

HIGH RHULAIN

Brian Jacques

Illustrated by David Elliott



ACE BOOKS, NEW YORK

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*Like the sun, High Rhulain will rise anew,
to set the downtrodden free.*

*A warriormaid with Wildlough blood
must cross the Western Sea.
She who looks ever through windows
at the signs which feathers make,
seek the Green Isle through her knowledge,
for all thy kinbeasts' sake.*

Praise for *High Rhulain*

“Jacques adds to the intrigue with several subplots boiling just beneath the surface . . . A welcome book.”

—*Booklist*

“His characterizations are complex and show multiple sides of both adult and younger personalities. The pacing is well handled, especially in a book with three story lines that entwine. As with the other volumes, there is sacrifice, death, and bloody battles galore.”

—*School Library Journal*

“This gripping and moving tale of heroism, sacrifice, and the fight for freedom will delight both Redwall fans of longstanding and newcomers to the series. Brian Jacques paints a vivid portrait with words . . . Peopled with funny and brave hares, bright and determined otters, moles, mice, a strong badger lord, and a good number of vermin creatures, this is a tale rich with humor, warmth, wonderful mouthwatering meals, song, and lots of riddles to solve.”

—*Through the Looking Glass Children's Book Review*

Redwall

The book that inspired a legend—the first novel in the bestselling saga of Redwall! The epic story of a bumbling young mouse who rises up, fights back, and becomes a legend himself . . .

Mossflower

Brave mouse Martin and quick-talking mousethief Gonff unite to end the tyrannical reign of Tsarmin—who has set out to rule all of Mossflower Woods with an iron paw . . .

Mattimeo

Slagar the fox embarks on a terrible quest for vengeance against the fearless mouse warrior Matthias cunningly stealing away what he most cherishes: his headstrong son Mattimeo . . .

Mariel of Redwall

After she and her father are tossed overboard by pirates, the mousemaid Mariel seeks revenge against searat Gabool the Wild . . .

Salamandastron

When the mountain stronghold of Salamandastron comes under attack, only the bold badger lord Urthstripe stands able to protect the creatures of Redwall . . .

Martin the Warrior

The triumphant saga of a young mouse destined to become Redwall's most glorious hero . . .

The Bellmaker

The epic quest of Joseph the Bellmaker to join his daughter, Mariel the Warriormouse, in a heroic battle against a vicious Foxwolf . . .

Outcast of Redwall

The abandoned son of a ferret warlord must choose his destiny beyond the walls of Redwall Abbey . . .

Pearls of Lutra

A young hedgehog maid sets out to solve the riddle of the missing pearls of legend—and faces an evil emperor and his reptilian warriors . . .

The Long Patrol

The Long Patrol unit of perilous hares is called out to draw off the murderous RapsCALLION army—one of the most ferocious battles Redwall has ever faced . . .

Marlfox

Two brave children of warrior squirrels embark upon a quest to recover Redwall's most priceless treasure from the villainous Marlfoxes . . .

The Legend of Luke

Martin the Warrior sets out on a journey to trace his heroic legacy: the legendary exploits of his father, Luke . . .

Lord Brocktree

The mighty badger warrior Lord Brocktree must reclaim the mountain land of Salamandastron from the army of a villainous wildcat . . .

Taggerung

The otter Taggerung, realizing he's not cut from the same cloth as the vermin clan who raised him, embarks on a journey to find his true home and family . . .

Triss

The brave squirrelmaid Triss plans a daring escape from the enslavement of the evil ferret King Agarnu and his daughter Princess Kurda . . .

Loamhedge

Young haremaid Martha Braebuck, wheelchair-bound since infancy, embarks on a quest to the mysterious abbey of Loamhedge to find a cure for her condition . . .

Rakkety Tam

Mercenary warrior squirrel Rakkety Tam MacBurl quests to rescue kidnapped Redwall maidens and thwart the plans of the murderous wolverine known as Gulo the Savage . . .

