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EULALIA!



A TALE OF
REDWALL

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A TALE OF REDWALL

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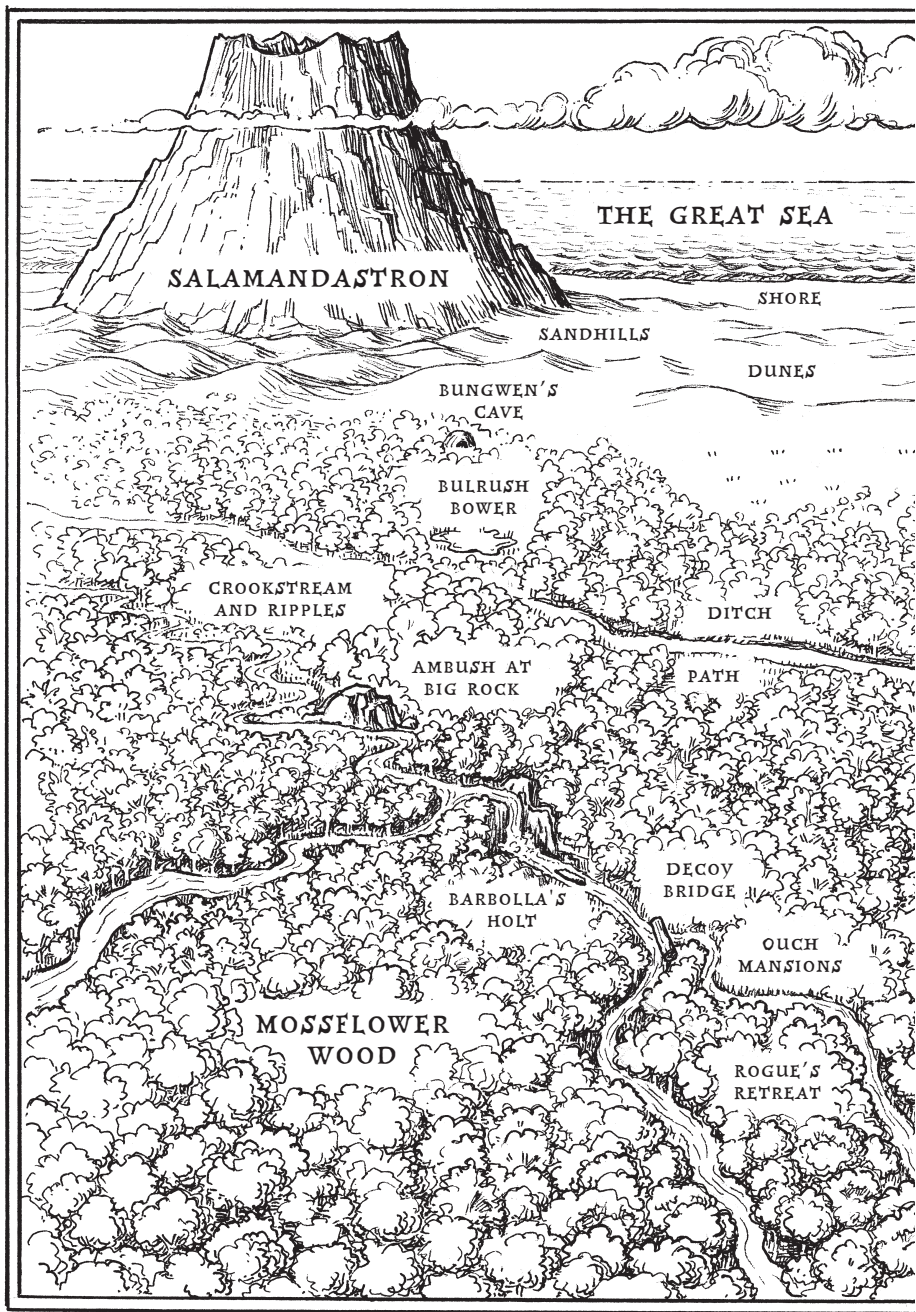
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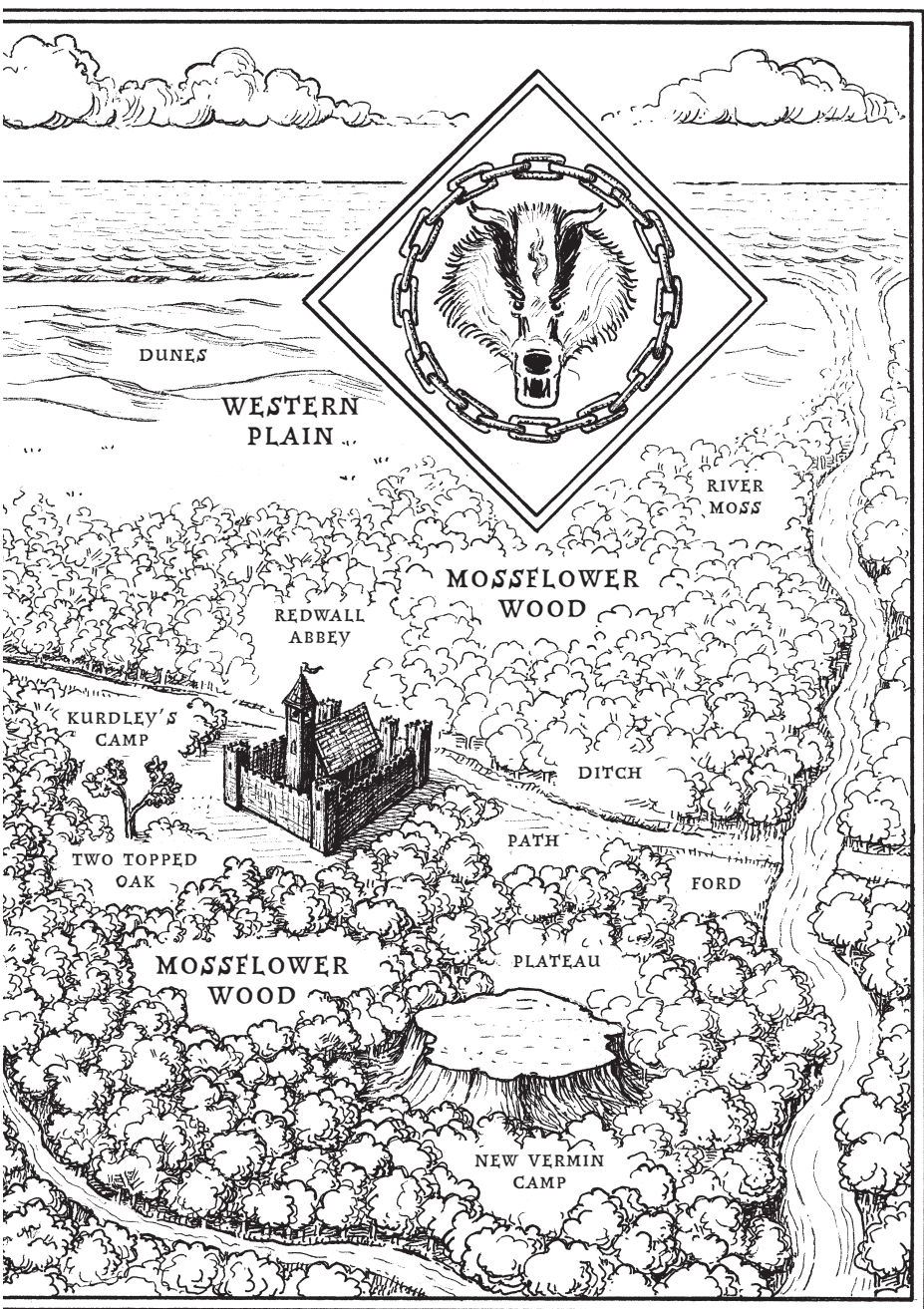
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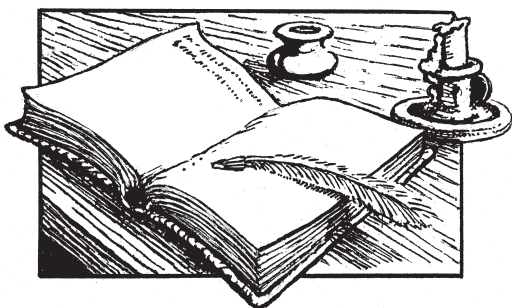


