

## Chapter Twelve

The mink and polecat horde skulked cautiously through the undergrowth as they approached the river. Pale sunlight glimmered through the trees to their right, shards of it flashing off their drawn weapons. Rasse Rankwolf and Vare Mittgild raised their snouts and peered over a boulder-strewn mound overlooking the ford. Vare scraped a claw along the edge of his axe and leaned close to his leader.

‘Looks as if they’ve gone an’ flown the nest, boss.’

‘I can see that, dimwit! Damn ‘em all.’

‘But ain’t that a good thing?’ asked the shabby polecat, frowning. ‘I mean, this way none of us gets hurt.’

Behind them, Sable Denbrok pushed his way through curling fern fronds to join them. His raggedy tail switched in frustration. ‘Ach! Not a good thing – stupid ‘cat.’ He waved his vicious-looking sword in the air. ‘Mink draw swords to spill blood, spill badger blood.’

Vare stared wide-eyed at the row of cruel notches along the blade’s top-edge and shrunk back against a boulder. Rasse smirked in amusement at the mink’s disappointment. He nodded towards Sable’s painted face and sniggered. ‘So, you’re all dressed up an’ no one to slaughter, eh?’

Sable glared at Rasse, his lips curled in a barely audible snarl. Above them, swaying flat-topped Scots-Pines creaked and sighed in the breeze. Vare forced a cough to diffuse the awkward moment. ‘Anyhow, instead of blatherin’ here shouldn’t we be moving in? Now that we own the place, I mean.’

Rasse held Sable's gaze a moment longer than necessary before nodding his agreement. 'Fine idea, matey – you lead the lads in, though. I've something needs doing ... someone to see.' He re-sheathed his sword, leapt over the boulder and splashed purposefully through the ford. Once at the far bank he turned right onto the riverside path – on towards the simple cottage he shared with Jilli Dunbar.

Vare turned to Sable who was staring at Rasse's back, his eyebrows raised in puzzlement. 'Got himself a date wiv a young lady,' he said, winking at the mink leader.

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Vare led the militia over the river and halted them in the clearing outside Barkstripe's vacant lodge. 'All righty, boys. We'll hang around here 'til the boss gets back.' He held up a paw to silence their grumbling. 'That'll do. He won't be long – and then we can have our share of the spoils. We've waited this long, ain't we? A while longer ain't gonna hurt none.'

Rooter stepped forward. A woollen hat slouched untidily on his head like an upturned bag, its ample folds obscuring his cheeks and sagging down his neck. He jabbed a paw in the direction of the ford, beyond which twists of smoke from several cooking fires were beginning to rise.

'What of them stinkin' critters?' He twisted and spat on the path behind him. 'I don't much like 'em being behind me back.' His comment sparked several mumbles of agreement, including a cuss and a spit from old Smooch. The dishevelled creature forced his way rudely to the front of the pack.

'Me oppo's right – you can't trust them mink devils so far us you can spit 'em!'

This time Vare held up both paws to silence the troop. 'Lads, lads – look, they're gonna be off soon enough – that were the agreement. They've helped us take the village, so they can have the land west of 'ere. We'll have nowt to worry about from yon mink – our Rasse'll see to –' He gave a start as a flash of scarlet beyond the assembled spears caught his eye. 'Ah, here's the boss now.'

Rasse stormed into the clearing, his expression as dark as a storm cloud. Spluttering angrily he shouldered his way through the pack, roughly sweeping the troopers aside. Vare stepped back a pace, bobbing his head nervously. 'Ah, you okay, boss?'

'She's gone,' growled Rasse, his cheek twitching dangerously. Vare thought better than to reply. Instead, he cautiously took another step backwards. Rasse's eyes narrowed as he glared into the distance.

'They've took her – took my Jilli from me.'

Smooch stepped forward and tugged at Rasse's sleeve. The ancient polecat coughed wetly into a paw before speaking. 'Achem! Ah, you doesn't know that, boss – she might-a gone all willing like. Maybe she wanted to go.'

The horrified troop reeled at the oldster's recklessness, their combined gasp masking the hiss of a dagger being drawn from its sheath. Striking fast, the militia leader seized Smooch's throat and thrust his blade deep into the old 'cat's belly. Smooch gaped glassy-eyed at Rasse's impassive features as his own lined face slowly twisted in agony. Snarling his revulsion, Rasse screwed the blade wickedly before snatching it out and booting the dying Smooch backwards into the dirt. He immediately swung round to face his dumbstruck troop, spittle flying from his taut jaws.

