

## Chapter Thirteen

Rooter and Flagg stood and watched as the handcart pulled away from them, its worn timbers creaking and swaying as the old stoat travellers hauled it down the trail. Rooter's eyes bore a distant, lost look, his face drawn as though he wished that it were he who was journeying southward. Flagg punched his sleeve.

'Come on, or we'll have the boss to answer to.'

Rooter turned around and stepped into line by the other 'cat.

'Huh, and we can't be havin' that now, can we,' he said, his lip twisted into a sneer. Together, the pair continued down the narrow glen. The remaining troopers, led by an eager Rasse were twenty metres or so ahead of them, the Kirkstone hills looming on either side, stark and grim. Rooter's tail jittered from side to side.

'Cripes, this place gives me the willies, don't it you?'

Flagg aimed his twitching snout toward the southern crags rearing upward to their right. A torn shred of cloud drifted across their summit.

'Oh no, it's sort of ... of majestic like. Cruel and unforgiving, but powerful and protective at the same time.'

Rooter gaped at him.

'Oh for pity's sake, don't go all poetic on me, lad.'

There was a rapid slap of sandals on the path ahead and the pair turned to see Rasse approaching. The polecat leader's paw rested on the hilt of his dagger as he stomped toward them.

‘Get a move on you lollygaggers. I ain’t come this far to be slowed by anyone, least of all you,’ he said, directing his anger at Rooter. He stood a moment longer glaring at each in turn then spun about and strode back the way he had come. Flagg skipped into step beside him.

‘So, boss,’ he said, his head bobbing in a fawning manner, ‘if what them travellers back there says is right we should be reachin’ Kirkstone itself by, what — tomorrow?’

Rasse’s curt nod was barely discernible. He had seen enough of this wretched country to last him a lifetime. He hoped that once this business was over he never saw a single heather-clad hill again.

As triggered by his thoughts, the wind moaned down between the surrounding hills, whipping up dust devils on the trail. One swirled up into his eyes. He screwed his face up in loathing. The smell reminded him of Jilli’s chicken pen back home. He snarled a curse and spat onto the path.

Rooter hung a pace or two behind, scowling at Rasse’s back.

‘You didn’t have to kill ‘em did you?’ he said.

Rasse stopped and turned, a warning look in his cold eyes.

‘What’re you on about now you blatherin’ idiot?’

‘The two rats. Them on the boat. You didn’t have to kill them, you could have left them –’

‘What’s got into you? You thinkin’ o’ becoming a priest all of a sudden? Look, two things. First off, you have to learn that no-one stands in my way. Thought you’d have known by now. Them two tried to pull a fast one, and they paid the price. They knew the odds.’ He stepped toward Rooter, his paw still resting on his hilt. ‘And secondly,’ he added through gritted teeth, ‘I shouldn’t have to explain myself to a lowlife toe-rag such as you. And believe me I won’t be doing again.’ He prodded Rooter’s chest. ‘This is warnin’ number two – and I don’t do threes. So take heed.’

Rasse turned about and stalked off to re-join the remaining troop. Rooter brushed his jerkin and grumbled beneath his breath. Flagg shook his head and sighed.

‘He’s right you know. You’re being a nut. He’ll run you through one of these days.’

Rooter kicked at a stone, sending it flying into the heather.

‘Huh, we’re the nuts for following him? What’s in it for us now, eh?’ He continued without waiting for an answer. ‘Nothing, that’s what. All he’s interested in is his stupid grudge with that damn outlander – and who’s to say he’ll beat him when he finds him? I heard that damn ranger has been showing the lad a trick or two with the blade.’

Flagg snorted scornfully.

‘Shouldn’t worry about him none,’ he said. ‘I’ve not seen the boss so fired up in a long time. You saw how he treated that mink villain back at the village. Put him right in his place, he did. Left him stammerin’ and spittin’ like the useless critter he is.’ He looked proudly toward the troop leader. ‘No, my money’s on the boss. I hope the outlander makes the most of the sunset tonight, ‘cause he won’t be alive to see another one.’

Another gust swept down the glen. Flagg sniffed deeply, puffing his chest out.

‘Ooh, wild sage. Don’t you just love it.’

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Seymour had been right. The Abbot provided an extravagant feast for them all. Even Deepdale had to give in before the monastery’s novices served the final course.

The ranger and Lapblud sat opposite Seymour at the long trestle table, filling in the gaps of their heroic rescue. Earlier, Deepdale had been

quick to proclaim Levi and Poppy the real heroes. As a result, the gathering toasted them many times over with the cellarer's finest table wines.

