

Chapter Ten

‘Don’t you worry yourself, lad,’ said Pitchrake as he passed Levi a pile of tarpaulins. ‘With a fair wind we’ll make Hengeport well afore your polecat friend and his slopjack crew.’

Behind them Poppy and the badgers sat crossed legged on the deck enjoying the warmth from Bilgebob’s flaming brazier. The first mate squatted alongside holding a toasting fork to the flames. A chunk of cornbread was browning on the end.

Deepdale nodded at the skipper’s assurance and plucked his pipe from his mouth. He aimed the stem toward the darkening clouds.

‘I’m surprised you set sail at all with this lot brewing, master Pitchrake,’ he said as a flurry of raindrops stained the deck timbers.

‘Oh, this is nothin’. All bark and no bite, you’ll see. Most o’ the wrath of that storm front’ll be landward. There’s another creepin’ in behind, according to my first mate. That one’s a might nastier by all accounts. But we should be safely moored in Hengeport afore she hits. Now, if you excuse me I’ll just take yon tiller from your friend afore he turns us onto a sandbar. Treacherous devils along this coast – especially with a brisk onshore breeze such as this ‘un.’

The skipper took the tiller from a grinning Lapblud. The stoat wandered over to join Deepdale and Levi.

‘Y’know I’ve always wanted to do that,’ he said, reaching into his jerkin for his pipe. Deepdale slapped him heartily on the back.

‘Aye, lad, and now you have. So come and get some toast. It’ll be good to get a warm belly and huddle down beneath one of them tarps before them clouds start piddlin’ on us.’

The wind increased in strength, screaming through the ratlines as the group sat huddled by the brazier. As darkness descended around them, the boat began to pitch and yaw on the rising waves. Pitchrake called out from the tiller.

‘Better douse them coals, Bosun,’ he said. ‘Best not have them tippin’ over onto the deck.’ Bilgebob smiled apologetically at the others. As he stood to carry out the order Laplud snatched the half-toasted chunk of bread from the First Mate’s fork and crammed it into his mouth. Deepdale glanced at the moon-washed white tops now cresting all around the boat, and turned to the Skipper.

‘Need any help, master Pitchrake?’

‘Aye lad, you can lay some lines tight across the deck and secure ‘em to the side rails. Then you and your friends tie on to ‘em afore you get under cover. Can’t be havin’ any of you slipping o’er-board can we.’

Deepdale had just managed to tie the last of the knots when the storm broke. He hurriedly secured himself to a line and scuttled under a tarpaulin to join the others. No sooner had he done so than the deck keeled sharply over as a gust slammed against the boat. Rain lashed down, sweeping across the deck, and in minutes the scuppers were awash.

The storm lashed the boat long into the night. Sleep was impossible for the passengers huddled beneath their tarpaulin sheets as thunderclaps boomed overhead and driving rain beat down onto the deck. A sudden ferocious gust rocked the small vessel and all aboard felt the boat twist around in the water.

‘Trim them sails, Bosun,’ shouted Pitchrake, trying to make his voice carry against the wind. ‘We’re drifting dangerously toward shore. I’ll try an’ bring her about.’

Levi poked his head out from the tarpaulin covers and looked astern. Pitchrake was standing on the afterdeck wrestling with the tiller with both paws. The rat spotted him.

‘Hold tight to them lines, young swab,’ he cried, ‘this is about to get rough.’ Above them, thunder crashed through the skies, the sound almost one with the thwack of wind-wracked canvas. ‘Bilgebob, I need them sails trimmin’ smartly.’ There was a slight edge to the Skipper’s voice as he peered into the lashing rain over the port beam.

Levi lifted himself higher from the covers. Rain thrashed his hair and stung his face as he followed the Skipper’s troubled gaze. Though he saw nothing beyond the deck rail, he did detect a subtle change in the sound of the sea. The dull, heaving sigh of the waves had risen in pitch, becoming a rumbling roar.

It was the sound of breakers crashing ashore.

The tight fist of panic clenched around Levi’s chest as he suddenly realised what was happening. Pitchrake called out again but Levi could not make out the words. He fumbled under the tarp to untie his line while around him the sound of the thrashing waves grew louder.