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*In honour of Peter McGovern,
a true friend and a great man*







Prologue

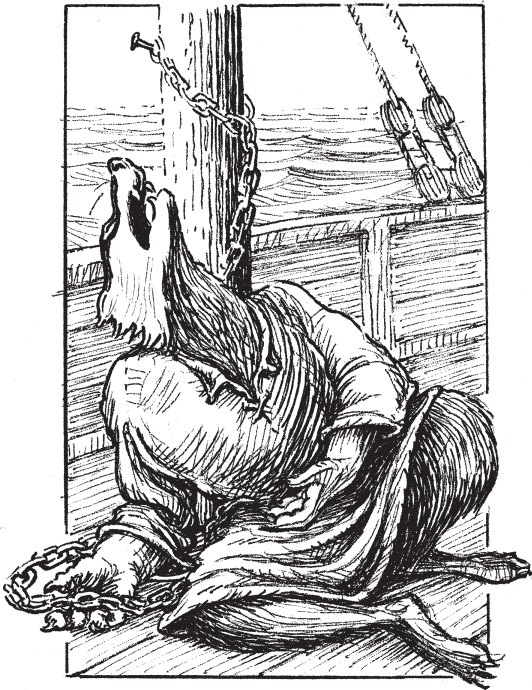
Am I not fortunate, sitting in the forge chamber at Salamandastron? The fire is well banked up – I feel its warmth all around me, whilst I gaze out over our western shores at the sea. What an awesome sight, the vast deeps, on a moonlit winter night. Mountainous waves take on a silver sheen, powerful and mysterious as they thunder in from beyond the horizon.

Headlong, they crash in cascades of foaming spray upon the shore. Chuckling darkly over pebbles, and hissing secrets to the silent sands, as they are drawn back into the depths of boundless water. Nature, my friend, beautiful and fearsome, a hypnotic force few can resist. Goodness, how one's mind can wander, merely sitting here looking out from the forge room window. I must get back to writing my Chronicle.

It is a tale of several fates, each with its own destiny. Since I arrived at this mountain, I have set myself a pleasurable duty. From my own recollections, and information gathered from friends, both old and young, I recently put quill to parchment and began this Chronicle. Mayhaps when the story is finally told, my young daughter will enjoy reading it. I hope you will, too, my friend. Well, it starts like this . . .

BOOK ONE

Longtooth's Prisoner





1

It was a night for raiding. Beneath a dark, moonless sky, high seas ran grey and smooth to the shores of the Northern Isles. With her big single sail bellying smoothly, the vessel *Bludgullet* nosed shoreward, like some huge seabeast seeking its prey in coastal waters. Perched at the masthead, straddling the mainsail spar, the lookout, a small rat called Firty, was first to glimpse the glimmering, golden light on the far side of the saltmarshes. Noting the position of the illumination, he slid skilfully down a rope to the gently heaving deck.

Scurrying to the captain's cabin, Firty rapped on the door. He waited until a tall, golden fox emerged. The little rat tugged his ear in salute.

'Cap'n, dere's a light showin' ashore, dead ahead. I t'ink it might be sum sorta buildin', Cap'n.'

Flinging a heavy cape across his shoulders, Captain Vizka Longtooth smiled, exposing a pair of oversized fangs. Firty swallowed hard. He, like every Sea Raider aboard the *Bludgullet*, had come to know the danger in Longtooth's smile.

'A buildin', ya say! Better sumthin' than nought on dis sun-fersaken shore, eh?'

The small crewrat nodded nervously, watching his

captain reach for the mace and chain. It was a vicious weapon, a spiked iron ball on a thick chain, attached to an oaken handle. Firty crept backwards, trying to stay out of his captain's way as he toyed with the mace and chain, swinging the spiked ball with a flick of his paw. The golden fox continued smiling, allowing the mace spikes to dent the woodwork of the cabin door. Firty tried to keep his eyes off the hypnotically swinging weapon.

'Will ya be goin' ashore, Cap'n?'

Vizka halted the swing of his mace; he fondled the spikes lovingly. 'Aye, it wouldn't be gudd manners not t'call when dey left a light on fer us. Tell Codj ter rouse der crew. We're goin' visitin'!'

As *Bludgullet's* keel ground into the shallows, the small, golden light stood out clear against the dark, velvet canopy of night sky. The vermin waded ashore, everybeast armed to the teeth, eager for booty and blood.

It was a night for raiding!

Lost in the deep sleep of total exhaustion, Gorath lay slumped by a glowing turf fire in the small farmhouse. There was a claw missing from one of the young badger's forepaws, his pads were thick with calluses and hardened scars. Wrestling half-buried boulders and uprooting scrubby tree stumps from the frozen earth was hard and punishing labour for a single beast. Gorath performed all his tasks unaided; his grandparents were too old for such heavy work. It was no easy life on the Northern Isles, both the weather and the land were hostile. Gorath, however, had youth on his side, plus unbridled strength, and an in-born tenacity. In short, he was like most male badgers, doggedly stubborn.

All Gorath knew of his early life had been imparted to him by his grandparents. His family came from the far Southern lands; both his parents were warriors who had fallen in battle during the Great Vermin Wars. The remainder of Gorath's family had been forced to flee the South.