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from Brian Jacques**

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The Angel's Command

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MARIEL OF REDWALL
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*For my friend
Alan Ingram,
the guardian at Redwall's gate!*

BOOK ONE

The Forgotten Tome

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BOOK TWO

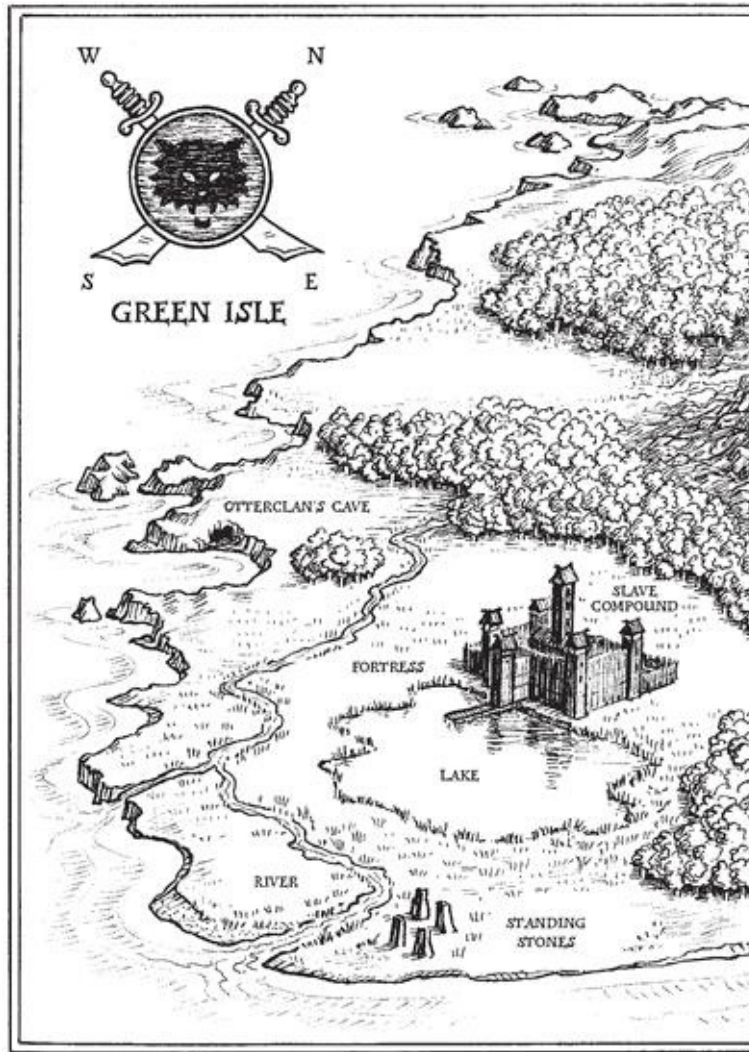
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Across the Western Sea

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HOLT SUMMERDELL



When autumn's day grows old,
sad orchard leaves do fall.

Dawn breaks o'er silent gardens,
bereft of sweet birdcall.

Stark winter's dirge then wails,
until the earth appears,
white clad 'neath drifted dunes,
whilst trees bear crystal spears.

My chamber is a refuge here,
against the snowbound night,
a flickering cave of crimson gold,
made warm by firelight,
where images are conjured,
of friends I used to know.

I battled and I marched with them,
one dusty long-ago.

I see them now arise again,
in memory that ne'er will fail.

Their legend is reborn anew,
and thus begins my tale.

BOOK ONE

The Forgotten Tome





The wind moaned like a wounded beast in the southwest. Gathering speed, it ripped over the heaving ocean, smashing the dark wavecrests to boiling foam. Evening skies darkened as the bruised heavy underbellies of cloudbanks tumbled into a chaotic stampede of black and leaden grey. Lightning scarred the skies. Thunder boomed out, like the sound of mountains cracking from peak to base. On Green Isle, the still waters of loughs and streams were whipped over their banks, flattening and saturating reed and sedge. Leaves showered widespread as trees shook their heads, goaded by the gale into an insane dance.

None of this concerned the big hawk as it fought for its life. The bird was cornered, even though it had ripped through the catching net with its fearsome talons. It choked and spat at the remnants of the tidbit which had lured it into the snare. But there was something it could not rid itself of: a star-shaped iron barb, which the bait had been wrapped around. It had pierced the roof of the big bird's mouth; one of the tips protruded from under its beak. Blood bubbled onto the hawk's throat feathers as it hissed in defiance at two young feral cats. They circled their quarry, yowling and spitting, looking for an opening to catch their fierce prey unawares.

