

CHAPTER SIX

‘Here, let me do that for you, you’re looking tired.’ Poppy reached out and took the flat stone from her uncle. Squatting in the centre of the small clearing she added it to a near-finished ring of others that, once complete, would form a makeshift hearth. Seymour stood and arched his back.

‘Thanks, Poppet,’ he said. He stepped back a couple of paces and sat heavily on a decaying log. ‘I am feeling a little used up and no mistake.’ He paused before adding, ‘today’s not been a good day.’

Poppy rose and stepped over to stand by his side. She swept a wayward lock of hair back from his forehead. It was cold and damp against her fingers. Concern creased her brow. Despite the clearing’s gloom she saw that dark smudges lay beneath her uncle’s eyes. She tried to remember the last time she saw him happy. His characteristic smile was gone, replaced by a tight, pinched line. She followed his gaze as Seymour sighed and looked about him.

All around them, vague shapes of badgers old and young were just visible toiling within the tree-cast shadows, hauling dead branches and thorn scrub from the entangling underbrush. Snatches of their chatter reverberated through that part of the dense woodland whilst, overhead, ancient boughs creaked gently in the quickening evening breeze.

‘Is it wise to have them work so hard, Uncle? It’s been a rough day for them, too.’

‘A bit of work’ll take their mind off the quandary we’re in – it’ll overwhelm them if they’re allowed to dwell on it.’

‘But we had a perfectly good campsite before,’ added Poppy, shrugging slightly, ‘and now you have us making another. I don’t understand.’

Seymour shifted position to face his niece. Around them amber ribbons of light from the setting sun slanted across the clearing, piercing the twilight and picking out clouds of midges dancing beneath the leaf canopy.

‘If I thought we were safe outside, we’d stay there. But I don’t.’ He absently cast his arm wide. ‘That’s why I’ve withdrawn into the wood and got these folk assembling the thorn barricade. Not exactly a fortress but it’ll create a defensive perimeter – one we can defend if need be.’

‘And...do you think we’ll have to?’ asked Poppy, hesitating before asking the question that was foremost in her mind. Before Seymour could answer her, Jilli Dunbar stepped lightly from the thicket behind them. She approached, wrapping her frock-coat tightly about her. Behind her a muted cheer echoed through the muggy woodland as a series of sharp cracks told of the first of the cooking fires being lit.

‘He’ll come, to be sure,’ she said. ‘It may not be tonight, but oh Rasse will be here. He has a demon in him, poor soul, and he’ll not stop until he gets what he’s wanting.’

Despite the clearing’s close, humid atmosphere, Poppy shivered as an icy chill swept through her.

‘But what is that, Jilli? You know him better than any. What is it he wants?’

Jilli shook her head.

‘I used to think it were the village, so I did. But now? Now I’ve no idea. Is it revenge driving him? Hatred?’ At this she glanced at Seymour, who acknowledged with a slight nod. ‘Or is it me he wants?’ she added, slowly. ‘If I truly thought that was it, I’d be leaving right now...rather than –’

‘No.’ Seymour’s voice suddenly seemed loud in the confined woodland. He reached up and gently pulled the little polecat down onto the log by his side. He draped a long arm around her shoulders. ‘You remain with us, he said, his tone softer. ‘No matter what Rasse’s motive may be. You’re one of us and you stay – and I’ll not have you harbouring any guilt, whatever the outcome. If what I’ve heard is true, you were that fellow’s victim long before the rest of us.’

Jilli twisted round suddenly and leapt to her feet, shrugging the man’s arm away. Her feline eyes, previously dull and lifeless, now blazed.

‘Ah well now, that’s easy for you to say – not harbour guilt and all – surely you must see that it spears my heart to see so many fall, and all on account of me.’

Poppy reached for her friend.

‘But you don’t know that,’ she said, flinching suddenly as the eyes were turned on her.

‘Aye, missy, and you can’t be a knowing otherwise.’ Jilli spun away from them and hesitated, pausing a moment to compose herself before turning back, meeting first Seymour’s eyes before facing Poppy. ‘Look, you’re pleasant folk, to be sure – but you’re outsiders in this land. How can you possibly understand what’s going on here? How can you appreciate how any of us feel? It maybe best that you cease your meddling and go back to your homes, grateful at least that you have somewhere to return to.’ The last of Jilli’s words snagged on a sob.

Thrusting a paw into her mouth, she skipped back and rushed into the woodland's gloom.