'Let that be a lesson to you all,' he said. 'Anyone of you slack-jawed lollygaggers got owt to say – owt clever like this scabrous scobberlotcher

here? 'Cause I'd much rather get it out the way now, while I'm in the mood to deal wi' it.' All of those assembled suddenly found something of interest on the ground before their feet, and Rasse spat in contempt. Then, grumbling under his breath, he stooped to wipe his blade in the grass.

Rooter glared at Rasse's back, his own paw tightening around his sword hilt. He may not have called Smooch friend – in truth he had simply tolerated the smelly old scallywag. But he'd been tolerating him for a long time, and that amounted to something in his own mind. His snout twitched as raw hatred welled in him, his tight muscles quivering in indecision. It was then he glanced down at Smooch's lifeblood draining into the soil. He pictured himself laying there and his cheeks burned with the shame of cowardice. He slowly loosened his grip on his hilt. Maybe not now, he thought. But one day. One day old Smooch will be avenged.

Rasse re-sheathed his weapon and turned to his squad. One by one he scrutinised their faces, searching for signs of rebellion. Eventually, satisfied he had retained their loyalty, he allowed himself a callous smile. Then he cast his paws wide, theatrically.

'Right boys,' he announced, all thought of Smooch forgotten. 'Skenmarris is hereby ours.' He waved to stem the jubilant cheers that erupted around the clearing. 'Go take what you want – but no squabbling, mind – because I'll soon be needing your services. There be a pretty polecat maiden as needs rescuing – and some stripey hogs as need teaching not to take what ain't theirs. But first off, we celebrate. Vare – go find us some cider.'

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The straggling line of villagers forged on eastward, knee deep in heather, their shadows stretching before them. A skylark hovered high above, little more than a speck in the evening sky, its cheery warbling song contrasting starkly with the melancholy moor. From his position towards the rear of the file Levi was reminded of an old wartime documentary he had seen in which thousands of French refugees fled an advancing German army. They had overloaded handcarts, too, he recalled. He stepped aside, allowing Poppy and the others to continue while he waited for Deepdale.

‘How much further to the fen?’ he asked the ranger. Nearby, a covey of grouse lifted from the heather, whirring low and fast over the brow of a hill.

Deepdale pointed eastward. ‘See yon line of trees? Fen’s on the other side.’

Levi nodded and sighed in relief. Like the others, he’d not slept since the night before last, and was now sure he could sleep standing up, given half a chance. He re-joined the others and plodded on towards the tree-line. As the heather-clad moor gradually gave way to higher terrain the ground sloped upward towards an escarpment, slowing the already exhausted villagers. Eventually, with the sun slipping below the horizon behind them, they left the moorland and entered the narrow line of sickly looking trees. Ahead of them stretched the gloomy waste of Alney fen; wide, silent and forbidding.

Levi halted on the crest of the ridge and leaned against an alder as he scanned the landscape. The ground sloped away sharply from the tree-line, down to the vast expanse of fen. Alders and wizened oaks gave way to a narrow strip of rough sedge grass, beyond which lay a maze of peat-black lakes, ringed by wispy reed grass and swaying bulrushes. Behind him, a curlew called out, its low *coo-er-lee* trailing mournfully over the darkening

heath. He turned to Seymour, briskly rubbing the gooseflesh that had suddenly unfurled along his forearms.

'Can we stop, here, Uncle?' he asked, gesturing to where the worn-out villagers had congregated along the lip of the escarpment, and were milling around in bewilderment. One, a dishevelled looking weasel shuffled towards them, wearily raising a paw in respect. It squinted blear-eyed up at Seymour.

'Excuse me for asking, but can't we stop now? We're done in, we are. I'd ask the chief,' he said, nodding to where the old badger slouched beneath the straggly limbs of an alder, 'but I reckon he's about as jiggered as the rest of us.'

Seymour glanced towards Barkstripe and nodded slowly. 'Your chief will have to give the word, my friend, but this does seem a good place to stop.' He nodded to where the weasel's partner stood, anxiously wringing her paws before her heather-snagged woollen tunic. 'Go and tell your lady to rest up. We'll have food and a hot drink just as soon as we can.'