Riggu Felis, Warlord of the Green Isle Cats, stood watching his two sons, scorning their efforts to dispatch the wounded bird. The wildcat chieftain turned impatiently to the pine marten, Atunra, his aide and constant companion.

"Gwurr! Is this a kill or a dance? Look ye, they fight like two frightened frogs!"

Atunra flinched as both young cats leapt back, a hair's breadth from the wounded hawk's lethal talons. "The big bird is a dangerous fighter, Chief. It is wise they do not rush in at it."

Riggu Felis gave a snort of derision. Casting aside his single-bladed war axe, he threw off his battle helmet and cloak, oblivious to the wind and rain.

"Garrah! I have raised cowards for sons! Step aside, ye weaklings. I can snap that thing's neck like a twig!"

As his two sons gave way, the big wildcat bounded in. Tail waving, ears flattened and fangs bared, he howled his challenge. "Arrreeeeekkaaarrrr!"

The wildcat chieftain made a barbaric sight, but the hawk was a born warrior and not easily daunted. Shaking its wings free of the last net strands, it powered itself straight at the foebeast's face, avoiding the outstretched claws. The savage, hooked talons struck true, deep into the area betwixt eyes and nostrils. Spreading its mighty wings, the big bird flapped a short distance into the air.

Riggu Felis screeched in pain, hanging helpless for a brief moment. Then his weight sent him crashing to the ground as the hawk winged upward and out of the trees. Both the young cats and the pine marten dashed forward to help, but too late. The bird had flown.

High into the raging gale it swooped, where it was flung by the elements into the maelstrom of keening wind and battering rain. Up and away it went, like a dead leaf in an autumnal gale—head over tail, talons over wings, a flurry of dark brown and white plumage, resembling a tattered quilt. Off, over glade, swamp, stream, sward and lough, across dune and shoreline. Out over the thunderous might of raging seas.

The warlord Riggu Felis lay senseless on the wet earth. His sons looked on in horrified awe. Atunra inspected the gruesome injury inflicted by the bird. Quickly she held his head facedown, wiping away the gore as she issued hasty instructions to the young feral cats.

“Jeefra, Pitru, run and get help. I’ll try to keep him breathing while he’s unconscious. Hurry now!”

Jeefra ventured a question. “Is he going to die? Has the big bird killed him?”

The pine marten snapped back, “Nay, he will live, as long as I can stop him choking on his own blood. Go now!”

Pitru leaned over Atunra’s shoulder. The pine marten kicked out at him. “Don’t tarry there gossiping, go and get help—a healer, carriers, bandages and salves. Half of his face is gone, ripped off, most of the muzzle, all of the nose, and his top lip, right down to the teeth and gums. Go quickly, stop for nought. Hasten, before your father bleeds to death!”

As they dashed off through the trees, Atunra stared down at the ravaged features of Riggu Felis. “You still have two eyes, though if ye see that face reflected in water, you’ll wonder why I saved ye. Still, half a face is better than none. Now Riggu Felis will be able to slay his enemies with just a look, methinks!”

Lycian still had her best seasons before her. She was rather young to be Mother Abbess of all Redwall. However, nobeast could deny that the pretty, slender mouse possessed wisdom, judgement and the good sense of most creatures twice her age.

On the west parapet of the Abbey’s outer walltop, Lycian and her constant companion, the molemum Burbee, basked in the welcome morning sun, sitting on their portable chairs enjoying mugs of hot mint and comfrey tea.

Burbee scratched her velvety head with a huge digging claw, exclaiming in curious mole dialect. “Hurr, marm, ee wuddent think this morn wot a terrible stormen et wurr larst noight, burr, nay ee wuddent!”

Lycian, surveying the gentle blue sky, blinked in the warm sunlight. “Thank goodness Mother Nature is in a calmer mood today. Just listen to that lark, what a beautiful song she’s singing! Can you hear it?”

The molemum had to listen a while before she could discern the sound. She nodded, smiling. “Hurry aye, marm, ’tis a seedingly noice!”

