



The Quest of the
Warrior
SHEEP

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EGMONT

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1

The Baaton

All the sheep were chewing cud when it happened.

Actually, that's not quite true, because Oxo, the enormous Oxford ram, had finished chewing and was butting a fence post that had given him a funny look. Links, the Lincoln Longwool with floppy curls, was composing a rap. Jaycey, the pretty little Jacob, was painting her hooves with mud and sheep-dip. And Wills, the orphaned Welsh Balwen lamb, was wishing he was at football practice.

In fact, of the five Rare Breed Sheep in Ida White's field in Eppingham, only Sal, the Southdown with a wide bottom and thin legs, was really chewing cud. She was sitting digesting yesterday's grass, passing it from one stomach to the next, and thinking about the olden days. Sal was proud to be a sheep, a member of the

great and ancient family Ovis. She worried sometimes that the younger generation, even the four other Rare Breeds with whom she shared her paddock, no longer cared about their glorious heritage.

That had been her thought as she'd stood up to sing verse 167 of her favourite poem, 'Songs of the Fleece'. Then, quite suddenly, the lights went out. Of course, fields don't have lights as such, but that's what it seemed like. Sal felt a sudden sharp bang on the head and her legs buckled under her. Next, she saw flashing lights and bursting stars. Now, as she opened her eyes, she saw a little shadow. Had there been a different shadow, a bigger, blacker shadow, before the bang on the head? She wasn't sure.

The small shadow was caused by Wills. Wills was short and skinny, so he didn't block out much sunlight.

'Thank Aries you're alive!' he said, then turned to call the others. 'Over here, you guys. Sal's been hit.'

Wills' voice sounded faint in Sal's ears.

'Quickly!' he urged.

The others, who had been ambling across the field,

increased their speed to a gallop. They stood around Sal, wondering what to do. Jaycey noticed a tiny cut on Sal's head.

'Ohmygrass!' she exclaimed. 'She's bleeding.' She wobbled on her dainty hooves and fainted.

'Fat lot of help she is,' grunted Oxo.

Wills turned towards the farmhouse where their owner, Ida White, lived with Tod, her grandson. 'I'll fetch help,' he said.

But Sal called him back.

'No,' she groaned. 'Just dab me with a dock leaf.' She tried again to sit up. 'What happened?'

'Something fell out of the sky,' said Wills, 'and bounced off the top of your head.'

'I'm glad it didn't fall on *me*,' said Jaycey, recovering from her faint. 'Blood is soooo unattractive.'

Oxo and Links began looking around, though they didn't have a clue what for.

'Was it this?' asked Links. His searching nose had bumped into a small, silvery object with stud-like buttons and a square of blue plastic. There were words printed above the square: RAMROM.COM. Most sheep cannot read but Wills could because he

had been brought up in the farmhouse kitchen.

‘Ramrom dot com,’ he read aloud.

‘Dot what?’ said Oxo. But he wasn’t really interested. He was peering at the small golden symbol above the printed words: a picture of a ram’s head. Sal peered at it too.

‘It’s a mobile phone,’ said Wills, amazed.

‘It’s a ram!’ exclaimed Sal.

‘It’s a ram *on* a mobile phone,’ said Wills, correctly. But Sal wasn’t listening.

‘A ram with golden horns . . .’ she murmured. ‘A ram with down-turned golden horns . . .’ She turned to Wills. ‘It fell from the sky, you said?’

Wills nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘And did you see a shadow?’ she asked. ‘Before it fell?’

Wills nodded again.

‘Yeah, I saw it too, innit,’ exclaimed Links. They had all noticed the loss of sunlight and the enormous dark shadow on the grass.

Sal looked at them gravely.

‘Surely you see what this means?’ she said.

Clearly they didn’t. Sal struggled to her feet.

‘You can’t *all* have forgotten the ancient prophecy,’ she cried.

They had.

Ignoring their blank looks and the pain in her head, Sal began to quote from the Songs of the Fleece.

‘Whilst the great Lord Aries lies
In his field above the skies
With the Baaton lying near,
There’s nought to fear.’

She paused, then started again, loudly, making Jaycey jump.

‘But one day, Lambad the Bad,
Who is evil, maybe mad,
Will try to steal the Baaton
From our king!’

‘Ohmygrass!’ Jaycey’s mother had often warned her about Lambad, the evil ram who eats lambs for breakfast.

‘Yes,’ said Sal. She fixed them with her yellow-eyed

gaze. 'I don't have to remind you about the Baaton, do I?' They shook their heads but she did anyway. 'It has a deeply magic power,' she explained solemnly. 'A power that can be used for good or for evil. Whoever owns it must decide. And only two sheep *can* own the Baaton: Aries the Good or Lambad the Bad.'