The weasel nodded gratefully and scurried off to join the others. Seymour turned to Levi. 'I'll speak to Barkstripe – out of courtesy, you understand. Meantime, you get some fires on the go.' He pointed to where a scattering of windblown branches littered the ground beneath the trees. 'We'll have no shortage of firewood at any rate. Have Poppy, Berry and the others gather it for you – they can do with the distraction.'

Deepdale stepped forward and leaned in. 'Have the lad light them down on the fen side of the ridge,' he said softly to Seymour. 'If we ain't careful, firelight will carry right yon side of the moor. I don't reckon we've been foller'd but ... well, Lapblud and me, we'll keep an eye out. Just in case.'

Using Deepdale's flint and steel, Levi struck sparks onto tinder-dry scraps of birch bark, where they settled like tiny gems. He blew gently, nursing them to life, then grinned as they flared up into crackling flame. 'Here, Pop, stack that kindling over here. Careful – not too close, let it breathe. I'll get another started over yonder.' Within minutes, four good-sized campfires were burning on the grassy levels in the lee of the escarpment. The damp fenland air had chilled considerably since sundown and the weary villagers drew close, grateful of the warmth.

Less than an hour later, everyone was silently tucking into a simple meal of root vegetables, served in a thin meat stock – a recipe Deepdale referred to as 'trail-stew'.

'There, that'll put warmth in folk's bellies,' said the ranger as he spooned up the last of his gravy. He was sitting with Levi, Whitespike and Lapblud on a slight rise, away from the fire. Lapblud leaned back, withdrew his slender dagger and began to pick at his teeth.

'Aye, 'appen thee's reet. Tha's nowt like a good scoff to put cheer in tha heart.'

Levi laid his bowl beside him. He leaned back on an elbow and stared out to where the reeds swayed at the edge of the firelight. 'I don't reckon I'll ever like them horrid reeds. Nor marshes, fens, bogs or anything like them.'

'Oh? Why?' asked Deepdale, a vague smile lifting the corner of his mouth.

'Why? They remind me too much of that chase the other night, that's why. My heart's still all fluttery.'

Lapblud nodded sagely as he jabbed the point of his blade towards the boy. 'But just think on, old love – if it weren't for them horrid reeds as thee calls 'em, none of us'd be here now. T'was horrid reeds as hid us from them

mink. Reeds an' a bit o' dark. Aye, tha heart'd nay be fluttery then, old lad, it would've been cold an' dead.'

Whitespike sat up suddenly. 'Hello, does he bring news from father, I wonder?' He pointed a paw in the direction of one of the fires, where Seymour had risen from his place alongside the badger chief and was striding determinedly towards them, his hood failing to hide his grim expression. He strode up the rise and hunkered down opposite Deepdale.

'What news?' asked Deepdale. 'Has Barkstripe decided owt yet?'

Ignoring the ranger's question for a moment, Seymour leaned forward and ruffled Levi's hair. 'You okay, lad?' he asked, his eyebrows raised enquiringly. 'Good – and well done with those fires. Just what people needed.' He sat back on his heels and glanced back towards Deepdale. 'No, not yet. He and the elders are to have a get-together – a prayer meeting to seek guidance from the ancients. They may cast an offering into the fen – I don't know, a dagger or something.'

Deepdale leaned over and spat into the grass. 'Heavens above! Tell 'em to come to me – I give advice for free. Besides, we could do wi' all the daggers we can get.'

Seymour stood. His hood concealed a frown beneath its folds, but he was unable to hide the annoyance in his voice. 'Yes, but it's their call. All we can do is assist – and guide where we can.'

'Aye, but I say we skedaddle, sharpish – head north like we said.' Deepdale leaned forward and grasped Seymour's ankle, urgently. 'Mayhap them beggars have stopped at the village now it's theirs, mayhap they haven't. But just remind Barkstripe – while folk may be feeling all cosy-like round them fires, we ain't a clue what's coming at us over yon moor.'

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'Do you really think they'll come?' asked Levi as he stared out over the sodden marsh. The bleak landscape was itself dwarfed by an immense sky that loomed darkly over them, stars twinkling like ice-cold jewels. Around their campfires, the exhausted villagers had begun to disperse, selecting patches of ground upon which to lay makeshift bedrolls. Several yards beyond, Barkstripe and Cob, together with Seymour and several village elders, huddled together by the still waters of the lake.

'Dunno, lad,' replied Deepdale vaguely as he regarded the solemn waterside assembly. He turned to Levi. 'That all depends on Rasse's motives. If it were the village the miscreant were after – as his lady-friend claims it were – they'll likely stay put.'