Lycian began singing a song from her Dibbun days, which harmonised perfectly with the bird’s trilling.

“When the new day is dawning
the lark doth ascend.
If I could but speak to her
I’d make her my friend.
She would tell of her journey
to the lands of the sky,

where the soft fields of cloud
like white pillows do lie.

She would sing of the earth
far below that she'd seen,
all patched in a quiltwork
of brown, gold and green.
As she wings on the zephyrs
of smooth morning breeze
to rise from the meadows,
the hills or the trees.
With the evening come down,
little bird, cease thy flight
'til the blue peaceful morning
awakes from the night."

The larksong and Lycian's ditty reached their finale together. Molemum Burbee, a sentimental beast, wiped a tear from her eye. "Thurr now, ee likkle bird bees hoi and far away."

Turning to face the Abbey, Lycian allowed her gaze to wander over the magnificent structure. Lovingly built but firmly fashioned as a mountain, the ancient sandstone walls ranged in hue from dusty pink to soft terra cotta in the alternating sunlight and shadow. From belltower to high slate rooftop, down to the mighty buttresses, twixt tiny attic and mullioned dormitory windows, among ornate columns and ledges and the long, stained-glass panels of Great Hall on the ground floor, Redwall Abbey stood, solid and steadfast against countless seasons and the severity of all weathers.

Lycian sipped her tea approvingly, nodding towards the front steps and main oaken door. "No storm could bother our home, eh, Burbee?"

Frowning, the molemum squinted over the rim of her mug at the Abbey grounds. "Hurr, that's a may be, young marm, but lookit ee h'orchard. Trees blowed thisaway an' that, fruits'n'berries be knocked offen ee boughs. Gurt pesky stormgale!"

Lycian patted her friend's paw, smiling. "Oh come on, old grumblechops, that's what usually happens in bad weather. Nothing our Redwallers can't put to rights. Drink up now, here comes our refill."

Besides being a Foremole (which is a lofty position among his fellow creatures), Grudd Longtunn was also the Head Abbey Gardener. A nephew of molemum Burbee, he was good-natured, cheerful and honest as the day is long. Balancing a tray on one powerful paw, he clambered up the steps to the walltop, tugging his snout respectfully to the Abbess and his aunt.

"Gudd mornen to ee, marms, an' a roight purty one et bee's, too. Oi bringed ee 'ot scones an' h'extra tea. Boi okey, you'm surrtingly can sup summ tea in ee course of a day. Moi ole tongue'd flow away if'n I dranked that much tea!"

Burbee chuckled. "Gurt h'imperdent young lump, lessen thoi cheek an' pour us'n's summ o' the brew."

Grudd placed the plate of fresh scones, spread with meadowcream and clover honey, between them. Whipping the cosy from a sizeable teapot, he topped up both their mugs. "Shudd see wot ee storm do'd to moi veggibles. Flartenned ee lettuces, snapped off'n celery an' strewed termatoes even whichway. Even rooted up moi young radishers. Burr!"

Lycian blew on her tea to cool it. "Your aunt Burbee was just remarking on the storm damage in the orchard. Is it very bad, Grudd?"

The Foremole's face creased deeply in a reassuring smile. "Doan't ee fret, h'Abbess marm. C

gotten moi molecrew a-workin' daown thurr, an' all ee Redwallers lendin' a paw. Just bee's two mor willin' beasts a-needed."

Lycian shot him a look of mock severity. "We'll be down just as soon as we've finished tea, m good mole, and not a moment sooner. Carry on with your duties!"

Grudd caught the twinkle in her eyes. He bowed low, tugging his snout in a servile manner. "Vurn gudd, marm, as ee says, marm, you'm take yurr own gudd toime, marm. Oi'll look for'ard to ee vis with pleshure. 'Twill be a gurt honner furr uz 'umble molebeasts!"

Burbee shook with mirth at the antics of her nephew. "Ho bee off'n with ee, you'm gurt fozzikel!"

