

Chapter Seven

Levi and Poppy dangled their legs over the stone quayside. Below the children restless flotsam bobbed against the sea wall on the rising tide, whilst above them shrieking seabirds whirled on the air currents, ready to swoop down on any unguarded morsel. Poppy shook her hair in the breeze and breathed deeply, savouring the tangy salt sea air. A small leather travel pack was beside her. Whitespike's crossbow lay on top of it.

'Strange, isn't it...this is the first time we've been alone in Caellfyon since our arrival. Yet Seymour seemed really set against your idea to split off from Deepdale's party and meet up later near Skenmarris.'

'Deepdale talked him around.' Levi said, half twisting to watch the confusion of dockside labourers lugging their loads back and forth. Several yards to the children's right, a broad beamed coaster wallowed on the rising tide, its single mast swaying to and fro. Painted in white on its stern was the name 'The Sparrow.'

'Seymour has been too preoccupied with things to see the changes the land has made in us,' said Levi. 'Deepdale knows we'll be okay. He's been a good teacher, I owe him a lot.' He turned and stared toward the far horizon, a dreamy look in his eyes. 'I'll probably owe him a lot more before this game is over.'

Poppy glanced toward the 'The Sparrow.'

'That's ours then?' she said.

‘That’s right,’ replied Levi. ‘Dunrood said the monastery has part shares in her. Said that she’s used for ferrying cargo between here and Cultaine. She’s skippered by a water rat by the name of Pitchrake. We’re to wait here until she’s loaded.’

As if on cue, a large grey rat heaved itself up from the coaster’s hold and stood on the after-deck. He glanced astern at the rising tide then across at the two children. He nodded once at the pair and gave a hurried salute. Then he turned to give instruction to a short, thick-legged rat who was coiling hawsers by the mast.

‘But did you really have to speak with the old monk?’ said Poppy. ‘I mean, we could have just as easily gone south with Deepdale and the stoats. We didn’t have to go with Dunrood and the monks to their chapter house at Carnsteads.’

Levi sighed and stood up to lean against a dome-topped capstan.

‘We’ve gone through this, already. Dunrood was the one who taught Rasse his weapon skills. I had to speak with him, but he was too poorly to talk much in the woods. Needed some more treatment. He got it at Carnsteads...it took a little time that’s all.’

‘But that seems odd, doesn’t it? I mean a religious order and all, teaching fighting and such.’

‘Not really. They see martial skills as a form of discipline. And remember, Rasse was a youth in their care. He hadn’t taken any vows to join them or anything. They simply taught him his letters and martial skills in the hope that the knowledge and discipline would give him a chance to make something of himself.’

‘So you hoped that Rasse’s teacher would also know his flaws and weak points.’

Levi glanced at his sister but said nothing.

‘And did he?’ pushed Poppy. ‘Could he tell you anything useful?’

Just then, the squat, stocky rat seen on the ‘The Sparrow’ approached them. He snatched the floppy cap from his head and peered up at them, blinking his black, beady eyes first at Levi then Poppy.

‘Good morning gentlefolks. I’m Bilgebob, first mate of the Sparrow there.’ The rat swept his cap wide to point out the coaster, where the master remained waiting at the stern. ‘Cap’n Pitchrake sends his compliments and asks that you join him aboard.’

Levi nodded his thanks and helped his sister to her feet. Together, the pair followed the rat down the quayside. Bilgebob led them onto the narrow gangplank, then he nimbly skipped onto the boat’s side rail and leaned forward to offer a paw as the children stepped aboard. Below them, muddy water lapped loudly against the boat’s timbers.

‘All’s now stowed aboard so we’ll be sailing directly,’ said the rat. Then as the children stepped down onto the deck he added, ‘It’s set to remain clear a day or two, so we should have a good trip. Our journey back may be a tad rough, mind, as there’s storms sweeping in from the east. Though that needn’t concern you folks, as you’ll be safely on dry land and on your way by then.’

Levi grunted as he thought of the journey that awaited him, back into enemy territory, on a mission that may well prove to be his most dangerous yet.

The water rat stepped forward to greet them. He shook their hands as he introduced himself.

