

Chapter Thirteen

The new sun rose majestically above the fen, painting the myriad of lakes orange-gold. Levi stared spellbound as, one by one, the sun ignited the patchwork of still waters until the fen lay before him glistening like leaded glass in a cathedral window. Deepdale squatted beside him and pulled his clay pipe from his belt pouch. 'Beautiful ain't it?'

Levi nodded, and turned to watch as the fox crammed scraps of tobacco into the bowl. The scent was rich and spicy. For reasons he was unable to identify, it reminded him of Christmas. 'I never realised fens could be such lovely places – always thought they were ... you know, flat and boring, like?'

Deepdale thrust a stick into the glowing embers of the fire and waited as it flickered into flame. 'Very underrated are fens,' he said, leaning back and offering the flaming stick to his pipe bowl. 'B'sides, you can find beauty in anything if you look.' Pipe in hand, the ranger stared wistfully towards the rising sun and the pair continued to sit in silence as, slowly, the camp woke around them. After breakfast, Barkstripe called the villagers together.

'Make thyselfes ready, good folk. If we make haste we can reach Monkgate afore nightfall.'

At Seymour's suggestion, Levi and Poppy gathered some of the able youngsters – Whitespike and Berry, and the polecats Jilli Dunbar, Hopsack Fleck and his sister, Flushpaw – and together they helped the older creatures assemble belongings, secure loads onto carts and prepare for

departure. Aided by the youngsters, the refugees were ready before the sun had reached the thinning clouds. At a signal from Barkstripe, they shuffled off the fenland edge, commencing the journey that would take them to the ancient abbey town of Monkgate. And, Poppy hoped, to safety.

Seymour's idea to include Hopsack and his sister in the aid-team appeared to work as the labour and sense of usefulness helped distract the young Flecks from their grief, and the pair visibly brightened as the morning wore on. Poppy watched tactfully as the pair manoeuvred an old badger couple's handcart between two straggly alders. As Hopsack steered the ungainly cart Flushpaw chatted pleasantly with the badger-wife in an effort to cheer her. But Poppy could see the loss of her brother in such a brutal manner had clearly hurt deeply and her eyes remained glassy and lifeless.

Poppy felt a knot form in her throat. Levi had also been victim to the savage minks' brutality, but had been fortunate. It could equally have been his body feeding the crows out on the cold, lonely marsh. She blinked rapidly to quell the rising tears and, spotting Jilli strolling alone at the marsh's edge, hurried to join her. The polecat maiden flinched as she approached.

'Sorry, did you call?' Jilli asked, dreamily. Poppy shook her head and jerked a thumb towards the two young polecats.

'Jilli, do you think they're okay? I'm worried about Flushpaw.'

Jilli watched the two youngsters a few seconds then smiled. 'Oh, but I shouldn't worry any – we're tough folk, she'll soon bounce back. I'll keep an eye out, though. Sure, but grief can sometimes do strange things with your head. You're apt to make silly mistakes, so ye are.'

A hint of sadness had entered the polecat maiden's voice and Poppy glanced sidelong at her, expecting her to continue. But she didn't and Poppy decided not to intrude with further questions. 'Thanks,' she said,

awkwardly.

With the flat, dark line of the fen far behind them, the villagers trekked westward over the windblown moor. Above them the sun climbed into a clear, cornflower-blue sky, while across the moor a steady breeze blew, casting rippling waves through the sea of biscuit-brown heather. Shortly before mid-day the straggling line reached the two round-topped hillocks they'd been making for. There they turned northwest. It was then that Poppy heard a loud swishing behind her and she turned to see Levi approaching, wading ankle deep through the heather.

He nodded, giving her a brief smile, then turned to Jilli. 'Ah, miss Dunbar?' he began, shyly. 'I was wanting to ask you about Rasse. If you don't mind, that is.'

'Why, ask away now,' Jilli replied, smiling at the boy's bashfulness.

'Er, what's he like?' Levi said, unconsciously stroking the tight leather straps of his sword hilt. Poppy regarded her brother closely. She knew that his question hadn't been prompted by mere curiosity. She knew his mind, and knew too he felt he was on a collision course with the militia leader and the two would eventually cross-swords.

'Oh, well now,' said Jilli suddenly brightening. 'He's handsome and exciting – witty at times, an –'

'No, I mean...'