Down in the orchard, Banjon Wildlough, the otter Skipper, was organizing the workers. Banjon wa not a big creature, as otters go, but he had an undoubted air of command about him. Everybea obeyed his orders, all working together for the common good—except the Dibbuns, of course. (The were the little ones; Abbeybabes were always referred to as "Dibbuns.") The otter Skipper tried keep his patience with their rowdy manner, which, after all, was the innocence of playful infants.

"No no, Gropp! Ye can't eat those apples, they ain't ripe yet. You'll get tummyache, I'm warnin ye. Taggle! Stop chuckin' them hazelnuts around. Grumby! Come down out o' that tree. Irgle, Ral, where are ye off to with that barrow?"

Banjon turned despairingly to his friend, Brink Greyspoke, the big, fat hedgehog who was Redwall Cellarhog. "I gives up! Can't you do anythin' with the liddle rogues?"

Brink was a jolly creature and well-liked by the Dibbuns. He tipped Skipper a wink. "I'll soon g 'em organised, leave it t'me, Skip."

Brink began by appealing to what Dibbuns loved most: their stomachs. "Lissen now, ye b workbeasts. I 'eard that Friar Bible 'as got lots o' candied chestnuts to reward willin' bodies with. S 'ere's the plan. See all this hard sour fruit wot's fallen? Well, that'll go for preservin' an' picklin'. All those green nuts, too—they'll be used in the cheesemakin'. Toss the lot into yon barrow, an' we' take 'em to the kitchens, that'll please the Friar greatly. Come on now, let's see those big muscle bulgin'!"

Squeaking with delight, the Dibbuns rushed to obey Brink.

Banjon spotted some of the older ones about to leave the orchard. They were led by his daughter Tiria. He called to the ottermaid, "Ahoy, me gel, where d'ye think yore off to?"

Tiria Wildlough stood a head taller than her father. She was a big, strong otter, with not a smidgeo of spare flesh on her sinewy frame. She shunned the typical dress of a maiden, wearing only a cutdov smock, to allow her free movement. This was belted around her waist by her favourite weapon, a sling which she had named Wuppit. Despite Tiria's young age, her skill with the sling was readil acknowledged by everybeast within Redwall.

She waved cheerily to her father, whom she always addressed as Skip. "We're going to help th molecrew with their compost heap, Skip. Was there anything else you wanted us for?"

Banjon paused a moment, as if making up his mind. "Foremole Grudd told me he'd like a load posts an' staves. He's thinkin' of buildin' fences to act as a windbreak from any more wild weather w might get. It'll cut down on damage to his fruit an' veggibles. D'ye follow me?"

One of Tiria's chums, a young squirrel called Girry, shook his head doubtfully. "No wood like th growing in our Abbey grounds, Skip. . . ."

His friend, a young mole named Tribsy, interrupted. "Nay zurr, h'only in ee Mossflower wuddlan will ee foind such timber—yew, ash an' mebbe summ sturdy willow. They'm all a-grown out thurr."

Banjon nodded. "Aye, Foremole asked me to go for it, but I got me paws full with wot's to be dor here. Tiria, me gel, I was thinkin', would you like the job of woodcuttin'?"

The ottermaid's eyes lit up like stars. "What, you mean go out into Mossflower? On our very ow

me an' Tribsy, an' Girry, an' Brinty? Of course we can!"

~~Her father's offer meant that they were grown-up and capable enough to be let out without supervision, alone into the vast thicknesses of the Mossflower Woodlands.~~

Banjon eyed his daughter with that no-nonsense look he had cultivated. "Right, so be it. Tiria, I'm holdin' you responsible, yore in charge. No larkin' about or strayin' off too far!"

Tiria strove hard to keep from bubbling over with excitement. "Count on me, Skip. Straight out, go to the wood and right back here to the Abbey. Right, come on, mates, let's get going!"

Skipper coughed. Turning aside, he stifled a smile. "Not so fast, crew. Take yore time, the wood won't run away. Oh, an' ye'd best take a cart along, an' two of Brink Cellarhog's axes. See Friar Bibble, he'll give ye vittles an' drink for a break at noon. Now remember, Foremole only wants sound wood—good strong branches, straight an' well-trimmed. Right, off ye go!"

Skipper Banjon watched as they strode off together, raucously singing an old work song.