The two old badgers took their little grandson in a small boat. They set off seeking a dream, a refuge of peace and happiness, where they could live without fear. They had heard tales of such places, the mountain of Salamandastron, and the Abbey of Redwall, legendary havens!

However, cruel fate and capricious weather shattered their dream. The aged badgers were landbeasts, with little knowledge of the sea. Their boat was blown far off course, and wrecked upon the rocks of the Northern Isles by a mighty storm. Gorath's grandparents stumbled ashore, carrying him between them, all three fortunate to be alive. That was how they came to a new life on the cold Northern Isles.

Their first few seasons ashore taught the three badgers some harsh lessons. A need for nourishment and shelter was paramount. Using timber from their wrecked boat, local stone, earth and moss, the grandfather built the house. Gorath and his grandmother foraged for food, whilst struggling to make the scrubland arable. It was hard, but they survived until their first meagre crop came in, confirming that they were finally farmers.

Gorath grew to be a dutiful grandson, and a diligent worker. He never failed his grandparents, though as the seasons passed, one into another, things became more difficult for him. Wearied with age and illness, his grandparents grew unable to carry on working.

Thus it was that Gorath faced the hardships alone. He carried on clearing the windswept scrubland, planting, digging, coaxing and harvesting sparse crops from the thin soil. It was grindingly arduous work for a lone young one, but Gorath never complained. Sometimes in the long, dark evenings, when the wind dirged outside, Gorath would sit by the turf fire, listening as his grandfather told tales of Salamandastron or Redwall Abbey. How much truth there was in such stories, none of the badgers really knew, having never visited either place.

But the young Gorath was ever eager to hear more. He

was thrilled at the thought of Salamandastron, the fortress of warriors, ruled by Badger Lords, where none knew the meaning of fear. His grandfather taught Gorath a song about Salamandastron. Though the young badger never had cause or reason to be anything other than a peaceful farmer, something in the ballad wakened a feeling deep within him. It stirred warlike emotions, which made Gorath both excited and fearful, when he sang it as he worked throughout the daylight hours.

‘Where wild waves break on West’ring shore,
that mighty rock mark well,
here live the free, the bold, the brave,
Aye, here the warriors dwell . . .
Salamandastron!
In dreams you speak to me.
Salamandastron!
Great fortress by the sea.

‘Let evil ones come as they will,
our steel awaits them here,
wild fighting hares and Badger Lords
will teach them how to fear . . .
Salamandastron!
Our battle cry rings far.
Salamandastron!
Come shout Eulaliaaaaa!’

Other times his grandmother told stories she had heard about Redwall Abbey. Gorath would gaze into the fire longingly. What a delightful place, the young badger thought. One immense home, built on happiness, peace and prosperity. Where many types of creatures lived in harmony, working, feasting and enjoying life together. Though Gorath was stirred by his grandfather’s stories of Salamandastron, he also liked to hear about Redwall, with its gentle, more tranquil way of life. But what did it all

matter now? Cruel fate and ill winds had denied everything to the young Gorath, leaving him far across the stormy seas, marooned on the harsh Northern Isles, with no means to follow his dreams.

These days, Gorath's main refuge came through sleep. More so as his grandparents had gone silent, they seldom told tales, or sang. They, too, withdrew into themselves, slumbering constantly.

The young badger lay by the fire, letting his eyes close, thinking how the weather had played a miserable trick on him. It had been a wild winter, followed by a false spring. In the space of a single night, all the crops, seedlings and fresh green growth, which Gorath had toiled upon, were blighted. Winter had returned with renewed fury, withering and freezing everything which had begun growing.

Gorath fell asleep with his grandmother's words echoing through his mind.

'If we have little else, at least we have peace on these Northern Isles.'

And so they had.

Until that night, when the *Bludgullet* sailed in, and Vizka Longtooth decided that it was a night for raiding!



2

Gorath found himself thrust roughly into a waking nightmare. Hot scattered embers of the fire were kicked into his face. Screams and roars echoed around the farmhouse amid the flickering shadows and smoke. Instinctively the young badger sat upright, grasping the closest thing to his paw. It was the big, double-pronged pitchfork he called Tung. But even as his paw fell upon it, a blinding pain exploded in his head. Dazed by the impact, he turned to see what had struck him.

A big, golden-furred fox wielding a mace and chain was standing over him. The intruder's long fangs glittered, as he smiled in astonished amusement, calling to his crew, 'Dis wan haz der head like a rock I t'ink.'

Before the stunned badger had a chance to dodge, the golden fox brought the ball and chain crashing down again.

Brilliant coloured lights and a cascade of shooting stars thundered through Gorath's skull. He fell into a void of agonized darkness.

How long he remained in that state, the young badger had no way of knowing. Then strange visions began confronting him, a mountain on the silent, sunlit shores of a great sea. He was wading slowly towards it through the

waves. Standing on the tide line, over twoscore huge badgers stood watching him. They were armed with a selection of swords, axes, clubs and spears, each one a beautifully crafted weapon. Something told Gorath that these were not beasts from among the ranks of the living, but the shades of warriors who had passed beyond the pale.

One massive, silver-coated patriarch, far older than the rest, waded out to meet Gorath. He thrust a paw into the young badger's chest, his voice booming out over the sea. 'Why come ye to Salamandastron?'

Gorath resisted the pushing paw, he did not like being shoved about. 'Take your paw from me, old one!'

But the ancient continued pressing him backwards. 'Go ye to the Abbey of Redwall!' He pushed Gorath hard with both paws, sending him floundering into the sea. The young badger spluttered, spitting out the cold salt water.

'Lookit, Cap'n, der stripe'ound's alive!'

Gorath retched, as a weasel hurled a second pail of sea water into his face. He came awake to find himself onboard a large ship, surrounded by vermin, an evil-looking crew. Weasels, ferrets, stoats and rats, all fully armed and clad in tattered barbaric gear. Gorath was held captive, a thick, iron chain was padlocked tightly about his middle, the chain secured to the lofty mainmast.

Refilling his pail from over the ship's side, the weasel hauled it up on a rope and prepared to swing it at the prisoner.

'Can I give 'im annuver drink, Cap'n?'

The tall, golden fox, who had struck Gorath down, was leaning on the midship rail. Smiling, he revealed his long fangs to the captive. 'Well, do ya still be t'irsty, stripe'ound?'

Congeaed blood from the dreadful wound on Gorath's forehead had stuck one of his eyes shut. The young badger stooped against the deck, his head was throbbing unmercifully. Saturated and shivering, he swayed as waves of nausea swept over him.

The golden fox kicked him, repeating the question.

‘Be ya deaf as well as daft? Do ya wanna drink, stripe’ound? Speak!’

Gorath pulled himself upright against the mast, staring at his captor angrily. ‘I am not called stripehound, my name is Gorath!’

