

The Taggerung

Brian Jacques

Random House Children's Publishers UK

Contents

Cover

About the Book

Title Page

Map

Prologue

Book One: The Babe at the Ford

Chapter 1

Chapter 2

Chapter 3

Chapter 4

Chapter 5

Book Two: Fifteen Seasons On

Chapter 6

Chapter 7

Chapter 8

Chapter 9

Chapter 10

Chapter 11

Chapter 12

Chapter 13

Chapter 14

Chapter 15

Chapter 16

Chapter 17

Chapter 18

Chapter 19

Chapter 20

Chapter 21

Chapter 22

Book Three: Deyna

Chapter 23

Chapter 24

Chapter 25

Chapter 26

Chapter 27

Chapter 28

Chapter 29

Chapter 30

Chapter 31

Chapter 32

Chapter 33

Chapter 34

Chapter 35

Chapter 36

Chapter 37

Epilogue

About the Author

Also by Brian Jacques

Copyright

About the Book

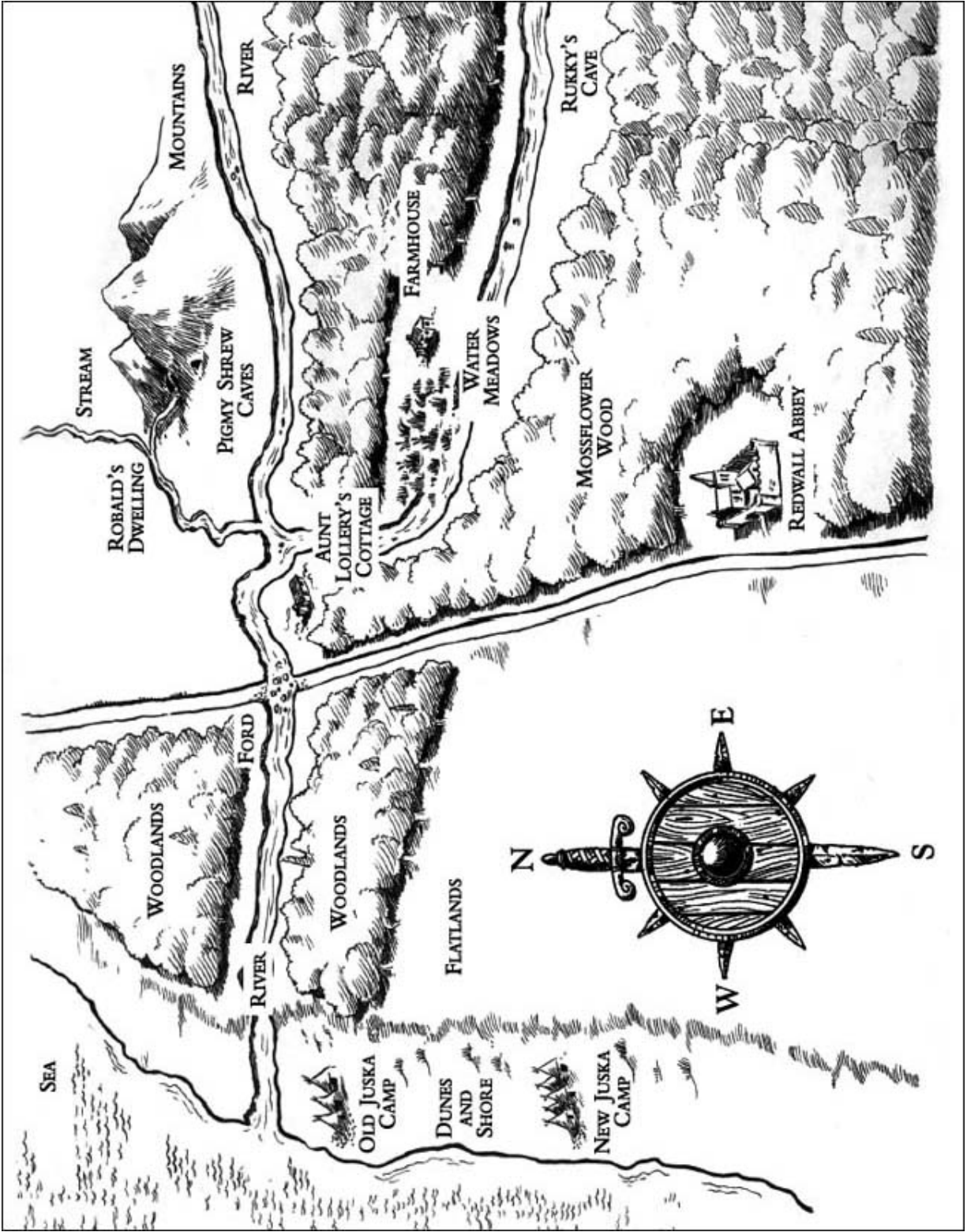
Sawney Rath, ferret chief of the Juska tribe, and his ruthless band of villains kidnap a baby otter from Redwall to raise him as the Taggerung - a legendary animal said to have supernatural fighting skills. The young otter is trained to be a ruthless killer, but the Redwall spirit lies deep within him and as he grows older he begins to dream of another life . . .