‘Bilgebob hasn’t been scaring you with his weather stories, has he?’

Poppy shook her head as Levi glanced about the orderly jumble on the deck. Stacks of crates and piles of sacks occupied most of the deck space, leaving only a few narrow walkways between the cargo.

‘He’s a bit of a weather buff is our First Mate,’ added Skipper Pitchrake. ‘Though the old lad’s rarely off beam with his forecasts, I’ll say that for him.’ He glanced up to where Bilgebob was hauling in the gangplank. ‘Cast off when you’re ready, Bosun. This tide’s almost set to turn, and we don’t want to be dragging our keel on them sandbars on the way out.’

Pitchrake lay a paw on Poppy’s shoulder and steered her toward the mast, where a space had been left surrounded by bulging sacks. Levi followed, half listening to the Skipper as he watched Bilgebob expertly unwind the bow line and cast it to a waiting dock rat on the quayside.

‘Can’t offer you much by way of comfort,’ said Pitchrake. ‘We’ve no cabin aboard. But we’ve plenty of sacks you can lie on, and tarpaulins to keep the draught out.’

‘That’ll do fine,’ said Levi, finally snatching his attention away from the first mate. ‘We’re only grateful you could take us. We’re meeting a friend, and travelling by sea will allow us to get there on time.’

Pitchrake slapped Levi heartily on the back.

‘Aye, that’s the spirit.’ He left them then and returned to his place at the stern where he grasped the waiting tiller. ‘C’mon, Bosun, let’s make some sail.’

Barely ten minutes after stepping aboard The Sparrow Levi and Poppy were leaning on the Taff rail watching Hengeport slip away, as above them taut sailcloth whipped and slapped in the quickening breeze.

Bilgebob's fair weather prediction was right on the button exactly as Pitchrake suggested it would be, and two days and a kind wind after leaving Hengeport, The Sparrow slid easily into Cultaine's harbour. As the coaster drifted close to the quay and the first mate readied to receive the mooring line, Levi and Poppy stood at the stern, leaned on the starboard rail, and stared at the town before them.

It was clearly not at all like their port of departure. Where one had been lively and colourful with a merry air, Cultain lay under a cloud. It was an invisible cloud, but one that was depressive and cheerless. From their position in the harbour, the children could see the town's straight streets issuing from the docks like spokes in a wheel. Gloomy and streaked with shadows, they were almost deserted and many of the buildings appeared boarded up, as though their occupants had fled.

'Welcome back to the south,' said Levi.

'What's happened?' said Poppy. 'It can't always have been like this.'

Pitchrake leaned toward them, while keeping a firm paw on the tiller and a wary eye on the closing quayside.

'No, it hasn't,' he said, his voice grim. 'But once Wormwich and Skenmarris fell, folk along the length of this river knew too well it'd be only a matter of time afore the invaders swept eastward to the coast. There's nothin' to stop them now, you see.'

Poppy shook her head sadly.

'But where –'

'Northward, my lady. Folks are migrating north now. I'm guessing The Sparrow will only dock here a couple more times, three at

most. Then I'll have to find another trade route. I gather the monks back at Carnsteads are already forming trading arrangements with a couple of towns on the west coast. Not how I would have wanted it – them northern routes can be treacherous in the winter, but needs must when there's a crust to be earned.'

Under Pitchrake's expert guidance The Sparrow docked with barely a bump and Bilgebob worked quickly to secure the mooring lines. Minutes later, the first mate had the gangplank in place, and a small group of swarthy dock rats gathered on the quayside ready to begin offloading the cargo.

'Well, Pop, I guess that's our cue to leave. The trip has given us a chance for rest but we'd best be on our way.' He hitched up his sword belt and tightened the thick, leather strap. Poppy glanced toward the town.

'I don't mind saying that I wish I were just about anywhere else but here. The sight of this place gives me the creeps.' She stepped toward the mast to collect her belongings. 'Where did Deepdale say he would meet us?'

Levi glanced cautiously about before replying.

'The edge of Alney Fen. Remember the place where we camped after leaving Skenmarris?'

'You mean where Wanbib caught up with us that night, and scared everyone half to death?'

