross-legged on the grass. Here, at the marsh's edge, the turf was thin like skin on the back of an old man's hand. Knuckles of bare rock jutted here and there, the desolate landscape rising gradually to a line of hills several leagues to the east. 'I mean, what good'll we be droppin' dead afore we get there?'

Deepdale's eyes narrowed as he considered Nipper's words. Laplad nodded his agreement.

'The old boy's reet, love,' he said.

Deepdale nodded slightly and stared back towards the marsh. In the far distance, several dark flecks circled high in the sky.

'Very well,' he said, slowly. 'But one more league, then you can rest. We have to assume the road'll be watched so we'll go cross country.' So saying, he turned east and began to stride towards the distant range. Levi pushed

himself to his feet and leaned over, offering a helping hand to Nipper. 'Good shooting, Nipper,' he said as he pulled the stoat to its feet. 'You saved my life, there. Thanks.'

Together, and with frequent backward glances, they crossed the open terrain heading in the direction of the distant hills. Eventually, they reached a lone outcropping of rocks nestling in the foothills. There, Deepdale called a halt.

'Get some sleep, I'll keep watch. We move on at dusk.'

The fox remained on guard as Levi and the two stoats slept. All through that afternoon he sat on one of the rocks, his russet head bathed in pipe smoke as he surveyed the westward plains for signs of pursuit. But none came. Several hours later, with the sun dropping towards the marsh, the ranger woke his comrades. Rested and refreshed, and with grim determination etched across their faces, they resumed their trek, eager to deliver news of Rasse's treachery.

The unsuccessful mink and polecat packs skulked back to the island rendezvous, weary, bedraggled and beaten. The neglected campfire was nothing more than a few burning embers by then and logs shushed as they settled into the grey ash-pile. By the few glowing remains the mink leader received the news silently, his whiskers twitching furiously, his paws bunched at his sides. Knowing the mink warriors had led the chase, Rasse watched, a malicious grin creasing his features. An ugly black crust marked the wound on his snout.

Denbrok growled angrily as he raised a paw to strike the cowering mink before him. The warrior, his clothes smeared in thick black slime from

the fruitless chase, shrank down behind his own upraised paw, but the blow never came. Instead, Sable spat into the fire, muttered something impolite in the invader's own harsh tongue and turned away in disgust.

As the relieved warrior scampered off to join his fellow troopers gathered at the edge of the island Rasse skipped nimbly to Denbrok's side, chuckling. 'Thought you said yon chaps were expert trackers?' he said, bolstered by Sable's earlier defence from the cruel coypu general.

Rasse's number two, Vare Mittgild, scuttled up behind him, wheezing gleefully. 'Good'n, boss, you tell 'im.'

Clearly stung by Rasse's mockery Denbrok halted and spun round, his expression hard. He stared unblinking into the polecat's face for several seconds, his ragged tail switching. Then, without a word, he turned and headed towards the trail that led south through the bog. As he neared the reed screen he beckoned for Rasse to follow.

'Come. I show you something, ya?'

Rasse shrugged at Vare and stepped into line behind the mink leader, picking his route carefully along the muddy trail. As he plodded on, a marsh bird called out under cover of the distant reeds, its strange *hoom, hoom, hoom* resonating over the marsh.

Rasse caught up with the mink. 'What's this all about, eh?'

'Ach – you see soon enough.'

It was several mucky paces further on before Rasse realised Sable was leading him to a wizened stump of a tree, protruding from the bog like an arthritic hand. To reach the stump, positioned several yards to the right of the trail, the pair were forced to leave the firmer ground, bounding from tussock to tussock. Once there, the two creatures perched unsteadily on a clump of sedge grass, surrounded by the stinking swamp.

The stump was roughly ten feet tall and leaned over at a dangerous

angle. Sable nodded towards the uppermost branch. Rasse blinked stupidly at him and glared up, open-mouthed.

'You ain't expecting me to climb that are you?'

'You climb. You see.'

Rasse glanced from the limb to the murky pool below it and swallowed dryly as he weighed up the branch's ability to bear him. The last thing he wanted was to hurtle headlong into that foul mess. As he contemplated the tricky climb Denbrok began to snigger. The mink's mocking laughter lit the fuse of Rasse's anger. There was no way he was going to appear cowardly before the giggling critter and he grabbed for the lowest branch.

'No problem,' he growled and began to climb. The ancient timber, blackened by age, was far tougher than Rasse expected and he quickly reached the uppermost branch. 'Yeah? Now what?' He'd humoured the strutting mink leader for long enough and his patience was wearing thin.

'Look north, yeah?'

Rasse looked around him to recover his bearings and, with the sinking sun to his left, he surveyed the marsh.

'And?'

'And what you see, stupid?'

'Nothin'.'

'Look some more.'

Rasse shaded his eyes, peering towards the milky horizon. Just as he was about to turn away he detected a slight discolouration there – nothing more than a faint smudge in the distance. He squinted in an effort to improve his vision.

'Wait, I do see something.' Far to the north a thin grey coil screwed into the air before scattering on the breeze. 'Smoke, I see smoke.' Rasse looked down to see Denbrok nodding slyly. Muttering a curse, Rasse shinned

down the tree and dropped onto the sodden turf opposite the mink leader, his boots splashing at the black pool's edge.

'Well?' he asked, his dark eyes narrowing. 'What is it?'

Denbrok leaned menacingly towards him, his peregrine feather flicking in the slight wind.

'You think my army need their fat coypu and sly polecat friends. Ya, Norrezali also believe it.' Sable's lip curled in a wicked sneer. 'Ach, but our forces need no one. Too long we've been caged in a corner of this miserable land. But no more, let me tell you. Now we take.' Sable prodded Rasse's chest. 'And you, you think we help our polecat friends to seize badger village in return for a few fields and rivers.' He jabbed a paw towards the drifting smoke. 'No, we take it all. You have your little village, sure, but Caellfyon,' he spat the name in contempt, 'it becomes ours. And there's the proof. Our conquest has begun – mink attack the town of Wormwich. Wormwich burns.'

Rasse glanced sidelong towards the smoke and swallowed, his confidence fading. Sable laughed coldly, sensing the polecat's discomfort. 'And so, you want the badger village? Then suggest you take it now, my friend. Otherwise I might just take it myself.'

'But you swore you'd help.'

'Ya, we help. Sable he keep his word, for sure. But you must attack now – before word from Wormwich get there. But Rankwolf – it is you who need mink. We mink need no one.'

Without another word, Rasse scrambled back to the island to round up his troops.