The fox ignored him, turning to the weasel with the pail. ‘Give der stripe’ound dat udder drink, Balid.’

As the pail of freezing water sloshed over him, Gorath gasped with shock. The fox pointed at him with his mace haft.

‘Yew got no name aboard my ship, except wot I calls ya. I’ll call ya Rock’ead, ‘cos yew got a skull t’ick as a rock. Aye, Rock’ead, dat’s a good name, eh?’

The crew laughed dutifully at their captain’s feeble joke. Balid, the water-throwing weasel, called out, ‘Sink me, Cap’n, ‘e must ‘ave a t’ick ‘ead, if’n ye couldn’t slay ‘im wid two blows o’ yer weppin.’ Balid had said the wrong thing, it was obvious by the pall of silence which fell over the crew.

The golden fox’s heavy cape swirled as he rounded on Balid. ‘I’m Vizka Longtooth, cap’n o’ der *Bludgullet*, an’ I didn’t kill dat ‘un ‘cos I wants ‘im alive. So wot d’ye say to dat, Balid? Who did yew slay, tell me?’ Vizka saw the weasel’s paws trembling as he bowed in abject apology.

‘Beggin’ y’pardon, Cap’n, I was wid Codj. We never slayed anybeast. Alls wot we did was set fire to der farm ‘ouse an’ locked de two ole stripe’ounds inside, so they couldn’t gerroun.’

That was the second slip of Balid’s tongue. It was also his last. With a maddened roar, Gorath launched himself at the weasel. The shortness of the chain prevented him from actually getting hold of Balid, but as the chain went taut, Gorath strained against it, lashing out with one paw. It connected with the weasel’s neck, slaying him stone dead.

Suddenly, Vizka Longtooth was yelling. ‘Back! Get back,

all of ye! Stay outta dat beast's way!' The vermin crew needed no second urging, they scattered to the for'ard and aft deckrails, away from Gorath's reach.

Codj the fox, who was Vizka's younger brother and second in command, took up the big pitchfork, which he had taken from Gorath's unconscious body at the farmhouse. 'Balid wuz my mate, I'll kill 'im fer dat!'

Vizka stayed his brother's paw. 'No, ye won't. I wants Rock'ead kep' alive.'

Codj scratched at his tail stump. 'Alive, wot for?'

The golden fox chuckled, nodding towards Gorath. 'Ye'd lose a sight more'n ya tailstump, if'n yew tried tacklin' dat 'un. Look close at 'im.'

Both foxes watched Gorath carefully. He was making sweeping lunges at everything, from the limits of the taut chain which held him to the mast. His powerful, blunt-clawed paws were flexing, seeking to tear and destroy anything, or anybeast. Gorath was panting hoarsely, foam flecking over his bared teeth. Fearful roars emerged from his heaving chest. But it was the badger's eyes which struck terror into the beholders. They were suffused totally with dark red blood. The Sea Raiders' young captive had become transformed into a ravening beast, in the grip of some awesome madness.

Vizka took the pitchfork from his brother, showing his impressive teeth as he whispered, 'Aye, Stumple, 'avin' no tail'd be der least o' yer worries if'n yer went near Rock'ead!'

Codj shot a resentful glance at his brother – he hated the nickname Stumple. It had come about after losing his tail in a fight when he was young. He spat sullenly in Gorath's direction. 'Dat beast's crazy mad, 'e should be slain, I tell ya. If'n ye won't let me do d'job, then kill 'im yerself!'

Vizka called out orders to his crew. 'Steer clear o' dat beast, don't feed 'im or give 'im water. Set course due south till I tells yer diff'rent. I'll be in me cabin wid Codj.'

Keeping a safe distance from Gorath, the golden fox steered his brother round to the captain's cabin.

Pouring out two beakers of seaweed grog, Vizka gave one to Codj, explaining his reasons for keeping Gorath alive. 'Lissen, I 'eard once about stripe'ounds like dat one. Some calls 'em Berserks, but ole Windflin said it was sum-mat called der Bloodwrath.'

Codj held out his beaker for a refill. 'Ya mean Windflin Wildbrush, der great Sea Raider?'

Vizka nodded. 'Aye, dat was 'im. Well, let me tell ya, Windflin was slayed by a stripe'ound wot 'ad der Bloodwrath. It was at dat place wid a funny name, Sammerstrong I t'ink, a big mountain castle, far down der sou'west shores. They says der beast wot killed Windflin was an ole stripe'ound called Asheye, a real mad Bloodwrath beast who couldn't be defeated.'

Codj took a swallow of the foul-smelling grog. 'Huh, 'e musta been a champeen fighter ter slay der great Windflin Wildbrush! But if'n Bloodwrath beasts are so dangerous, why do ya want to keep one alive? Best cure for any mad-beast is to kill 'im quick!'

Vizka winked slyly at his younger brother. 'Nah, ya don't turn a beast like our Rock'ead inta fishbait, 'e's val-ible. I got plans fer 'im.'

Codj was intrigued by his brother's words. 'Plans?'

Vizka expanded upon his scheme. 'Aye, plans. If'n I could break Rock'ead, an' tame 'im, jus' imagine dat! We'd 'ave a one-beast army, we'd be der terror of d'land an' sea!'

Codj was not wholly convinced. 'Did ya see der way Rock'ead slayed pore Balid? Huh, one smack of 'is paw was all it took. I never seen nobeast wid dat sorta strength. So 'ow are ya goin' ter tame der beast if'n ye can't get near 'im?'

Vizka shook his handsome golden head pityingly. "'Tis a gud job I'm der brudder wid der brains. Ain't you 'eard dat 'unger an' thirst are de best tamers of all? We jus' keeps

Rock'ead chained t'der mast, an' starve 'im inter my way o' thinkin'. Hah, 'e'll do like I says, or perish, 'ow's dat fer a gud idea, eh?'

Codj was in awe of his older brother's wisdom. 'No wonder yore cap'n o' der *Bludgullet*! Er, an' why are we sailin' south?'

Vizka commandeered the grog flask, as Codj was about to pour himself more grog. 'We're goin' south 'cos dat's my orders. Aye, an' I ain't goin' down as far as dat Sammerstrung mountain. Let fools like Windflin get themselves slayed by madbeasts. I tell ya, dere's lotsa places where der livin' is soft. Good vittles, loot an' plunder, dat's wot I'm after, Codj, an' I don't want ta fight for dem either!'

Codj stared ruefully into his empty beaker. 'So 'ow d'yer plan on doin' all dat?'

The golden fox spread his paws disarmingly. 'Rock'ead can take care of all der fightin' an' killin' fer us, once I got 'im trained proper.'

All of this sounded quite good to Codj, but he still had unanswered questions. 'But if'n we ain't sailin' for der stripe'ound mountain, where else are ya plannin' on goin'?'