Levi nodded. It all seemed so long ago. So much had happened since then, yet this was the first real chance he had had to reflect on events. He quickly decided that now was not the time to chew over their misfortunes, and pushed the swarming thoughts away. He had to remain positive, somehow.

‘Come on, Sis, time we were off.’ Levi gathered up the travel pack while Poppy scooped up their tarpaulin cover and shouldered the crossbow, then together they threaded their way through the piles of cargo to where Pitchrake and Bilgebob awaited them by the gangplank. Poppy handed the skipper the tarpaulin.

‘Oh, don’t you worry about that,’ said Pitchrake with a smile. ‘I’ve plenty of tarps. And if old Bilgebob’s predictions are right, you may be needing it afore you’ve a roof over your heads.’

Poppy thanked him, and after brief but polite goodbyes, the children stepped ashore and set off toward the town.

Not a word was exchanged between them as they wandered between the colourless rows of abandoned buildings, keeping the distant estuary on their left. The few listless polecats and weasels they did meet peered at them through vacant eyes before shuffling on their way again.

Five minutes after leaving The Sparrow, the children stepped out of the town’s shadow, and almost immediately the cobbled road came to an abrupt end. There it merged with a rutted dirt trail that ran arrow straight westward, flanked by tall swaying grasses. Pockets of thorn scrub were dotted here and there, their dry branches rustling in the onshore breeze.

Levi glanced over his shoulder at the town’s desolate buildings and dark, empty windows.

‘Well, I’m glad that’s behind us. I don’t care if I never see Cultaine again. The rotten mink can have the place for all I care.’

‘Levi,’ snapped Poppy, ‘that’s horrible. Think of those poor people having to leave their homes.’

Levi pursed his lips.

‘Sorry, you’re right. It’s not just the Skenmarris folk now, is it? Seems like the whole of Caellfyon is on the move.’ He reached for his sword hilt and gripped it tightly. ‘That Rasse sure has a lot to answer for.’

‘Where do we go now?’ asked Poppy.

Levi paused as he mentally tried to picture the maps he had seen at Barkstripe’s lodge.

‘Well, if I’m right, the Alney Fen should be a couple of leagues north of us,’ he said pointing to their right where the grasslands merged with the distant horizon. There, a vague, plum coloured smear ran east to west, shrouded in a dull grey mist. ‘We’ll stay on this track for a mile or so, then cut north.’

Poppy viewed the scrub grass with distaste.

‘More itchy seeds to get stuck in my toes again,’ she said.

The sun was just beginning its slide westward when the pair stopped by the trail for a rest. Sitting on a large stone, Poppy dug a couple of scones from her pack. She handed one to Levi.

‘There’s only a few more of those left,’ she said as she reached into the pack once more and withdrew a horn flask. ‘Not quite sure what we’ll do once they’re gone.’

‘We’ll get by,’ said Levi. His voice was flat and unconvincing. ‘Besides,’ he added quickly, ‘we’ll soon have Deepdale with us again. He’ll see us right.’

As he chewed his lunch, he stared northward to the distant empty fen and wondered for the first time whether they would indeed find their friend at the pre-set meeting place. Nearby, a moorland bird called out, its forlorn, penny whistle notes drawing his attention to the loneliness of the land around them. A cold lump settled in the pit of his stomach, making it difficult to swallow.

Several leagues to the west, a thin mist gathered, cloaking the hill overlooking Skenmarris. It chilled the air and deposited pearls of moisture onto the windswept grasses of the plateau. Three dark-clad figures inched toward the ridge.

‘Careful, lads,’ whispered Deepdale as he peered over the rocky ledge. ‘Sounds’ll carry like a bar-room shanty in this flippin’ mist.’

‘Can’t see a bloomin’ thing,’ said Lapblud as he squinted ahead.

‘Aye, could have done wi’out it,’ added Deepdale. ‘And don’t forget, it covers the enemy just as much as it does us. Eyes and ears open.’

As the three settled on the ridge they listened to the sounds coming up from the village below. Nipper spat into the grass as harsh mink accents carried on the breeze.

‘We’ll wait for nightfall,’ said Deepdale, ‘then venture out down this side, plotting a course to the north of the village. Keep the woods between them and us and we should be able to skirt around okay.’

