

Chapter Eight

Deepdale hesitated before turning toward the boy. 'What happened, lad?' Levi paused to gather his thoughts, his mind still reeling following their capture.

'Poppy and me we — ' his breath caught in his throat. 'Poppy?'

Deepdale heard Levi pull away and shuffle across the floor.

'Poppy?' repeated Levi more urgently. Then something moved to the ranger's left.

'I'm here.' The voice was Poppy's, but her tone was wooden and lifeless.

'You okay?' began Levi, dragging himself over the packed earth floor toward his sister. 'Did they hurt you?'

'Not much, but I'm sure they will sooner or later. We've lost, Levi. We failed them.'

Levi hung his head in the dark. This time he could not argue with her, though he truly wished that he could.

Despite the pain that wracked Deepdale's own body, he dug his heels into the floor and pushed himself upright. The wall behind him was cool and damp. 'Nobody's lost while we're still drawin' breath,' he said. 'Come here, the both of you. Huddle together, keep warm.' He felt Poppy snuggle up to his side. She turned to him.

'Even you have to admit that things don't look too good,' she said.

The sound of voices reached them from nearby. The exchange was brief, then footsteps receded into the distance.

‘They’ve looked better,’ said Deepdale after a pause. ‘Aye, we’re in enemy hands and trussed up like game birds but ...’ his voice trailed off. He had run out of answers.

The three sat in silence for several moments.

‘Where’s Nipper and Lapblud?’ asked Levi eventually.

Deepdale sighed. ‘I don’t know,’ he said. He explained the events leading up to their rout on the hilltop. ‘There were too many, we scattered. I got caught afore I reached the bottom. Dunno about the others. Hope they escaped but ...’

Poppy sat up beside him. ‘So they could still be out there. There’s a chance they — ’

Suddenly the three started as someone whisked back the door curtain allowing flickering torchlight to flood the small room. A figure stepped inside and held the torch high. It was Rasse. The jug the children had seen him with earlier remained in his other hand and the polecat now swayed drunkenly. He took a step closer to Levi and snarled down at him.

‘Not so cocksure now, are we?’ he said, his words thick with drink.

Levi pushed himself back to the wall, ignoring the pain in his arms. He had somehow known he would meet Rasse again, but he had hoped that when that time came the terms would be more favourable. He eyed the hilt of Rasse’s sword, just visible above the polecat’s shoulder and swallowed drily. After all they had been through was this to be how it would end? Tethered and slain in cold blood in a dirty outhouse.

Rasse snarled again and aimed a kick at Levi’s leg. At this Deepdale sprang forward as far as his bound body would allow and growled at the polecat his lips drawn back from his sharp, white incisors. Rasse recoiled quickly, dropping the torch to the floor. Then, recovering his wits and

realising he was in no danger, he kicked wildly at the fox but lost balance and fell backward, his paws flailing. He would have hit the ground, too, but someone darted quickly into the doorway and two dark paws grabbed him around the middle.

Beyond the polecat, Levi saw the fur kilt and leather breastplate of a mink warrior. The mink pushed Rasse upright and wrestled him inside, the Peregrine feather in the warrior's cap just tipping the door lintel.

'Denbrok and Rankwolf,' growled Deepdale. 'The scurviest scumbags in Caellfyon.'

Sable Denbrok took a couple of steps into the hut and levelled a claw at Deepdale.

'Ach, insult me now, filth, for tomorrow in our fires you beg for death.' The mink turned and eyed Levi and Poppy over the guttering torchlight. He sneered, aiming the claw at each in turn. 'Ah yes, and you outlanders will also beg, as the flames sear your hairless, pastry white flesh.'

He stamped on Rasse's torch, extinguishing it, then pushed the Polecat ahead of him before he too stepped outside.

'I said they would want to hurt us,' said Poppy, breaking the silence that had descended in the hut.

'Look on the bright side, at least we have a little light now,' said Levi nodding toward the open doorway. Outside, the mist remained above the clearing partially cloaking the trees beyond.

'You okay, kids?' said Deepdale. 'Did the swines hurt you out there?'