She drew a deep breath and continued reciting.

'For the Baaton they will fight,
For many a day and night,
Till to the prize they can no longer cling.'

She stood silent for a moment, then took another breath and started again. To her surprise, she heard other voices joining in, mumbling at first but gradually growing louder.

'Then from a shadow dark and cold,
Will fall the Baaton, it is told.
And the special Rare Breeds few
Will know what they must do.'

The sheep glanced uneasily at one another. Did that mean them? They carried on.

'For without the Baaton's magic rays,
The Ram of Rams will die in days.
Only *they* can save his life,
And the world from pain and strife.
They must be Warriors, brave and true!
Sheeply Warriors through and through!'

The voices that had joined Sal's trailed away again. The sheep stared down at the small silver object lying in the grass. Links was the first to speak.

'So like . . .' he asked slowly, 'are you sayin' this tingy's the silver Baaton of the *real* Golden Horn Dude? Aries, the Sheep Daddy of them all?'

Sal looked at him directly.

'Yes.'

Links backed away a little. They all did, respectful and suddenly afraid. Even Wills began to wonder. It still looked like a mobile phone. But although he knew a bit about such things and the ways of humans, he knew much less about sheeply prophecy.

‘Brothers and Sisters of the Fleece!’ proclaimed Sal. ‘We have been called. Even now, Lord Aries is wandering the earth, getting weaker by the hour. We must find him and return the Baaton! If we fail, the future of sheepdom will be . . . zilch!’

The word zilch was not in the Songs of the Fleece but this was a vital moment. They had to understand.

‘If Lambad lays his hooves on this, he will use its power against all wearers of the fleece. Just for fun, he will torment us with the unscratchable itch and turn our pastures to dust. Then he will give any of us who refuse to obey him to the dogs!’

Jaycey whimpered.

‘So . . .’ continued Sal, raising her head, ‘we must find Lord Aries. And until we do, we must defend the Baaton with our lives . . . We must be Warriors, brave and true!’

There was a brief silence. The sheep looked at one another, each thinking that it was cauliflower night tonight. The human boy, Tod, would be bringing a barrow load for them at any moment.

‘Are we sheep or are we sheep!’ demanded Sal.

The others blinked.

‘Then I shall go alone!’ she cried, and trotted towards the fence, her fat hindquarters wobbling slightly.

‘Wait!’ Oxo, Links and Jaycey scampered after her.

At the fence, they all turned to look back at Wills.

‘Wills?’

‘Of course I’m coming,’ he said. ‘But won’t we need the Baaton?’

He picked it up in his teeth and ran to join them.

Oxo stood facing the fence, pawing the ground with one hoof. ‘Right,’ he said, ‘let’s ship these sheep out. Charge!’

He crashed into the fence, turned a somersault and landed on his back on the flattened wire.

‘Just making it easy for you,’ he called, styling it out.

‘Yeah right,’ said Links. He and the others followed, treading on Oxo’s tummy as they squeezed through the gap he had made.

They trotted off into the golden evening bravely enough but within minutes they had slowed to a walk. There was no hedge on the far side of this new field and without one they didn’t feel safe.

‘I think,’ announced Sal, ‘we need a bonding circle.’

‘A what?’ asked Oxo, backing away.

‘Brothers and Sisters of the Fleece!’ Sal suddenly cried. ‘Let us join heads! One for five and five for one!’

She lowered her head, then, when no one else moved, she twisted her neck round and glared up at Oxo until he lowered his head too. ‘Jaycey, come here between us,’ Sal ordered. Jaycey stood between Sal and Oxo and lowered her own head.

‘Don’t scratch my lovely horns with your bony old skull,’ she said to Oxo.

Links went and stood on the other side of Sal and she felt his floppy curls against her face as he too lowered his head. Wills squeezed in between Links and Oxo. He had to stand on tiptoe but he completed the circle.

‘Baa . . .’ said Sal, and the wheel of sheep, the tops of their heads pressed firmly together, woolly bottoms outwards, began to turn.

‘Baa,’ Sal repeated as she shuffled. ‘Baa . . . Baa . . .’

The others joined in. ‘Baa . . .’

Ever faster their bonding circle span and ever more loudly their baas rose into the sky.

‘Baa . . . Lord Aries . . . Baaa . . . Your Rare Breed Warriors are coming . . . Baaaaaaaa . . .’

And that’s how aliens got involved.

2

Unidentified Flying Objects

There was a lane at the far side of the field in which the sheep were bonding, and in the lane was a tractor, driven by Tony Catchpole.

