

## Chapter Two

The following day, Vare and his band caught up with Rasse in Monkgate, finally tracking the militia leader down to a damp and dismal cellar beneath The Jug and Jig Inn, home to the town's guild of thieves. He stood atop a rickety looking staircase leading down to the crypt-like basement and hesitated, testing the treads with his boot. At Vare's back, his small gang of troopers edged toward the landing, necks craning, while beyond them, the dull murmur of voices, interspersed with bawdy laughter, sounded from a crowded bar.

A long wooden table occupied the centre of the cellar. Scattered haphazardly around it were a number of seats made from old barrels, most of them occupied by shifty looking rats. Vare scanned the dimly lit room as a score of beady eyes glinted back at him. Eventually, two stocky rats, both sporting golden earrings, stepped aside to reveal the polecat leader, seated grandly in a barrel-seat, his boots resting on the table.

Vare saw at once that Rasse had taken time out to purchase a new cap. Its multi-coloured studs gleamed in the light from the log-fire blazing in a wide inglenook at the head of the room. Dragging his boots from the table, Rasse stood and waved impatiently.

'Come on down, don't be shy. Wondered where you'd got to.'

Vare gripped the shaky banister and descended the staircase, expecting at any moment to be pitched to his doom by any of the dangerously tilting treads.

‘Where I’d got to?’ he said, as he finally stepped off the flight into the room. ‘Me an’ the lads’ve run all the way from that stinking fen – we’re about pooped.’ There were murmurs of agreement from behind as the small band edged unsteadily down the stairway to join him. Vare tugged the scrap of cloth from his pocket and waved it. ‘Besides, do you recognise this.’

Rasse’s eyes widened. He leapt onto the table, scattering jugs of muddy brown ale, before jumping down to snatch the cloth from Vare’s paw.

‘Where’d you find it?’ he asked urgently.

Vare jerked a paw back at one of the polecats.

‘Flagbar saw it on the moor, this side of Alney.’

Rasse held the cloth to his face a moment and, with eyes half closed, inhaled its familiar scent. He blinked and gasped sharply to hold his emotions in check. Glancing sidelong at the assembled troopers, he stepped up and clapped a paw around Flagbar’s shoulders. The ‘cat trooper, named after his broad, chestnut coloured eye stripe, turned and grinned at his mates as Rasse led him toward the table, calling to one of the rats.

‘Padpad, pour this lad an ale – he’s done his old Rasse a service.’

Leaving Flagbar to receive his drink, Rasse returned to Vare, leaning excitedly toward him.

‘Do you reckon she left it on purpose, like?’

‘That’s the view o’ the boys, boss,’ Vare said, trying to sound encouraging. Behind him, Slashir Seamfric nodded vaguely, gazing longingly as Flagbar guzzled ale from a badly chipped jug.

‘Aye – me too,’ replied Rasse, staring off toward one of the damp-stained walls. Green mould mottled the lower half of the wall and, from

somewhere behind the staircase, came the steady plink-plink of dripping water.

Rasse snapped out of his daydream and twisted sharply to face his number two, one paw clutching the surprised polecat's jerkin.

'We gotta save her, Vare,' he said, his breath hot on Vare's face. He shook the jerkin, urgently. 'Jilli needs me now – need's her old Rasse, she does.'

Vare nodded rapidly, more from the violent jiggling than agreement. Rasse released him, jabbing a claw at Vare's scarred breastplate.

'And you're the chap to do it, matey.'

'I am?' Vare blinked up at his commander, but Rasse was already turning away, beckoning one of the burly rats forward.

'Yes, Vare – take the lads...well, most of 'em.'

'But - what'll you be doin'?' Vare's eyes narrowed.

'Me?' Rasse clapped his paw onto the rat's shoulder. An old scar ran the length of its snout and up onto his forehead, partially closing one jet-black eye. 'Me an' Finkwart here are going to assemble a band of his best and nastiest cut-throats – and then we'll really teach them stripey hogs a lesson they won't never forget.'

Finkwart gazed coldly toward Vare and snickered cruelly, giving motion to his earring. Vare shuddered, suddenly uncomfortable at sharing a room with the creature. He turned to Rasse.

'But...in that case, what exactly do you want me to do.'