‘Reckon the boy’ll be on Alney?’ said Nipper.

‘Don’t fret, he’ll be – ’

‘Hussht!’ The voice was Lapblud’s. He lifted his head and peered to their right where the mist swirled wraithlike around the brow of the hill. The wiry stoat already had his sword in paw. Deepdale inched slowly backwards. The ridge had afforded them cover from the village below, but Lapblud’s warning had suddenly made him aware of their exposure from behind. He reached for his sword. Beside him, Nipper rose to a crouch and slowly slid an arrow from his pouch, notching it ready.

Suddenly, a long line of ghostly shadows appeared within the mist. Deepdale sprang to his feet, drawing his sword.

‘Quick, boys, time to go,’ he said, no longer trying to remain silent. As the three turned to flee the ridge, a hoard of armed mink warriors leapt forward, their surging bodies shredding the mist screen to tatters. Harsh cries rang out over the hillside as the mink attacked, their eyes lit by a crazed fury. It was a lithe, ferocious looking creature, its bare chest shaved in intricate swirling patterns, which led the attack, a gleaming blade clutched in each paw. A badger’s tail hung like a trophy from its sword belt.

‘There’s too many,’ shouted Deepdale as he leaped off the ridge and onto the steep, grassy slope. ‘Scatter, lads – run and save yourselves – and good luck!’

Pursued closely by screaming mink, the fox and two stoats dispersed onto the hillside, each leaping into its own flimsy cover of mist.

‘Can we stop now? It’s nearly dark and I’m cold and tired.’

Poppy trudged on behind her brother as around them a chilly dusk enveloped the fen draining the colour from the landscape. The wind had turned to sweep in from the northeast during their long afternoon’s march and now raised goosebumps on the children’s bare arms. Rainclouds scudded overhead like old tattered rags. Levi half turned and gave his sister a reassuring smile.

‘Sure, we’re just about there now – don’t you recognise it?’

Poppy strode up to join her brother and stared ahead into the gloom.

They had held to firm ground on the edge of the fen for several miles, keeping tall flag-tipped bulrushes to their right, and the moorland ridge to their left. Occasionally their trail had fragmented in places where the black fen encroached upon its sedge grass perimeter. As Levi had been reluctant to walk the ridge for fear of being seen the children had been forced to hop and skip from one tussock to another to keep their feet from sinking into the mud.

Here, the grass border was broad. Familiar silhouettes of windswept alders and ancient oaks loomed on the ridge ahead. Poppy blew a long sigh of relief.

‘At last.’

‘Told you didn’t I.’

Despite her weariness Poppy skipped on ahead, spotting in the half-light charred patches where the villagers had cooked the first meal of their wilderness trek. Levi was already scooping up windblown sticks.

‘Come on,’ he said, reaching into his belt pouch for his tinder and flint. ‘Let’s get a fire on the go before this night air soaks the kindling.’

‘Crikey, I think you’ve been with Deepdale too long...it’s turned you into a bushwacker,’ said Poppy, laughing. A sudden thought halted her amusement. She turned and surveyed the ridge.

‘Deepdale. Shouldn’t he be here already?’

Levi crouched to stack his firewood into a small pile.

‘This is where we said we’d meet, but one party was bound to arrive before the other. It’s just that we were first. So don’t worry, he’ll be on his way.’

It did not take long for Levi to set the fire going and the children quickly gathered round to warm themselves. As they ate their cold

supper the night clamped down around them, the dense cloud cover blanking out even the faintest starlight.

With the onset of night an icy wind swept in over the fen. Poppy pulled her pack close and unstrapped the tarpaulin cover.

‘Here. Better wrap this around us.’

No sooner had the children huddled under their cover when the first drops of rain pattered down.

The night was cheerless and cold, with the icy drizzle persisting through much of it, finally dispersing southward as a chill dawn peered over the fen’s eastern lip. Levi peered out from under the tarp. The fire, long since drenched, was now no more than a sodden pile of charred wood. He shivered as he realised he stood no chance of finding anything that would burn.

He pushed the cover back and stood up, rubbing his legs to restore the circulation and generate some warmth. Poppy peered out from the cover.