THE TAGGERUNG

A Tale of Redwall

Brian Jacques
Illustrated by Peter Standley

RHCP DIGITAL





Prologue

My father always says that the life of a scholar is more rewarding than that of a cook. When I asked him why, he told me it is better to have ink on your paws than flour on your nose. But then he grew serious and explained to me that to be a Recorder at Redwall Abbey is a great honour. He said that my writings will form part of our Abbey's history. They will remain here for all creatures to see, for ever and ever. Then he laughed and said that no matter how much care goes into the making of a piecrust, it disappears in the space of a single meal. So I am serving my apprenticeship under that good old mouse, Brother Hoben, our senior Recorder. Old Hoben sleeps a lot these days, so I get lots of practice. I am finding more and more that I like to write. My mother thinks my writing shows a great talent. But mothers are like that, aren't they?

I have been working since last winter on the strange tale of the Taggerung. I have spoken to many Redwallers about it in the evenings, and spent my days writing it up. What a story it is! Brother Hoben says that every good tale should have the proper ingredients and they are all here, believe me. Sadness and joy, comedy and tragedy, with a little

mystery sprinkled throughout and quite a good dose of rousing action. Sounds a bit like a cooking recipe to me. Be that as it may, I have finished writing the account. This evening I am due to start reading my narrative to all the Redwallers, in Cavern Hole. Winter is the best time for stories: a good warm fire, some tasty food and drink, and an attentive audience. Who could ask for more? I can see the snow lying deep on the ground outside our gatehouse; icicles are hanging from the trees instead of leaves. Daylight is fading as night steals in early. All that remains for me to do is to wash this ink off my paws, get my scarf . . . oh, and wake Brother Hoben. The old fellow is in his armchair, snoozing by the embers of the fire. Then it's off to Cavern Hole to read the tale to my friends. I'm really looking forward to it. Would you like to come and listen? I'm sure you'll be welcome. If you don't know the way then follow me and Brother Hoben, though it will take a while, as he shuffles quite slowly and has to lean on me. By the way, don't forget to wipe your paws before entering the Abbey. Oh, and another thing, please compliment my dad on his Autumn Harvest soup; I know that will please him. Right then, away we go. Watch out for Dibbuns throwing snowballs. Come on, we don't want to be late. Silly me, how can we be late? They can't start without me. I'm the one who will be reading the tale of the Taggerung, you know. But I've already told you that. Sorry. Up you come, Brother Hoben, you can sleep by the fire in Cavern Hole. But don't snore too loud or my mother will wake you up and tell you not to interrupt her talented daughter's wonderful story. That's mothers for you, eh!

*Sister Rosabel,
Assistant Recorder of Redwall Abbey.*

BOOK ONE

The Babe at the Ford





1

The clan of Sawney Rath could feel their fortunes changing, much for the better. Grissoul had predicted it would be thus, and the vixen was seldom wrong. Only that day the clan foragers had caught a huge load of mackerel which had strayed into the shallows of the incoming tide. Fires blazed in the scrubland beyond the dunes that evening, as the fish, skewered on green withes, blistered and popped over the flames. Sawney was not as big as other ferrets, but he was faster, smarter and far more savage than any stoat, rat, weasel, fox or ferret among his followers. Anybeast could lay claim to the clan leadership, providing they could defeat Sawney in combat, but for a long time none had dared to. Sawney Rath could fight with a ferocity which was unequalled, and he never spared the vanquished challengers. Sawney's clan were nomads, sixty all told, thieves, vagrants, vagabonds and tricksters who would murder and plunder without hesitation. They were Juska.

Many bands of Juska roamed the coasts, woodlands and byways, but they never formed a united force, each choosing to go its own way under a strong Chieftain. This leader always tacked his name on to the Juska title, so that Sawney's clan came to be known as the Juskarath. Though they were little more than dry-land pirates, Juska vermin

had quite a strict code of conduct, which was governed by Seers, omens and superstition.

Sawney sat beneath the awning of his tent, sipping a vile-tasting medication which his Seer Grissoul had concocted to ease the stomach pains which constantly dogged him. He watched the clan, noting their free and easy mood. Sawney smiled as some of the rats struck up a song. Rats were easily pleased; once they had a full stomach and a flagon of nettle beer they would either sing or sleep. Sawney was only half watching the rats, his real attention focused upon the stoat Antigra. She lay nursing her newborn, a son called Zann. Sawney could tell Antigra was feigning slumber from the hate-laden glances she threw his way when she thought he was not looking. Sawney Rath's eyes missed very little of what went on around him. He pulled a face of disgust as he sniffed the mixture of feverfew and treacle mustard in the cup he held, and, spitting into the fire, he muttered the newborn stoatbabe's name.

'Hah, Zann!'

Grissoul the Seer stole up out of the gathering darkness and placed a steaming plate of food by his side. He glanced up at the vixen. She was an odd-looking fox, even for a Seer. She wore a barkcloth cloak which she had covered in red and black symbols, and her brow, neck and limbs were almost invisible under bracelets of coral, brass and silver. About her waist she wore a belt from which hung a broad pouch and bones of all kinds. One of her eyes was never still.