Lapblud ceased rubbing goose fat onto his scabbard and leaned forward, waving a greasy rag in their faces. 'Aye, but think on – how does thee reckon yon villain feels about his brown-eyed beauty sloping off wi' us? Could be she's a bit o' baggage we'd 'ave been best off leaving behind.'

Deepdale drew on his pipe and nodded grimly at the young stoat's words. A rhythmic chant reached them on the still, night air. 'Looks as if yon prayer meet's started.' The chant continued for several minutes. Then, following a brief moment of silence, the small congregation crouched to submit their offering to the lake. Deepdale leaned back and blew a wispy jet of smoke into the air. 'Who do your folk pray to, lad?' he said, addressing Levi. Levi stammered, surprised by the sudden question. 'I mean,' helped the fox, 'them down there call on their ancestors – while old Lapblud here ... well, his stoaty folk have a – what you call it, Lap? A creator?'

Lapblud nodded, folding his rag.

'Well, I – we have a creator,' said Levi, 'but most folk don't bother with him.'

'Tha doesn't?' asked Lapblud, suddenly interested. He slipped his earthenware pot of goose fat into his knapsack. 'What, then? Tha must believe in summat, surely?'

Levi considered the question a moment and nodded. 'Well, many people believe the world formed by accident. A big bang.'

Deepdale gasped in amazement nearly spitting out his pipe, while Lapblud gawked open-mouthed, stunned into an uncharacteristic silence. The stoat was the first to recover. 'Tha what? A bang? And what about thy folk, were it a bang as made them appear?'

'No, life started in a puddle. By accident. Simple creatures first.'

Lapblud shook his head in disbelief. 'Aye, must be simple creatures as believe such twaddle. A puddle.' He turned to Deepdale a moment. 'Hear that, lad? A puddle. Hardly gives meanin' to a chap's life, does it? Folk must be reet radged to think they're theer by accident. Sheesh.'

Before Levi could open his mouth to reply the loud *chuck-chuck-chuck* of a startled blackbird resounded through the alders behind them. 'Ayup!' whispered Lapblud, suddenly flinging himself down onto the grass. 'What the 'eck's upset him?' Still *chucking* loudly, the blackbird shot from cover, flapped over their heads and onward towards the fen. Levi and Deepdale exchanged troubled looks. Clearly, whatever had disturbed the bird must be coming at them over the moor. Silently, they drew their swords, rolled onto their bellies and crawled warily up to the ridge.

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The lofty hall that once housed Barkstripe and his family resounded with a cacophony of whoops, shouts and booze-fuelled laughter. Strident snatches of verse echoed round the smoke-blackened rafters and carried far into the

night. One of the merry polecats, his padded waistcoat soaked with ale, performed a drunken reel on the table as he forced a wailing tune from a squeezebox. Around him, several flickering candles welded onto guttered wax on the table top quivered as he danced.

'Have a care there, Dunbutt,' called Rooter, pointing to the rush-strewn floor. 'One of them candles goes over, an' this'll be a real house-warmin' party.' Behind Rooter, on the platform at the rear of the hall, Rasse leaned back contentedly in the badger chief's armchair. A huge fire, roaring in the nearby fire-pit, cast flickering highlights over the polecat's beaming face.

'Ah, this is the life, eh, Vare?' he said, hoisting his booted feet onto the table. He grabbed a jug from the table and tilted his head back to take a swig. 'Tcha! Blooming thing's empty,' he snarled, upending the jug and shaking it disgustedly. Several amber droplets dripped onto the table, flashing once in the firelight. 'Do us a favour, matey – get us another, pronto.'

Vare was not listening. Instead, the stooping lieutenant squinted quizzically towards the door, where a troop of mink warriors were filing into the hall, spears presented in readiness. Their feather-decked leader headed the line. Vare gently ran his paw along his axe blade.

'Looks like we got company, boss.'

A dull murmur spread round the room like a bush fire as the polecats ceased their carousing and turned to face the newcomers. Rasse frowned as he assessed the situation. It was clear all the mink were now assembled, yet Sable Denbrok remained in line with his troops, ominously silent. 'There be more o' them than us, Vare. Reckon we've got trouble here.'

'What's he waitin' for?' whispered Vare, glaring spitefully at the assembled warriors. 'I say we rush 'em, boss. You just gimme the nod – the lads'll fight to the last if they have to.'