‘Any sign?’

‘Deepdale?’

She nodded.

Levi shook his head.

‘I’ll nip up to the ridge, see if I can see anything.’

He scuttled up to the treeline and peered out over the moor. The bleak landscape was empty, with nothing but scattered gorse bushes to break the monotony of the scene. He glanced over his shoulder. Poppy had roused herself and was folding their makeshift bivouac away. She glanced up at him. Levi shook his head and crawled back down to join her.

‘Look, Deepdale said he was going as far as Skenmarris to scout the enemy activity there, and then come on to Alney and meet us here.

So, as we know the direction he's coming from there's no reason why we can't venture out to meet him. Keep our eyes open and we'll see anything moving on a ten mile front on that moor.'

Poppy nodded slowly but doubt was in her eyes.

'Have we got everything?' said Levi.

'We don't have that much,' said Poppy, half turning to show she had the pack and crossbow slung over her shoulder.

'Come on then. We set off now we should make Skenmarris by nightfall.

A mist was crawling up from the river by the time Levi and Poppy reached the outskirts of the village. It drifted through the undergrowth and around the shuttered dwellings, chilling the air and amplifying the sounds around them.

Levi turned to his sister, a finger pressed to his lips.

'Keep quiet,' he whispered. 'The slightest noise and they'll hear us for sure in this.'

Poppy nodded and slowly hefted the crossbow off her shoulder. She held it waist high. A quarrel was already slotted into its groove.

Levi smiled at her.

'Good girl. Just watch where you put your feet. There's twigs all over this path.'

Half stooping, they slowly continued into the village.

The sounds of revelry were all around them. Somewhere, one of the invaders was singing a song. The words were alien to them, the voice throaty and rough. Flickering campfires sent shadows dancing through the trees. Cooking smells drifted on the night air. The aroma was pungent and heavy with spices.

‘Hope we don’t get invited to dinner,’ whispered Poppy, wrinkling her nose.

‘We get caught, we’ll probably be dinner,’ replied Levi. ‘Keep close, we’ll cut through here.’

He stepped off the path and into a stand of young trees where shadows loomed on either side. Poppy shivered.

‘Do you know where we are?’ she asked.

‘Reckon we’re approaching Bullyrag’s place,’ he said. ‘I’m sure that’s his garden through there.’

They continued to creep cautiously through the trees, carefully feeling for the twigs that threatened to betray their presence. A harsh voice called out nearby. Levi signalled for them both to squat down and they lowered themselves silently into the shadows.

Levi peered through the tangle of undergrowth. A path lay just beyond a nearby spinney. He hoped it was the one that would lead them to Barkstripe’s lodge. He was sure that the foreign leaders and their prisoners would be nearby.

A short thickset figure swayed into view at the trees’ edge. A thick woollen cloak exaggerated its size. The creature carried a pot jug in one hand. It sang snatches of the same throaty song they had heard earlier, the verse punctuated by drunken chuckles.

‘It’s a Coypu,’ whispered Levi. ‘They seem to be in charge – or they seem to have Sable Denbrok dangling on their strings, at any rate.’

The creature squatted down at the edge of the spinney, swigging from the jug as it relieved itself.

Poppy wrinkled her nose, again.

‘Pooh!’

‘Shush!’

The children waited until the Coypu had finished and had lumbered back toward the campfire, then they too moved off.

‘This way,’ said Levi, pointing to a small, dark structure beyond the trees.

They warily crept out onto the path, peering both ways before leaving the security of the shadows. Then they quickly crossed the path before hunkering down by a willow hurdle that marked the boundary of Bullyrag’s lodge.

Poppy glanced across at the Badger’s garden. The vegetables lay trampled into the soil, and ragged scraps of plants lay scattered in all directions.

‘Oh, poor Bullyrag,’ whispered Poppy. ‘He loved that Garden.’ ‘Right then, Barkstripe’s place is just through there.’ Levi pointed ahead. There they could just see the charred carcass of the hall’s roof enshrouded within the lighter grey of the mist. ‘Oh no, Deepdale heard from one of the polecats that there’d been a fight and fire in the hall. Had no idea the place had been gutted.’