Sawney tipped the plate with his footpaw. 'Am I supposed to eat this mess?'

She smiled coaxingly. 'Yar, 'tis the mackerel without skin or bone, stewed in milkweed and dock. Thy stomach'll favour it!'

The ferret drew from his belt a lethally beautiful knife, straight-bladed, razor sharp, with a brilliant blue sapphire

set into its amber handle. Delicately he picked up a morsel of fish on the knife point, and tasted it.

‘This is good. I like it!’

Grissoul sat down beside him. ‘None can cook for thee like I.’ She watched him eating awhile before speaking again. ‘Th’art going to ask me about the Taggerung, I feel it.’

Sawney picked a sliver of fish from between his teeth. ‘Aye. Have there been any more signs of the Taggerung?’

Antigra interrupted by leaping up and thrusting her baby forward at them. ‘Fools!’ she shouted defiantly. ‘Can’t you see, my Zann is the Taggerung!’

The entire camp fell silent. Creatures turned away from their cooking fires to see what would happen. Sawney stood up, one paw holding his stomach, the other pointing the knife at Antigra.

‘If you were not a mother nursing a babe you would be dead where you stand. Nobeast calls Sawney Rath a fool!’

Antigra was shaking with rage. The baby stoat had set up a thin wail, but her voice drowned it out.

‘I demand you recognise my son as Taggerung!’

Sawney gritted his teeth. Thrusting the dagger back into his belt he turned aside, snarling at Grissoul, ‘Tell that stoat why her brat cannot be called Taggerung!’

Grissoul stood between them, facing Antigra, and took a starling’s skull, threaded on thin twine, from her belt. She swung it in a figure of eight until the air rushing through the eye and beak sockets made a shrieking whistle.

‘Hearken, Antigra, even a long dead bird can mock thee. Shout all thou like, ’twill not make thine offspring grow to be the Taggerung. You it is who are a fool! Can thou not see the omens are all wrong? Even though you call him Zann, which means Mighty One, he will never be the chosenbeast. I see all. Grissoul knows, take thou my word now. Go back to your fire and nurse the babe, and be silent, both of ye!’

Antigra held the newborn stoat up high, shaking the babe until it wailed even more loudly. ‘Never!’ she cried.

Sawney winced as his stomach gave a sharp twinge. He turned upon the stoat mother, roaring dangerously, 'Enough! You have heard my Seer: the omens are wrong. Zann can never be called Taggerung. Unless you want to challenge me for the leadership of the clan and change the Juskarath law to suit yourself, I command you to silence your scolding tongue and speak no more of the matter!'

He turned and went into his tent, but Antigra was not prepared to let the matter lie. Everybeast heard her shout after him: 'Then you are challenged, Sawney Rath!'

His stomach pains immediately forgotten, the ferret Chieftain emerged from the tent, a half-smile hovering round his slitted eyes. Vermin who had seen that look before turned away. Only Antigra faced him as he asked quietly, 'So, who challenges me?'

He saw the creature, even before Antigra replied, 'Gruven, the father of Zann!'

Gruven stepped forth from the shadows. In one hefty paw he carried a small round shield, in the other a tall slim spear, its point shining in the firelight. He struck a fighting stance, his voice loud and clear.

'I challenge you, Sawney Rath. Arm yourself and face me!'

Sawney had always liked Gruven. He was a valuable asset to the clan. Big, strong, but not too intelligent. Sawney shook his head and smiled patronisingly.

'Don't do it, Gruven. Don't listen to your mate. Put the spear and shield down; live to see your son grow up.'

Antigra whispered something to Gruven which seemed to embolden him. He circled away from her, jabbing the spear in Sawney's direction. 'I'll live to see my son become Taggerung. Now fight like a Juska, or die like a coward!'

Sawney shrugged off the insult. 'As you wish.' He turned, as if to fetch his weapons from the tent, then half swung back, as though he had forgotten to say something to the challenger. 'Oh, er, Gruven . . .'

There was a deadly whirr as the knife left Sawney's paw. Gruven coughed slightly, a puzzled look on his face, then fell backward, the blade buried in his throat up to its decorative handle. Sawney finished what he had been saying. 'Don't ever hold your shield low like that, it's a fatal mistake. Grissoul, I'll see you in my tent.'

Ignoring Antigra's wails, Sawney beckoned the vixen to sit beside him. 'What have you seen?'

Grissoul emptied her bag of stones, shells and bones on the ground, nodding sagely. 'See thou, my omens have fallen the same since the end of the last rain. Our Taggerung is born at last. There are other Juska clans abroad in the land, and any of these would deem it a great honour to count him as one of them. Such a beast is a talisman of great power. The Taggerung can change the fortunes of a clan. Nobeast is mightier; none can stand before a Taggerung. Long seasons have passed since such a warrior lived. Who would know this better than thee, Sawney, for was not thine own father the chosen one? Ah, those were glorious days. Our clan was the largest and most feared then. Everybeast had to bow their heads to your father. Zann Juskarath Taggerung! Can you not remember the respect he commanded wherever we went—'

Sawney cut the Seer off impatiently. 'Cease your prattle about my father. I know how great he was, but he's long dead and gone. Tell me more of this new Taggerung. How do you know he's born, and where do we find him?'