Poppy's own eyes glazed over. She made to follow but felt her uncle's strong hand on her forearm, restraining her.

'Leave her. She has to work this one out herself.'

Poppy stared into the shadows, her body trembling with indecision. Suddenly, intense tiredness overwhelmed her uncertainty; a crushing, body-numbing fatigue such as she had never felt before. Sighing heavily, she flopped down by her Uncle, allowing her head to fall forward onto her chest. She scrunched her eyes shut, squeezing them down onto her hot brimming tears.

Levi trudged wearily through the knee-high grasses. Nightfall had closed in rapidly since sundown and already the rising moon lent a bluish tint to the darkening landscape. He listened to the muted conversations around him. He could barely make out Nipper's and Lapblud's rumbling chatter as they brought up the rear of the column.

Behind him, Hopsack cheerily nattered away with one of the polecat captives whilst the remaining prisoners trailed behind bearing the stretched form of Whip Fointiw. Mercifully, the stricken weasel was now sleeping peacefully once more. Levi frowned at the sound of Hopsack's merry chitchat.

Striding along a couple of paces ahead of Levi Deepdale led the small party onward into the gloom. Without breaking step the fox turned and glanced over his shoulder. He spotted Levi's puzzled expression.

'Hey, what is it, lad?'

Levi glanced swiftly at Hopsack then skipped forward to join the ranger.

‘I just don’t understand,’ he said, his voice little more than a whisper, ‘how Hopsack can be so chummy with the prisoners especially after, you know, Foulson’s death and such like.’

‘That’s easy, it were the mink that slaughtered Foulson and the others. The polecats held back.’

‘Oh sure, like it happened that way. They’re bound to say that now, aren’t they? Why should we believe them after all the trouble they’ve caused?’

Deepdale stared long and hard at Levi. The fox sighed and shook his head.

‘Simply because we’re in no position to doubt them, lad. For in case you’re forgettin’ we weren’t there to say otherwise.’

‘No position to doubt...? You amaze me, Deepdale – they pitched in with that creature Rasse, sold out on their friends and allied themselves to the mink, just so they could run folk from their homes and split the spoils. That’s why we should doubt them.’

‘Yes I know that, I’ve spoken to the captives myself and – ’

‘And I didn’t think you of all people would be so easy to fool.’

Deepdale snatched at Levi’s cloak and pushed him aside, steering him away from the column. The action drew curious glances from the others. Deepdale hurriedly waved them on before turning on Levi, the fox’s paw still bunched up at the boy’s throat.

‘I believe ‘em,’ he said, his voice hissing between clenched jaws, ‘because it stacks up. You’ve gotta understand that life in Skennmaris weren’t all a bed of flowers if you were a polecat. The ‘cats were little more than second class citizens at the beck and call of the badgers. I’m

not criticisin' Barkstripe, it was just the way it were. Natural order of things, if you like.'

Deepdale released Levi's cloak, smoothing the material down with his paw. His voice softened.

'So it were also natural for the polecats to show loyalty for their own. In this case it were Rasse. And, for all his faults Rasse is a good leader - captivating yet forceful. So it followed that they'd pitch in with him. He gave them a sense of pride in themselves. Sure, Rasse was bitter and had a bee in his pants about Barkstripe and the way things were run, and yeah, he swayed the rest of them to his own twisted way of thinking, but things bein what they was, it were only natural that they'd support him.'

'But surely,' said Levi, shaking his head, 'they must have realised that what was happening was...well, wrong.'

'Aye, laddie, they did - eventually. Once they knew Rasse's mind. But by then it were too late. They'd pitched their dice. They were in. And getting out weren't an option. To voice a conflicting opinion was suicide. So, come the attack on the watchtower, they knew they'd overstepped the mark, and that what they were doing were evil. By then it were too late. So, all they could do was hold back. They knew there'd be killing, and that them as would die were friends of theirs...but there was nowt they could do but ensure they never took part in it. So, do I believe 'em? Yeah, sure I do. As I say, it stacks up.'

'But,' Levi jabbed his thumb over his shoulder, 'those 'innocents' of yours nearly killed us all back there. If it weren't for -'

'I know what happened back there,' snapped Deepdale. 'But think on it. If them twenty or so 'cats were a committed and loyal fighting force it'd be our bodies feeding the crows right now.' He pointed toward the nearby group. 'And anyway, do they look like

demoralised captives to you? Look at them. They look like a great weight's been lifted from their shoulders.' He sighed, wearily. 'Besides, you seem bitter.' It was said more as a question.

