

Chapter Twelve

Levi dragged his feet through the sodden carpet of rotting vegetation. His head was down, his eyes scanning the ground, searching for anything that would burn. Two paces ahead of him Whitspike stooped and picked up a length of bog wood. He turned to Levi, holding it out.

‘This any good, you reckon?’

Levi took the piece and sighed. Like everything else around them, the wood was cold and damp.

‘We’ll take it anyway. Your sister already has a decent fire going, so this might burn.’ He tucked it with the few other pieces under his arm and glanced back to their campsite several metres away. The campfire cast a shimmering yellow glow through the mist. The shadowy forms of the others were gathered around it.

‘C’mon,’ he said, wearily. ‘We’ll try and get a few more pieces then head back.’ He shuddered as a chill ran through him. ‘I’m sure half of Caellfyon is covered by stinking marsh.’

‘Not really,’ replied Whitespike. ‘Of the four main areas, three of them are in the east. You just so happen to have suffered all three.’ He forced a smile and patted Levi’s shoulder. ‘Come on, I’m sure we’ve enough wood. Let’s get back afore we chill through.’

Levi stood a moment, his mouth agape. The cloaking mist seemed to hang on him like cold, wet towels.

‘Before we chill through? That’s a good one,’ he said. ‘I already feel like one of Tesco’s frozen turkeys.’

With the grey mist swirling about them the pair ambled back toward the camp. Strange wet sucking sounds came from the surrounding bog, along with the occasional distant splash.

‘Don’t fret any,’ said Whitespike, noticing Levi’s unease. ‘Folk reckon swamps and fens are dead places, but they’re not. Especially at night. Frogs make a right racket for one thing.’

‘I’ll just be happy to reach dry ground again,’ replied Levi as he stepped up to the gorse flanked hummock they had chosen for their campsite.

Poppy and Berrysap squatted on the far side of the fire. Berry had set up a griddle using a flat stone and was now baking scones using the supplies Pitchrake had given them. Deepdale turned to greet them as Levi tossed the damp wood onto the ground.

The fox half rose from his log seat and pushed the wood closer to the fire. His head was bathed in pipe smoke.

‘Come on lads, get yourself warm. We’ll soon have some hot food in our bellies thanks to Berry here. The lass is a marvel and no mistake.’

Levi squatted by the flickering flames and warmed his hands. The hot scones’ yeasty smell hung on the air reminding him of his hunger.

‘How much longer — ’

‘Oh, just a moment more to brown them off,’ interrupted Berry.

‘No,’ snapped Levi turning to Deepdale. ‘How much longer must we cross this stinking fen?’ He wrinkled his nose. The ever-present stench of decay reminded him of rotten cabbages.

Deepdale drew the pipe from his mouth and blew a column of smoke upwards. He paused a moment, his head nodding slightly. Overhead, pinprick stars shone clearly between a break in the clouds.

‘If we manage an early start, I’m reckoning on reaching the Branbourne Bridge by mid-afternoon.’

‘And what does that mean?’

‘It means we’ll then be on the Skenpey Road, and that’ll lead us right into Kirkstone.’

Levi flinched at a loud croak from nearby.

‘You’re a bit jumpy, lad,’ said Deepdale. He leaned forward to pat Levi’s arm. ‘You’ve no need to be. We’re safe now. In a couple of days we’ll be back with friends and Rasse’ll never catch us in that time.’

Levi nodded and glanced about him.

‘Where’s Lapblud?’

Poppy pointed to the furthest gorse.

‘Over there,’ she mouthed silently.

Levi peered into the mist and could just make out Lapblud’s partial silhouette by the bush. He looked from his sister to Deepdale and back again. Poppy shuffled round the edge of the fire to join him.

‘I wanted to go to him but Deepdale wouldn’t let me,’ she whispered, glaring at the ranger from the corner of her eye.

‘Deepdale?’ said Levi. Something in the old stoat’s body language had concerned him. ‘What’s the — ’

‘Lapblud chooses to be alone, so it’s best to leave him that way,’ said Deepdale leaning toward them. ‘In our haste to put distance between us and Rasse an’ ‘is wicked beggars,’ he jabbed his pipe stem toward the dark swamp, ‘the old lad hasn’t had time to dwell on his loss. And now? Well, I guess this swamp is a keen reminder of his Nipper. He lived on Alney, you see. This is a reminder, I guess. So now it’s time for him to grieve. And no-one else can do it for him or make matters any easier – he has to do it alone.’