The vixen studied a single speedwell flower, which she had picked earlier that day. It was pale pink, with three fat petals and one thinner than the others. She smiled slyly.

'My visions tell me a mark shaped like this little blossom will be upon him, or maybe her, for who can tell if Taggerung be male or female?'

Just then a weasel called Eefera entered and gave Sawney his knife back, cleaned of blood traces. Sawney dismissed Eefera and placed the blade lightly against the Seer's nose.

‘You said any clan would deem it an honour to count *him* as one of them. The Taggerung will be a male creature. Stop playing your little games and get on with it!’

Grissoul turned the knifeblade aside with one paw. ‘He will have the speedwell mark on him, where I know not. See thou these two bones, fallen next to each other, with this shell across the ends of both? That means a river, or a stream, and the shell is for a place where those who dwell not in the waters may cross the stream. Do thou see it also?’

Sawney nodded. ‘That means a ford. The long path from north to south has such a ford, where the stream crosses it in Mossflower country, a good five-day march from here.’

Grissoul closed her eyes, swaying back and forth. ‘Today I saw a hawk strike a dove in the air. Their cries mingled, and gave out together a bell-like sound.’

Sawney gave a start. ‘You mean the old Abbey of Redwall! That’s the only place that gives out bell sounds in all that region!’

The Seer kept her eyes shut. ‘Methinks that would be it.’

Sawney grabbed Grissoul’s shoulder so tightly that her eyes popped open. He pulled her close, his voice like a rasp. ‘Speak not to me of Redwall. I would not go within a mile of it. I have listened to the talk around the campfires since I was nought but a whelp. The place is accursed!’

He released the quivering vixen and gestured dramatically. ‘I am not stupid. The history of Redwall Abbey has taught me a lesson. I know how many warlords and conquerors, with vast hordes and mighty armies to back them, have been defeated by the woodlanders who dwell behind those walls. Even in the seasons long before our great-grandsires’ ancestors were born. You’ve heard their names, everybeast has. Cluny the Scourge, Slagar the Cruel, Ferahgo the Assassin, and many others. All of them defeated and slain. But I’ll tell you one name that won’t be added to the list. Sawney Rath, Chieftain of the Juskarath!’

Grissoul spoke soothingly to calm Sawney's rising ire. 'Nay, fret thou not. The bell-sound omen is a warning, telling thee not to go near yon red Abbey. Beware the sound of the bell!'

Sawney spat neatly into the fire. 'Hah! I already knew that. I'm as wise as any omen. Just tell me what part Redwall Abbey plays in all this?'

Grissoul gathered up her paraphernalia and cast them a second time. She stared at them, then pointed. 'See thou those bones which fell foursquare with that red piece of stone at their centre? Watch!' She lifted the red stone slightly, and an ant crawled from beneath it and ran over the bones. The Seer smiled triumphantly. 'It means that the Taggerung will be a creature from the Abbey!'

Sawney placed a paw on the ground, and the ant ran on to it. The ferret held the paw close to his eyes, watching the insect circling a claw. 'What manner of creature will it be?'

Grissoul pursed her lips. 'Who can tell?' She inspected the pawprint Sawney had left in the sandy ground. 'Five days from here, at the ford where waters cross the path. Then will thou see what sort of beast the Taggerung will be.'

Sawney stood up and patted his stomach. 'I feel better. Tell them to break camp; we travel tonight. To have a Taggerung in my clan will be the greatest of honours. My Juskarath will make the journey in four days. I want to be there early, in case other clan Seers have had visions. I'll slay anybeast who comes near that ford. Tell the clan to hasten or I'll leave them behind . . . aye, the same way I'm leaving Gruven here.'

Grissoul stared at him, almost fondly. 'Th'art a wise Chieftain, and ruthless too!'

Sawney checked her as she went. 'One other thing. Once we have the Taggerung we travel back this way fast, to the sea and shores. Nobeast at Redwall must know 'twas my clan that took him. If the tales about them are true, they

must be fearsome warriors, with a long paw for vengeance. I need to avoid a conflict with such beasts.'

He waved a paw, dismissing his Seer. As he did so, the ant was hurled from its perch and fell into a basin of water. Sawney failed to notice it, but the ant swam!



2

'After spring's soft rain is done,
At waning of the moon,
Four dry solid days of sun,
Will bring forth growth and bloom.'

Drogg Spearback, Cellarkeeper of Redwall Abbey, patted the soft headspikes of Egburt and Floburt, his little grandhogs. 'Well said, young 'uns. You finally got it right!'

Squincing her snout and tugging at her grandfather's heavy cellar apron, Floburt, the inquisitive one, piped up. 'But Granddad, we ain't growthed an' bloomed. I'm still only likkle, an' so is Egburt. Why is that?'

The stout old hedgehog winked knowingly at his grandson. 'Cummon, Egburt, you tell 'er why.'

Egburt sucked the tassel of the girdle cord which circled the waist of his smock, pondering the answer. 'Hmm, er, 'cos us isn't veggibles, we 'edgehogs, not plants.'

