

Chapter Four

Slashir Seamfric spat angrily at Whip's bound body and spun round to join Vare, seated with the others by the fire. Behind him, the captive weasel remained upright, tightly strapped to the ancient stone. His bloodied head slumped onto its chest and flopped to one side, the poor creature faintly groaning with what little strength remained within.

'That's all I can get out of him,' Slashir said, angrily kicking a stone into the flames.

'It's enough.'

'But we don't know how many more o' them there are.' Slashir pointed to where the slaughtered squirrel scouts had been stacked in an untidy heap. Drew's body topped the pile, his clothes still smouldering. A dark cloud of flies buzzed over them, whilst countless others crawled over the heap, feeding on the open wounds. 'There might be an army o' them red blighters waitin' for us.'

Vare sighed with frustration.

'Then we'll just have to use our noggins,' he said, tapping the side of his head with a dirty claw. 'We sorted these out didn't we? Well, we can do it again.'

Around them, the mysterious ring of stones pointed like accusing fingers toward the dark edged rain clouds hanging low over the mound. Vare's reply failed to reassure the troubled Slashir. He nodded toward the north.

‘What about yon ranger?’

‘Pah! Him?’ Vare spat into the fire. ‘He’s nowt but a pifflin’ popinjay. His day’ll come. You’ll see.’

Around the fire, the remaining polecats exchanged troubled glances, some muttering under their breaths. Vare shook his head in disgust and pushed himself to his feet.

‘C’mon, let’s move out.’

Slashir pointed to Whip.

‘What about him?’ he said, dragging his sword from its scabbard. ‘Should I run him through?’

Vare glanced toward Whip’s battered body. He shook his head. ‘Nah, leave him – he’s as good as dead, already.’

Vladock, celebrated thief rat of Monkgate, slunk along the shadows of the empty street, his long, scaly tail dragging in the dirt behind him. He halted outside the door of the Jug and Jig inn and sniffed the air. The door hung open. The inn was silent, its die-hard band of regulars having staggered home to their squalid hovels hours ago. Above the stooping rogue, dawn’s pale light crested the untidy row of roofs lining the narrow alleyway.

Vladock peered left and right, his sinister, blood-red eyes sparkling in the half-light. Grunting in satisfaction, he pushed his way inside, into a gloomy hallway that was as empty and silent as the street outside. The rat hurried toward a low archway opposite. From there, he wound his way along a maze of cramped, gloomy passageways, finally halting outside a wooden door. The musty smell of damp filled the narrow space, the bare stone floor cold against his tail. Pausing only

briefly, he opened the door and stepped through, leaving it open behind him.

The door opened onto the same wooden landing that had so unnerved Vare only two days earlier. Unlike Vare, however, Vladock was well used to the trembling platform, the basement being home to the guild he called his own.

The heat of the cramped basement contrasted sharply with the frigid street as the fire, banked high to counter the room's damp chill, roared loudly in the grate. The flames, their tops lost behind the chimney breast, gave the room a strange, crimson glow.

Ignoring the unsteady structure beneath his feet, Vladock pushed back the black velvet cowl from his head, releasing a pair of large, pink ears that sprang free, twitching furiously. Turning his long grey snout to the basement below, he searched the crowded room, his darting eyes widening slightly, as they finally spotted Finkwart, seated at the table with the polecat from the south. He nimbly descended the staircase, his soft leather boots making no sound against the rickety treads.

The rat guild-master crossed the open space at the foot of the stairs as a mangy cut-purse, seated on Finkwart's right nudged the burly rat. Finkwart looked up. An almost imperceptible sneer rippled along his upper lip, quickly replaced by a leering grin as he jumped to his feet.

'Vladock! Ma-ate!' He held his paws wide in greeting, his golden tooth flashing coldly.

'Don't gimme that, Fink.' Vladock turned to Rasse, appraising him as he viewed every newcomer – assessing their worth and usefulness to him. 'So, this the one as wants to use my lads for his personal blood feud, yeah?'