"Oh the seasons turn again again,
as Redwall beasts do work work work,
through sun an' wind an' rain rain rain,
we never never shirk shirk shirk!
To table then each eventide,
as sun is setting down down down,
a-feasting drinking singing,
with ne'er a tear or frown frown frown!
We all! We all! Are happy at Redwall!
Our Abbey! Our Abbey!
We're proud to serve Redwall one and all, one and all!"

Brink Greyspoke stood up from fruit gathering. Rubbing his back, he nodded at the departing group. "First outin' on their own, eh? You sure yore a-doin' the right thing, Skip?"

Banjon nodded. "They'll be right as rain with my Tiria in charge. Ye can't keep young 'uns penned atwixt Abbey walls forever. Do they know where ye keep yore axes in the cellars?"

Brink stroked his chinspikes. "Aye, they know alright, Skip. I just 'ope they bring my new 'un back in one piece. I fitted a beech haft on it only two days back, 'tis a good axe, that'un. . . ."

He was about to expand on the subject of axes when he spotted the Dibbuns marching off in a determined manner. "Whoa there, liddle mates! Where are ye bound?"

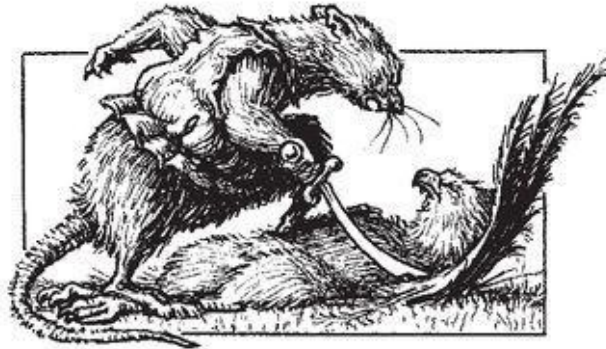
Grumby the hogbabe pointed toward the main gate. "Ho, us is goin' to 'elp Miz Tirrier to chop wood. Don't not worry, Skip, we keep a h'eye on 'em for youse!"

Brink gathered the little ones up and placed them in the big wheelbarrow amid the windfall fruit. "Yore far too young t'be rovin' about woodlands. I'll take ye up t'the kitchens an' tell Friar Bibble t' feed ye all well for yore hard work. Will ye lend a paw 'ere, Skip?"

Banjon took one of the barrow handles. "I certainly will, matey. Friar Bibble might feed me, too. A liddle bird told me that he's bakin' sugarplum pudden today."

The Dibbuns roared with delight. "Sugarplum pudden! Whoooooaaayyy!"

Brink turned his eyes skyward, murmuring to Skipper, "I'opes to goodness he is, 'cos if'n he ain't, we'll 'ave to run for our lives from those liddle 'uns!"



In the woodlands south of Redwall Abbey, other young creatures were abroad that day: a small gang of water rats, eight in all, headed by one Groffgut. Leaving the larger vermin bands, they had wandered up country, seeking any opportunity to plunder, kill or cause terror. This was done in the hope of establishing themselves as a feared vermin band. Thus far they had made patchy progress, but Groffgut's confidence was growing daily.

Warm noontide sun slanted through the trees onto a quiet streambank. Some of the rats lay about by the shallows, fishing the limpid waters, whilst others foraged for nests with eggs in them. Groffgut disdained such menial tasks, letting the others do all the chores. By virtue of his size, strength and quick temper, he was the chief. Stretched flat out, he gazed over the bump of his paunchy gut, idly watching the blue-grey campfire smoke blending amid sun shafts.

One of his minions, Hangpaw, limped up from the shallows, displaying a small perch dangling from a line. "Yeherr, Chief, lookit, I gorra fish!"

Groffgut was not impressed. "Yarr, s'only a likkle 'un. Stick it onna fire, an' go an' catcher some big 'uns."

An excited whoop rang out from farther up the bank. "Yaggoo! Cumm an' see dis, mates, I gorra h'eagle!"

Groffgut heaved his bulk up irately. "Wot's dat Frogeye shoutin' about now?"

Plugtail, another of the gang, came scurrying up. "Chief, Chief, Frogeye's catchered a h'eagle!"