The meal was almost over. As novices laid the table with oatcakes, cheeses and chutneys the merriment began to fragment into isolated pockets of comfortable chatter. Levi tugged on Poppy's sleeve.

'Come one,' he said, rising from the bench seat, 'I need to get some air.'

The two children smiled their excuses and stepped from the brightly lit room into the shadowy gloom of an adjoining corridor.

'There's a small courtyard this way,' said Levi. Then, after they had gone a few more paces he added, 'Ah, here it is, I can see the torches.'

They stepped out into a small courtyard, barely more than five or six metres square. It was an area of hard stone, sharp angles and deep shadows. Guttering torches hissed in wall sconces around the place, giving movement to the shadows and filling the air with the smothering smell of smoke.

Poppy looked up to the open sky above. The honey sweet taste of mead was still on her tongue.

'Isn't it peaceful?' she said leaning against a wall. The stone's cold quickly penetrated her smock and, with a sharp intake of breath, she pushed herself away.

'Sorry, Pop,' said Levi.

'For what?'

'For dragging you out. I just felt, I dunno, I just had to get away. Berry and Spike are back with their Mum and Dad and, yes, I'm glad. And I'm pleased everyone's happy but...'

'But you're tired. We all are.' Poppy laid her hand on his arm. 'Things'll seem different in the morning.'

Levi shook his head, sadly. He had hoped the fresh air might erase the dark thoughts that had been creeping into his mind since their arrival. Instead, the night seemed to close in on him. Somewhere in the distance a shutter slammed. His already squirming stomach coiled up some more.

‘Remember when we lay by the fire at Barkstripe’s, and I couldn’t sleep?’

Poppy thought for a moment. ‘You mean the night before you were to go with Deepdale to see what Rasse and his crew were up to?’

Levi nodded in the dark.

‘That’s right. I can’t help it but I feel just the same now – like something’s about to happen.’

‘Something?’ asked Poppy, her voice suddenly small.

‘Something bad. I felt it then. That night by the fire. And look what’s happened since. Well I feel it now and I’m scared, Poppy. Scared of what tomorrow might bring.’

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Rasse shielded his eyes from the rising sun as he stared up the rise toward Kirkstone. A dusty haze rose above the buildings as the town came to life. An assortment of handcarts had been passing them for some time, each laden with wares bound for market. Rasse pushed himself up from his boulder-seat and turned to the others.

‘Come on you lot, let’s get some breakfast. You’ve done well to march through the night. But at least we’re here now. Them last couple of leagues has given me a craving for grub. I’m sure we can find someone in there with a few tasty titbits for a band of starving travellers.’

‘What then, boss,’ asked Flagg as he beat the seat of his pants with a dusty paw.

‘We do what has to be done – and then we can go home.’

The group moved off in silence, heading up the hill toward the town.

‘This home you’re on about,’ said Rooter, his voice heavy with scorn, ‘where is it then? Sorry to ask, like, but the last one I had were snatched from me by them fancy friends of yours.’

Rasse spun round, his dagger suddenly in his grasp. ‘That’s it.’ He leapt at Rooter and grasped the shocked polecat by the throat. ‘Don’t say I didn’t warn you.’ He swept the dagger back, the blade glimmering like a flaming rod.

‘NO, BOSS,’ called Flagg from behind.

Rasse gave a throaty growl and slackened his hold. Rooter’s stomach tensed painfully in anticipation of the killing thrust he knew was only moments away. His whiskers twitched violently, his eyes darting between Rasse and Flagg.

‘I mean we don’t know how many of them we’ll find,’ continued Flagg, his words spilling out in a rush. ‘We’ll probably have need of Rooter’s spear arm before the day’s out.’

Rasse fixed Rooter with a blazing stare, his nostrils flaring as he fought to control his anger. He grunted in disgust and threw him roughly to the ground.

‘Seems you’ve got yourself an ally,’ he said. ‘So you make sure you do something useful today, or else all friend Flagg will have done is delay your execution.’ He kicked Rooter in the backside. ‘Now git, and join the others.’

The sun had risen into the dense grey clouds by the time the polecats reached the market.

‘Okay you lot, gather round,’ said Rasse as he fished deep into his belt purse, withdrawing a pawful of pegs. ‘It’s time to pool our resources. So come on all of you, pitch in.’

They each handed over what sums they had, and Rasse quickly did the maths.