Finkwart nodded, placing a paw on Rasse's scarlet jerkin. The rat's long claws curved to sharp points like tiny sickles. Rasse hauled himself casually to his feet.

'Well?' he growled, interrupting Finkwart's introductions. 'Are we on?'

Ignoring the question a moment, Vladock turned toward the head of the table and flicked his paw at the rat seated in a high-backed chair. The rat nervously scuttled out, backing into the shadows at the edge of the room. Vladock sat, leaned on the table and steepled his claws before him.

'Well, my southern friend, that all depends, yeah?'

'On wha-'

'On whether the enterprise will turn a profit, of course. This is no charity, Rankwolf.'

Rasse forced a smile. He swaggered toward a chair closest to the guild master, dragged it from the table and sat, adopting a relaxed pose.

'I searched their village and found nowt,' lied Rasse. 'Everything they owned, they took with 'em. Everythin of value, that is.'

'And how can you be sure they had any valuables in the first place?'

Rasse sat back, his mouth gaping in mock astonishment.

'What? How can I b-? Let me put it this way, laddie – them poor souls grafted dawn 'til dusk...often 'til their fingers bled – and,' Rasse choked back a feigned sob, 'and that evil chief creamed everything. Gave 'em enough to keep 'em alive while he loaded his coffers with booty.' Rasse paused, allowing the suspense to build. 'Booty which is now headed north – out in the open. Unguarded and ready for the picking.'

Vladock nodded slowly, warily searching Rasse's face for a hint of mischief. He glanced up at Finkwart, who was now leaning on Rasse's chair-back.

'Well?'

'Seems sound to me...boss.'

'Mmmm,' considered Vladock, 'it all seems rather risky to-'

'Wha-? Risky?' Rasse leaped up, shoving his chair backward into Finkwart's chest. The rat thief gasped, clutching his sore ribs. 'We're talking farmers here, mate.' He cast his paw round the table, where guild rats now crowded in, listening eagerly to the exchange; a tough band of cutthroats, one and all. Rasse forced a laugh.

'Reckon all your lads have to worry about, is a scratch from a pitchfork.'

Vladock considered Rasse's words for a moment. Around the table, the devilish rats leaned close, staring at their leader with cruel, hungry eyes.

Finally, Vladock stood.

'Very well,' he said, reaching out with his long, thin paw to Rasse. Throaty cheers filled the room as the rats, some with swords already drawn, jigged gleefully.

Ignoring their exuberance, Vladock grasped Rasse's paw and pulled the polecat to him, until their snouts touched. He hissed dangerously into Rasse's grinning face.

'But I warn you, I expect a handsome return from this, yeah? Fail me and you'll find that this guild's reach is long indeed.'

Rasse blinked his understanding, then, releasing his paw from Vladock's grasp, he jumped away from the table and drew his sword, jabbing the blade upward and cutting circles in the air.

'C'mon boys! Let's get rich.'

Still waving his sword, Rasse rushed toward the staircase, the band of excited rats swarming in behind his eagerly switching tail.

Poppy sat cross-legged before the dying campfire, listening as Berrysap chatted away about nothing in particular. She casually tightened the band on her ponytail. Her hair felt dusty and dry. She longed for a shower - and some nicely scented shampoo.

On the other side of the fire, Seymour squatted on his haunches, staring at the faintly glowing embers. To his right, Bullyrag Hoarhide nodded silently to his own inner thoughts. A light breeze swept through the undergrowth carrying with it the distinctive smell of wild garlic.

Encouraged by their uneventful trek out of Monkgate, Seymour had allowed the villagers an extended breakfast. Already, pale sunlight crested the nearby woods, no more than a blush staining the surface of the thin clouds.

Grateful of Seymour's decision, the weary villagers took advantage of the break from trekking. Some lounged by smouldering campfires and chatted, while others roamed through the woods or strolled onto the plain. A pair of young weasels darted nearby struggling for possession of a leather ball.