Groffgut shoved him to one side. The rest followed him as he went to investigate, grumbling all the way. "Huh, shupid! Rats don't catcher h'eagles, don't dat ijjit know? It's h'eagles wot catchers rats!"

None of the gang had ever seen an eagle before, but there was no doubt that Frogeye had captured a big, fierce bird. It looked a lot like they imagined an eagle should look. Frogeye's lazy eye, the one that normally remained lidded over, was blinking up and down, exposing the milky-hued pupil, as the rat danced around, prodding and tripping his find with a crude, homemade spear. The wounded and exhausted bird stumbled forward, desperately trying to get at the lifesustaining streamwater.

Frogeye slammed his spearbutt into its body, toppling it backward, tail over crest. He laughed callously. "Yeeheehee! See, I told ya, didden't I? I caught a real live h'eagle all by meself!"

Groffgut drew his sword, which was in reality a broken scythe blade with a rope handle. Approaching the big bird, he stood on one of its half-spread wings, pinning the other with his blade. He inspected it. Had the bird not been injured or fatigued, any rat would have rushed for cover at the sight of it. Groffgut saw clearly that it was unable to resist. The bird's savage golden eyes were

clouded and flickering shut, a stream of dried blood apparently having sealed its lethally hooked beak. The magnificent dark brown and white plumage stuck out willy-nilly after being battered for leagues across stormbound seas.

Groffgut gave the gang his verdict. "Aye, it's a h'eagle, shore enuff!"

Nobeast took the trouble to argue, though Hangpaw, a thin rat with a withered limb, ventured to enquire, "Wot's we s'posed ter do wid h'eagles?"

Threetooth, who lacked all but three fangs, cackled. "Yer eats 'em, I think."

His companion, Rashback, so named because of an unsightly mange, scratched vigorously at his scraggy tail. "I didden know ye could eat h'eagles!"

Groffgut eyed him contemptuously. "Ye can eat anybeast once it's dead, turnep'ead!"

Frogeye became huffy at not being consulted. "Hoi! Dis is my h'eagle, Icatchered it. S'pose I duzzen't wanner eat it, eh?"

Groffgut pointed at Frogeye with his sword. "Tern around willyer, mate."

Frogeye turned obediently, and Groffgut dealt him an enormous kick to the bottom, which knocked him flat. The breath whooshed out of Frogeye as Groffgut stamped a footpaw down on his back, sneering, "I'm the chief round 'ere! Who asked yew, malletnose? Plug, git yore rope round de h'eagle's claws, lash 'im tight."

Plugtail flung his rope around the big bird's legs and noosed them securely. The bird could only flap its wings feebly in protest.

Groffgut issued his orders to the gang. "We'll eat the h'eagle later. Let's 'ave a bit o' fun wid it first. T'ain't every day yer gits a h'eagle ter play wid. Tow it back ter camp, mates!"

The wood-gathering expedition had been a success. Tiria and her three friends had worked diligently, filling the cart with a selection of long branches and straight, thick limbs. It was mainly good yellow staves, some pieces of ash and a selection of lesser but useful bits of willow and birch. The four companions were following the course of a stream, which they knew flowed close to the south path at one point. Once they reached the path, Redwall would be within easy walking distance. Tiria estimated they would reach the Abbey by early evening.

Enjoying the freedom of the outdoors, and being in no great hurry, they opted to take a break for an afternoon snack on the streambank. Girry unpacked the last of their food, whilst Tiria checked the ropes which bound the cargo of wood to the cart. Brinty and Tribsy skimmed flat pebbles over the slow-flowing stream. The ottermaid felt quietly proud of herself; she had completed her task without any untoward incident. Cooling her footpaws in the shallows, she watched the noon shadows start to lengthen over the tranquil waters. Two green- and black-banded dragonflies patrolled the far river margin, their wings iridescent in the sunlight. Bees droned drowsily around some water crowfoot blossoms, and birdsong echoed amid the trees.

Tribsy left off skimming and sat down to eat. "Froo' corjul an' hunny sangwiches, moi fayverrit!"

Tiria smiled. "Good old Friar Bibble, he knows how to look after hungry workers, eh Tribsy?"