'Not much,' said Levi. 'It's these stinking ropes that's the problem. If we got rid of these, it would be a big improvement.' He shifted his bound legs to restore his circulation and grimaced as something grated against his anklebone. His mind suddenly flashed back to the villager's

woodland campsite following Rasse's final raid. The night the badgers were taken.

'What an idiot,' he said suddenly, unable to keep the excitement from his voice. 'Poppy, feel in my boot, will you? This one.' He half rolled over, and lifted his legs.

'Do I have to? You've not bathed once since we arrived here.'

'Yes you do – and yes I have ... once.'

As Deepdale curiously looked on, Poppy shuffled down so that her hands were level with Levi's boots. She probed down the side of the leather, inhaling sharply as her fingers closed on something.

'Got it?' asked Levi.

'Uh huh,' grunted Poppy.

'Got what?' said Deepdale, leaning over to see what was happening.

Poppy withdrew the item and grasped it firmly in both hands. She ran her fingers over it, tracing the inlaid beadwork and delicately feeling its keen, bronze edge.

'Whitespike's dagger,' she said.

Whitespike was right to feel pride in his dagger as it took only minutes to slice through their bonds. As Deepdale was cutting through the last of the ropes at Poppy's ankles Levi leaned back and gingerly rubbed his own wrists.

'You okay, lad?' said Deepdale as he returned to Levi's side, offering him the knife.

‘A bit sore, that’s all.’ Levi took the dagger and slid it down into his boot. ‘Now to rescue the badgers, I guess. I’m sure they’re in the stockade.’

‘They are,’ replied Deepdale. ‘I heard ‘em brought in not long after I were thrown in here.’

Poppy gathered up the ropes and tossed them against the wall.

‘Lucky you remembered that knife, Levi, at least we can defend ourselves now.’ She looked toward the door.

‘Hold up there, lady,’ said Deepdale. ‘Them woods are still teeming with mink. They’re feelin’ right chuffed with themselves right now, so let’s leave ‘em to party awhile, and maybe they’ll pickle themselves in ale. Once things go quiet, that’s when we’ll make our move.’ He held out a paw to Poppy. ‘Sit yourself down. I’d dozed a bit before you came in but you both seem jiggered, so I’ll take watch an’ you get some shut-eye. In which case I’d better be having that blade back, lad. Just in case.’

Levi leaned forward and returned the dagger to Deepdale, then slumped back against the wall. He reached for Poppy and she flopped down beside him, shuffling close. With his mind no longer distracted by the pain of his bonds Levi quickly felt the icy cold rise through the floor and seep from the wall penetrating his clothes. Just when he thought there was no chance of sleep he began to feel Poppy’s body heat warming his side. He gently pulled her closer. She slumped her head onto his shoulder and within minutes, she was breathing deeply, evenly.

Soon Levi felt his own eyelids drooping. The last thing he saw as he drifted into sleep was the silhouette of Deepdale standing guard in the shadows by the door.

Levi sat up with a start as he felt Deepdale's paws on his shoulders, shaking him from sleep.

'C'mon, boy, it's time,' said the ranger.

Poppy was already standing by her brother's side stretching her arms. Levi glanced beyond Deepdale to the open door. The mist had lifted but the darkness remained. Above the trees stars glinted like beds of cold gems. Levi paused to listen. Stillness had descended over the woodland.

'Told you,' said Deepdale as though reading Levi's thoughts. A crafty glint had returned to the ranger's eyes. Levi reached up to his friend's face.

'You're hurt,' he said, noticing for the first time an angry scar running along the ranger's cheek beneath his left eye. Congealed blood lay matted on the fox's fur. Deepdale gently batted the boy's hand away.

'I'm okay. They just knocked me about a bit, that's all.'

Poppy turned and inspected Deepdale's face.

'Are you up for this?' she said, concern in her eyes.

'More than ready, lass. It's payback time.'

Levi wandered over toward the door and peered around the doorframe toward the ruined hall. The trunk of a nearby beech tree glowed dimly, reflecting the light from a hidden campfire.