'There's no time for that,' Rasse replied as he watched the mink warriors nearest the door shuffle aside to make way for a squad of burly coypu. The newcomers swaggered in, led by general Bucko Norrezali. Rasse involuntarily raised a paw to the angry red scab on his snout and flinched as the dozen or so heavily armed coypu threaded their way to the centre of the hall. His hall.

Dressed similarly to their leader, with leather breastplates and broad, scarlet sashes, the coypu troops all bore deadly great-axes, long-shafted and crowned with spikes. Sable Denbrok pushed himself away from the wall and skipped into line beside the general. Together they approached the dais.

Rasse's hackles rose as the atmosphere, only moments earlier jovial and high-spirited, became charged with menace. Forcing a tight smile he levered himself out of the chair, instantly regretting his last jug of ale as he fought to control his wayward limbs. Feigning self-assurance he cast his arms wide in greeting. 'Welcome, General – glad you could join our little knees-up.' He turned to Vare. 'Lieutenant, get the general a jug of the old badger's ale – oh and one for mister Denbrok here, he looks like he could do wi' a tipple.' As Vare moved to conduct his errand, Rasse leaned over and hissed urgently into his ear. 'Get yoursen by the fire and stand ready. I've got a feelin' this ain't a social call.'

Norrezali's sloping eyes narrowed to slits as he watched Vare step off the platform and edge cautiously towards the fire-pit. Rasse clapped his paws, brightly, reflecting a swagger he no longer felt. 'Dunbutt!' He called to the polecat musician. 'Give us another tune from that screech-box o' yours.' He turned to the coypu as the first hesitant strains from Dunbutt's squeezebox filled the hall. 'Nice of you to come.' He bowed politely. 'Welcome to me humble abode.'

The coypu regarded Rasse coldly before turning his gaze to the hall. He nodded approvingly. 'Si, bueno – I like eet, like eet fer-ry much-a.'

The smile dried on Rasse's face as icy cold snakes began to writhe in his stomach. Something about the coypu's tone disturbed him. He stepped off the platform, his longsword reassuringly heavy across his back. He sidled up to the general and reached up to clasp his shoulder. 'Come now, matey – how's about summat to eat then?'

As Rasse tried to steer the coypu towards the centre table, Norrezali stepped aside, roughly brushing the polecat leader's paw away. Dunbutt's scratchy tune died, the final note seeming to hang in the ominous hush that descended over the hall. Eventually the coypu general spoke, his voice thick with spite. 'Tell-a me señor Rank-a-wolf – why you steal your friends'-a homes, heh?'

Rasse blinked stupidly, stunned by the general's odd question. He looked to the mink leader for support but saw he was now standing impassively shoulder to shoulder with Norrezali.

'I suggest you answer his question, herr Rankwolf,' the mink said, grimly.

'Well, I – er, that is we —'

'Let-a me put it this-a way eh?' Norrezali gestured towards the assembled polecats. 'You and these-a scumbags double-cross your friends-a, yeah? So tell-a me – what's to stop-a you double-crossin' me, eh?'

Rasse's eyes darted nervously from the general to the mink leader as he stammered stupidly, unable to assemble a reply from his ale-addled brain. Around the centre table the polecat militia muttered dangerously, some already reaching for their weapons.

Bucko Norrezali stepped back apace and hawked a huge gobbet of phlegm at Rasse's feet.

'Turn-coat peeg!' he spat, his long walrus whiskers quivering. 'Kill heem – kill-a them all!'

Snapping excitedly the coypu squad levelled their wicked looking axes as Sable spun round to his own troops. At his signal, the mink warriors lowered their spears and surged forward eager to massacre the outnumbered polecats.

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Deepdale crept up to the ridge, the hem of his cloak dragging on ragged saw-sedge. Levi and Lapblud were already peering out over the dark moor, laying before them like a wide, black sea. The moon slid from behind a cloud and painted a blue tint over the landscape, touching the edges of the few scrub covered hillocks.

Deepdale looked questioningly at his scout. Lapblud shrugged and shook his head. All was silent once again. As the three waited, weapons drawn, eyes probing the darkness, there came a faint *tac* of a twig breaking a few yards ahead and a little to the right. Silently, the ranger signalled to the others, then crabbed across to intercept. Levi patted Lapblud's shoulder before he, too, edged along the ridge, following the fox. He gripped his sword hilt in an effort to calm his fluttering nerves.