The young mole smiled from ear to ear. "Hurr, an' us'll be back at ee Red'all in gudd toime for supper. Oi dearly loikes a noice supper, so oi doo's!"

Brinty took a long swig of the fruit cordial. "Don't you ever think of anything but eating, old familar face?"

Tribsy patted his stomach. "Whut's to think abowt, maister? Oi bee's nought but ee pore choil needin' vittles aplenty to grow."

Brinty watched the young mole demolish a sandwich in two bites. "You're growing sideways instead of upwards."

Girry gestured his friends to be quiet as his ears stood up straight. "Sssh! Listen, did you he

that?"

They listened for a moment, then Tiria shrugged. "Hear what?"

Girry pointed upstream. "Over that way, sounded like somebeasts enjoying themselves, laughing and shouting."

Tribsy wrinkled his snout. "Oi doan't yurrs nuthin'. You'm squirrels can yurr better'n uz mole burr aye."

Brinty shook his head. "I don't hear anything, either."

Girry began climbing a nearby elm. "Well, I can hear it, there's something going on up yonder. You three stay here, I'll go and take a peep."

Tiria cautioned her friend, "Stay in the treetops, Girry. Don't go getting yourself into any trouble. I don't want to face my dad back at the Abbey and have to tell him something happened to you!"

The agile young squirrel threw her a curt salute. "Yes marm, don't fret marm, I'll be fine marm!"

The ottermaid watched him ascend into the upper foliage. "Well, just be careful, and less of the fuss marm, please! I'm only one season older than you, cheekybrush!"

Tribsy commandeered another sandwich. "Oi'll just finish off ee vittles while us'ns bee's waiting. Ho joy, this 'un's gotten cheese on it, moi fayverite!"

Brinty looked at his molefriend in amazement. "Is there any sandwich that isn't your favourite?"

Tribsy shook his head solemnly. "Oi b'aint found one as yet, zurr."

After a while they went back to skimming stones. Tiria was by far the best skimmer, making one flat chip of bankrock jump nine times as it bounced over the water. It was rather pleasant passing an afternoon in this fashion, the ottermaid thought. She began to wonder what the fuss and stern warning from her father had been all about.

Just then, Girry dropped down out of the elm in a rush of leaves and twig ends. The young squirrel, breathless with indignation and urgency, gabbled out, "They've got a big bird hanging upside down from a tree and they're lighting a fire under it, hitting it with spearpoles. We've got to stop them! Tiria, oh, the poor bird!"

Grabbing her friend, the ottermaid shook him soundly. "Make sense, Girry! What big bird, when, and who's hitting it? Now take a deep breath and start again, properly!"

Girry obeyed, taking several breaths before he recovered. "I went upstream. I was up in a beech when I saw them. There's about eight water rats, nasty-looking scum. Anyhow, these rats, they've got a big bird strung upside down from a bough, and they're torturing it to death, I swear they are. Please Tiria, we must do something to help the bird!"

Unwinding the sling Wuppit from about her waist, Tiria took charge swiftly. "Take an axe, Girry. Go on ahead of us and get close to the bird without being seen. Then wait for us. Tribsy, Brinty, take two good yew staves from the cart and follow behind me!"

Plugtail and Hangpaw were trying to set light to a heap of twigs, leaves and moss beneath where the big bird was hanging upside down. They had to keep ducking as the other gang rats swung the haversack back and forth by prodding and striking at it with their spears. The bird's wings hung limp and outspread. Though it hissed feebly at its tormentors, there was no way it could stop them.

Groffgut was enjoying himself immensely at the expense of his helpless victim. He swung his cruel sword at the bird, clipping a few of its throat feathers, while taunting it cruelly. "Once dat fire's ablaze, we'll roast yer nice'n'slow, birdy. May'ap it'll be supptime afore yore dead an' ready, eh?"

Frogeye took a lunge at the bird with his spear but missed. "Kin I 'ave one of its legs, Chief? It wud be me wot catchered it."

Groffgut snarled and aimed a kick at him. "I'll 'ave one of yore legs if'n ye slays that h'eagle too quick. Stop stabbin' at it like that, snottynose!"

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