'Hastle 'em, m'boy. Find 'em, and then hit and run. Again and again.' Rasse paused and scraped a claw through the matted fur of his jaw. He grinned. 'In other words, you're to badger them badgers.'

'Aye, but the lads'll rest up awhile first – surely. Get 'emselves a dri—'

‘No time,’ Rasse said, waving a paw dismissively as he retreated into the room. ‘Them striped hogs left town yesterday – so you’ve got some catching up to do.’

Vare glanced toward Flagbar, who was by then dragging a paw across his ale-wetted jaws. He groaned. And then, with his tongue rasping like sandpaper over his parched mouth, he turned and reached for the shaky staircase.

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Levi squatted alongside Deepdale in the long grass of the heath. Seated in a semi-circle opposite them was a mixed scout party: squirrels, stoats and one shifty looking weasel, each one waiting for instructions from the ranger.

One of the squirrels glanced at Levi and nodded, dipping its clay pipe and breaking the steady spiral of smoke rising from the bowl. Levi nodded back, respectfully. Aspen had introduced her cousin Flickerdock to them earlier that afternoon, and Levi had immediately taken a shine to the cocky young squirrel.

Deepdale cleared a patch of ground before him and began to drag a stick across the bare earth.

‘Now, listen up, lads,’ he said.

‘And lasses,’ muttered the weasel in a throaty voice that told of too much time spent in the bars of Monkgate. ‘Don’t thee be forgettin’ me.’

One of the squirrels scoffed loudly.

‘Hah, don’t give us that, Salty Blurfric, you’re more of a lad than the rest of us.’

The group erupted into coarse laughter as a few vulgar comments were exchanged between the two sparring creatures. Deepdale batted the air, and the hilarity fizzled to a halt as the small group became attentive once more.

‘Here’s the column, right?’ said Deepdale. The ranger placed a small line of pebbles on the ground and glanced at the ring of faces to ensure they were all paying attention.

A cool breeze rippled over the ground, turning the surrounding plain into an ocean of sighing grass. Above them, the vast, open sky loomed large like a massive dome.

At Deepdale’s back, the sun appeared from beneath the dense cloud cover, continuing its inevitable slide toward the western horizon. The ranger knew that, in little over an hour, the land would be enveloped by total darkness, without even a break in the cloud to admit the moon’s dim light. He placed a further pebble onto the ground.

‘And you’re to place yourselves here, right? To the rear of the column. Keep yer eyes sharp and blades sharper – I’m sure that if them scoundrels attack, it’ll be from behind, so you’re the main defence.’

‘Tail-end Charlie,’ said Levi, suddenly thinking of the rear gunners in the old World War Two bombers. All eyes turned to him, and he wished he had stayed silent as he felt the colour rise up his neck.

‘That’s right,’ added Deepdale, clapping a paw around Levi’s shoulders. ‘And a right bunch o’ Charlies you all look, too.’

There was more laughter as the ranger rose and helped Levi to his feet. He waived for silence, once more.

‘Aye, have a laugh, now,’ he said. He jerked a paw over his shoulder toward the distant line of villagers. ‘But tonight starts the real business of defending them folk. So be on your guard.’

Flickerdock stepped forward and offered the ranger his paw.

‘Don’t worry none – I’ll keep them Charlies in check.’

The young squirrel, dressed only in cross-gaitered breeches and a long, sweeping cloak nodded toward Levi once more, flicking the slim kestrel feather, held erect in the creature’s headband. Suddenly, he blinked in surprise and angled his head to peer behind the ranger.

‘Hello, looks like we have a visitor.’

Deepdale and Levi turned.

There, skipping swiftly toward them, the tails of his greatcoat flapping at his ankles, was Whip Fointiw.

‘What’s he want?’ asked Levi, frowning.

Deepdale shook his head.

‘Search me.’

Seconds later, Whip stood before them, his breath wheezing through his open mouth as the young weasel struggled to regain his composure.

‘Sorry, mester Deepdale,’ he said, between wheezes. Deepdale held up a paw.

‘Steady on, there, Whip – compose yourself. Besides, it’s just Deepdale, no need for the “mester”.’

Whip nodded gratefully as he snatched a few more lungfulls of air.

‘I was just figuring – I ain’t been much use to folk so far. Was wonderin like, if I couldn’t just er — ’

Before the struggling weasel could finish, Salty Blurfric launched herself toward him, grabbing at his coat with one paw, while she eagerly knuckle-scrubbed his head with the other.