As he neared Deepdale he saw the ranger was peering through the grass, to where a bank of disturbed sedges were trembling, as though someone was crawling through them. He stiffened and silently brought his sword up to lay on the ground before him. He sensed the ranger's tension, as though the fox were about to strike.

The grasses stopped moving.

There was a pause.

Out of the cover came a small, quavering voice. 'Eh ... anyone there?'

Deepdale glanced wide-eyed at Levi, then returned his gaze to the moor. 'Who're you? Reveal yourself.'

'Th-that you, Mester Deepdale? S'me, Wanbib. From the Wormwich watchtower.'

Levi breathed a sigh of relief. He was about to stand when Deepdale seized his arm, staying him. Lapblud joined them. His own weapon remained ready. He called out across the moor.

'Is thee alone, lad?'

'Yes.'

'Let's see thee - show thysen.'

The grasses ahead parted and Wanbib slowly stood, shoulders sagging, his body streaked with filth. The frightened stoat's blunt snout appeared nut-brown in the poor light and trembled with emotion. Deepdale stepped forward, immediately recognising the tomahawk thrust into the young stoat's belt.

'Well now, young lad – looks like you've been in the wars, already.' He laid a paw gently across the stoat's shoulders and began to guide him towards the ridge. Overwhelmed at having reached safety, Wanbib folded, weeping into his grubby paws.

Leaving Lapblud on the ridge, staring out into the night, Deepdale and Levi led the sobbing stoat towards one of the fires, where a small crowd had already begun to gather, attracted by the disturbance. Levi politely forged a path through.

'Make way, folks. Hungry, cold stoat wanting some food.' He stood back, giving Wanbib room to slump onto a boulder in the fire's glow. The small crowd pressed in expectantly. Two young polecats, one male and one

female, rushed to the front and forced their way through to Wanbib's side, where both began jabbering at once.

'Where's Foulson?' said the male, eagerly. 'What news of our brother?'

Deepdale strode forward. He'd found some left-over food at the neighbouring campfire, and held a steaming bowl in his hands. He placed himself protectively between the polecats and the weary stoat as he laid the hastily prepared meal in Wanbib's lap. Then he gently bundled the two to one side.

'Come now, Hopsack,' he said, gently. 'And you, Flushpaw – all in good time. He's about done in. Let him eat first.'

Seymour and Barkstripe joined them. The old badger glanced sadly at Wanbib, before looking questioningly at Deepdale. The fox shook his head slowly, his expression grim. Barkstripe groaned and dragged a weary paw across his brow. He turned away, blinking rapidly.

The modest meal revived Wanbib a little. Laying his bowl aside he stared blankly into the flames and began to recount his tale. Throughout his account his voice remained flat and distant, the assembled villagers leaning forward intently, eager to catch every word. They gawped wide-eyed at the young stoat as they heard of the attack on the tower, gasping in horror at news of Diggle's fate.

Wanbib paused as he scanned the faces gathered around the fire, until he spotted Hopsack and Flushpaw Fleck. Then, holding their gaze as though talking to them directly, and with his voice breaking, he told of finding Foulson Fleck at the foot of the tower steps. The young polecats' reaction was immediate, with Flushpaw's mournful wail fracturing the night as Hopsack, his own face twisted in grief, leaned over to comfort his sister. Levi signalled to Poppy. Together with Berry and Jilli, she went over to lend what comfort she could to the pair.

Triggered by the polecat's sorrow, many of the assembled villagers also began to weep. But there was anger, too – and fear aplenty.

'We're done for,' wailed one of the weasel-maids.

'Aye, this is nothin' but folly,' cried her partner jabbing a claw towards Barkstripe. 'We should never have come here. Now we've been and lost everything.'

Seymour leaned close to Barkstripe as the weasel's comments prompted more dark mutterings among the crowd. He cupped his hand over the chief's ear. 'This is bad, Chief,' he said, one eye on the restless crowd. 'We can't afford such doubt, we must take control now.'

Barkstripe shook his head wearily, holding his paws out in a hopeless gesture. 'What doth ye suggest, Hawkeye? For I'm at a loss right now.' Before Seymour had time to reply Deepdale stepped forward, grabbed young Wanbib's paw and lifted it into the air. As the startled stoat blinked in amazement, the ranger called out to the gathering.

'Three cheers for Wanbib and the fallen heroes of the Wormwich Beacon!'