Tony was a farmer, but only because his family had always been farmers in Eppingham. He would much rather have been an astronaut. There was nothing he didn't know about space travel or Unidentified Flying Objects. He knew they were there. He just hadn't seen one yet.

Today, as Tony bounced along on his tractor, something unusual caught his eye. Something above Ida White's fields. He stopped for a better look.

The setting sun was shining in his eyes but there was definitely a roundish golden blur, hanging in the air. He shaded his eyes and beneath the dazzle saw something spinning on the ground. He squinted.

Sheep? A circle of sheep! He could hear them too, now he'd switched off the engine.

'Baaaaaaa . . .'

Dark clouds suddenly masked the sun and a brilliant shaft of light seemed to strike from the hovering blur in the sky, down to the ground where the sheep were spinning. But the glare was intense and Tony had to close his eyes for a moment. When he blinked them open again, the field was empty. The sheep had disappeared.

He hardly dared breathe. He squinted into the sky and thought he could see the golden blur moving swiftly into the distance. A thrill of excitement swept away his shock. He knew he must share this fantastic news with the world. He tapped a number into his mobile phone and held it to his ear with a trembling hand. At last there was an answer.

'Organic TV. How may we help you?'

Tony tried to stay calm.

'My name's Tony Catchpole and I've just seen a flock of sheep beamed up into a UFO.'

The Rare Breed Warriors heard the tractor roaring

away as they staggered out of the brook into which they had tumbled. The bonding circle had spun out of control. Now they all felt a bit giddy as they climbed back up the muddy slope to the sunlit grass.

Wills had managed to hang on to the Baaton. He put it down so he could speak.

‘May I ask a question?’

Sal sneezed then nodded.

‘The thing is,’ said Wills, ‘I understand *why* we’re going. But not *where*. Where are we taking the Baaton?’

‘To Lord Aries, of course,’ said Sal.

‘But where is he?’

Sal coughed slightly to hide her embarrassment. She hadn’t thought of that.

‘Well . . .’ she began. ‘Well. Lord Aries, Ram of Rams, is a Soay. And Soays live in the North.’ She began to feel more positive. ‘Yes, we must go North, to the place of jagged mountains and bare rocks, of howling winds and snow from which the first sheep sprang. We must go where even the thickest fleece is no protection against the elements and the weakest perish.’

‘I can hardly wait,’ muttered Oxo.

‘Are we going to walk all the way?’ asked Jaycey. ‘I’ve only just painted my hooves!’

‘Of course we’re not going to walk,’ said Sal. ‘We shall use all the resourcefulness and cunning for which we sheep are rightly famous.’

They stood in silence, trying to think of a time when any of them had been resourceful or cunning. Then Wills spoke again.

‘Um . . . Could I suggest that at the moment, the most cunning thing we could do would be to get out of this field and turn right at the sunset?’

‘Quite,’ said Sal. Then she blinked at Wills. ‘Why turn right exactly, dear?’

‘Because left would be South.’

‘Absolutely,’ agreed Sal. She looked at the others. ‘You see. How cunning is that?’

Links nodded. ‘Cunning as sheeps.’

He and Wills both raised a front hoof and clacked them together.

‘Way to go, man,’ said Links.

The other sheep joined in, even Sal. It was her first high hooves ever.

Then the Warriors trotted off towards the lane, taking the Baaton with them.

In the distance, a golden hot-air balloon was picking up speed in the freshening evening breeze and drifting away from Eppingham.

Some time later, the balloon began to lose height, then skimmed across the treetops as the pilot brought it in to land. The basket hit the ground with a bump and two passengers, young men in their twenties, tumbled out. One of them, whose name was Neil, was wearing expensive jeans and a designer jacket, and was clutching his bent sunglasses. His taller, skinnier companion, Luke, was wearing torn jeans, a faded T-shirt and a scruffy parka. Neil staggered to his feet and strode off without a word. Luke wiped his palms on the sides of his jeans and smiled awkwardly at the pilot.

‘Sorry again,’ he said, looking embarrassed. ‘Didn’t mean to upset you.’ He gave a little wave, then ran off after Neil.

The pilot scowled. ‘Next time Boyd’s Bank give you a day off,’ he shouted, ‘go to the beach or something.’

Neil ignored him. He flung open the door of his flashy yellow sports car and stood glaring across the top of it at Luke.

‘So. Why exactly *did* you chuck your phone out of the balloon basket?’ he demanded.

Luke shrugged. ‘Cos you said to get rid of it.’

‘I didn’t mean like that,’ snarled Neil.

‘What does it matter?’ asked Luke.

‘What does it *matter*?’ shouted Neil. Some people nearby turned to stare.

