

opening extract of

high rhulain

written by

brian jacques

published by puffin books

All text is copyright of the author and illustrator

please print off and read at your leisure.



1

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 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. 'Arrrreeeekkaaarrrr!'

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, 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 as 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. 'Ye 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. 'Hurr aye, marm, 'tis aseedingly 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 slated rooftop, down to the mighty buttresses, twixt tiny attic and mullioned dormitory windows, and below, 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 as may be, young marm, but lookit ee h'orchard. Trees blowed thisaway an' that, fruits'n'berries be'n 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 Longtunnel 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 float away if'n I drinked that much tea!'

Burbee chuckled. 'Gurt h'imperdent young lump, lessen thoi cheek an' pour us'n's summ o' that 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 every 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 frett, h'Abbess marm. Oi gotten moi molecrew a-workin' daown thurr, an' all ee Redwallers lendin' a paw. Just bee's two more willin' beasts a-needed.'

Lycian shot him a look of mock severity. 'We'll be down just as soon as we've finished tea, my 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. 'Vurry gudd, marm, as ee says, marm, you'm take yurr own gudd toime, marm. Oi'll look for'ard to ee visit 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 foozikil!'

Down in the orchard, Banjon Wildlough, the otter Skipper, was organizing the workers. Banjon was not a big creature, as otters go, but he had an undoubted air of command about him. Everybeast obeyed his orders, all working together for the common good – except the Dibbuns, of course. (These were the little ones; Abbeybabes were always referred to as 'Dibbuns.') The otter Skipper tried to 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 tummy ache, I'm warnin' ye. Taggle! Stop

chuckin' them hazelnuts around. Grumby! Come down out o' that tree. Irgle, Ralg, where are ye off to with that barrow?'

Banjon turned despairingly to his friend, Brink Greyspoke, the big, fat hedgehog who was Redwall's 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 get 'em organised, leave it t'me, Skip.'

Brink began by appealing to what Dibbuns loved most: their stomachs. 'Lissen now, ye big workbeasts. I 'eard that Friar Bibble 'as got lots o' candied chestnuts to reward willin' bodies with. So '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'll take 'em to the kitchens, that'll please the Friar greatly. Come on now, let's see those big muscles 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 smidgeon of spare flesh on her sinewy frame. She shunned the typical dress of a maiden, wearing only a cutdown 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 readily acknowledged by everybeast within Redwall.

She waved cheerily to her father, whom she always addressed as Skip. 'We're going to help the 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 of posts an'

staves. He's thinkin' of buildin' fences to act as a windbreak from any more wild weather we 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 that growing in our Abbey grounds, Skip. . . . '

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

Banjon nodded. 'Aye, Foremole asked me to go for it, but I got me paws full with wot's to be done 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 own, 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, get 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 choppa 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 fruits. 'Yore far too young t'be rovin' about woodlands. I'll take ye up t'the kitchens an' tell Friar Bibble to 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! Whoooooraaaayyy!'

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!'