Following the briefest of pauses, a number of stoats began to cheer. Their enthusiasm spread quickly and, in seconds, everyone was clapping and praising, their loud hurrahs ringing out over the fen.

Seymour stepped forward and patted Deepdale's back. 'Well done, my friend!'

'I figured they needed heroes, not victims, laddie.'

Barkstripe climbed onto a rock and raised his staff high, gradually quietening the crowd. As the mumblings waned he nodded his thanks to the enterprising ranger, for he knew that Deepdale's quick thinking had helped quell a possible rebellion. Once he had the villagers' attention he delivered his address.

'Good folk,' he began, his gruff voice carrying over the fen's edge. 'I'd like to announce summat. When we reach safety – as indeed we will. Heroes Diggle Bristlesides and Foulson Fleck will both be honoured – aye, and Wanbib here. For wi'out him we'd never have had any warning at all.' He signalled to Whitespike, who was watching proceedings from the fireside. 'Break out the birch wine, son. Tonight we drink to our fallen champions – and then we sleep. For tomorrow we make for the safety of Monksgate.'

Warmed by a generous tot of wine the tired villagers soon returned to their bedrolls, by which time a calm stillness enveloped the campsite once again. Three of the campfires were by then merely glowing embers. The fourth remained well alight, illuminating Levi, Seymour and Deepdale who remained seated on a log within its perimeter of warmth. Deepdale leaned forward and tossed a wizened alder branch into the flames.

'So it's to Monksgate we're headed, eh?'

Seymour stared into the fire and watched absently as flames licked around the branch, blackening its edges. 'Indeed,' he said eventually. 'There were some as wanted to make for the forest situated a league or so to the west of here. Build there. It was decided that even it were too close to the mink threat; that we'd only earn a brief respite and would continue to live under the shadow of further attacks.'

'Aye, I see the sense in that. Now the beggars are swelling in numbers they're greedy for land.'

'What then, uncle?' asked Levi looking up. He'd removed his breastplate and it lay unbuckled in his lap, where he had been cleaning it with goose fat borrowed from Lapblud.

'We make for the Kirkstone pass.'

'Kirkstone?' spat Deepdale, quickly. 'Why, that's many leagues north – there's some here who –' he halted and peered around, before lowering his

voice. 'There's some as will never make it. Old'uns. Young'uns. The journey'll kill 'em.'

Seymour gently waved a hand to calm the troubled fox.

'And that's why we make for Monkgate first. There we'll leave the sick and the weak – Barkstripe is friendly with the abbot there. We'll restock with supplies, and then strike north. Kirkstone is far enough away from this troubled south for folk to begin new lives, safe in the knowledge that the next generation may also live in peace.'

Deepdale turned and peered towards the ridge, beyond which lay the brooding moor.

'Well, that's all very well – but let's hope Rasse is content with the village now he's won it. Let's hope he and his wicked allies stay there. Because if it's us Rasse is after, we've a bloomin' long trek afore we get to Kirkstone. And most of it's out in the open.'

The ranger snatched up a handful of twigs and flung them into the fire, where they were quickly consumed. From the darkness beyond the black lake, a mournful cry pierced the night as a solitary owl swept low over the fen.

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Rasse snatched at the sword slung across his back, yanked it from its sheath and swung the long blade down. In stepping back to spit at him, Bucko Norrezali had given the polecat room to wield his weapon. And wield it he did as Rasse placed all his strength behind the strike. The blade bit deep, cleaving the coypu general's burnished hide breastplate and fancy scarlet sash in two. As the horrified Norrezali gawked in disbelief at his tumbling armour the hall erupted into chaos. Rogue Neba, the coypu second in

command snatched his dazed commander aside and rushed forward, swinging his wicked curved blade towards Rasse's skull.

Rasse called out to Vare as he pulled his own blade up to parry. 'THE FIRE VARE – NOW!' Sobered by the immediate and bloody threat, he glanced right and spotted the shadowy form of Sable Denbrok rushing his flank. It was time to leave. Slashing his long blade left and right to counter-strike Rogue Neba's weapon, he leapt onto the long table. 'Come lads! To me!'

Many polecats were already there, desperately hacking at mink spears as the feather and bead clad warriors swarmed the table, jabbing at the polecats' legs. Skipping 'cats skidded on pools of slippery wax as candles were trampled underfoot. Several were kicked onto the floor, where their smoking stubs lay smouldering in the tinder-dry rushes.