Vizka poured him more grog. 'Don't bother yore 'ead over dat, brudder, I'll find someplace. Yew go about yer bizness an' leave it t'me. I'll look out for ya, Codj.'

But the stumptailed fox was still not satisfied. 'Wot'll dis place be like?'

Vizka pondered a moment before answering. 'T'will be a place where I kin rule, jus' like a king!'

Codj persisted. 'Like a king, eh, an' worrabout me?'

The golden fox patted his brother's back. 'Yew kin be cap'n o' der *Bludgullet*, dat's wot!'

The younger fox's tailstump quivered with joy. 'Me, a real cap'n? Bludd'n'tripes, ya won't regret it, brudder. I'll be der best cap'n in all der seas, jus' yew wait'n see. Hee-heehee, me, a cap'n!'

Vizka ushered him to the cabin door. 'Aye, yew a cap'n.

Now go an' keep *Bludgullet* onna straight south course, an' don't strain yer brains wid too much thinkin'. Oh, an' remind der crew t'stay clear o' Rock'ead, an' not t'give 'im any vittles, norra crumb nor a drop, unnerstand?'

Grinning foolishly, Codj threw a clumsy salute. 'Aye aye, Cap'n, unnerstood, Cap'n!' He held the salute, standing there grinning, until Vizka was forced to enquire.

'Well, wot d'ya want?'

Codj giggled inanely, winking several times. 'Ain't ya gonna say "aye aye, Cap'n" back ter me?'

The golden fox frowned. 'No, I ain't, yore norrin charge aboard dis ship yet, I'm still cap'n, gerron wid ya werk!' He slammed the door in his younger brother's face.

Codj looked crestfallen, but only for a brief moment. He brightened up, swaggering off along the deck, practising his role of captain-to-be. Selecting a small, puny-looking rat, Codj jabbed his rump with Gorath's pitchfork, and issued him gruff orders. 'Tell der steersbeast t'keep 'er on a south course! Make dem lines fast, an' swab dat deck! But firstly fetch me some vikkles from der galley! Go on, 'op to it!'

Pleasantly surprised that his commands had been carried out so promptly, Codj perched on the rail, out of the prisoner's reach. Making a great show of lip smacking, he applied himself to a bowl of hot soup and a tankard of beer, taunting Gorath. 'Haharr, would ya like some vikkles, Rock'ead?'

The young badger crouched silently beside the mast, his forehead wound congealed into a huge, ugly scab. This had been induced by the late Balid, drenching him with pails of cold sea water. Gorath's dark eyes smouldered with hatred at his captor, but he did not rise to the mocking fox's bait. However, Codj continued as he ate.

'Mmmm, nice drop o' soup dis, made wid veggibles from yore farm it was. Beer's tasty, too, did yew brew it, or was it de old 'uns? Heehee, dey ain't got much use fer eatin' an' drinkin' now, 'ave they?'

With a sudden roar, Gorath charged his tormentor, giving out a strangled grunt as he was jolted to a halt by the chain. Shocked by the speed of the badger's rush, Codj jerked backwards, spilling soup and beer over himself. Recovering himself, he sneered.

'Shame ya can't git yore paws on me, ain't it? Ya look t'irsty, I'll give ye annuder drink, eh!' Lowering a pail into the sea, Codj flung it over Gorath. The young badger stood unmoving, he did not even blink his eyes as the cold salt water lashed over him. Some of the vermin crew, who were watching, laughed at Codj's feeble attempt to rouse the prisoner further. This drove the stump-tailed fox into a rage. He began shouting at Gorath. 'Did ya like dat likkle drink, Rock'ead, d'ya want some more, eh? Ahoy, thick'ead Rock'ead, I said d'ya want some more, ye can talk, can't ya?'

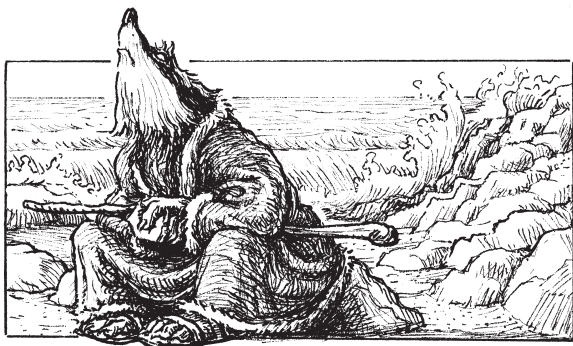
Gorath stared unblinkingly at him, then spoke. 'I can talk, but I don't waste my breath speaking to deadbeasts.'

With an expression of comical surprise on his face, Codj looked around at his shipmates. 'Did ya 'ear dat? De stripe'ound called me a deadbeast! Idjit, I t'ink Vizka musta knocked yore brains loose when 'e belted ya wid 'is mace. Can't ya see I'm still alive an' kickin'? See, I'll give ya anuder drink, jus' to prove it!'

Even as the contents of the pail sloshed over him, Gorath was still staring at his torturer. This time his voice was dismissive, heavy with contempt.

'You murdered my kinbeasts, so I'm going to kill you. I've said all I have to say to you . . . deadbeast!'

Dark blood began rising in Gorath's eyes, clouding them with the fury of Bloodwrath. At that point, Codj's nerve deserted him. Dropping the pail, he fled aft. Still dripping water, the young badger stood, staring after his mortal enemy.



3

With Salamandastron, his beloved fortress, at his back, Lord Asheye sat on his favourite rock, not far from the front entrance of the mighty mountain stronghold. Turning seaward, the ancient badger sniffed salt-laden air, mingling with the softer aroma of landward breezes. Producing a big, spotted kerchief from his dressing-gown sleeve, he blew his snout loudly, and inhaled again. Ah yes, spring was finally done, it was the first day of summer. Tapping the butt of his yew staff against the rock, he hummed one of the Long Patrol hares' marching songs, singing along mentally with the tune.

'Can ye see the golden gorse on the heath,
an' dainty pale blue flax upon the plain,
do ye feel the dewy grass underneath,
then step lively, 'tis summertime again!

'Oh, we'll tramp, tramp, tramp!
if the sergeant says we must.
Aye, we'll left, right, left!
till our paws raise up the dust!
With me blade ever ready at my side,
an' a knapsack full o' vittles on me back,

I'll go rangin' over hills far an' wide,
an' good comrades like you I'll never lack!

'Oh, we'll march, march, march!
till our paws are droppin' off,
until it's one, two, halt!
Tell the cook to serve the scoff!'

Lord Asheye allowed himself a rueful smile. Those were the days! Long-gone seasons, when he would go roving forth at the head of his Long Patrol. Some of those hares had been sprightly paced, but he could outmarch them all. Aye, those were the days of his strength and prime, full of exuberant power and speed. In those times, there was none to equal Lord Asheye. Nobeast possessed his reckless daring in battle.