'You mean ... as a soldier,' said Jilli turning to him, her expression suddenly severe.

Levi nodded.

'Well now, I'm not the one to be askin',' she said, sadly, 'but sometimes I'd play hop-rock with him –'

'It's like draughts,' offered Poppy, noticing her brother's vacant look. 'Berry played it with me a few times – when you were out having fun with Deepdale.'

Levi scowled at his sister as Jilli continued.

‘Sure, and I’d thrash him soundly – put him in a rare mood, so it would.’

‘Yes, but wha –’

‘And what has this to do with soldiering?’ interrupted Jilli, regarding him with a level stare. ‘He can’t think ahead, Mister Levi. Far too impulsive is my Rasse.’ She turned away, the sadness returning to her voice. ‘Sure, and one day he’ll suffer for it. And most likely cause serious trouble for someone else. I just know it.’

The roar of rushing water was loud in Rasse’s ears as he tumbled end over end through the surging river. The gushing waters had conveyed him and the surviving sprawl of troopers away from the village, leaving behind the snapping mink warriors. But, at the mercy of the torrent and the jagged-edged rocks littering the river-bed, they were far from safety.

Rasse grunted in pain as the current slammed him against a boulder. He reached to snatch at the long grasses drooping into the water from the river bank but, once again, the surging waters carried him onward. Every part of him ached. He yearned to fill his tortured lungs with fresh clean air without taking in great gulps of mucky brown water. But was the flow slowing? Its violence dwindling? It was certainly shallower. He’d repeatedly scraped the bottom, his body carving out scoops of loose pebbles from the river-bed, which continued to churn with him in the flood.

His head broke surface and he gasped for air, opening his eyes for a split second as the bank swept past in a blur of colour before the raging water pitched him headlong once more. But there was something ahead. On the bank.

Reaching?

Instinctively, Rasse jabbed his paw out of the water and immediately connected with the something. Whatever it was grasped him tightly, holding him against the current's pull, and he winced in agony as his limb almost tore from its socket. There he remained for several seconds, the silky waters surging over him, threatening to pluck him further downstream. Until the something began to pull and, little by little, dragged him from the water like a bundle of washing, hauling him onto the sodden riverbank.

Eastwards, somewhere over Skenmarris and the distant ridge-line, storm clouds gathered. They billowed upwards, their tops flattening out ominously. Sunlight painted their edges white, like mould on cheese. With water pooling around him Rasse lay motionless as a small crowd of soaking polecats gathered, dripping onto their leader's lifeless form.

'He ain't breathin',' said one.

'The boss is dead,' cried another, raising a chorus of gasps from the bedraggled crowd.

Rooter Stripeorl shouldered his way to the front. 'He ain't dead, you soft lummox. He's like a newborn babe, is all – needs a bit of help with his first breath. Here, allow me.' He stepped forward and, with a spiteful sneer, gave the stricken Rasse a swift kick with the tip of his boot.

Rasse sputtered into life, retching violently. He pushed himself upward onto all fours, several thick beads of spittle trailing from his slack jaws. 'Who the 'eck –?' he gasped, struggling to rise from the grass. The militia leader's tattered jerkin hung loosely from his shoulders, his honey coloured fur matted and slick with mud. Blood caked around a gash on the top of his head, his precious studded cap lost to the tumultuous waters.

'It were me, boss' declared Rooter, bending to offer Rasse a paw. 'You'd a been deaded if I hadn't got you breathin'.'

Aided by Rooter, Rasse stood and nodded curtly to him, a warning look in eyes. Not wishing to feel Rasse's blade in his own belly, Rooter shuffled

backwards to the rear of the small crowd. Rasse's eyes narrowed as he watched the scruffy trooper withdraw. Then, turning suddenly, he called over the assembly, his eyes searching. 'Where's Vare?'

'I'm here, boss!'

The group parted as their number two pushed forward. Rasse eyed him as he approached. Several deep cuts criss-crossed the polecat's breastplate and his strip-leather kilt appeared even more ragged than usual. Rasse embraced him warmly.

'Thank heaven, matey – dunno what I'd a done if I'd have lost you.'

Vare blinked with astonishment and gaped at the militia leader. 'Steady on, boss. Not in front o' the boys.'