‘Mmm, situations bleak, lads. Still, I reckon we can get us some nosh with this.’ He handed a few shiny stones to two of the troopers. ‘Here, dash along and get us some breakfast. No flippin’ fish, though. I can’t stand fish.’

As the two scuttled off to the nearby booths, Rasse drew his long sword and walked toward the edge of the square.

‘Right I’ve a blade that needs sharpening. Suggest you lot do the same. Badger hide can be as tough as a miner’s boot.’

He stopped at one of the surrounding buildings. Then, with his back to the wall, he slid down to sit cross-legged in the street. He laid his sword across his knees, produced his whetstone and began dragging it across the blade’s edge in measured, even strokes.

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Levi stared out of the leaded glass window and watched the sun climb up toward the bruise coloured clouds. The panes’ uneven tilt fragmented it into an odd shape as if it was somehow broken.

‘You eatin’ them, then?’ asked Lapblud seated by him. Levi turned.

They were back in the Abbott’s grand dining room. Beyond Lapblud sat Deepdale, tucking into his breakfast. At the far end of the table, Barkstripe and Cob huddled close to their children. Poppy was with them. So too was Jilli Dunbar. The young polecat maid saw Levi looking her way and flashed her eyelashes at him.

'Well?' pushed Lapblud. 'You having them crackers or not?'

Levi stammered an apology and glanced down at the Poppy Seed Cookies on his plate. The taste of Pumpkin Marmalade and Crab-Apple Jam remained bitter-sweet on his tongue.

'No, you're welcome,' he said. Lapblud grabbed the plate before Levi had chance to change his mind.

Seymour sat opposite, chatting to the ancient Abbott, a rumped old badger by the name of Taxus. The Abbott's pelt seemed to hang loosely from his stooped frame, reminding Levi of Poppy's fluffy pyjama case. Occasionally Levi would see Seymour glance at him out of the corner of his eye. There was something strange in the look. Something that made Levi feel even more uncomfortable than he was already.

The feeling of impending doom that he had felt the evening before had remained with him through the night, thwarting sleep and leaving his eyes gritty and sore.

Levi watched as Lapblud reached over the table for the jam pot.

'I'm really sorry about Nipper,' he said.

'Aye, lad.' Lapblud scooped a dollop of jam onto his cookie. 'He were a good 'un and no mistake. They don't make them like him anymore. Still, there's no sense being weepy about these things. Life goes on.' He crammed the loaded cookie into his mouth.

'How did Missus Bodkin take the news? I take it Deepdale told her?' Levi waited while Lapblud finished his mouthful. The old stoat sucked his fingers then wiped his mouth on his napkin.

'No lad, that job were mine. I'm her brother, you see.'

Before Levi had chance to reply, the door at the far end of the hall opened and one of the largest badgers Levi had ever seen walked in. He left the door open and shuffled around the table toward them. Levi was put in mind of an oddly shaped potato, the sort that is round and fat with

a smaller, knobby bit on top. The badger stopped beside Deepdale. Leaning forward, he whispered something into the fox ranger's ear. Deepdale nodded and turned toward Levi.

'This here's Brother Rowan, the herbalist. He's offered to take us to the infirmary to see how Hopsack and Whip are shapin' up.'

Levi brightened a little.

'And how are they?' he said, addressing the Herbalist.

'Doing well, laddie,' the badger replied in a surprisingly high, sing-song voice. 'The young polecat warrior will probably be out today ... I'm having a job keeping him in, so it's as well. The little weasel chap is coming on, nicely. Some nasty cuts, mind, but my truffle poultices seem to be doing the trick.'

Deepdale swung his leg over the bench and stood, rubbing his paws down his jerkin. He tapped Lapblud's shoulder.

'Come on, you can bring what's left with you,' he said. He turned to Levi. 'You coming?'

Levi glanced around the table. The meal appeared to be over. Barkstripe was just wiping his jaws on a napkin. He was to take his family to see the other Skenmarris villagers that morning. They were housed in the monastery's lodging houses beyond the church.

'Okay,' said Levi. 'I've nothing spoiling.'

Seymour interrupted his conversation with the Abbot and leaned over the table.

'Actually, Levi, I'd like you and Poppy to stay here awhile. There's someone I'd like you to meet.'

Levi glanced toward Poppy. She shrugged at him and shuffled around onto his bench as the others rose to leave. Outside, a flock of rooks circled the church tower squawking noisily.