He gripped his staff tight, sighed deeply, then released his hold on the stout yew pole. Ah, but then . . . no creature had the Bloodwrath like him. What had been a boon in youth and war had become a curse in old age and peacetime. Now the countless seasons weighed upon his silvered fur like a millstone. Now he was paying the price for that wild life he had led. The great badger's mighty frame was bent with age, old wounds he had taken were a toll on his stiff limbs.

But the worst penalty by far was his blindness. All those blows and injuries he had sustained, whilst fighting heedlessly in the grip of Bloodwrath. Asheye had paid for them with the loss of his sight. He heaved himself from his seat on the rock, stepped awkwardly upon a small boulder and tripped. Blowing sand from both nostrils, the once-great beast reached out, scrabbling vainly for the staff, which seemed to elude his paws. Lord Asheye smiled bitterly, muttering aloud to himself, 'As blind as a badger, hah, where've I heard that before?'

A stout paw passed him the staff, and helped him upright. 'T'wasn't me that said it, sah, you'd have prob'ly

taken my bonce off with a single biff, if I had, wot!' The Badger Lord immediately identified the speaker by his firm grip and drawn-out speech mode.

'Ah, Mull, take me inside, will you please.'

Major Mullein Braggwuth Barshaw was a tall, distinguished hare. He wore the dark blue, silver-buttoned tunic of Salamandastron's Commanding Scout Major. Other hares, those of his rank and above, referred to him as Mull. A strict disciplinarian, expert scout and formidable fighter, Mull had been constantly at his Lord's side in the last few seasons. The pair shared a friendship that went back a long way. Mull steered Asheye towards the main fortress door, chatting leisurely.

'Inside it is, sah, teatime doncha know, hot scones, dab o' meadowcream, strawb'rry preserve, an' mint tea, wot! A charmin' an' delicious daily ritual, sah!'

The old Badger Lord shuffled past the main door into a vast, rough-hewn corridor, whose walls were adorned with family crests, suits of armour, fearsome weapons and regimental flags. Lowering his voice, Asheye confided to his companion, 'Let's not go into the large Mess Hall. Have them send tea up to my forge room, Mull. I need to speak with you in private. Too much din in that Mess Hall.'

Major Mullein nodded. 'Right y'are, sah.' He signalled to a pair of young hares who were on their way to the mess. 'Tringle, Furps, nip along and see the Quartermaster Sarn't, will ye. Tell him to set out two trays of afternoon tea for us, bring 'em up to the forge room, if y'd be so kind.'

The youngsters both threw the Major a smart salute. Furp's sister, Tringle, smiled impudently at Mullein. 'Both with cream'n'jam, Major?'

Lord Asheye glared her way in mock severity. 'With extra cream and jam, young miss. Oh, and, Furps, remember which is your left paw and which is your right. Don't go tripping and spilling any, eh.'

Furps bowed awkwardly and stumbled against Tringle.

'Oh er, ah, hmm, no trippin' an' spillin', do m'best, y'lordship, I certainly will, wot!'

Both young hares shouted simultaneously, 'On y'marks! Get set! Go!' They bounded off at top speed. Major Mullein chuckled.

'Stap me, sah, those two haven't stopped racing against each other since the day they were born.'

The old badger made a shrewd observation. 'That's because they both want to be runners in your Scout Patrol, Mull.'

The Major was surprised that Asheye concerned himself with such small details. However, he hid his feelings with a languid drawl. 'Do they really, I hadn't noticed, sah.'

Lord Asheye's forge room was the traditional retreat of every mountain ruler, going back in time to the first Badger Lord. It had a raised fire at its centre, which was never allowed to go out. Charcoal, seacoal and driftwood were piled along one wall of the room, which had all the trappings of an armourer: two anvils, a quenching vat, a ready supply of metal and well-seasoned timber. The metal for blades, the timber for handles and hafts. There was also a bellows, a barrel of oil and bunches of secret herbs, used in the making of weapons. On the wall opposite the door was a long, open window space, facing the shore and the Western Sea.

Lord Asheye sat on the low, wide sill, beckoning the Major to sit beside him. Mullein had been in the forge room many times, yet he still could not help staring in wonder at the weapons which hung from its walls.

Most of them were made for Warrior Badgers, huge spears, hefty shields, stout longbows with arrows almost as tall as himself, and swords. Such swords they were, legendary weapons of massive proportions, broad-bladed, double-pawed hilts, far too heavy for any but a Badger Lord to wield.

Asheye spread his big, greasy forge apron on the sill between them as a knock sounded on the door. 'Ah, the tea. Come in, please!'

It was the first time Furps and Tringle had been permitted to enter this inner sanctum. Their heads swivelled from side to side, trying to take in everything.

Major Mullein hid a smile, cautioning them, 'Eyes front, chaps, look where you're jolly well goin'. Lose that tea an' I'll have your tails for dinner, an' your guts for garters.'

Wobbling slightly, the two young hares made their way to the sill and placed the trays down gingerly. Lord Asheye gave their ears a gentle tug.

'Well done, you two. Now, let's see who'll be first back to the mess. On y' marks . . . get set . . . go!'

They flew off like twin arrows, with the Major shouting, 'I say, shut that door on y'way out! Oh never mind, I'll jolly well do it myself, wot!' He rose and went to shut the door. 'Now, sah, what were y'wantin' to chinwag about, eh, wot?' Mullein spread a substantial-looking scone with strawberry preserve and thick meadowcream.

Lord Asheye ignored the food, lowering his voice as he confided to the Major. 'This is for your ears alone, Mull, not to go beyond this room. Understood?'

'Indeed, sah, mum's the word, wot!'

Asheye nodded his great silver head. 'Good beast, Mull, I know I can depend on you, so listen carefully. Since the turn of the last moon I've been having dreams . . .'

The Major interrupted with a chuckle. 'Know what y'mean, sah, I get 'em m'self. Some pretty odd ones, when I've been scoffin' cheese'n'pickles for supper in the mess.'

Asheye gave a deep snort of irritation. Mullein knew he had said the wrong thing and apologized.

'Ahem, most dreadfully sorry, m'lud, bloomin' silly of me t'mention it. Pray continue, sah!'

The old Badger carried on with what he was saying. 'Being blind has sharpened my perception, made me face things more rationally. Though what rhyme or reason

there is in the voices of long-gone Badger Lords I cannot say. But I trust in them, and I feel instinctively I must heed their words.

‘They have told me of my fate, and mark this, the ones who speak to me in dreams cannot be ignored. This is what I have learned. It is decreed that once the autumn leaves start to fall, I will not be seen again at Salamandastron. So it must be.’

Mullein protested. ‘Not you, sah, why, you’ve got absolute scads o’ seasons to go yet!’