Drogg chuckled until his stomach wobbled. Rummaging two candied chestnuts from his apron pocket he gave them one each. 'You've got a brain 'neath those spikes, young 'og!'

The hogbabes sat either side of their grandfather, on an upturned wheelbarrow in the orchard, enjoying the late

spring noontide sun. Drogg spread both paws, gesturing round and about.

‘See all that? Well, that’s growth an’ bloom for you! Plants, grass, fruit’n’flowers, springin’ up like wildfire after the rains. Come midsummer we’ll be up to our spikes in apples, pears, plums, damsons, strawberries, blackberries an’ all manner o’ berries. Lookit the salad crop, o’er yonder by the redcurrant hedge: radish, cucumber, cress, scallions, lettuce. Ready for gatherin’ in, those are. Remember this, my liddle ‘uns, you be plantin’ stuff in the earth an’ it’ll grow quick like. Save for the great trees like those in Mossflower Wood. They grow slower, stronger, just like us creatures, though trees live much longer’n we do.’

Both little hedgehogs sat listening as they munched candied chestnuts. Drogg expanded his lecture, telling them of their heritage, Redwall Abbey. He loved the place with a fierce pride, which he communicated to them. ‘Plants, trees an’ creatures, they come’n’go sooner or later. Not this ole Abbey, though! Lookit all this wunnerful red sandstone. Shines like dusty pink roses in late noon sun. Nobeast who comes wantin’ trouble can pass those big rampart walls of the main gate with the liddle gate’ouse beside it. I couldn’t even guess ‘ow old our great Abbey buildin’ is. Bell tower, gables, columns, Great Hall, Cavern ‘Ole, kitchens, dormitories, an’ my cellars too. They must’ve been ‘ere for ever an’ a day!’

Floburt dug her tiny paw into his broad apron pocket, searching for more nuts. Her granddad usually carried a goodly supply. ‘Have you been ‘ere forever’n’aday, Granddad?’

Smiling, he shook his great spiked head. ‘Dearie me no, though I been an Abbeybeast longer’n most, save for ole Cregga.’

Egburt joined his sister in rummaging in the apron pocket. ‘Ole Cregga the Badgermum? ‘Ow long’s she been ‘ere, Granddad?’

Drogg pondered the question, chewing the milky sap from a grass stalk. 'Hmm, let me see. Cregga is wot they call the last of the old 'uns. I think she's older'n some o' the trees 'ereabouts. Great warrior she was, but blinded in some ancient battle. Brother Hoben, the Recorder, says that Cregga has outlived two Abbesses, Tansy an' Song, both long gone. He says that she knew Arven the Champion an' my great-grand'og, Gurgan Spearback, many seasons afore I was born. So figger it out yoreself. 'Ow old d'you think Cregga is?'

Egburt's eyes grew wide as he tried to calculate the answer in hedgehog manner, by counting on his headspikes. 'Phwaw! She mus' be eleventeen thousing seasons old!'

Drogg allowed them to find the rest of his candied chestnut supply before he rose slowly. 'Aye, at least that much, I'd say. I got to go now an' broach a barrel of October Ale for the counsellors' meetin' tonight. You Dibbuns stay out o' trouble, an' don't go gettin' those nice clean smocks muddied up, or yore mum'll dust yore spikes with an oven paddle. Why don't you go an' see if there be any news of Filorn ottermum's babe? But mind, don't make a nuisance of y'selves. See you anon.'

Both Dibbuns giggled at the idea of their mother spanking them with an oven paddle. She was far too gentle. Being sent early to bed was the limit of punishment for Redwall babes. When Drogg had departed, they clambered from the wheelbarrow and ran squeaking and jumping into the orchard. A tiny mole was exploring a clump of bilberry stalks, searching among the pink globe-shaped blossoms. Waving a pudgy digging claw in greeting, he called out in the quaint mole accent, 'Burr, goo' day to ee. They'm bilbeez ain't a growed yet. Taken ee toime they be's!'

'My mum sez you get tummy ache from eatin' bilberries afore midsummer,' Floburt commented sagely.

Gundil, the Dibbun mole, flicked his stubby tail scornfully. 'Moi mum sez ee same thing, but oi loikes bilbeez, h'even

if'n oi do gets tumbly h'ache.' He ambled out of the bilberry clump and shrugged. 'Bain't none thurr, tho'. Whurr us'n's be a goen?'

Egburt pointed towards the Abbey. 'We goin' t'see if Filorn ottermum's new baby be a borned yet. Cummon!'

The three little chums wandered off paw in paw towards the Abbey. Once inside, they stopped off at Great Hall to play a favourite Dibbuns game. Almost lost amid the vastness of stone and timber beams, they hopped about on the floor, in and out of harlequin hues of sunshafts from the stained glass windows far above them.

Gundil gave a deep bass giggle, holding a paw to his face. 'Hurrhurrhurr. Luk ee! Oi be's all purkle!'

Floburt twirled about in a pool of amber light. 'An' I'm all gold, a solid golden 'ogmaid!'

Egburt chose a shaft of aquamarine blue, floundering upon his back as though he were drowning. 'Save me! I'm unner the deep deep water! 'Elp!'