'Oh well then, see you later,' nodded Deepdale, then he and Lapblud followed Brother Rowan out. Barkstripe stood. Bowing slightly, he thanked the Abbott for breakfast. Then he too left the hall with his family. Jilli tagged along closely behind, looking pleased to be reunited with Berry once again.

'What's this all about?' asked Poppy, flicking crumbs across the table.

Levi shook his head. 'No idea.'

'Well, who could Seymour possibly want us to meet.'

Levi sighed. 'Same answer. Still no idea, Poppy. Your guess is as good as mine.'

The old Abbott rose from the table. Seymour stood with him, and together they bowed graciously. Suddenly, each turned toward the door as a loud rumpus struck up outside. Seymour looked questioningly toward the Abbott as several loud shouts echoed around the courtyard.

'Don't worry,' said the Abbott, resting a paw on Seymour's forearm. 'Sometimes I have the novices attending the gate. They can, at times, be a little over zealous in their duty. I'm sure it's nothing.' With a nod to Levi and Poppy, he turned and left the room.

'What's this all about?' asked Poppy as Seymour walked around to their side of the table. Levi's eyes remained fixed on the door. His hand strayed down to his empty scabbard. He glanced at Seymour's sword belt, before remembering that all their weapons had been deposited at the gatehouse.

'I have a surprise for you both,' said Seymour wandering over to a side door, shadowed within an alcove. 'I nice one, I hope.'

Levi turned and followed Poppy as Seymour opened the door and leaned into the room beyond.

'Come on, Paul,' he said.

Levi inhaled sharply. He felt as though something had sucked all the air from the room. He fired a glance at Poppy. She was looking at him, her eyes wide and brimming with tears. Hot tears filled his own eyes. Then, like athletes out of starting blocks they both threw themselves toward the door, Poppy a pace ahead. She ran into the room and halted abruptly, as though she had struck an invisible barrier.

‘Dad,’ she said, her voice brittle.

Levi reached for the doorframe but thought his knees would buckle before he got there. They didn’t, and on wobbly legs he followed his uncle and Poppy into the small room beyond.

It was a sparsely furnished ante-chamber, possibly intended as a store of some kind, but Levi saw nothing but the wooden armchair and the man standing before it, dressed in a monk’s robe. Poppy launched into their Dad’s outstretched arms. With tears streaming down his face Levi followed immediately and snuggled close, enjoying the warmth of his Dad’s chest. The woollen robe was rough but he didn’t care.

Despite the joy he felt, Levi turned and fired an accusing glance at Seymour. Seymour saw this and held a hand out in apology.

‘I couldn’t tell you,’ he said. ‘Though once we arrived in Caellfyon I knew that one way or another I’d be bringing you here ... not that I ever imagined it being under these circumstances.’

Paul gently pushed the children away and draped an arm each over their shoulders. He smiled at them. The usual tired expression Levi knew so well, with its worry lines and downcast mouth had disappeared. In fact his father appeared rested and relaxed. He tousled Levi’s hair.

‘Don’t be hard on your Uncle Seymour, kids. You see, I swore him to secrecy.’

‘But he told us you were staying with friends,’ said Poppy.

‘And that much was true,’ said Paul. ‘They were Uncle Seymour’s friends. And they’re now they’re mine, too.’

‘That’s right,’ said Seymour. ‘Besides, if I’d told you back in Skenmarris, you’d have been itching to get up here. There was too much going on at the time. Folks were relying on us too much for any of us to consider our own preferences.’

‘But once we were on our way,’ said Levi. ‘Once you knew we’d be coming here, surely—’

‘I couldn’t, not even then,’ said Seymour, shaking his head. ‘The journey was agonising enough as it was, without the added torture of knowing your Dad was at the end of it. We all had to stay focused on the tasks in hand. And we did, and we prevailed.’

Paul leaned and kissed the children on their foreheads.

‘That’s right. But you’re here now, and we’re together again – hello, what’s that?’

A loud clattering at the courtyard door startled them. There was a squeal as something crashed in the yard, then suddenly several bodies burst through the door into the hall beyond. There came the sound of the Abbott’s voice, raised in anger.

‘Put aside your weapons,’ he shouted, ‘I’ll have no violence here.’

The next voice chilled Levi to the core. It was Rasse.

‘Stand back, father Abbott, this won’t take long.’

Levi’s breath quickened in his throat as fear took hold of him.

Seymour looked urgently around the room, and then erupted into action.

‘Paul, the chair,’ he shouted.