‘With all their timber and thatch once these buildings catch alight they’re as good as gone,’ said Poppy.

‘Well, if Barkstripe’s is wrecked where are they holding the prisoners?’

The children had been squatting in the shadows of Bullyrag’s hurdles for only a few minutes when, around the corner from them, the old badger’s cottage door was flung open bathing the yard in a dull golden light.

‘If only we could see what’s going on round there,’ said Levi, straining to see around the building’s end wall. A group of mink spilled out into view, each jabbering excitedly in their harsh dialect. Suddenly, Levi felt Poppy’s fingers dig into his forearm, pulling him back into the shadow.

‘Look.’

He turned to peer at the group. There in their midst were the two badger children. Levi breathed a sigh of relief.

‘Deepdale’s guess was spot on after all.’

‘Looks like they’ve had a rough trip, though’ Poppy said, noting their tattered, grubby clothing and hunched, downcast appearance. ‘I bet that awful beast Rasse drove them hard all the way.’

‘Speaking of which, where is he?’

Just then, a further creature stepped out of the cottage and into the lamp light. At first Levi thought the newcomer was Rasse, the creature certainly had the polecat’s build, but then Levi noticed the animal’s snub nose, and the single grey Peregrine feather in its cap.

‘Hey, that’s Sable Denbrock, the mink leader. It was him we saw at that meeting on the Wormwich Marshes. If only we had Nipper and his bow right now.’

The Mink turned to address someone remaining in the doorway, hidden from the children’s view. Levi was sure that Sable had switched to their language, and was equally sure he had heard the word ‘arrangement,’ but the rest had been a jumble. The children watched as the two creatures shook paws. Then Sable turned, barked a command and herded the assembly off, driving the two young badgers out of the yard, passing so close to the children’s position they could hear the captive’s rasping breaths. Once on the path the group turned right and headed towards Barkstripe’s burnt out lodge.

‘I bet they’re taking Berry and Whitespike to the stockade,’ said Poppy. Once they’re in there I’m not sure what we’ll do to get them out. It’s sure to be guarded.’

‘We’ll find a way,’ said Levi, although his tone of voice exposed his true feelings. ‘If only Deepdale were here – I can’t imagine what’s holding him.’

‘But we can’t afford to wait. What if the Mink do intend using them as slaves on the sled lines? What if they’re shipped out straight away? We’ll never be able to rescue them once they’ve moved out from here. Here is the only chance we’re going to get.’

Levi paused a moment and dragged a hand wearily over his eyes.

‘You’re right, come on.’

The two children were about to move out from their cover when, to their right, Sable’s accomplice stepped into the yard. Levi’s breath snagged in his throat as a tall polecat advanced into the apron of light spilling from the cottage door.

‘Rasse,’ hissed Levi through gritted teeth as he reached instinctively for his sword. Poppy stayed his hand with hers.

‘Not here – our priority is our friends. Now’s not the time for revenge.’

Although Rasse, too, appeared shabby and trail-stained, his self-satisfied expression was plainly visible in the dim light. He held a large earthenware jug in one paw. Clearly, the deal he was hoping to strike with the mink had gone to plan.

He looked up as someone called him from inside. He took a leisurely swig from the jug, wiped his mouth and, with a final sidelong glance over Bullyrag’s garden he stepped back toward the cottage.

The door rattled shut plunging the yard back into darkness.

The mink warriors were barely ghostly grey figures within the mist when Levi tugged at Poppy's sleeve and signalled for them to follow. Together they stepped from the gloom by Bullyrag's workshop and headed off in cautious pursuit.

Once out of the old Badger's yard they turned right, stooping low to hug the shadows at the path's edge. The mist hung like ragged drapes from the tree canopy. Levi shivered, not knowing whether it was the mist or his own dread of failure that caused his discomfort.

As they neared the ruins of Barkstripe's lodge dim lamplight cast a mellow glow onto the path, shrinking the shadows.

'We'll have to crawl from here,' said Levi. He dropped down onto all fours, wincing in pain as a lump of dirt ground into a raw graze on his knee.

'Shush!' said Poppy. She pointed left in the direction of the ford. There a group of mink warriors were little more than vague shapes in the mist.