'No, mate.' Rasse steered Vare away from the riverbank. 'You see, I may 'ave been dashed down that blasted river, but I was thinkin'. I've got plans for you. A very important mission.'

The bemused troopers looked quizzically at one another then stepped into line behind their officers, each listening intently.

'You see there's now the matter of revenge,' added Rasse, his lip curling in a leering grin. 'For what's been and gone and happened.'

'But boss,' piped one of the bedraggled 'cats, 'we can't wallop them mink and such now. We've been beat – half the lads've been lost in the scrap at yon lodge – the other half in the drink.'

Rasse spun round. 'Not the mink yer blitherin' idiot,' he spat, staring scornfully at the offending trooper, a particularly ragged individual with only one ear.

'Who then?' asked Vare, now looking as confused as the others.

'WHO?' Rasse's voice rose to a shriek and Vare flinched nervously. 'Who? Why Barcus-stripeface an' his rag-tag bunch of mud crawlin' maggots. That's who.'

Vare shook his head slightly as though that would clarify things, then

sighed with relief when one of the troops stepped forward with the obvious question. 'B-but, Barkstripe, why him?'

'WHY?' Impossibly, Rasse's voice rose another octave as his paw hovered near his empty dagger sheath, the weapon having been lost in the river. 'Be-cause, dimwit – it's all their fault, innit?'

'It is?' said Vare. He cast his paw around the surviving band. 'But lads're right, boss – we ain't exactly looking our best right now.'

Rasse sighed and rolled his eyes skywards. 'That,' he said, jabbing a claw onto Vare's scored breastplate, 'is why you're goin' to stalk the miserable bunch – shouldn't be too hard to pick up their trail away from the village – while I go to Monkgate and rustle up support. I got a few favours there I can call in. Particularly one from a nasty bit o' work labelled Vladock – head of Monkgate's guild o' thieves. Once you're on the maggot's heels, send word to me there and I'll meet you. And then, matey, I'll get me Jill back and we'll teach the rest o' them guttersnipes not to mess with Rasse Rankwolf and 'is boys.'

Levi and Deepdale led the straggling column towards Monkgate, the town now clearly visible on the skyline beyond the moor. Levi's bare legs were angry red from his sandal tops to the hem of his kilt, whipped sore by coarse-grass and heather, and were beginning to itch furiously. It was as much as he could do to refrain from scratching them.

'How much longer, Deepdale?' he said, his dull monotone reflecting his fatigue. 'That flamin' town doesn't seem to get any closer.'

He was aware that Barkstripe wanted desperately to escape the open moor and reach safety before nightfall. But the journey, normally accomplished in two days, had taken only one and the trek had been

gruelling. Even blacksmith Bion and his brawny friends were struggling now as their pain at hauling the travois' etched lines into their weary faces. All talk had ceased several miles back, leaving only the constant buzz of insects, the whispering breeze and the *swish, swish, swish* of weary feet through the heather, marking time like a pendulum. A pendulum that was gradually slowing.

'Should only take half a mark,' replied the ranger, turning to peer at the winding file behind him. 'But if they slow much more, we'll be strugglin' to reach it afore dark. And if that 'appens we'll be stuck on the moor for the night anyhow. They hold to the old ways in Monkgate.'

'The old ways?'

'Aye. Town gates're closed come nightfall. No one in. No one out.'

Levi sighed and dragged a grubby palm across his forehead as he watched the sun slipping slowly behind the distant rooftops, touching the clouds to flame. The radiance extended to the town itself, which glowed as though the sandstone buildings were ablaze. Levi lowered his head, too tired to appreciate the beauty.

The ranger guessed right, and half an hour later, the column lumbered towards the town gates. Several golden lights were already flickering beyond the perimeter wall as, within, townspeople settled to their evening meals. A dark coloured barrier, its colour indistinct in the dying light was mounted on a pair of trestles before the open gates. It spanned the opening, barring their entry.

Deepdale held up a paw, halting the column, as a scruffy-looking rat shuffled out of the gatehouse and ambled towards them, its long nose quivering. Behind the rat a reedy voice called to him from within the shadowy interior.

'Who's that, Stoolie? Disturbin' us this late.'

The one named Stoolie called back over his shoulder. 'Ne'er you mind

yoursen', Roscoe – I got this'n, you just get them lamps lit.'