Floburt and Gundil dutifully rescued Egburt and all three fled downstairs into Cavern Hole, where preparations were under way for the counsellors' meeting. Friar Bobb, a stout old squirrel, shooed them out with a rush broom.

'Come on, out out. You'll get trodden on, wandering about under everybeast's paws. Go and play elsewhere, you rascals. Quick now. Scoot!'

He made as if to run after them. The little pals thought it was great fun to be chased, and trundled off helter skelter. Halting on the dormitory landing above the first flight of stairs, Gundil stifled his chuckles and peeked down the spiral stairwell. He tapped a paw against his velvety snout.

'Ee Froyer woan't foind us'n's oop yurr. Hurr, boi 'okey ee woan't!'

Shaking with glee, Egburt pointed to a door. 'Let's 'ide in there unner the beds!'

Gundil stood on Egburt's back in his effort to reach the latch, but it still proved too high. Floburt was trying to

clamber up on top of them both when somebeast inside heard and opened the door.

The trio of Dibbuns fell tail over ears into the room. Filorn the ottermum stood holding the door, smiling down at them.

‘Well, well. To what do we owe the pleasure of this visit?’

Gundil tugged his snout respectfully. ‘Uz cummed to see if’n ee likkle h’otter was borned, marm.’

Rillflag, Filorn’s husband, their daughter, a pretty little ottermaid named Mhera, and the great Badgermum Cregga were standing around a woven rush cradle in one corner. Mhera, who was four seasons older than the three Dibbuns, beckoned them over.

‘He was born this morning. Come and see. He’s beautiful!’

Cregga looked so huge and intimidating that the trio backed away slightly. A deep rumbling laugh came from the blind badger as she sensed their trepidation. Turning her sightless eyes in their direction she whispered gently, ‘Oh, do come and look at him. He won’t bite you. Neither will I. It’s Gundil and the two little Spearbacks, isn’t it?’

Floburt trotted dutifully over to the crib, with the other two trailing behind, wondering how the blind badger knew who they were. Standing on tip-paw they gazed at the tiny new otterbabe. The little fellow stared solemnly back through sleepy dark eyes. Soft infant fur fuzzed out from his chubby cheeks, and a small pink tongue-tip showed as he yawned contentedly.

Mhera stroked his fluffy paw. ‘Isn’t he the prettiest little cub you ever saw?’

Egburt looked up at her enquiringly. ‘Is that ’is name, Cub?’

Rillflag stroked his son’s downy head, smiling. ‘No, cub is just a word for a babe. His name is Deyna. My great-grandsire was a warrior called Deyna, and he carried a mark from birth just like this little fellow, see.’

He turned the babe’s paw pad upward. Instead of being all black like the other three, this one only had black edging. In

the centre was a pink mark, like a four-leaf clover, with one piece thinner than the others. Gundil touched it.

‘‘Tis loike ee likkle flower. Can ee babby coom owt an’ play with us’n’s, zurr?’

Rillflag shook his head in amusement. ‘Not yet. Next season, maybe.’

Filorn took a box from the mantelpiece and let them each choose a piece of preserved fruit from it. ‘I’m sure you’ll make good friends for little Deyna when he’s old enough to be up and about. Run along and play now.’

Cregga enveloped all three Dibbuns in her massive paws. ‘Not so fast there, rascals. I could hear you outside. You only came in here to hide from Friar Bobb, didn’t you?’

Floburt shook her head vigorously. ‘Ho no, marm, ‘onest we didn’t. Us was comin’ to see if Deyna was borned. Ole Friar Bobb chased us out o’ Cavern ‘Ole.’

The blind badger tapped a paw against her forehead. ‘Of course, I’d almost forgotten, the counsellors’ meeting. Right, you three can help me manage those stairs. Slowly, now; my paws aren’t as young as yours!’

‘Hurr, doan’t ee wurry, marm. Uz’ll get ee thurr noicely!’

Hiding a smile, Cregga allowed the three to grasp her robe and guide her to the door. ‘Thank you. I’m sure you will!’

When they had gone, Mhera picked her new little brother up and walked round the room with him, talking softly to him as she had seen her mother doing.

‘Who’s going to grow up into a great big riverdog like his dad then, eh?’

Rillflag shook his head. ‘He ain’t a real riverdog until his back’s touched runnin’ water.’

Filorn took the baby from Mhera and held him close. ‘Don’t you think he’s a bit young for that?’

The big male otter snorted. ‘Not at all. My father took me to the river when I was his age, just as I took Mhera when she was born. Deyna will feel the running water on his back too!’

There was a note of pleading in Filorn's voice. 'But he's so small. Perhaps you could wet his back in the Abbey pond, at the warm shallow edge?'

Rillflag was adamant. 'The Abbey pond has no current; it doesn't run on to the sea. It's got to be running water. The ford, where the stream crosses the path, that's the place.'

'I'll go with you, Father. I'll carry little Deyna.'

Rillflag patted his daughter's shoulder. 'No need for that. You stay here and help your mother. I can carry that little rogue, he weighs nothing. Me and Deyna will bring you back some fresh watershrimp and good long watercress. Maybe some hotroot too, if we spot any.'

Filorn resigned herself to the fact that argument was useless. Her husband could be a very stubborn creature.