The ancient badger’s immense paw covered his gently. ‘Now, now, don’t go upsetting yourself, my friend. It comes to us all sooner or later. The thought of passing on does not worry me unduly. I’ve had a fine, long life, much longer than I deserve really, considering the wild path my Bloodwrath led me down. In my dreams I have spoken with the great heroes of Salamandastron, Lord Brocktree, Sunflash the Mace, Boar the Fighter, Urthclaw, and others too numerous to mention. They all tell me one thing: Redwall Abbey will soon be in grave danger!’

Major Mullein sprang from the windowsill, his paw clamped on the sabre hilt at his waist. ‘Then with your permission, m’lud, I’ll arm up the Long Patrol an’ get ‘em marchin’ for the Abbey today!’

Lord Asheye beckoned Mullein to sit down. ‘If it were that simple, you’d have been on your way with the Patrol three days back.’

The Major’s long ears rose stiffly. ‘Then what the deuce is holdin’ the confounded job up?’

Asheye turned his sightless gaze towards his friend. ‘The new Badger Lord.’

Major Mullein was back up and pacing the chamber. ‘New Badger Lord, what new Badger Lord? Nobeast told me about any new Badger Lord!’

Asheye waited until the Major slowed his pace. ‘Listen, Mull, I told you I would not see another summer here, so who’ll rule Salamandastron when I’m gone?’

Mullein came to a halt, stamping his footpaw. 'But what's all that got to blinkin' well do with Redwall bein' in danger? Really, sah, I'm all at sixes an' flippin' sevens with your dreams'n'riddles!'

Asheye reached out and clasped his friend's paw. 'Then sit down and be patient. Here, pour me some tea and I'll explain as best as I can.' The Badger Lord sipped his drink slowly, only continuing when he felt the hare had calmed down. 'This Badger Lord who will succeed me, I have learned that he is still a youngbeast. However, he is possessed of an even more ferocious Bloodwrath than was ever inflicted upon me. Our Long Patrol will not be needed at Redwall Abbey because he is fated to be there when the danger arrives. But before he can ever rule this mountain, he must be tested in the fires of battle. Now do you see?'

Mullein stroked his bristling moustache. 'Indeed I do, sah. The Lord of Salamandastron must be as wise as he's strong an' warlike. But how will we know this chap, what does he look like, sah?'

Lord Asheye turned his face to the sea. He sat silent, feeling the gentle wind upon his face. Major Mullein watched the old Badger Lord closely, waiting for a reply. There was a long pause, then Asheye suddenly began speaking as though he was in the grip of a trance.

'Who will defend Redwall Abbey,
in its days of peril and strife?
The beast who shuns both armour and sword,
torn from the simple life.
He with destiny marked on his brow,
who walks with the banished one.
Send forth a maid to seek out the Flame,
to rule when the old Lord is gone!'

Asheye rose, shaking himself like one waking from sleep. 'Great seasons, where did that come from?'

Major Mullein tried not to sound surprised. 'Must've

been your dream chaps who put it into your head, m'lud. Beggin' y'pardon, but you've never been one for the jolly old poetic verse an' all that, wot! Well, stap me, sah, looks like Redwall's in for a bit of a ding dong. Hmm, an' there's a Champion on the horizon, one who'll flatten the flippin' foebeast, if I'm not mistaken. Sounds like an odd chap from your description, wot? Never heard of a Badger Lord who shuns armour an' bloomin' swords. What I really don't understand is the bit about destiny bein' marked on his brow, an' as for walkin' with a banished one, an' sendin' out a maid to seek for a flame . . . if y'don't mind me sayin', sah, the whole thing's got me flippin' well flummoxed.'

Asheye took a sip of his tea, which had now grown cold. 'Well, old friend, I had no idea that I was going to speak such a rhyme, so you'll excuse me if I confess to being as baffled as you are. However, it does explain a few things from my dreams. The coming trouble at Redwall, and the arrival of a Warrior. Also, the fact that this other badger will rule here in my stead, always supposing that he lives long enough, or isn't defeated in battle. As for the rest, I'm truly puzzled. Where's the maid that we must send forth?'

Mullein twirled his moustache briskly, and stood both ears to attention, always an obvious sign of his displeasure. 'Hmph! So that's why I'm not allowed to sally forth with the Long Patrol, sah, a confounded maid is the one for the blinkin' task, accordin' to your sources. Hah, I question the wisdom of a load of long-gone badger spirits. I mean, what possible use would one maid be in the midst of an invasion upon Redwall, eh, wot?'

The ancient badger patted his friend's paw. 'Now, don't get your whiskers in an uproar, Mull, I'm bound to obey the voices of past mountain Lords. So, how do we choose this maid whom we must send to solve our problems? Any suggestions, Major?'

The discussion was interrupted by a series of urgent knocks upon the door. Mullein rattled his sabre hilt. 'Yes, stop knockin' the bloomin' door down. Come in!'

It was Corporal Thwurl, a tall, droopy hare, with a mournful countenance. His nose was swollen, one ear was askew, and his left eye was a puffy slit. He saluted Mullein. 'Major, sah, wish to report, sah, ruckus in the mess, sah, Assistant Cook's gone bonkers, sah!'

Lord Asheye rested his forehead against the windowsill, sighing wearily. 'Not Mad Maudie again. Deal with it, would you, Major Mullein? No, wait, bring her up here. We'll see what she has to say for herself this time!'

When Corporal Thwurl left, Asheye and Mullein waited in stony silence for several moments. Then sounds of a tussle echoed up the stairway outside. Apparently it was the offender being brought to the forge room by four guards. She was very vocal.

'Yah, gerroff, you swoggle-toothed bounders! If I could jolly well get free I'd biff your snouts off! Just you wait, I'll poison your porridge, I'll sabotage your salad, I'll destroy your duff, I'll . . . I'll . . . wahoo!'

Stuffed into a floursack, which was fastened at her neck, the miscreant was hauled into the room and dumped upon the floor. There she struggled, coming out with more colourful oaths at all and sundry. Mullein drew his sabre, roaring.

'Silence, marm! Be still, ye fiend, cease that din!' He slashed downward, neatly severing the drawstring of the sack, and releasing the young haremaid. Lying flat on the floor, she wiggled her ears and threw the Major a salute. 'Most kind, sah, thank ye!'

Mullein silenced her with a glare, turning to Thwurl. 'What're the facts, Corporal, make your report.'

The droopy-faced Thwurl pawed tenderly at his nose. 'There was complaints h'in the mess, Major, h'about the soup. It was too 'ot, sah, this h'assistant cook 'ad loaded it with red pepper, wild ransom, an' that 'otroot stuff, wot otters likes to h'eat.'

The assistant cook interrupted from her prone position.

'Too hot, my auntie's pinny! Barley soup's as dull as blinkin' dishwater, it needed livenin' up!'