Levi flinched at the creature's harsh, nasal rasp. The rat squinted up at the ranger and drove his paws into the deep pockets of his shabby greatcoat. He sniffed loudly, blinked once or twice, then turned his gaze to the shuffling group, his beady, close-set eyes glinting coldly.

'Now then, circus in town, is it?' He was still chuckling at his own wit when Barkstripe forged to the head of the column.

'What's goin' on here, Deepdale?'

'I reckon this kind chap's about to let us in, sir.'

The rat's eyes darted from badger chief to ranger and back again. 'Whoa, there – hold it a minute, I never said such a thing.' He puffed his filthy vest out in an effort to assume importance. 'In fact, no one's allowed through the town gates after lightin' up time. Town rules.'

Deepdale slowly drew his sword and Stoolie flinched as the ranger laid it on his quivering shoulder, the point aimed towards the darkened lodge beyond. 'That's as maybe, but you ain't lit-up yet.' Several tiny sparks flew from the gloomy interior, accompanied by an angry squawk and the metallic scratch of flint on steel.

'Yes but we would be, if one apprentice gate-rat weren't so flippin' useless,' replied Stoolie, raising his voice deliberately.

Deepdale lowered his sword. 'But you ain't.'

Barkstripe prodded the rat's vest with his staff. 'Now look here, good sir, I need to get these folk inside,' he said. He gestured with his remaining paw towards the exhausted villagers, all of whom were by then watching the discussion with weary resignation. 'Some're sick. I wish to see Vittus Cluff, the abbot here. I'm a good friend of his.'

The rat pointed his snout skywards and began to tap his foot. 'Sorry chum, good friend or not rules is rules – it'd be more'n my job's worth to –

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Deepdale's blade whipped up to the rat's throat, parting the lank, grey fur. 'If you doesn't let us in *right now*, your gizzards'll be decoratin' yon gatepost.'

The rat gagged a couple of times, his tiny pea-sized eyes glaring wildly at the ranger's blade. 'Roscoe – raise the post, forget the lamps.'

Deepdale held the twitching rat on his blade as Barkstripe led the villagers past them, under the arch and into the town. The badger chief turned to Levi and chuckled. 'Yon rat's learnin' a lesson he won't forget in a hurry.' He nodded towards a large sandstone building, barely visible beyond a slight bend in the narrow street. 'Now we'll see if me friend Vittus can help.'

Levi turned sharply to the chief, his mouth open. 'You mean you don't know?'

'It were never guaranteed, lad.' Barkstripe laid a paw on his shoulder. 'But, I'm always hopeful.' The chief saw the concern cloud Levi's features. 'Hey, now,' he said, 'we're safe here. We've lost some good people, aye, but we've endured – partly thanks to you – and now we can rest up, an' gather our strength before movin' on to where we can begin again. To forge ourselves a new life – one free from fear an' doubt.'

Levi gave a slight nod, though he was far from encouraged by the badger chief's words. Yes, they were safe and that was indeed cause for a celebration of sorts. Despite this, the hairs on his neck rose, not because of the lowering temperature, but rather Nipper's unbidden voice that had entered his thoughts and was resonating through his mind. *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.* Nipper's voice faded, only to be replaced by Jilli's own soft tones: *Far too impulsive is my Rasse. And he'll most likely cause serious trouble for someone else. I just know it.*

Head down, Levi trudged on as though he were suddenly bearing a

heavy load, his footsteps echoing in the cramped space of the darkening alley. The buildings either side of the weary column appeared to be merchants' dwellings, their awnings now pulled back, windows shuttered for the night. Two such buildings were marked with huge cornerstones, their surfaces scored and scuffed by years of passing feet. Here the street funnelled inwards, little wider than a footpath.

Levi glanced towards the looming abbey only yards ahead and his mind wandered to another; one that had marked the start of his bizarre adventure. With his mind distracted by the building's gloomy façade he lost his footing on a loose cobble and scraped the wall to his left, the coarse sandstone dragging harshly across his skin. He rubbed his sore arm, shifting his gaze to just above the abbey roof. There, as the last blood-red strands of sky faded to dark, a picture of Thornley Abbey formed like a superimposed image, and he wondered whether he'd ever see its mysterious door again.