'Your father's right, Mhera. You'd only slow him down. We'll get a nice naming party organised while he and Deyna are away. Then, when he's made a real riverdog of our baby, we'll name him properly, like any other Redwaller.'

Mhera took to the idea eagerly. 'Yes! The moment you set off, Dad, we'll get organising with Friar Bobb, Drogg Cellarhog, the Foremole and Sister Alkanet. I can start gathering mushrooms and scallions for pasties, Mama can get the ingredients ready for her fruit and honey cake, and we'll ask Drogg if he has a cask of strawberry fizz . . .'

Filorn held up both paws against her daughter's onslaught. 'Enough, enough! I'm starting to feel worn out just listening to you. We'll make a start after your father's left. Er, when will you be setting off, dear?'

Rillflag took an old travelling cloak and fashioned it into a carrying sling across one shoulder. He selected a stout ash-handled spear, which would double as a travelling stave. 'As soon as you've packed some food and drink for two warriors. Enough for three days should do. We don't plan on wasting time at the wayside, do we, Deyna?'

From his mother's arms, the baby otter gave a rough squeak. Rillflag nodded in his direction. 'He said no.'

All three burst out laughing.

Down in Cavern Hole the meeting of Redwall counsellors was about to begin. A supper of spring vegetable soup, new-baked oatbread and wedges of white cheese studded with hazelnuts, with October Ale and apple flan, was being served to the counsellors seated round the big table. Foremole Brull, Cregga Badgermum, Brother Hoben, Friar Bobb, Sister Alkanet and Drogg Cellarhog were present. Brother Hoben indicated an empty seat as he recorded the members' names.

'Where's Rillflag this evening? Anybeast seen him?'

Cregga leaned forward to accept a tankard of October Ale. 'Otter business. I think he's got to take the little 'un for some ceremony or other. You know the way he is about otter rituals. Anyhow, I'll make his apologies for absence.'

Friar Bobb tapped the tabletop with his ladle. 'On with the meeting, then. Sister Alkanet?'

The Sister was a thin, severe, no-nonsense type of mouse. She bowed formally to the others and began.

'Friends, this Abbey has been without Abbot or Abbess for far too long. I suggested this meeting so that the situation might be finally remedied. Have you any ideas?'

Foremole Brull held up a sizeable digging claw. It was unusual for the moles to have a female leader, but Brull was solid as a rock and full of good common sense. She was liked by all.

'Yurr, oi doan't think et aimportant. Ee Abbey be runnen noice'n'smooth unner Cregga Badgermum. Nowt amiss wi' urr; she'm gudd!'

A general murmur of agreement confirmed Brull's mole logic. Before Sister Alkanet could object, Cregga spoke for herself.

'You all know I'm not a real Abbess, never wanted to be. But when old Abbess Song went to her reward I took up the job of caretaker, in the absence of anybeast's being elected

officially. I'm countless seasons older than the oldest among you, I'm blind, sometimes I ache all over and I sleep most of the day. However, as Brull says, the Abbey runs nice'n'smooth. I merely guide or advise. Redwallers are trusty, responsible creatures; they usually know what needs doing to keep the place up to the mark. I'm quite happy to leave things as they are, though even I won't last for ever. If you're content with an ancient, blind badger sitting in as substitute, then I'll continue to do so. With your kind permission, of course.'

Amid the applause from the counsellors, Sister Alkanet, who was always the mouse to raise difficult issues, raised her paw. 'Then what about a Champion? Redwall needs a defender like Martin the Warrior.'

Friar Bobb's snort of impatience was heard by all, as he wagged his ladle at the Sister and gave vent to his feelings. 'I've got four great plum puddings steaming in the kitchens, and I've also got a sleepy assistant. Young Broogle will probably let the puddings boil dry if I'm not there soon. Sister Alkanet, marm, you brought up this same question at this same meeting this time last season. I'll give you the same answer now as I gave you then. Redwall is strong. Tyrants and vermin warlords have broken their skulls against our walls. The Abbey is too hard a nut to crack, vermin everywhere know that. Only a fool would try to test our might. These days there is no need of perilous warriors and great swords—'

Alkanet was up on her paws, pounding the table and objecting. 'But what if there were, Friar? What if the day came when we woke to find the foe at our gates and no brave one to lead or defend us? What then, sir? What then?'

Cregga's big paw hit the tabletop, silencing further argument. 'Enough! We are supposed to be responsible elders, not squabbling Dibbuns. Friar Bobb, you may return to your kitchens. I'm very fond of plum puddings; they mustn't boil dry. Now, Sister, in answer to your question.

Champions and Abbey Warriors have always arisen when the need is great. It would be presumptuous of us to appoint one; that is something nobeast save Martin the Warrior can do. Martin was the founder Warrior of Redwall. His sword hangs over the picture of him on the tapestry in Great Hall, and there it will stay until he chooses the next Warrior. When our Abbey is in danger, the spirit of Martin will enter some young Redwaller, and he or she will pick up the sword of Martin to defend us. So let us hear no more talk of electing a Champion. Sit down, friends, and let's do this good food justice. Brother Hoben, pass me the bread and cheese, if you please. Sister Alkanet, would you like to pour me some October Ale?'