The desperation in his uncle’s voice unlocked Levi’s paralysed muscles. He quickly sidestepped allowing his Dad to rush forward with the chair. He reached for Poppy and she ran to his side as Seymour grabbed for the door and tried to slam it shut. It was too late. A booted

foot thrust forward, striking the door and knocking it back. Rasse stood at the entrance, his sword gleaming in the alcove's half-light.

'Well look ye here, we've a whole nest of the beggars.' Several polecats crowded behind him, their spears held aloft.

Many voices were now shouting loudly in the courtyard. Someone called out Deepdale's name. Somehow Levi knew that even if the fox was on his way from the infirmary he would be too late to save them.

A flash of steel caught his eye and a spear flew into the cramped room. Paul instinctively threw up the chair knocking it aside. It skated off, struck the wall to Levi's left and clattered to the floor. Seymour glanced down at the weapon. It was barely two metres away. He recovered his initiative and leaped toward it, only to run into the path of another. Levi watched in horror as it pierced his uncle's shoulder, spinning him around and spraying Levi's face with blood. Seymour stumbled, crashed against a crate and slumped to the floor. Poppy screamed.

Paul took one look at his brother. Then, shouting with rage he leapt toward Rasse.

Rasse skipped half a pace backward, reversed his sword and whacked the man aside the head. Levi stared in horror as his father dropped like a felled tree in the doorway. He edged backward to the cold wall as Rasse skipped over his father's prone body and advanced on him, his sword levelled. Two other polecats followed him into the room and forced Poppy into a corner, holding her back with their weapons.

'Levi no,' she screamed, desperately trying to bat aside the spears with her bare hands, 'don't let him do this.'

Rasse chuckled under his breath as he gripped his sword in both paws.

'Hello, young buck,' he said, grinning. 'Reminds me of the first time we met, don't it you?'

Despite the appalling events of the past few seconds, and the terrible threat he now faced, Levi felt his mind clear a little. He shook his head.

'That wasn't me.' He glanced once to the floor beyond the lifeless form of his uncle, then back to the glinting blade before him. He focused all his attention on it, following its slightest move.

The blade twitched as Rasse flexed his muscles to strike. This was Levi's signal. He dropped to the floor as the blade scythed the air above him. With one hand groping for the fallen spear he rolled away from the wall. His fingers closed on the shaft. He had no time to work out which way around the spear was as Rasse was already turning, sweeping his sword downward. The whoosh of the blade was loud in the enclosed space. Levi sliced upward to parry the blow.

The crack was almost deafening as the sword smashed the spear shaft, splintering it only inches away from Levi's stunned hand. He looked up at his attacker. Adrenalin had given his vision amazing clarity and he saw that, in his desperate effort to strike the killing blow, Rasse had followed-through hard almost pitching him off balance. Levi glanced down at the wrecked spear. Luck was on his side. At the end of the splintered shaft was a gleaming spear tip. He flipped it over in his hand, grasped hard and, putting all his weight behind the blow, thrust upward into Rasse's exposed belly.

The polecat squirmed around, his eyes wide in horror. Then, seeing the protruding shaft, he squealed like a pig and dropped to the floor, his booted feet thrashing on the stone tiles. Levi looked up at the remaining polecats in the doorway, knowing that if they rushed him he was done for anyway. They glanced at one another. Then, as one they tossed their weapons to the ground and stepped backward. The two animals holding Poppy in the corner lowered their weapons. She gave a squeal, pushed

one of the spears away and ran to where Paul was just regaining consciousness by the door.

Levi stood and brushed himself off. He raised his hand and felt the blood on his face.

'Seymour!'

He spun around and squatted by his uncle's side. Forgetting all that Deepdale had taught him. Had the ranger been there, he would have no doubt scolded the boy on his forgetfulness.

*'Never turn you back on an enemy, unless you know for sure he can do you no harm.'*

Levi finally realised his error when he heard movement behind him, followed immediately by Poppy's warning scream. He spun round on his heels, almost toppling off balance.

Rasse had raised himself to a crouch, his dagger grasped in one paw raised only inches from Levi's neck. Levi knew he was powerless to stop the polecat striking. He heard a scuffle and, at the same time, sensed a rapid movement somewhere behind his enemy, then stared as a spear blade erupted from Rasse's throat in a fountain of blood.

The polecat gagged, his breath bubbling in the gaping wound. Then he toppled aside.

Rooter stood there. He spat once in disgust at the dead militia leader and tossed his bloodied spear onto the floor.

'That one's for Smooch,' he said.

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