'They're all over,' whispered Levi, crawling forward and peering around the broad trunk of a beech toward the burnt out hall. 'There's another group here in the yard, and that's as well as those escorting the badgers. 'Can't understand what might have spooked them – it's almost as if they're expecting us.'

'I guess they're more warlike than the polecats,' said Poppy as she joined him. 'Maybe we're just used to Rasse and his sloppy outfit.'

A harsh call from nearby silenced the children. Levi stole a glance into the yard and immediately shrank back.

'A mink heading this way.'

Together they shuffled sideways, inching further into the dense undergrowth. A brief moment later a mink warrior stepped from behind the beech and onto the path. It muttered in its outlandish tongue and rammed the shaft of its spear into the dirt barely inches from Levi's face. Levi knew it was now only flimsy shadows that protected them from certain discovery.

The warrior continued to stand guard at the entrance, stamping its feet every now and again to lessen the chill. Their nerves stretched taut, both children flinched at the sound of a night bird from somewhere above them, its cracked piping call flattened by the mist.

Some time later a voice called out from the pathway to their left. The children turned. Another warrior, its spear slung casually over one shoulder, was approaching from the ford holding up a steaming beaker. There was a crunch of sandals on grit as the guard turned.

The guard called out a greeting, sounding well pleased, and wandered over to meet the other. He propped his spear against the furthest gatepost and accepted the beaker. Levi saw their opportunity. He half turned and nodded, signalling for Poppy to back away, and together they scuttled backward away from the lodge. When they had withdrawn several yards, to where the darkness offered them better cover. Levi shuffled round to face his sister.

'Okay, a head-on approach is impossible. We know that now.'

'What can we do then? We don't just give up.'

Levi nodded toward the dense stand of trees behind the lodge.

'We skirt around the back and approach the stockade from the far side. Should have thought of that first, I guess.'

'We'll be away from the lamplight, too.'

Levi gazed into the gloomy woodland as he thought his plan through, trying to remember the layout of small outbuildings beside the lodge.

‘There should be more cover for us that way,’ he said. ‘But I still can’t get over the amount of guards they have on duty. So we’ll have to be mega careful.’

‘Like I said, maybe they’re like that. I suppose all the drunkenness back in the village made us too sure of ourselves, that’s all.’

Levi stared his sister in the eye.

‘And that’s what we can’t afford. We get cocky and we fail. We fail and Whitespike and Berrysap are done for too. Just remember why we’re doing this.’

Taking the lead once more, Levi edged back down the path side seeking an opening between the thorn bush then, signalling first to Poppy, he crawled through a shadowed gap and into the mist-wrapped woods.

The musty smell of damp earth and rotting leaves lay heavy around the children as they crawled through the thickets that surrounded the blackened shell of Barkstripe’s old home. Their need for stealth slowed them and it took close on half an hour to skirt the hall and its outbuildings before they were finally able to approach the stockade.

The tips of the rampart wall protruded above the mist like a line of giant pencils. Surprisingly, the gate lay open, a black arch within the dark line of timbers. Several yards past the arch, a mink warrior was scarcely visible in the mist. Lamplight flickering from behind gave it a spectral glow.

Taking care to remain in the shadows Levi sat back on his heels and rubbed the slick covering of dead leaves from his palms.

‘Okay, this is it. There’s not so many of them this side, so with luck we may be able to cross the open ground to the stockade wall. One of us can sneak inside, get the badgers and, if all goes well, get out again.’

Poppy studied the scene before them. There was at least twenty metres of open ground to cross before they reached the cover of the stockade. Crossing it unseen would not be easy.

‘Look, if we both go we’re doubling the chance of making a sound and being discovered. How about I stay here with the crossbow. Cover you from behind. If that guard approaches or becomes a threat I should be able to take him out from here.’

Levi checked the area, knowing that Poppy was making perfect sense. It would reduce the risk if one stayed behind, and as she had said earlier, it was not about heroics – they had a mission to perform.

‘Okay. I’ll cross. Stay here in the shadows and keep your eyes on that guard.’ Levi slowly drew his sword and scooped up a handful of dirt that he wiped along the blade, dulling the steel. He turned to his sister and kissed her cheek. Her face was cool. ‘Wish me luck.’