‘Course yer can join us, love. We’ll be glad to ‘ave yer.’ She winked up at the bemused Deepdale. ‘Don’t thee worry none, I’ll see to him.’

Deepdale glanced questioningly toward Flickerdock.

‘It’s your call, Flick.’

Flickerdock smiled as he watched Salty lead a stunned Whip back to the assembled scouts, her paw wrapped tightly about the young weasel's waist.

'I don't reckon I have much option, now Salty's got her claws in him. There's none here brave enough to stand in her way.' The squirrel turned to Deepdale, his expression suddenly grim. 'Mind you, friend Whip'll never be the same again,' he said, his face breaking into a broad grin.

'Aye,' replied Deepdale turning toward the north, 'that's what's troublin' me.'

Levi and Deepdale left the laughter of the small band of scouts behind and, together, they strode swiftly through the waving grasses toward the column.

'Do you think, he'll be alright?' asked Levi, unable to get the wide-eyed innocence of Whip from his mind.

'Dunno, lad,' replied the ranger, staring ahead. 'Will any of us be, come to that?'

Levi glanced over his shoulder toward the distant scouts. He could just make out the slight form of Whip, swamped by his comical greatcoat. Suddenly, the young weasel waved – just one flick of a white paw, then it was gone.

Levi turned back to the north and swallowed hard. Something about the wave disturbed him. It had a manner of finality about it. A nauseating surge suddenly rose from his belly. For reasons he was unable to name, he felt sure they had placed Whip in terrible danger.

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Levi and Deepdale were still about a mile south of the main column when the ranger suddenly gripped Levi's arm urgently and pointed to the west.

'What?' asked Levi, squinting over the plain.

The sun was slipping rapidly behind a distant mound, leaking pale orange light into the sky.

'There. Look toward that flat-topped tor, then scan left. About half a league distant.'

Levi tugged his cloak around him to stave off the sudden chill of evening, then, shielding his eyes from the glare, he leaned forward, searching.

'I see them.'

Levi watched as a distant huddle of figures wandered northwards, nothing more than silhouettes, moving slowly against the backdrop of orange sky. He frowned at the ranger.

'Who do you think?'

'I've no idea,' interrupted Deepdale, shaking his head slowly. He glanced right, toward the line of villagers. 'But we need to find out. Ringbob, Aspen and their party are yon side of Barkstripe – so the column's flank is exposed. Come on!'

Levi held back.

'But there's more of them —'

'Then it's a good job you have that fancy sword of yours – hurry!'

Their chase across the plain could not have been more badly timed, coming at the end of a long and tiring day. They had already travelled many leagues, starting from sunrise, and their brisk, half hour jog toward the mysterious figures left Levi exhausted, his breath rasping painfully against the back of his throat. Eventually, Deepdale beckoned to a low outcropping of rocks several yards away. He turned toward it, his pace slowing.



By the time Levi reached the mound, his jellied legs threatening to fail him at any moment, Deepdale was already squatting in its long shadow. Levi dropped heavily to the ground.

‘Now what?’ he said, gasping for air.

‘Now we just check these characters out,’ replied Deepdale, peering over the rocks.

Levi stared sidelong at the ranger as he waited for a reaction. It came quickly.

‘Well, I’ll be,’ said Deepdale, chuckling.

‘What is it?’ Levi scrambled up to join the ranger, wincing as he scuffed a knee against the coarse surface of the boulder.

‘A party of monks, by the look of things.’

Levi stared out, the cool breeze caressing his flushed face. Sure enough, a small band of stooping, brown-clad figures shuffled northwards, faces shielded by their shapeless hoods. Bunched together as they were, it was impossible to judge their number, but Levi guessed the figure to be no more than eight. Behind them, the sun sank like a dying rose.

‘One of them’s injured,’ he said, pointing to where two monks trailed behind the main party, burdened by a stretcher, which they carried between them.

Deepdale rubbed the stubby, red hairs of his jaw.

‘Wonder what they’re doin’ this far out of town?’

Levi snorted.

‘Maybe it’s that Vittus Cluff chap, off to spend the cash Seymour gave him – I always thought Abbeys were charitable places.’

Deepdale smiled crookedly.