'It's a shame this opening isn't on that wall,' he said, pointing to the back of the hut. 'Away from prying eyes.' Deepdale spun Whitespike's dagger in the air, catching it neatly.

‘That can be remedied.’ Without bothering to explain, he squatted down and began digging with the point of the blade into the earthen wall of the hut. Poppy understood immediately. She knelt down by his side and began clearing away the debris. Levi remained at the door.

‘Keep the noise down,’ he said.

Within minutes, Deepdale had cut a sizeable hole in the hut wall, large enough to crawl through.

‘Here’s your door,’ he said.

Levi stepped over and patted the ranger’s back.

‘Come on then, it’ll be getting light soon. You two first.’

Deepdale led the way, and then Poppy and Levi followed him through the hole to the open space outside. As the three stood up Deepdale leaned close.

‘Careful now. We’re still in view of any patrol that may be lurking around the ford. Keep to the shadows.’

The children followed the ranger, skirting the hut wall and silently crossing to the stockade. Once there they shuffled around until they reached the entrance. Deepdale hunkered onto his haunches pulling the children down.

‘I’ll stay here. You two nip inside and get the badgers. As the gate’s open and there’s no guard my guess is they’ll be trussed up tight like we were, so you’ll be needing this.’ He offered Levi the knife.

Levi weighed the knife in his hand and took a deep breath. Above them, the trees shifted restlessly. Then he and Poppy entered the stockade.

Once inside they paused a moment, allowing their eyes to adjust to the gloom.

‘Over there,’ whispered Poppy.

Levi followed her gaze and, sure enough, what appeared to be two bundles lay propped against the far wall. One of the bundles moved before the children were half way across the compound.

Poppy cupped her hand to her mouth.

‘It’s okay, it’s Poppy and Levi – you’re safe now.’

There was a sharp intake of breath and then both figures shuffled, trying to sit up.

‘Poppy, that really you?’ Berrysap’s voice quivered with excitement.

Poppy hurried over to her friend.

‘Shush, we’ve got to get you of here.’

Levi joined her and immediately began sawing at Whitespike’s bonds. Within minutes both badgers were free. They hugged briefly.

‘What now?’ said Whitespike reaching for his dagger.

Levi held on to it.

‘Sorry, but if you don’t mind I’ll let Deepdale kee — ’

‘Deepdale?’ interrupted Berry. ‘Is he here, too?’

Levi nodded.

‘Outside. But things haven’t gone to plan and this is the only weapon we’ve got. So if Deepdale can have it just while we’re out of danger ... we’ve a ways to go yet.’

Whitespike wrapped his paw around Levi's hand.

'Lead on.'

The group assembled outside the stockade where Deepdale was waiting. He was holding the unlit torch from the hut.

'Thought we'd need this,' he said. Then, seeing Levi's puzzled expression, he added, 'I've been doin' some thinking. Our best chance of escape lies over yon moor to Alney. It served us right once, so no reason not to take it now. Thing is, our chance of getting' through them woods unseen is slim. So, if we're to succeed, we need a diversion.'

The ranger glanced down to Levi's belt where his leather pouches remained slung.

'They took your weapons, boy, but did they leave you with other stuff?'

'What? Tinder and flint?' Levi patted his belt bags. 'Aye, they're here.' He dug into a pouch and passed them to Deepdale.

Deepdale batted the air for them all to squat down.

'Right, you lot get ready. I'm going to see how damp this here hut's thatch really is. When I shout, you run fast as you can across the clearing, get yourself in cover as soon as you're able. Don't fret any as I'll be right behind you.'

'What then?' asked Levi.

'Then,' said Deepdale nodding toward the village, 'we'll see how well the thatch burns over there – see what them mink value most of all, the village they were so desperate to take, or us few humble folk ... 'cause to save one they're gonna lose the other.'

Levi, Poppy and the badgers waited like athletes poised in starting blocks each listening intently to the sounds behind them.

‘I don’t like this,’ said Whitespike. ‘We ought to be sneaking out, not making a racket.’