'Do yer ruh-reckon we're home and dry yet, Hawkeye?' asked Bullyrag.

Poppy shushed Berry's chatter with a sweep of her hand. She was eager to hear her uncle's reply. Eventually, Seymour shrugged.

‘Who can tell?’ A dark shadow passed over Bullyrag’s face, and Seymour quickly added, ‘But let’s not forget, Deepdale has his chaps out protecting our rear – whilst his odd friend, ah...’

‘Ringbob,’ offered Poppy, remembering with a smile the scrawny fox Deepdale had found in Monkgate.

‘Aye, Ringbob – well, he and some others are ranging ahead of us. So, we’re as safe as we can be under the circumstances.’

Bullyrag grunted and looked toward the north.

‘But there’s ser-still a long way to go.’

‘Yes, there is but it’s level going until we reach Kirkstone Glen and, by then, we’re almost there.’ He dropped an arm onto Bullyrag’s wide shoulders. ‘It’ll get easier, my friend. Folks aren’t used to trekking, that’s all. Give them a few more days and they’ll soon be eating up the distance, no problem.’

Bullyrag nodded. Just then, Berrysap squealed and pointed up into the overhanging limbs of the oak.

‘Oh, look at the birds,’ she cried.

High in the canopy, several blue tits darted among the branches, chittering excitedly as they sought morsels beneath the fresh, green leaves. Poppy watched the gaily coloured birds flashing brightly in the gloomy tree-top – then quickly averted her gaze, as an icy tremor swept her shoulders.

She glanced southward over the open plain, suddenly overwhelmed by an intense and inexplicable sadness. And wondered whether indeed any of them would survive to reach their destination.

‘At least the weather’s staying fine,’ said Levi, pointing to where the warm sun had already burned off much of the cloud cover to leave thin shreds like tattered lace.

‘Aye, but fine for us is fine for them,’ replied Deepdale grimly. ‘Keep your eyes peeled lads, this grass can hide far more than crickets and such; I’d hate us to fall foul of a stinking ‘cat ambush – no offence young Hopsack.’

‘None taken,’ replied the honey-faced polecat adjusting his helm.

The small party had ranged westward from the woodland campsite before turning south, four pairs of eyes keenly searching for signs of pursuit. Hopsack trotted up to join Levi and the Ranger leaving Lapblud bringing up the rear, an unlit pipe hanging from the stoat’s grizzled jaw.

‘What’s that place, Deepdale?’ Hopsack pointed eastward toward a distant tor, its top ringed by ancient stones.

‘Ah, ‘twas put there by the old folk, my boy. Can’t say what for – some say there’s a great king buried underneath, along with his family, slaves and masses of treasure. They also say the old ‘un’s spirits dwell on the hill...that’s what keeps grave robbers away.’

While the fox spoke, Lapblud strode up to join them. He plucked the pipe from his mouth.

‘Ee, but it’d be a fair vantage point, we’d see a reet stretch from there.’ He patted his jerkin. ‘May be have us a bite an’ sup at the same time.’

Deepdale peered toward the tor, his eyes narrowing.

‘What you reckon, Levi?’

Levi smiled down at Lapblud. From the skirmish on the Wormwich Marsh, to their flight from Skenmarris, the willowy stoat had proved himself a wise old brawler.

‘Who am I to disagree? A day like today, we’ll see for miles.’

Deepdale nodded.

‘Aye. Still not sure what a mile is, but I understand the sentiment. Come on lads, let’s make for yonder tor.’

They had halved the distance to the tor when Hopsack pointed ahead.

‘They look ominous, Deepdale.’

‘Crows. Spotted them a way back.’

Levi glanced sharply at the ranger. Carrion crows. So named for their diet of dead flesh. He shuddered. The melancholy, caused earlier by the hawk’s killing of the young songbird, had suddenly returned tenfold. Deepdale noticed the boy’s dark expression. The ranger nodded.

‘Aye,’ he said, simply. Then turning to the others he added, ‘Let’s hurry.’