‘Poor chap,’ said Whitespike, slowly shaking his head.

Deepdale reached out and tousled the badger between his ears.

‘Don’t fuss none, lad. He’ll be right by morning. Mark my words.’

On the far side of the fire Berrysap stood and wiped her paws down her smock.

‘Right then, who’s for scones?’

An eagle soared through the clear sky flaring its wing tips in response to the subtle changes in updraft from the dun coloured hills below. It swerved left, racing over the town beneath it and onwards, out of the glen and over the plain toward the setting sun.

Seymour glanced upward as the bird’s shadow passed over him. He turned and smiled at Bion.

‘What a beautiful sight eh?’

Bion nodded, indicating the town ahead of them.

‘Aye, but not so grand as that one. I really never thought we’d make it. Thank you, Seymour.’ He reached into his apron pocket, withdrew a handkerchief and dabbed his eyes. ‘It’s now I feel for them poor souls as didn’t make it.’

Seymour clapped him on the shoulder.

‘Indeed. We owe it to them to make the most of things now. Getting here was one thing, but this is where the work really starts. Don’t forget we have a settlement to build.’

As they neared the town, several of the Skenmarris badgers began to overtake them. For the first time since leaving their homes, there was a lightness in their steps. Some of the badger children scooted on ahead, shouting and laughing, their fears forgotten.

Seymour felt a paw grip his shoulder and turned to see Barkstripe leaning heavily on his staff beside him. Barkstripe angled his grizzled face toward Seymour's.

'I can't pretend I'm pleased to get here, Hawkeye. I was against the whole thing from the off. You know that. More so since...' He choked back a sob, unable to speak the names of his children. He squared his shoulders and composed himself. 'But, you had our wellbeing in mind – I see that well enough. And, though the march was appalling, you've delivered us safety. You've led my people well at a time when I simply couldn't. And for that I do thank you.' He slipped his paw off Seymour's shoulder and slowed his pace once more. Seymour stopped and turned to face him.

'I'm relieved to get here, Chief. Extremely relieved. But there's no pleasure in it – not until your children are here safely with you once more. Be assured, Deepdale has never failed us yet, and Levi and Poppy are very capable ... far more so than I ever imagined before bringing them out here. I've no doubt that if anyone can succeed in the mission, they can.' He reached for Barkstripe's paw. 'Here, let me help you. It's only fitting that we enter the town together.'

A short while later the rutted trail merged with the cobbled streets of Kirkstone, and the villagers entered the gloomy street, their eyes wide with wonder.

Its appearance was very different to their familiar southern settlements. With gritstone walls and smooth, blue slate roofs the buildings had a sturdy, unyielding appearance. Bion shook his head in amazement as he indicated the buildings on either side of them.

'They look like they just pushed themselves out of the ground, don't they. As natural as yon granite mounds dotted about them hills.'

The street's musty odour reminded Seymour of Thornley Abbey. But there were other scents, too. Smells that grew stronger with each step: the yeasty scent of bread, fish and the rancid smell of freshly dyed wool drifted on the air. A cool gust swept down the street, whipping up a flurry of cut corn stalks and carrying with it the buzz of voices and creak of cartwheels. Seymour glanced ahead.

The street opened out into a busy market place. Several stalls lined the square, each with colourful canopies that rippled and slapped in the breeze. Crowds of residents drifted from stall to stall. They were a mix of creatures: mainly badgers, polecats and stoats, though there were a number of rats and squirrels, too. Seymour tapped Bion's arm and nodded toward the nearest booth.

Leaving the villagers to investigate the various stalls, the pair walked across to where the stallholder, a scrawny looking rat with one eye, was standing behind a table strewn with pots and pans of various sizes.

'Excuse me,' began Bion, 'we seek the Kirkstone monastery.'

The rat sniffed and massaged his chin with a grubby paw.

'Sorry friends I'm about to pack up,' he said, slyly.

Seymour stepped forward.

'Here, Bion, give this chap something for his trouble. How about that loaf we have left?'