An agonising shriek rent the air as a spear pierced Dunbutt's leg. He grabbed for the shaft but slipped in his own pooling blood. He flailed once for balance then spun onto the floor as yowling coypu surged forward, hacking at the stricken creature. Dunbutt's squeezebox wailed one last time as it was rent in two, drowning out the polecat's own death-cry.

Struggling back to back with Rasse, Slashir Seamfric grunted as a spear tip punctured his boot. He called to Rasse over his shoulder. 'It's no good, boss, we're done in.' Rasse skipped aside as a coypu's axe swept down, cleaving the tabletop.

'HELP, VARE, IF YOU PLEASE.'

The strained timbers of the table groaned as one edge fell away, pitching a stricken polecat to his doom. Seeing this, the coypu diverted their attention to the table and more axes struck the shattered boards. The desperate polecats fought to remain upright on the buckling table, their feet slipping in wax, blood and spilled ale. Around them, eyes gleaming with

bloodlust, the mink and coypu snapped and snarled as they sensed victory, their weapons poised ready to butcher their enemy.

'VARE,' screamed Rasse, desperately.

Over by the fire-pit Vare swung his axe as he fought his way towards the flames, catching a coypu beneath its slobbering jowls. 'I GOT PROBLEMS O' ME OWN 'ERE, DONCHA KNOW!'

A trail of dead and dying beasts lay behind Vare, and only one more coypu remained between him and the fire. His eyes narrowed as he assessed his options and, stooping slightly, he inched forward to engage. The hefty coypu bellowed a challenge as it swung its long axe. Vare paused, feigned left and ducked as the heavy axe swung round, flinching as the blade surged by, a claw's breadth above his head. Seizing the moment, he leapt, pitched into a forward roll and sprang to his feet in front of his startled enemy. He grabbed the coypu's jaw as the creature gaped at him wide-eyed, its bulky weapon useless at close-quarters. The coypu's long whiskers drooped over its gaping mouth, framing orange buckteeth flecked with spit. Vare brought his axe down – once, twice, then he tossed the dying creature aside and leapt towards the fire.

Sparing only a second to glance at his struggling comrades, Vare snatched the coypu's discarded axe and, grunting with exertion, swung the cumbersome weapon into the steeply banked fire. A score of flaming brands exploded outward in a shower of burning embers and wood-ash, scattering wide over the rush-covered floor.

The mink and coypu spun round and glared in horror as the burning logs tumbled end over end, leaving blazing trails in their wake. In seconds, berserk battle cries became screams of terror as flames snaked along the floor, the fiery coils looping around the miserable creatures' legs.

'Now lads!' Rasse screamed to his shocked troopers as they, too, stared dumbstruck at the web of flame now engulfing Barkstripe's hall. 'Here's our only chance – follow me.' Rasse and the others leapt from the table as it finally collapsed in a heap of shattered timbers onto the burning floor. Laughing gleefully, the polecats danced nimbly through the spreading inferno, zigzagging their way towards the open door. Vare was waiting for them.

'Get a move on, they're comin'.'

'GET THEM!' Sable screamed frantically, but his stricken troops were too preoccupied trying to save themselves from the swelling inferno. It was already too late as Rasse was already leading his troops into the cool night air.

'Quickly – to the river.'

Bright, orange flames were threading through the thatch, breaking through and surging into the sky when the 'cats scuttled out of the yard, leaving the blazing hall behind them. The scorched troopers fled the clearing and raced down to the ford, some beating out flames on jerkins or breeches. There, Rasse led them over the slick stones, splashing through shallows. He was nearing the south bank when sounds from behind told him the mink had recovered. He groaned, audibly. Snatching a moment to glance over his shoulder, he saw them sweeping towards the ford, angrily slashing the air with their razor-sharp spears.

'Hurry, this way,' cried Rasse turning right. Leading his remaining troops westward, he ran furiously along the riverbank, the sounds of pursuit ever closer. Minutes later they reached a bend in the river. Here, the channel narrowed between boulder-strewn banks and what had been a trickling stream at the ford was now a tumultuous flood.

Rasse leapt onto a slick, moss-covered rock. 'Come on, lads – into the river, it's our only chance.' Without waiting for the others, the polecat leader spun around, snatched a deep breath and jumped.

The icy cold water seized Rasse's chest like a vice, winding him instantly. He craned his neck and gasped, snatching what air he could, before the surging waters boiled over him, sweeping him, tumbling and clawing downstream.