Levi snorted, looking away into the distance before turning his eyes on the fox once more.

'Well, yeah. Sure I'm bitter. I think I've reason t –'

Deepdale poked Levi's breastplate as he leaned forward, his face only inches from Levi's own. The fox's breath was hot on the boy's face.

'I don't want to hear it. It's bitterness that's brought us here. Rasse's. Vare's. Aye, rest of the polecats, too. But if we allow ourselves to be bitter, too, it'll only spread more of the same. More anger, more killing...and more bitterness. You must have seen it in your own world, Levi. One blow leads to another just to settle the score, and so it goes. Sure, we have to defend the Skennmaris folk, and that may mean more fighting. We may have to defeat Rasse himself before the end. But we have to break that cycle of bitterness. If Hopsack can do it after suffering his loss, I'm flaming sure you can.'

Deepdale turned his gaze northward, beyond the trudging line of creatures several yards away.

'Now's the time for mending. Mending and compassion. And I only hope we're not too late for either.'

The moon had crested and was beginning its downward sweep to the west when the group neared the badger's woodland campsite. A ghostly mist hung like a white sea around the trees. Threads of wood smoke drifted on the air. With less than half a mile to the woods Deepdale stopped suddenly, his ears erect, his snout twitching. He held

up a paw halting the column and then slowly crouched down into the grass.

Behind him, the stretcher-bearers lowered their burden to the ground as around them the others squatted down, their own senses suddenly alert. Levi crawled forward to join the fox, the damp grasses brushing icy drops onto his face and brow. He glanced sidelong at his friend. The fox remained motionless, but for his lightly twitching whiskers and the occasional switch of an ear. The silence pressed on Levi's eardrums as long moments passed.

Suddenly, the piping call of a hunting owl fractured the stillness, the sound flattened by the mist. Deepdale turned to the boy.

'I fear we're too late, lad. Did you hear that?'

'It was only an owl – wasn't it?'

'No, no, before that.'

Levi glanced toward the woods a moment, before turning back to the fox.

'No? What?'

'Sobbing, lad.'

Levi shook his head and stared toward the trees.

'You sure? I don't see nothing.'

'It came from within the woods.'

Deepdale rose slightly from his crouching position and, signalling the others to follow, slowly picked his way through the grass. When they were only a stone's throw from the tree line he dropped and turned. He jabbed a paw at Lapblud and Nipper then signalled left and right. Without a word the two stoats peeled off from the column and, crouching low, stealthily approached the woods, unslinging their weapons as they went.

The Ranger turned to Levi.

‘Okay, boy, careful now. There’s been treachery here. Dark it may be but that much is plain.’ As he made to move off Deepdale felt a sharp tug on his cloak. He stopped and turned. One of the Polecat captives stood there.

‘What is it, Flagg?’

The polecat shifted his feet uncomfortably as he gestured vaguely toward the other ‘cats behind him.

‘Let’s have our weapons...we can help.’

‘You know I can’t do that.’

Flagg blinked in surprise.

‘But you’ve no option, ranger. Look at you, there’s only four of you, and there’s no tellin’ what you might find in there.’

‘Aye, but go we must.’ Deepdale placed a paw on the polecat’s shoulder. ‘I thank you for asking, but I can’t re-arm you, my friend. Not yet. Stay here with the wounded.’

He turned, patted Levi on the back and together the pair stole away toward the woods.

Despite their desire to hurry, the small group’s need for stealth robbed them of speed, and progress through the clinging grass was slow. All the while, Levi stared intently toward the woodland edge, searching the gloom for possible signs of movement. Then, with barely feet to go before they reached the trees, a rank of shadows detached itself from the darkness and stepped forward through the ragged mist, moonlight suddenly glinting from a line of speartips.

Seymour stood from his log-seat and strode across the clearing, his arms wide in greeting.

‘Deepdale, Levi, thank heaven you’re both safe.’

Bion, the brawny badger blacksmith escorted Levi and the Ranger into the clearing, his remaining spears ushering the remainder of the scout party and their captives in behind them.

‘I found ‘em approaching from the western edge. All’s quiet there now. Left a couple of lads just in case.’

Seymour nodded his thanks. He stepped forward and hugged Levi close then shook Deepdale warmly by the paw. Behind him, a number of Skenmarris badgers shuffled forward into the firelight. All bore the same anguished expression and stooping, weary demeanour. Defeat was etched deeply into their features.