Free from his safety line, Levi launched himself from out of the covers and stumbled toward the stern to assist Pitchrake with the tiller. Above him the sail boom creaked as Bilgebob succeeded in changing the trim. The mast groaned as it took the strain.

Levi skated across the rolling deck. Pitchrake gave him a crooked smile and shuffled aside to make room at the tiller. As Levi reached out to take hold the bow reared violently throwing him down.

Levi clawed at the sodden boards as the boat slewed to starboard and juddered to a stop. Beneath the decks, keel timbers shrieked as though the boat screamed in pain.

Levi waited for the deck to settle then reached up and seized the tiller. Instead of being rigid and unyielding it swung freely beneath his grasp, pitching him over in stunned surprise. He felt the Skippers paws grasp his collar and haul him to his feet. Beneath them the boat's keel continued to shriek in protest

'Secure that sail!' yelled Pitchrake, his voice edged with dread. 'We've run aground – she won't take much more o' this.'

The Skennmaris badgers trudged northward, the early morning sun throwing their shadows far onto the plain. Progress had been good since they had connected with Monks' Street. The ancient road was well defined, the grass along it matted and well-trodden. Where it ran through boggy hollows, the track had been dressed with stone providing a firm surface.

Seymour strode at the head of the column. Beside him was Bion Lathe.

'Folks' spirits has been up since we reached this road, Seymour.'

'Indeed, we've made better time, too.'

The badger nodded sagely and peered over his shoulder to where the meandering line of refugees strolled doggedly onward. The last battered handcart had finally collapsed three days earlier and the most able males now carried cloth bound packs high on their shoulders.

'Do you really think we'll make it now?' he asked.

‘I do,’ replied Seymour glancing down at the stocky badger. ‘Every league we cover increases my certainty of it. There’s been no sign of the rebels for days now.’

Though its memory remained raw, the bitter scene of Rasse’s last attack was far behind them. Ahead, the Kirkstone Heights loomed ever larger with each stride, their heather clad lower slopes blazing majestically, bright against the darkening skies beyond.

Seymour closed his eyes and breathed deeply. The breeze had turned during the night and now swept down from the north carrying with it a tangy hint of pine. It reminded him of the Scottish Highlands, and half-forgotten holidays. Happier times.

A voice from behind interrupted his thoughts.

‘Sure and if the hills aren’t just beautiful this morning,’ said Jilli as the young Polecat caught up with the pair. She turned to Seymour. ‘I’ve brought you a visitor,’ she added, grinning. ‘When he catches up, that is.’

Seymour stopped, took Jilli’s paw and stepped aside allowing the column to move on.

‘And who might that be?’ he asked, searching the line of trudging creatures. A travel-worn badger couple and their three young cubs plodded by, but Seymour’s eyes were already on the slightly built form beyond, tottering between two makeshift crutches. The creature’s russet snout quivered as it snuffled the air.

‘Well I’ll be. If it isn’t young Whip.’ Seymour stepped forward and gently embraced the young weasel.

‘Aye, sir it’s me alright – but I should go easy wi’ them squeezes if I were you, ‘cause if Missus Bodkin sees you she’ll have your innards.’

Seymour stepped back from Whip and eyed him approvingly.

‘Oh I wouldn’t wish to undo her work young Whip, for she’s certainly performed miracles with you.’

‘And so quickly, too,’ added Jilli as she looped her paw around Whip’s waist.

‘And where is the dear lady?’ said Seymour scanning the line. Jilli groaned.

‘Oh, she’s at the back helping the poor chief and his wife,’ she said shaking her head.

Seymour stooped to quietly address the Polecat-maid.

‘Are Barkstripe and Cob any better this morning? I’m afraid with one thing and another I haven’t been able to spend much time with them.’

Jilli shrugged as she examined the ground at her feet.

‘The cubs’ kidnapping has wrecked the poor dears so it has. Each day as passes seems to add more grey to their whiskers.’

‘D’you think there’s a chance?’ piped up Whip. ‘For Master Levi and Mistress Poppy, I mean. D’you think they’ll manage to free our friends, sir?’