Bion frowned at Seymour and, seeing the determination in the man's expression, he shook his head and dug into his pack, withdrawing a crusty loaf. The rat accepted, eagerly snatching the bread from Bion's grasp. He sniffed it and clutched it to his chest. Behind them the sun slipped beyond the rooftops, casting a shadow into the square.

‘Ah, now. Let me see ... the monastery you say. A large building would it be? Owned by monks, maybe?’ he asked, enjoying himself. Bion was losing his patience.

‘Yes, of course,’ he said, his paws balled into fists.

‘I know the one.’ The rat jabbed a claw to a side street leading east from the market place. ‘Down Pinfold Lane, past the Jolly Miller then left up the hill.’

Seymour thanked him curtly, turned on his heel then led Bion into the square to round up their friends.

The rat studied them out of the corner of his good eye. He sniffed wetly and turned his attention to the loaf, holding it up like it was the head of a traitor. Then he sniggered and spat into the street.

Deepdale led the others out of Kirkstone toward the sprawling monastery. Whitespike and Berry trod along behind him, leaning forward into the steep incline. The desire to see their parents had overcome the badger’s fatigue allowing them to lengthen their stride during much of the afternoon’s march.

Poppy and Levi were at the back of the party.

‘That was a pretty place,’ said Poppy, indicating the huddle of buildings behind them. Levi batted the air to disrupt a dense cloud from Lapblud’s pipe. The stoat was ambling along before them, his paws clasped firmly behind his back.

‘What’s he smoking, for goodness sake? Flaked cow-pat? He half turned to glance at the town. ‘Yeah, kind of reminds me of the holiday we had in the lakes that year. Mum and Dad rented an old stone

cottage, remember? The owner had a shiny, bald head. Dad called him "Eight Ball." What was the place called?

'Ambleside,' said Poppy.

'No, silly, the cottage.'

Poppy shrugged and glanced ahead.

'Hello, what's Deepdale want?'

The fox was striding toward them, signalling a halt.

'Right then, here we are,' he said once he had reached them.

'Now, them monks don't just let anyone in, so what are we going to — '

'We'll just say we're with Barkstripe and the others,' volunteered Levi, quickly. Deepdale held up a claw and shook it gently.

'Aye, but what if they're not here, and the gatekeeper has never heard of them?'

Lapblud dropped back to join them. He stood at Deepdale's shoulder staring at the ground before him. Poppy looked over him to where the two badger children waiting on the path.

'Course they're here...I mean, why shouldn't they be?' she said.

Deepdale's beads clattered softly as he shook his head.

'I've no idea, and that's just the point I'm making.' He nodded toward the badgers. 'But them two think their Mum and Dad are just beyond that gate. So, if they're not we ought to have a back-up ready, otherwise two young cubs are liable to get upset real quick.'

Lapblud scratched his chin.

'We know they were headed for this place don't we?' This drew nods from the others. 'Well, if they ain't here yet, it means they will be at some point soon, don't it? So we tell Miss Berry and Master Whitespike that we'll just wait for 'em. In which case could I suggest the pleasant hostelry on the corner, back there?'

Deepdale patted the old stoat's back.

‘Hah, he can sniff a jug from a league or more,’ he said.

‘Excellent idea. Should have thought of it myself ... the brain must be more frazzled than I thought.’

The four re-joined the badgers and together they approached the monastery. The narrow gate appeared sturdy studded by rows of bolts. An iron ring fashioned to look like rope hung in the door’s centre. Levi stepped up and, with a look at Deepdale, slammed the ring against the door. He stepped back to wait, admiring the arch above. The stone was engraved deeply with fine acorn leaves, reminding Levi of the church back home.

They did not have long to wait before heavy bolts were drawn back and the door opened to reveal an aged badger monk, his face grizzled with grey. He thrust his paws deeply in the gaping sleeves of his habit and bowed low in greeting. Deepdale stepped forward and bowed respectfully.

‘Greetings, brother, we come in search of our friends – refugees from Skenmarris far to the south. They were headed this way.’

Before the monk had time to reply, Berrysap squealed in delight. She leapt over the worn stone threshold, elbowed her way past him, and ran into the monastery grounds. Her brother quickly leaned to peer around the puzzled monk. His breath caught in his throat.