‘If only you could have made it back earlier.’ Seymour shook his head. Exhaustion hung on him like an old shroud. ‘What a day we’ve had.’ He paused a moment then, making a conscious effort, straightened his shoulders and led the pair toward the log. ‘Enough for now, you look like you’ve been through the mill yourselves. Come, sit down and take rest, I’ll rustle up a hot drink.’

Deepdale shook off the man’s arm and stepped back toward the clearing.

‘Aye, Seymour, there’s nothin’ I’d like better. But first we’ve some wounded as need urgent attention.’

The polecat captives crowded into the clearing, led by Hopsack and the two stoat scouts. Hopsack cradled his injured paw. Blood had seeped through his makeshift bandage. Behind him, the stretcher bearers lowered Whip Fointiw to the ground. When the assembled badgers saw his tattered, blood-flecked clothing and deathly grey pallor, a strained hush descended on the area. Many eyes turned toward the captives and angry mutterings filled the clearing with menace.

Levi glanced at the anxious polecats. They stood huddled together at the edge of the clearing, hemmed in by Bion's spear wielding warriors. Levi then followed the polecat's frightened gaze, across the clearing to where the Skenmarris villagers pressed in. Some had already gathered windblown sticks from the woodland floor and now brandished them threateningly. He drew his sword, ran across the clearing and placed himself before the captives, turning to call out to the swarming badgers.

'There'll be no more violence here. Hellfire, have you people not had enough suffering?'

Deepdale strode up and joined him, his own sword also held ready.

'The lad's right. Throw down your weapons. These are my captives under my care, and I'll see none hurt.'

The Skenmarris badgers halted in a line mid-way across the clearing. Some lowered their sticks, grumbling harshly. Seymour pushed his way through, followed closely by Poppy and Jill Dunbar. Poppy looked wretched, her eyes ringed with red. Seymour held up his hands and turned to face the assembly.

'Do as he says. Go back to your families and get some rest. For tomorrow we must move on.' As the badgers turned and shuffled back into the woods, Seymour turned his attention to the Ranger.

'You may be right, Deepdale, but you have to understand their anger.'

'I do understand,' growled Deepdale dragging a blood spattered paw across his forehead. 'Only too well.'

'No,' said Seymour, his face suddenly more grim than ever. 'We were attacked again tonight. Barely an hour since. It was Rasse and

some foul thugs. We repelled them. Bion's men put up such a fight that Rasse's followers quickly lost heart.'

'That's good.'

'Not quite.'

Behind Seymour Poppy began to sob. He turned and placed an arm over her shoulders.

'You see, Deepdale, they did manage to break through our line. But it was only afterwards that we discovered the enormity of what that meant. The evil swine has taken captives this time.'

Seymour reached into his pocket and withdrew a knife, its sheath brightly decorated with beadwork. Levi felt his heart ice over and he stepped forward to get a better look. He remembered the weapon well. Seymour weighed the knife in his palm and held it up before Deepdale.

'We found this in the coppice where Berrysap and Whitespike had hidden during the attack. They've gone. Rasse has them, and I dread to think what torments he has in store for the poor creatures.'

Levi and Deepdale sat side by side on the log-seat, staring silently into the dying fire. The campfire's dull glow held back the encircling darkness, casting dancing shadow onto tree trunks, where the night mist gave them a spectral sheen.

Poppy was with the pair, seated uneasily on the log's edge. Every now and again she would glance sidelong at her brother, as though waiting for him to speak. Neither had exchanged a word since the others had left the clearing, leaving the three alone.

The assembly had dispersed quickly once Levi and Deepdale had diffused the brief crisis and sheathed their swords. Seymour had gone to the Skenmarris folk. There, aided by Jilli Dunbar – who seemed keen to make amends for her earlier outburst – he intended issuing hot drinks to the villagers. Lapblud and Nipper had followed them into the woods, where no doubt they aimed to select themselves a remote campfire by which they could smoke and chat long into the night.

Mother Bodkin had accompanied Hopsack and overseen the safe delivery of Whip to Dunrood's campfire where she hoped to obtain the monks' medical aid, whilst Bion and the badger spears had taken the captives away under guard, after first giving Deepdale their assurance that none would be harmed.

A glowing log settled in the fire sending a flurry of sparks spiralling into the air. Levi lifted his gaze from his cupped palms and watched the last of the sparks die in mid air.

'We have to go after them, you realise,' he said, to none in particular.