As Alkanet leaned across to pour, Cregga whispered, 'Come on, friend, smile. It doesn't hurt to look happy!'

The Sister was mystified as to how Cregga knew she was wearing a frown. She tried a smile as she filled the tankard. The blind badger smiled back and tapped her paw. 'Thank you, Alkanet. That's much better!'

Soft perfumes of dog rose, vetchling, red clover and nightdewed grass lingered upon the still night air with hardly a breeze to disperse them. Rillflag strode energetically north on the old path, glancing up at the star-pierced vaults of the skies above. Slung upon his back was a bag of provisions; in one paw he held the spearstaff, the other rested beneath his cloak cradle, protecting the sleeping babe therein. He breathed deeply, listening to the distant tolling of Redwall Abbey's twin bells, Matthias and Methuselah, sounding the midnight hour.

Deyna moved slightly in slumber and gave a small growl. Rillflag felt a shudder of delight course through him, and he hummed an old otter tune to his son. Life was good. So good!



3

Sawney Rath chose his spot carefully. Within a half-day's march of the ford, he camped the clan on the broad stream's north side. Morning sunlight filtered through the trees as the band of assorted vermin sat, weary and miserable after their forced march from the coastal scrublands. Clad in his usual plain leather tabard, belted by a strap fashioned from fine brass links into which was thrust his amber-hilted knife with the sapphire pommel stone, Sawney, however, looked vital and eager, ready for anything. The only decoration he had was the Juskarath clan mark, a black stripe of dye running from skull to nosetip with two lines of red dots running parallel on either side. These moved as his mobile face did while he issued his orders.

'Rawback, you stay here with the others. Grissoul, Eefera, Dagrab, Felch, Ribrow and Vallug Bowbeast, you come with me. Remember this, Rawback, for I'll hold you responsible. No fires, not even a wisp of smoke. Any food must be eaten as it is, no cooking. No tents or lean-to shelters, or sleeping either. Stay alert on your paws, everybeast. We'll be coming back this way fast when we do, so be ready to move. Antigra, Wherrul, I want no sign left that Juskarath have been here. You'll be in charge of cleaning up pawprints and

tracks. When we return with the Taggerung we travel back west to the shores. I've no need to tell you what'll happen to anybeast who disobeys my commands, or tries to cross me. Understood?'

There followed a jangling of bracelets and earrings as the vermin touched their left ears in silence, the clan sign of understanding. Sawney's quick, vicious eyes roved back and forth over them, and then, without flinching, he drew his dagger and nicked the point against his own left ear in a challenging gesture.

'See how easily I shed my blood. I am Sawney Rath, and I can shed your blood far more easily. Keep that in mind!' He nodded to the six he had picked. 'Come on, let's go and get a Taggerung for our clan!'

Rillflag was astounded. He was muttering to himself as he laid little Deyna down on a bed of soft mosses by the streambank.

'Hoho, what a riverdog you're goin' t'be! Not only got that back wet in the runnin' water, but you nearly swam away from your ole dad. I never knew a cub your size that'd swim right off. Mhera wailed enough t'frighten the birds when her back was wetted, but nary a sound out o' you, Deyna!'

He tickled the otterbabe's stomach roughly. Deyna doubled over and bit his father's paw with tiny white milk teeth. Rillflag roared with laughter as he released his paw.

'Hahahahohoho! Proper liddle shark you are. Lucky there weren't any tasty fishes swimmin' in the water, or you'd 'ave ate 'em all, eh, son!'

He sat awhile, fondly watching the cub, trying to remember an otter streamsong as the babe's eyes began to close in the warm mid day sun.

'Ho if I was a stream I'd chance to go,
A racin' to the sea,
Yonder way fresh waters flow,

An' that's the way for me.

Leapin' an' boundin',
Splashin' an' soundin',
Rudder round rock an' log,
With pike an' trout,
I'd frisk about,
A good ole riverdog!

Through leafy glades the waters call,
Across the open meadow,
An' when I sight a waterfall,
Why down will go me head oh!'

Deyna's eyes flickered as he fought against the slumbers which threatened to overcome him and he yawned aloud, giving out a squeaking sound. Rillflag turned his attention to the shallows, where movement had caught his eye.

'Hah, I see watershrimp. What do you say, liddle matey? Shall we catch some to take back to Redwall? You stay there an' watch your ole dad. I'll show you the way 'tis done!'

Sawney crouched behind a broad elm trunk on the other side of the stream, Grissoul at his side. He pulled the Seer close, whispering in her ear, 'That's no Taggerung, he's a full grown otter. What do we do now?'

'That one is no part of my vision,' the vixen Seer whispered back. 'Thou canst do what thou likes with him; he is none of our concern.'

Felch the fox, Dagrab the rat and Vallug Bowbeast were hiding on the other side of the stream, behind a high-banked bend. Sawney slid back towards them, staying on the opposite bank until he was out of the big otter's eyeline. Then he waved to Vallug, attracting his attention. Sawney pointed to Rillflag and made a gesture with both paws, as if firing a bow. Vallug nodded. It was a simple task for a skilled bowbeast.