

Chapter Fourteen

Levi climbed the steps from the courtyard and stepped into the half light of the infirmary building. He was in a narrow entrance hall. An arched window was high on the wall opposite. Outside the window a sycamore swayed in the breeze, its curling leaves turning russet-gold.

The fat herbalist reversed out of a cupboard, puffing and wheezing, his arms loaded with white bedsheets. Levi fought to remember his name.

‘Good morning, Brother Rowan,’ he said eventually. He nodded to a side entrance that opened onto a brightly lit room beyond. ‘Is Seymour in there?’

‘Ah, ‘tis our young warrior,’ replied Brother Rowan, struggling to speak while securing the pile of sheets with his chin. ‘He is indeed. Some of your other friends are there, too. Your sister isn’t there, though.’

‘Oh she’s outside. We’ve just been saying goodbye to our badger friends over in the lodges. She’s a bit upset – just needs a few minutes.’

The herbalist peered up at Levi above the pile of bedsheets.

‘Ah, so you are going, then,’ he said.

‘That’s right. We figured as my uncle has accepted Barkstripe’s – the badger chief’s offer to head up the new village, there’s little point our hanging around for him to recover.’

‘So you’re leaving with that ranger chappie.’

Levi nodded.

‘And how is Seymour?’ he said after a pause.

The herbalist made toward the door that Levi guessed led to the ward. The badger's portly backside filled the doorway, blocking out the light, before he stepped through into the room.

'He's doing fine. The blade didn't hit anything vital and the wound was clean. It was more ugly than dangerous.'

Levi smiled as he thought of the school bullies back home.

'Funny, I know some people like that,' he said as he followed the herbalist into the ward. 'More ugly than dangerous, I mean.' He sniffed the air.

The floral scent of pot-pouri filled the room; herbs, the sweet smell of lavender, and the warming whiff of wood smoke from the fire crackling in the nearby hearth. Golden bars of autumn sunlight slanted across the room illuminating the four beds ranged against the far wall. Three of them were occupied.

Hopsack Fleck was sitting upright in the nearest bed. He still wore a bandage around one forearm. Levi's mind strayed to the battle on the moor, and to Vare's headless body spread-eagled on the grass. He clenched his eyes and shook his head to clear the image.

'Hey, Levi, you okay?' called Hopsack cheerfully. 'How come young Whip there gets the prettiest visitors?'

Levi followed Hopsack's glance to the next bed, where Whip lay back against a small mound of pillows. By his bedside sat Jillie, holding the young weasel's paw.

'If you quit your bellyaching you might just get your turn,' replied Levi. Hopsack whooped in delight earning himself a level stare from Brother Rowan.

Levi wandered over to join his Dad and Deepdale at Seymour's bedside. His uncle's shoulder remained heavily bandaged, but the

dressings were clean. Seymour turned and smiled at him. He patted the bed for him to step close and Deepdale shuffled aside to make room.

The ranger's clothes had been washed and his boots cleaned. Even his fur was brushed and braids tightly plaited. Levi could not remember seeing him so spick and span.

'You brush up well, Deepdale,' said Levi, nudging him.

Deepdale rubbed his nose self-consciously.

'Aye well, when I've delivered you and your sister to that gateway of yours, I'm off back north. To Wickstane. Figured I'd check out an' old friend.'

'Would that be a young vixen,' said Levi, lightly rattling the ranger's beads.

'It might. Then I might find me somewhere to settle. Figured I needed a bit o' peace after having you dragging on me coat-tails.'

Levi glanced quickly at Seymour. Seymour nodded his understanding and turned to Deepdale.

'Well, I don't have a key to give you,' he said, 'but I can tell you where it's hid. It's the key to a nice farm. Good land.' He held up a hand to stop any argument. 'Let's say it's a 'thank you' gift.' He offered Deepdale his hand to seal the deal. The ranger was speechless.

'Where's Poppy?' asked Seymour.

'Just outside,' said Levi, glancing toward the door. 'Ah, she's here.'

Poppy strode toward them. Her face still showed traces of tears but she smiled bravely as she wandered around to sit on Seymour's bed.

'Barkstripe and the others alright?' asked Seymour reaching for Poppy's hand. She nodded quickly, averting her eyes.

'And the polecats, Rooter, Flagg and the others,' said Seymour, 'how're they.'

‘A bit sheepish,’ said Levi. ‘But Bion is keen to ensure they aren’t shut out.’

‘He’s a good one. We may not have made it without him and his friends from Wormwich. He’s going to be a great help when we establish the new village. And we’re both keen to ensure the polecats are included, too. Now’s a time for reconciliation with the badgers. Both will be equal in our new society. Only that way will we prevent these things happening again.’

Deepdale nodded his agreement.

‘But it’ll be a hard road. There’s deep-seated resentment there,’ he said. ‘The bitterness had been brewing for years. Wounds’ll be deep.’

‘But we’ll do it, Deepdale,’ said Paul.

Levi and Poppy turned sharply. Their Dad was looking at each in turn, as though gauging their reaction to his comment.

‘We?’ asked Poppy, her voice breaking.

‘But you’re coming with us, Dad,’ added Levi quickly. ‘With Pop, Deepdale and me.’ He searched his Dad’s face as he felt a cold fist close around his heart. ‘You will come, won’t you, Dad?’ he added, reaching for Paul’s hand.

Paul took Levi’s hand as he shook his head slowly.

‘I’m not ready. I’m sorry, son, but I don’t have your strength.’

‘Strength,’ spat Levi, unable to contain his disappointment.

‘Your Dad’s right,’ said Seymour. ‘You came here to escape something, and in so doing faced a situation far more terrible. Yet you summoned the strength to face it. You faced your fears and won. Your Dad’s own battles aren’t quite won yet.’

Deepdale placed a paw on Levi’s shoulder.

‘Strength can sometimes be found in the most unlikely of places, and brought out by the most difficult of trials.’

Levi turned to his Dad.

‘Will we see you again?’ He spoke with long pauses as though afraid to ask the question, and even more afraid to hear the answer.

Paul reached for him and pulled him close, beckoning for Poppy to join them. Together the three stood huddled at the foot of Seymour’s bed for several moments. Outside, a bell rang out sharp and clear in the morning air. Eventually Paul held them at arm’s length, looking from one to the other.

‘Of course you’ll see me,’ he said. ‘One day you’ll look out of the window and there I’ll be walking up the path – or who knows, maybe I’ll see you here, walking down mine.’

Levi stared into his Dad’s eyes, his mind suddenly in a spin. Saying all those goodbyes had made things seem so final. He had never even thought of the possibility of returning.

He looked around him.

All the people he and Poppy loved and trusted were there in that room, and yet they would shortly be leaving them. He replayed his Dad’s words in his mind and smiled.

Maybe he’s right, he thought. Maybe one day we will be back.

THE END