Lord Asheye growled out from his windowseat. 'Silence, miss, stand up straight, to attention! Corporal Thwurl, carry on with your report, please!'

'Well, sah, h'I told 'er wot h'I thought of 'er soup, an' she struck me on the nose with 'er ladle, sah, then she went h'on to further h'assault me, an' several h'others, sah. We 'ad to subdue 'er by stuffin' 'er h'in a sack, sah. Whereupon she continued to shout h'insults at h'us, an' . . .'

Major Mullein waved Thwurl to silence. 'Yes, yes, I get the general drift, Corporal. Assistant Cook, what have you to say for yourself, do you wish to refute the charges, wot?'

Assistant Cook Mad Maudie (the Hon.) Mugsberry Thropple fluttered her eyelashes endearingly at him. 'Only to say, Major, that I'd do it all again if that puddenheaded oaf said nasty things about my soup, only next time I'd punch him in his other eye, too, so there!'

Lord Asheye shook his great head sternly. 'That's quite enough of that, miss. Corporal, you and the guard may leave now. Major Mullein and I will deal with this, thank you.'

When the escort had departed, the badger resumed his seat on the windowledge. He spread his big paws despairingly. 'Maudie Thropple, what are we going to do with you, eh?'

Mad Maudie, as she was known to the mountain hares, shifted guiltily from one paw to the other, murmuring, 'Really, I don't know, m'lord, what's anybeast goin' t'do with me, that's what my old pa used t'say.'

Major Mullein wagged his ears knowingly. 'My old friend, rest his memory, Colonel Thropple. What a gallant and considerate creature he was. Don't you remember any of the lessons he taught you, Maudie?'

The young hare smiled brightly. 'Oh indeed I do, sah, Pa

taught me to box, an' I've been Regimental Champion of the Long Patrol for six seasons now!

Mullein squinched his eye into a jaundiced stare at her. 'We know that right enough, m'gel. You've also been on more charges than any other hare I can recall. You've served five terms in the guardhouse, and had three final warnings about your conduct, wot!'

Maudie stared at the floor. 'Sorry, sah.'

The Major's tone hardened. 'Sorry, is it? Well, let me tell you, missy, sorry's not good enough this time. You've tried the patience of everybeast on this mountain far too long, ain't that right, Lord Asheye, sah?'

The badger nodded. 'Yes, it is, Major. Maudie, you leave us no alternative. It gives me no pleasure to drum you out of the Long Patrol. At dawn tomorrow you will leave Salamandastron!'

In the stunned silence which followed, Lord Asheye listened to the haremaid's tears splashing on the forge-room floor. There was a loud sniff from Mullein, then he approached the Badger Lord and whispered in his ear.

'I say, sah, we've never drummed a hare from the jolly old regiment. Couldn't ye find some alternative for young Maudie? I've known her since she was a mite, the daughter of my old comrade Colonel Thropple. I used to bounce her on my lap when she was nought but a babe.'

The Badger Lord could not explain his next statement. The words tumbled unbidden from him. 'I think there's a lot of good in you, Maudie Thropple, so in memory of your father's fine name, I'm going to give you one last chance. The Major and I have decided that you shall go on a most important mission. It will be both dangerous and demanding. Are you willing to go?'

Mad Maudie scrubbed the tears from her eyes with a floury paw. 'Oh, rather, sah, say the bally word an' I'm off like a flippin' lark after a ladybird!'

Major Mullein was still registering surprise at Asheye as he spoke to the haremaid. 'Right, off y'go, pack a light

kit an' weapon, apologize to the Corporal and those others you biffed, then report back here for instructions.'

As the forge-room door slammed shut, Mullein wheeled upon the Badger Lord. 'What'n the name o' blue blazes made y'say that, sah?'

Asheye shrugged. 'I don't know, Mull, but I think Mad Maudie's the one who'll get the job done. Don't you see yet? She's the maid who will fulfil my dream!'



4

Abbot Daucus was a brisk, energetic mouse in his mid-seasons. On this particular afternoon his energy was being sorely taxed, as he searched Redwall Abbey high and low, accompanied by Granspike Niblo, the plump, old hedgehog who was Abbey Beekeeper. Daucus paused at the foot of the attic stairs, waiting for Granspike to catch up with him. Both creatures, panting heavily, sat down together on the stairs. Daucus scratched at his scrubby, ginger-tinged beard.

‘Well, marm, apart from these attics, that’s the whole of the Abbey building we’ve been through, from the wine cellars to the dormitories. I don’t think we’ve missed anything, have we?’

Granspike stared enquiringly at the Abbot. ‘The kitchen larders, he could’ve hid himself there?’

Daucus discounted the suggestion. ‘No, I searched them myself, whilst you were going through Cavern Hole. Confound that young Prink, where does he get to? More important, where do our goods and chattels go, where does he hide them?’

Granspike rose wearily, dusting her apron off. ‘Dearie me, Father Abbot, I was wrong an’ you were right. We

should never have taken Orkwil Prink into Redwall. Both his parents were a bad lot, ramblin' an' thievin' like wild-beasts. 'Tis true enough, what was said about 'em, a Prink'd steal the eyes out o' yore head if'n you didn't watch 'em. Four seasons of that rascal is more'n enough for any Abbey. Aye, an' Master Prink has sorely tried every-beast within Redwall. I think he's run out o' sympathy from all, includin' meself!

Daucus patted the good hedgehog's spines carefully. 'It's not our fault, Gran. We couldn't refuse a young 'un a roof over his head and food. It's his mother and father I blame, deserting him and running off like they did. Ah well, no use going over all that again, come on, let's go and take a look through the attics.'

He picked up the lantern they had brought along and began climbing the spiral staircase. They had ascended only a few steps, when a deep, rumbling voice echoed up to them from the lower dormitory floor.

'Bee's you'm up thurr, zurr h'Abbot, wull ee bestest cumm daown. Oi've founded ee likkle scallywagger!'

Daucus immediately recognized the caller, Foremole Burff, the leader of Redwall's quaintly spoken moles.

Granspike Niblo's voice went squeaky with relief. 'Thankee, Mister Burff, we'll be right down!'

Foremole Burff was waiting on the dormitory landing. He tugged his snout respectfully. 'Zurr, marm, you'm ax-cuse oi furr not coomin' up thurr, oi'm gurtly afear'd o' tall places!'

Knowing the moles were soildiggers, and afraid of heights, Daucus smiled understandingly. 'I'm not too fussy on them myself, Burff. Did I hear you say that you'd caught Orkwil? Where is he now?'

Foremole Burff pointed a hefty digging claw in a downward motion. 'H'in ee gate'ouse, zurr, an' he'm gurtly well guarded, burr aye!'

As the trio trooped downstairs, Granspike shook her