The sun was directly overhead when the four crested the tor and entered the encircling stones. Levi glanced about him, noticing immediately the smouldering heap in the centre of the ring. He was about to turn away, believing the mound to be nothing more than clothes, when he realised with dismay that blackened paws protruded from sleeves and that the charred remains, indistinguishable at first from the rest of the pile, were battered bodies. Squirrel bodies.

Levi’s stomach lurched quickly and he averted his eyes, swallowing hard to suppress the bile that had risen to his throat. He turned sharply away from the fire. Lapblud was running toward one of the stones, shouting something incomprehensible and waving his arms. Ahead of him a great flock of crows launched themselves from the stone, filling the air with frantic wing beats and angry cries.

Levi blinked to clear the smouldering pile from his vision and focused on the stone, noticing for the first time something was strapped to the ancient relic. Stepping closer, horror piled on horror as he made out the battered body of Whip Fointiw, the poor weasel recognisable only by his old great-coat, now ripped and caked with blood.

Levi spun away from the scene and slumped to the ground, one trembling hand covering his mouth, stifling the sob that welled inside him. He searched the open mound for something to distract him from the scenes of suffering. Immediately before him one of the huge stones leaned precariously, its slate gray surface gleaming in the mid-day sun, until ghostly wisps of smoke from the pyre drifted into view, reminding Levi of the carnage.

‘Cut him down!’

Lapblud’s voice echoed dreamlike in Levi’s mind.

‘Easy now, steady.’

Suddenly, Levi felt a firm paw grip his shoulder, shaking him roughly.

‘Come, Levi,’ shouted Deepdale, leaning over him. ‘The lad’s alive – though for how long I’d dare not say.’ He hauled Levi to his feet and turned him around, pulling the boy’s face close to his own. ‘We need your help, too. We’ve got to get him to the monks, for only brother Fannion can help Whip now.’

Levi stood. He looked despairingly into Deepdale’s face through lifeless eyes.

‘What’re we doing?’ He asked, quietly. ‘I mean, every move we make, someone dies. What are we doing?’

Deepdale stepped back and placed his paws onto Levi’s shoulders.

‘We’re doing what we can, lad. And whether we make a difference...well, that all depends on how we respond to setbacks such as this’n.’ He gently steered the boy to where Lapblud and Hopsack were carefully laying the stricken young weasel onto the grass. ‘And we can start by getting this brave lad to a healer, afore it’s too late.’

Faced with transporting Whip’s battered body over the plain without inflicting more injury, Levi was forced to put his despondency behind him and focus on the task in hand.

Luckily, some of the squirrel’s clothing had escaped the pyre’s flames and these, together with the ropes that had bound the weasel to the stone, Levi hastily transformed into a makeshift stretcher. Then, taking time only to administer basic first aid to their patient, and ignoring their own needs for food and drink, the four tired scouts quickly hoisted Whip up and, between them, began their descent from the blood-drenched tor.

Vare Mittgild’s awkward, stooping gait carried him swiftly over the plain. The multicoloured laces strung from his belt flicked and flapped against his leather kilt with each loping stride. Behind him, his troopers stumbled wearily through the waist-high grass, wheezing like steam trains. Vare spat in disgust. He halted suddenly and spun around, his jaw creased in a cruel snarl.

‘C’mon you useless lallylagers! You heard what that whinin’ weasel said. Mostly old ‘uns and a rabble of kids up ahead. Easy pickings.’

The polecats staggered to a halt and collapsed onto the ground, seizing the opportunity for a breather. Between ragged gasps, Slashir spoke up for the troop.

‘Aye, boss. That’s as maybe – but surely you can see the boys are done in. We been traipsing through this blooming grass all morning wi’out refreshment – what with that and that blinkin’ sun...well, I’m sorry Vare but it’s enough to drain a chap.’

Vare’s tail switched dangerously. He stepped forward and unhitched his wicked looking war axe from his belt. The blade edge glittered icily as he clutched the weapon in both paws, swinging it back in a low, dangerous arc.