‘It was sneaking in what got us caught in the first place,’ said Poppy. She placed a reassuring hand on Whitespike’s shoulder. ‘Don’t worry, Deepdale knows what he’s doing.’

From behind them came the sound of striking flint. They waited, their senses straining. They soon heard a series of sharp crackles followed immediately by a steady hiss, then Deepdale shouted.

‘RUN!’

The four launched themselves across the clearing, covering the open ground in seconds. They paused in the woodland shadow as the ranger thudded up behind them, the flickering torch held aloft in one paw. Behind him, the hut’s thatch had caught hold and ribbons of flame flicked upward sending a myriad of sparks into the night air.

The village remained quiet.

‘C’mon,’ said Deepdale.

He took the lead and together they forged on through the undergrowth heading toward the village. Whitespike and Berrysap looked across sadly as they passed their ruined home. Beyond, the distant burning thatch cast a yellow-golden tint to the hall’s blackened roof timbers. As the group neared the woodland path, the first shouts of alarm rang out.

At Deepdale's signal they squatted down into the shadows, barely a spear throw from the path. Already, confused mink were running down the path toward the fire, shouting in their foreign tongue.

'They're calling for water,' said Berry.

'You understand the rogues?' asked Deepdale.

'Not really, it's just that we were offered water when we arrived, and I've just picked out the word again a few times. They're tryin' to fight the fire.'

'Well in that case, let's give them a bit more work to do,' said Deepdale pushing himself upward into a stooping run. The ranger hurtled through the snarl of shrubs, holding the torch as low as he could. The others followed close behind.

'Bullyrag's place is up here,' said Whitespike, breathing heavily.

No sooner had he spoke when the roof of the old badger's cottage loomed above the encircling trees before them. Together they skirted the garden to the north. Deepdale signalled for them to wait. Then the ranger took off across the garden toward the cottage.

Whitespike watched as Deepdale approached the building, and then he glanced quickly toward the strip of woodland path visible through Bullyrag's open gateway. A mink warrior had spotted Deepdale's torch and halted there. The warrior checked both ways then shouted as he unslung his spear from his shoulder. He charged through the gate heading toward the cottage.

Deepdale's attention was on the building before him. The frantic shouts echoing through the woods drowned out the sound of the approaching mink. The ranger ran to the eaves and offered the torch to the

thatch, his back to the warrior. The mink slowed, readied his spear and took aim.

Whitespike stood paralyzed with terror at the unfolding scene before him. The others, focusing on Deepdale, had failed to spot the warrior. Whitespike blinked and breathed deeply, releasing his locked muscles. He leaned forward and grabbed a rock from the garden. In one graceful motion he took aim with his left paw, pulled back his right and pitched the rock into the air.

The mink was on the point of throwing his spear when the rock caught him on the side of the head, bowling him over like a skittle. Already Whitespike had covered half the distance to the stunned warrior. Before him, the building's thatch was well alight with bright orange flame dancing swiftly along the roof. Deepdale turned, torch still in paw, and watched as the mink rose to its knees, to be pitched over by the hurtling badger.

The ranger leapt forward to assist the young badger. But Whitespike needed no aid. He knelt on the mink's back, grabbed its head and, leaning backward, twisted the creature's head. Its body jerked violently, then lay still. Deepdale ran up, snatched at Whitespike's sleeve and hauled him to his feet.

'C'mon, lad, time to leave.'

Together they sprinted back across the garden and re-joined the others. Levi was about to relay what had just happened.

'Save it,' said Deepdale, abruptly. 'Let's go.'

He led them deeper into the undergrowth before turning south-eastward, back toward the village. Poppy glanced behind her. Bullyrag's

cottage was now an inferno as flames leapt upward above the surrounding trees.

Deepdale torched two more cottages on their way to the moor. The cold grey line of a new day was rising above the distant fen when, with the two young badgers nearing exhaustion, Deepdale led the small group onto the heathland and away from the woods. Behind them, the raging firestorm that was once Skenmarris illuminated what was left of the night sky.