Seymour stared off southwards, his mouth drawn into a thin line. The misty horizon suddenly seemed further away, intensifying the barren landscape between. He forced a smile.

‘Oh, I think so, Whip. I’m sure it’s only a matter of time before we see them all again.’

He turned to re-join Bion at the head of the line as a cool breeze swept over the plain. It riffled through the grass with the sound of a thousand whispering voices.

The frail sun hung above Alney Fen; a pale disc in a bloodshot sky. Below, among the bogs and tussocks, Rasse skipped across a sludge-black pool, disturbing several grey moths that stuttered into the air like tiny ghosts.

‘C’mon, you lot. Pick them heels up or we’ll never catch the blighter at this rate.’

His small party of troopers stumbled on behind him, their legs coated with foul smelling mud. One of the troopers, a hostile looking creature with an upturned snout, sneered at Rasse’s back and growled.

‘Tchah, if he wants the outlander that bad why doesn’t he just clear off an’ get him,’ he said as he plunged up to his knees in another filthy pool. ‘It ain’t as if we’ve been rewarded any so far. His last big idea went belly-up, leaving us with nowt. At least in Skenmaris the old badger paid us regular.’

Rasse overheard the complaint, his muscles tensing with every word. He spat into the bog, spun round and leapt back to the trooper’s position. He regarded them coldly, his eyes tracking from one to the other as around them twitchy reed stalks clattered in the breeze.

‘Who’s the grizzling malcontent this time, is it you Rooter? Usually is.’

Rooter boldly met Rasse’s angry gaze and shook his head slowly. Rasse responded with a wry smile.

‘Ah, that means it’ll be you then, Pug,’ he said, turning toward the speaker. Pug stared back defiantly, and snorted loudly, his hog snout curling up even further. The remaining troopers stood quietly, waiting. Scattered chips of sound from chirruping marsh flies suddenly seemed loud in the charged atmosphere.

Rasse sighed, made as if to turn about then struck. He sprang forward, catching Pug with a vicious backhand slap, spinning him

around and onto his belly. Without pause Rasse leaped astride the prone trooper. A blade flashed in the pale morning light. He yanked Pug's head back, exposing his throat. Rasse was about to slash down when a figure rushed in.

'GET OFF HIM!'

Rooter jabbed his spear shaft in the ground, blocking Rasse's attack. The other troopers gasped and stared dumbstruck at Rooter who, it appeared to them, had just signed his own death warrant.

Rasse rose slowly and stepped away from Pug, leaving him spitting blood onto the grass. Rooter's eyes widened as he realised the mess he was in, but he stood his ground, both paws tightly gripping his spear. Rasse growled at him.

'An' what's your problem, exactly?'

'What you going to do?' Rooter asked, his words spilling out in a rush. 'You going to kill us all? Where'd you be then, I wonder?'

'No, I'm just goin' to kill you, my friend,' Rasse replied, coldly. He sheathed his dagger, reached over his shoulder and drew his sword. The blade was notched but the edge was keen, bright against the dull grey steel. 'You know no-one defies me like that and lives to brag about it.'

Rooter braced himself and held his spear crossways across his chest in a futile attempt to defend himself.

'Oh, I know that too well,' he said. 'You slaughtered a mate o' mine and I stood by and did nothing. I swore then I'd never do that again. Never let you kill another one of us in cold blood – after all that we've been through for you.' He saw Rasse frown, trying to recollect, and he shook his head in disgust. 'You don't even remember, do you? Well his name was Smooch, and he was my friend.'

The surrounding troopers began to mutter, some turning cold stares on their leader. Pug stood, wiping blood from his muddied snout. He glowered at Rasse, scooped up his spear and stepped shoulder to shoulder with his new ally. Rasse weighed the situation and smiled lopsidedly. He re-sheathed his sword and wiped his paws on his jerkin.

‘I ain’t got time for this sickening sentimentality right now.’ He jabbed a claw toward Rooter’s face. ‘But mark me well, butt-breath, you might just get your come-uppances at some other time.’

Rooter exhaled slowly as Rasse turned away.

‘Aye, and you might just get what’s comin’ to you and all,’ he said under his breath.