‘Mother,’ he cried, then he too hurtled through the narrow opening into the open courtyard beyond.

The yard was overshadowed by a large church and octagonal chapter house. To the left of these a group of smaller buildings huddled in the lea of the outer wall. Cob was standing on the steps of one of the buildings, leaning heavily on a balustrade. The old badger stood with one paw clutched before her mouth, gaping pop-eyed as Berry and Whitespike scampered toward her, their feet kicking up dust.

‘Right then, I reckon that answers one question at least,’ said Lapblud, a slight smile creasing the corner of his eyes.

‘Your friends arrived yesterday,’ said the monk, stepping away from the threshold and inviting them in. ‘I take it the two youngsters are the chief’s missing offspring?’

‘That they are,’ said Deepdale, stepping inside. ‘Yesterday you say? And how were they?’

The badger withdrew his paws from his sleeves and placed one onto Deepdale’s shoulder.

‘Tired, my friend, as I observe so too are you. Father Abbott thought it best to admit them to the infirmary, under the care of the brother herbalist. Each has responded well to rest and my brother’s tonics, but I feel the safety of these walls has been the greater medicine. Come now.’ He beckoned them to follow him to a low building several metres to the right of the gate, where a young monk waited holding a stack of towels.

The old badger nodded his thanks to the youngster and lifted the uppermost towel, handing it to Deepdale.

‘Here, wipe away your cares and rest easy. I am brother Woodstock and I am at your service.’ He handed out the towels to each of them. Levi and Poppy were surprised to find they were warm, with a faint citrus scent. They wiped the trail dust from their faces, hands and necks. When they had finished they saw the young monk had disappeared into the lodge. He appeared moments later with four large goblets on a tray.

‘Here,’ said Woodstock lifting a goblet and offering it to Deepdale, ‘a drop of our cellarer’s finest will slake your thirst and invigorate weary limbs.’

Together they nodded their thanks and drank deeply. Levi flinched at the liquid's strong citrus tang, then drank deeply, allowing it to soothe his parched throat. He was draining his goblet when he heard a shout behind him. It was Seymour.

He turned to see his uncle striding toward them, a broad smile on his face. Despite the monk's liquor, Levi's mouth felt suddenly dry and he swallowed down on his rising emotion. Poppy gave a squeal and ran out, her arms wide.

'Uncle Seymour.'

Seymour embraced her, lifting her feet from the ground. Levi wanted to hug his uncle, too. He was sure that if Deepdale and Lapblud were not there he probably would have done. Seymour joined them, leading Poppy by the hand.

'I am delighted to see you all,' he said. 'Delighted and mighty relieved. I fear that, had you failed in your mission, poor Barkstripe and his good lady would not have survived the year. Their hearts were breaking a little more with each passing day.'

'Aye, we would have got here sooner but we were all in,' said Deepdale. 'Took it easy since Branbourne. Saw no point in driving us into the ground.'

Seymour nodded his agreement. He looked around him.

'Where's Nipper,' he said, hesitantly.

Deepdale sighed and looked to the ground.

'Aye, that's another story,' he said, sadly. 'Nipper failed to make it.'

Seymour groaned and wiped a sleeve over his eyes.

'So many,' he said. 'We may have reached our goal, but the price has been so, so high.'

Deepdale stepped close to Seymour. His expression was grim.

‘We may have reached our goal,’ he said. ‘But we may not be safe yet.’ Seymour raised his eyebrows but remained silent. Deepdale continued.

‘Rasse is still out there. He pursued us certainly as far as Cultaine, and was probably waiting for us at Hengeport. But the boat’s skipper agreed to drop us at a creek north of the harbour, and we gave the blighter the slip.’

‘Yes, Uncle Seymour,’ added Levi, ‘for all we know, Rasse might be right behind us.’

Seymour stared into space, chewing his lip for a moment. Then, with a brief nod he appeared to brighten.

‘A boat, you say? It sounds like you have a rare tale to tell. Come on, let’s get you settled and then we’ll eat. We’re all guests of the Father Abbott, and you’ll be pleased to know he keeps a rare table.’

Lapblud pulled the pipe from his mouth and stared into the cold bowl.

‘Well that’s summat, anyhow. Me belly’s flapping against me backbone.’