‘Dunno what gave you that idea, laddie.’ He turned to Levi and tapped a claw on one of the rocks. ‘Do you know the only difference

between them monks and yon merchants back in Monkgate market?’ He didn’t bother waiting for Levi’s response. ‘Them charitable monks are far more skilled at makin’ a profit. Taking money from them as can’t spare it while, all the time, they have three square meals a day, and a feather pillow to rest their heads.’ He sniffed, as though to emphasise his point.

‘What now, then?’

‘What now?’ said Deepdale, rising. ‘Now we show them the true meaning of the word charity.’ He noticed Levi’s puzzled look. ‘We’ll see if we can give the poor beggars some assistance. Move yourself, lad.’

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The monks, all of them stoats were surprised to see a fox and a strange outlander trotting toward them. They bunched even closer together, glancing nervously at one another. One of their number stepped forward holding a quarterstaff across his chest.

‘Well met, strangers,’ he said as Deepdale and Levi reached him.

‘Peace and good health to you.’

Deepdale sniffed and touched his forehead in a cursory salute.

‘Aye, and on you, brother.’

The monk swept his hood back and offered his paw. Deepdale shook it warily, taking a few seconds to assess the creature. The stoat’s fur, peppered with grey flecks suggested old age, but a lively spark glinted in his eyes lighting his face with youthful energy.

‘I am Brother Fannion – Fannion Furl,’ declared the stoat, sweeping his staff toward his comrades. ‘I and my friends here are journeying north to our chapter house at Carnsteads. One of our number is sick and in need of urgent aid.’

Levi stepped toward the stretcher. He smiled reassuringly at the nearest bearer and, holding the creature's gaze, slowly reached out to the sick stoat lying prone beneath a blanket. Levi rested his palm against the creature's damp fur, coiled tightly across its brow. He flinched.

'Hellfire, Deepdale! He's burning up.'

Deepdale glanced at Levi then turned questioningly toward Fannion.

'He needs help now,' he said. 'Monkgate's closest – why not make for there?'

Fannion shook his head sadly while, behind him, his brothers began to mutter angrily.

'We were there, son - had to leave to make room for refugees from the south.'

Levi spun round to the monk, his eyes blazing.

'That's terrible!' He strode toward Deepdale as, behind him, one of the brothers approached the stretcher and began to mop the sick stoat's brow. 'You know what that means? They had to make way for — '

'Aye,' interrupted Deepdale, his voice a low growl. 'Seymour's payment ☺' he left the rest unsaid and turned to Fannion. 'Then you're from ... '

'Wormwich,' finished the monk. 'The mink raided, we had to flee.' He glanced toward the stretcher. 'It all proved too much for old Dunrood there. I just hope...'

In the distance, a shrill warble marked the short, low flight of a curlew, the sound trailing off to nothing.

Levi kicked a stone, angrily, sending it spinning into the grass.

'It's all that Rasse Rankwolf's fault.' Fannion turned round sharply.

'Rankwolf. That's a name I've heard before.'

One of the brothers, his stoop far more pronounced than the others, stepped forward, reaching out to grip Fannion's shoulder with a bony paw.

'You have, brother.' The monk's voice was a low, throaty rasp. 'We took the creature in when his tinker father died – ye were nowt but a lad yerself.' He jerked his paw toward the prone figure on the stretcher. 'Dunrood became his teacher – had high hopes fer the lad. But ...' his voice trailed off as he shook his head sadly.

Levi tugged urgently on Deepdale's cloak.

'We must help them,' he said. He turned to Fannion, his face suddenly glowing with excitement. 'You must come with us,' he said, pointing over the plain in the direction of the villager's campsite. 'We have friends – rest up, eat – then travel with us awhile.'

Deepdale stepped back a pace, looking warmly at the boy, then nodded approvingly.

'The boy's right,' he said. 'Go north with us, as far as the Monkstreet Bridge, then you can turn east, and on to Carnsteads.'

Fannion's body sagged slightly. Sighing with relief, he stepped forward and embraced Levi warmly.

'Oh, most generous!' he said. 'These moors are far too dangerous for the likes of us to travel unguarded.'

Deepdale muttered his agreement and looked toward the south. The swaying grassland was robbed of its verdant colour by the setting sun. Toward the distant horizon, several granite tors reared toward the skyline, like shadows.

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