‘Drained? Drained?’ he said, his voice rising. ‘If them useless creatures don’t get to their feet RIGHT NOW I’ll bloomin’ well drain them. Drain them for good.’

Slashir skipped nimbly backward, his eyes wide.

‘They’re getting up, boss,’ he said, beckoning frantically to the others.

‘Aye, they’d better be. If you and them tubs o’ chicken grease think you can stand between me and the recognition I deserve, you can think again.’ Vare lowered his axe and stabbed a paw to the north. ‘Out there is a rabble o’ worn out and feeble stripe hogs who just so happen to be holding the chief’s dear lady captive – and we’re gonna show friend Rasse and everyone else exactly what we’re made of by setting her free. Oh, and slaughtering as many of them arrogant streak-faced swine into the bargain.’

With low rumbles of complaint, the polecats pushed themselves wearily to their feet. Vare sensed the squad’s growing disquiet. Glancing nervously from trooper to trooper, he quickly realised the

implications should such a mutinous mood get out of hand. Time, he thought, to cut some slack.

‘Lads,’ he said, softening his tone. ‘We’re all pooped. It’s been a tough few days. Just a few furlongs more.’ He pointed to where a distant outcropping of rocks rose above the surrounding plain. ‘That’s all, an then we can stop for a drink.’

With the polecat leader’s axe now safely secured once more, a much relieved Slashir Seamfric snatched his raggedy cap off and clutched it to his chest in greasy paws, bobbing his head graciously.

‘Thank’s, boss...why, you’re all heart.’

Vare snorted. Turning north once more, he resumed his tireless pursuit of the unfortunate badgers. Behind him, with blades and belt buckles chinking, and sunlight glinting from their spear tips, the weary troopers forged onward, their booted feet cutting a swathe through the grass.

The sun had begun its sweep westward when the exhausted polecats finally gained the rock strewn ridge. Stumbling wearily through the scattered boulders, they threw themselves in untidy heaps onto the ground. As packs and pouches were flung open and water flasks located a scruffy and particularly shrewd polecat by the name of Oswull turned slyly to Slashir.

‘And how much longer you reckon we have to put up with this blighter’s belly-aching?’ he muttered behind his paw. ‘Afore we do summat about it, that is.’

Slashir glanced nervously toward Vare. The ‘cat leader was standing atop a large boulder staring fixedly toward the north, eyes shielded by an upraised paw. Before Slashir could reply, Vare spun around and called to him, his voice strained by a sudden urgency.

‘Ayup, Seamfric. Get your flipside up here, pronto!’

No sooner had Slashir scuttled up onto the boulder before Vare had grabbed his neck and twisted him around, forcing his head forwards.

‘There. That line of trees yonder. Tell me what you see.’

Slashir squinted, trying his best to ignore the pain of Vare’s claws on his neck. His eyes slowly focused on the distant spread of woodland. He scrunched his face up, straining to probe the plain’s flickering heat haze. A confusion of shapes swirled and boiled, until gradually a small knot of figures materialised out of the tree-cast shadows.

The realisation of what he was seeing caused his breath to catch in his throat. Vare flung him roughly aside and snatched at his war-axe.

‘Aye, I thought so, too.’ He turned swiftly to the sprawling troopers. ‘UP, UP!’ he barked. ‘It’s killing time.’

The polecat pack snarled hungrily, their fatigue suddenly forgotten. With eyes glinting with bloodlust, they leaped up as one and drew their weapons. Vare batted the air to quieten the spirited troopers.

‘Hush, boys. Softly does it. There be a fair bit of ground to cover afore we reach them, and we don’t want to give the game away too early, now do we. Stay low an’ stay silent. Secure any loose buckles – in fact owt that’ll spoil the surprise.’ He snickered cruelly. ‘Hah, I almost feel sorry for them, ‘cause they ain’t gonna know what hit ‘em.’