Deepdale shrugged.

'Go? Go where?'

'We can't just leave them,' said Levi, his arms held out as though pleading. 'It's Whitespike and Berrysap we're talking about here.'

Annoyance flared in Deepdale's eyes as he turned quickly toward Levi. He stared a moment, then the emotion drained away quickly, as fatigue took its place once more. He shrugged again.

'Look, they've more'n an hour's start on us, we're about jiggered and we don't know where they're bound. Besides, it may be too late, anyroad.'

'I don't think so,' said Poppy.

Levi and the ranger stared at her. For several moments the only sound was from beads of water that dripped off the mist-dampened branches and fizzled in fire.

‘What?’ said Deepdale, eventually.

‘Something Jilli’s been saying.’

Deepdale hunched forward on the log and turned to face Poppy.

‘Go on.’

‘Well, we have to ask ourselves why Rasse took them. In the same way we have to ask why he’s been tormenting Barkstripe and his people all this time. Why he sold out the Badgers to those horrid Mink.’

‘Because he’s a stinking sneak,’ said Levi.

Poppy pursed her lips and sighed at her brother before addressing Deepdale once more.

‘He sold the Badgers out because he wanted the village for his own. He’d even promised Jilli a big house – a promise he’d only be able to keep if it was a house he took for himself. A house like Barkstripe’s maybe? Except something happened to foil his plans.’

‘Aye,’ said Deepdale, taking over. ‘Like the Mink welshing on their deal and keeping Skenmarris for their own – one of the polecats told me as much on our walk here. He said there were a bitter fight in Barkstripe’s own lodge. A raging fire, too. Said Rasse and the others only escaped by the skins of their filthy teeth. He also said that’s when something in Rasse snapped. Said he were different from that day on. Sort of crazed...or more crazed than he had been.’

‘So-o,’ said Levi slowly, staring into the fire as though for inspiration. ‘That’s when Rasse’s need for the village turned into the need for revenge. And that’s why he’s been harassing the Badgers since.’

‘True,’ said Deepdale. ‘Except he was no longer thinking straight. I mean, why else split his forces at Monkgate? Why send Vare here while he himself stayed on in the town?’

‘To hire them raiders,’ offered Poppy.

‘Aye m’dear, but if they’d kept together there’d have been no need for help, would there? Rasse would have led the war party and they’d have been stronger with him at the helm. No, that were a big mistake of our friend Rasse’s, and it’s what gave us a breather – though it don’t feel much like it right now.’

Levi grimaced as he shook his head.

‘Yes but that only brings us back to the first problem. Or problems. Why kidnap the two Badgers – and what’s he planning to do with them?’

Deepdale picked up a stick and began scratching shapes in the dirt as he thought that one through. He tapped his stick in the ground.

‘To trade with Barkstripe for their release.’

Poppy shook her head.

‘Trade what? Rasse knows Barkstripe had nothing of value, except Skenmarris that is. Yes, I do think Rasse intends using them as trade, but not with Barkstripe. He’ll be looking to the Mink again, to get something he’s always wanted.’

‘Skenmarris,’ said Levi.

‘That’s right,’ said Poppy. ‘We know the mink value slaves, which they use on their evil sled lines around the harbours of Agersund and Sigstad. How much more would they value high-status slaves, such as the children of a Caellfyon Chieftain?’

Deepdale nodded slowly.

‘Aye, aye. It’s all Rasse has left...the only way he can achieve what he set out for in the first place.’ He tossed the stick into the fire.

‘The young badgers will simply be pawns in Rasse’s game to win Skenmarris back for his own.’

Levi stood up and turned to face the others.

‘Then we really have to rescue them. ‘Because one thing worse than being captives of Rasse is for Whitespike and Berry to be in the hands of the Mink.’

Poppy leaped up to stand by her brother and, thrusting her hands on her hips, turned to face the ranger.

‘If there’s to be a rescue party then I’m coming, too. It’s not fair that Levi sees all the action...besides, I’ve been a nursemaid long enough.’

‘Rescue it might be if we’re lucky, but it’ll be no party,’ said Deepdale, grimly.

‘I don’t care, I’m coming. I’ll follow you if I have to.’

Deepdale stood and clapped a paw on their shoulders.

‘Very well, Poppy, your zeal may well be needed before this venture is done. Pack your things both of you. Have a hot meal and get some sleep. I’ll go find Lapblud and Splitlug. We leave at dawn.’