He stood up and, with a glance toward the distant warrior, he ventured out.

Levi’s heart pounded in his ears. He could not remember feeling as vulnerable as he did as he crossed the clearing. It felt as though he was walking naked through a shopping mall. Except this mall was fraught with danger. He crossed the half way point and the guard was no longer in sight.

With only a few metres left to go before he reached the shadows of the stockade a surge of excitement ran through him. He really was going to make it. That was when he heard Poppy scream.

Levi's stomach scrunched instantly like a clenched fist. He spun around and instinctively dropped to a crouch, his grip tightening on his sword hilt. The hopelessness of their situation struck him immediately. A mink warrior had grasped Poppy's upper body and hauled her off balance, a paw clamped over her mouth. As Levi looked on, a second mink hurried out of the shadows and snatched Poppy's feet, lifting her off the ground. Levi sprang up to rush to his sister's aid, ignoring the pounding footsteps now fast approaching from behind. He had barely started his run when a vivid pain ballooned in his skull filling his vision with dancing, scarlet flashes. Then nothing.

Levi's insides spun over as he felt himself hauled painfully to his feet. His head was a throbbing ball of agony and his shoulders felt as though hot knives were piercing the sockets. Rough paws gripped his arms sending the pain downward to where it flared in his wrists. He tried briefly to pull his hands apart and quickly bit down on his lip to stop himself screaming. As the pain subsided and his senses returned, he felt the loops of coarse hemp that bound his wrists. A warm trickle ran down the backs of his hands. He opened his eyes.

The two mink warriors he had seen earlier were dragging Poppy along by his side. Her hands and feet were also bound tight. Her head hung down to one side, bobbing loosely as the mink dragged her over the clearing. Despite the poor light Levi saw her face was chalky white, her eyes wide and staring. They twitched in recognition at him but her look remained expressionless.

The mink carried the pair past the entrance to the stockade. The guard they had seen from across the clearing stepped forward and leaned over Levi jabbing his back painfully with the shaft of his spear. It thrust its face into Levi's, taunting him in its hateful language, its breath reeking of bad fish. Levi's captor pushed it away with a curse.

Levi returned his attention to Poppy. Her appearance worried him far more than their predicament. She looked – vacant, as though she had given up. He had never seen her like that before. Poppy had always been the one to fight on when everyone else had admitted defeat. He turned his face slightly so that he stared her in the eye.

'Don't worry, Sis,' he said. 'All's not lost. Deepdale and the others'll come for us. Just see.'

Levi's captor snarled and swung a paw at him, cuffing him aside the head. Levi winced but gritted his teeth, refusing to cry out.

The group approached a small thatched outbuilding, probably one of Barkstripe's stores. A hide curtain hung down over the doorway. Gripping Levi tightly by one arm, the mink used the haft of its spear to flick back the curtain, revealing a pitch-dark interior.

Poppy's guards hauled her in first. Levi heard her thrown to the floor and felt the heat rise to his cheeks as she cried out. It was his turn next, and just when he believed the pain in his shoulders could not get any worse his guards tossed him onto the floor. Pain flooded Levi's body and his jaw shook with suppressed agony.

On their way out the guards flung the curtain back into place, plunging the small room into total darkness.

Levi lay and shivered like a wet dog as the hopelessness of their situation threatened to overwhelm him, then he remembered the lost look in his sister's eyes and fear gripped his throat.

‘Poppy?’ He turned his head trying to see her, but it was so dark he might well have had his eyes shut. Someone moved by his side.

‘Poppy, that you?’

Levi writhed snakelike toward the figure. As he edged forward, his cheek brushed something cold. It stank of old leather and mud. A boot. Poppy wore sandals. It moved suddenly beneath him. Levi scuttled back, his pulse suddenly racing.

‘W-who’re you?’ he said, the coppery taste of fear lining his mouth once again. His increased anxiety sharpened the pain in his shoulders. In the stillness, he heard the chatter of small beads as the figure turned toward him.

‘Sorry, lad, I’ve failed you this time.’

The voice was rasping and weak, but unmistakable. Levi’s breath caught in his throat.

‘Deepdale!’