Neil glared at them too, then slid into the driver’s seat. ‘Get in,’ he snapped at Luke.

Luke lowered himself carefully on to the plastic bag that covered the front passenger seat. ‘OK,’ he said, trying to get comfortable on the slippery plastic, ‘so I shouldn’t have lobbed it over the side just because you didn’t like my photos.’

‘It had nothing to do with the photos,’ growled Neil.

Luke looked puzzled. ‘What then? It was only when I showed you the photo I’d just taken of you and the pilot that you went ballistic and said to get rid of it. Then when I did, you tried to climb out of the balloon to catch it!’

Neil took a few deep breaths and tried to calm down. He unbent his sunglasses and put them on.

‘Forget the photos, Luke. Why was that *stuff* still on your phone?’

‘What stuff?’

‘What stuff . . . what *stuff* . . .?’

Neil’s knuckles were white on the steering wheel. ‘The stuff, Luke, that you hacked from the bank’s computer? The account details, the security codes, the passwords, the PIN numbers . . .’

It was funny, thought Luke, how the human voice managed to get out through clenched teeth. Then he felt the g-force as the car took off like a rocket. He held on tight but he was still baffled.

‘What’s it matter?’ he said. ‘I only did it because you said I couldn’t. I told you it wasn’t impossible. Difficult but not impossible.’

Neil’s teeth seemed to be grinding now. Then, after driving a mile in less than fifty seconds, he slowed the car to a halt. This time when he spoke, he sounded suddenly remorseful.

‘The thing is, Luke, I have a confession to make. I owe you an apology . . .’

Luke was too surprised to speak.

‘When you’d done the business yesterday – downloading all that stuff, all the bank details and everything, on to your mobile like you said you could – and you gave me your phone to prove it . . . Well, before I gave it back, I did something rather bad. I transferred some of the details on to my own computer. It’s all gone again now – I’ve wiped it. But if anyone looks at your phone, they’ll still be able to link it to me and what I’ve done . . .’

‘Why?’ asked Luke. ‘What *have* you done?’

Neil sighed deeply.

‘I borrowed some money. I needed a bit for my poor old mum, see. She’s ever so poor, Luke, and she’s got bad feet and lots of other bad bits that can’t be fixed without cash. And she needs to be living in a little bungalow, not on the thirty-seventh floor of a tower block like she is now, where she can’t even take her cat out for a walk. If she *could* walk, that is, which she can’t because of her feet. But if anyone finds out what I’ve done, I’ll go to prison and my poor old mum’ll be marooned in the sky with her bad bits till she dies. And I won’t even be able to visit her and take her a

bowl of nourishing soup every day like I do now . . .’

Luke sniffed, then wiped his nose and eyes on his parka sleeve. He hadn’t realised Neil’s mum was so poorly. He hadn’t even realised he had one.

Nevertheless, Luke was in a difficult position. He had hacked into the bank records and now money had been stolen. It was a serious matter.

‘Of course,’ said Neil humbly, ‘I only took it from the accounts of really, really rich people. And only little bits they won’t even notice. And it’s not really stolen, only borrowed. I shall pay it back a.s.a.p. Every last penny. But until I do, your phone mustn’t fall into the wrong hands. For my poor old mum’s sake.’

Luke was overcome. He wiped his nose on his sleeve again.

‘It’s not a problem,’ he said. ‘I can work out exactly where it fell from the height/speed ratio of the balloon.’

‘You can?’

‘Easy.’ Luke frowned in concentration for a moment, working out the arithmetic. ‘Just follow the signs to Eppingham,’ he announced. ‘It must have dropped in a field near there.’

Neil started the car but Luke put out a hand and stopped him.

‘Call her first,’ he said with another sniff.

‘What?’ said Neil warily.

‘Call your poor old mum and tell her everything’s going to be all right.’

‘Oh,’ said Neil. ‘Oh, right. Yeah. Thanks.’

He took out his own phone, smiled shiftily, and got out of the car. Soon, he was back. The call had been very short.

‘How is she?’ asked a concerned Luke.

‘Who?’ said Neil, startled.

‘Your poor old mum.’

‘Oh, right. Um. Out.’

‘Out? I thought she was marooned on the thirty-seventh floor?’

‘Out of earshot. She’s deaf as well as everything else. Probably in the bath. I’ll try again later. Let’s crack on, yeah? Eppingham, you say?’ The car leapt forward and roared away.

A little while later it had to screech to a halt to let a line of five sheep pass by in the opposite direction. One of them was making a funny noise. Luke leaned

out to watch them go. Another one had a surprisingly silvery mouth.

‘Did you see that?’ Luke asked Neil. ‘A sheep with fillings.’