

Chapter 4

The bottle

Cake flew everywhere, whizzing past people's ears, landing in their hair and their eyes and their laps. Some people were caked with it. For a moment they were too shocked to react. In the ruins of the cake some kind of machinery continued to whirr.

Tosh was jumping up and down with glee, while Wee Nanny was convulsed with laughter and Baby Brother was chortling with delight and feeding bits of cake to Woo-woo. Hardly anyone heard the voice croaking "Tee-hee!" from the shadow of the tower.

No one else was amused. Mother MacBear was on the verge of tears.

Then Wompy stood up. His big ears stood up too. He said as sternly as he knew how: "Tosh, is this your doing?"

"Yes, we found a use for your moon machine, Mr Wompy. Good, wasn't it? Really cool. Waverley Bear couldn't have done better!"

"We?" said Wompy. Duff and Beth were shaking their heads vigorously. Wompy paused while he thought. Then, "Begonia!" he shouted. "Is this one of your old tricks? Come on, show yourself!"

But nothing happened. Begonia had already fled from the scene of the crime.

"Tosh, you have gone way too far this time," continued Wompy. He clomped his big hind foot. "Your only excuse is that no doubt Begonia led you on. But..."

Wompy stopped as the sound of singing came from the stairs, and a troupe of children from the village emerged, dressed as bishbirds. They had come for their herrings, as they usually did at the end of the MacBears' banquet.

They danced around the table, sticking their feet out sideways to imitate the bishbirds' funny walk. The catastrophe of the cake had to be put aside while everyone listened to the children singing:

We are the bishbirds

bish bish bish

and you must grant

our every wish

*We are the bishbirds
bish bish bish
and we demand
our favourite dish*

*We are the bishbirds
bish bish bish
and what we want
is fish fish fish*

While they went through this routine a second and a third time, Duff and Beth fetched the big pail of herring. "Herring for the bishbirds!" they cried.

Still dancing, the children took a herring each, and set off down the stairs on their way back to the beach where the bonfire was blazing. The MacBears and their guests also took a herring each and followed the children.

"How could you do that?" said Beth to Tosh as they went. "You know how much time and effort Mother put into the cake. It would have been the best bit of the evening and you spoiled it completely. You and Begonia." The nature of what he had done was beginning to dawn on Tosh.

"Tosh needs his Father," Mother MacBear said sadly to Wompy. "I can't cope with him sometimes."

Lots of other animals from the village were gathering around the bonfire. The herring were all placed on stones close to the fire to cook.

The children now danced around the bonfire singing their bishbird song again. But now everyone else joined in with an extra verse:

*They were the bishbirds
bish bish bish
Good riddance, we say,
to bad RUB- BISH!*

In the last line they gradually raised their voices and belted out "BISH!" as loudly as they could.

Later there was another song about the bishbirds. Bobby MacGoat played his fiddle and Wee Billy and Wee Nanny sang:

*When bishbirds ruled the loch,
each isle and every rock
danced the whole summer long,
enchanted by their song.*

*Like birds of paradise,
their beauty filled the skies,
and all of Bearloch fell
under their fearful spell.*

*With madness in their eyes
they sought the farthest west,
where days no longer die
and birds no longer nest.*

*Far, far away they flew
on wings of peacock blue,
bright red and radiant green,
in search of the unseen.*

The song was hauntingly beautiful, but the effect was rather spoiled when Wee Nanny got the giggles as soon as she stopped singing. No one had any idea why.

Tosh, feeling rather ashamed of himself, had slipped away on his own. He walked down to the beach where there was a small jetty. He recognized Bobby-in-the-Boat's fishing boat moored to it. He sat on the end of the jetty, his legs dangling over the water, and looked out over the loch. It was a scene that had a consoling effect on almost everyone who lived in Bearloch.

Away from the bonfire, it was a still and quiet evening. After a while Tosh's attention was caught by a small sound, and, looking down, he saw a bottle bobbing about in the water and knocking against the side of the boat.

Tosh knew that in stories messages arrive from the sea in bottles. The idea came to him now, and, although he dismissed it as just story stuff, it intrigued him enough to want to make sure. So he clambered over Bobby's boat and managed to grab the bottle - a whisky bottle, as it turned out.

Believe it or not, there was paper, quite a lot of paper, inside it, and the only visible writing was an address: To the MacBear family, Bearloch, Far Northern Lands. The handwriting - Tosh was almost sure of it - was his father's.

At most other times Tosh would have probably have been unable to resist the temptation to open the bottle and read the message at once. But, if this was his first thought, it at once gave place to a second thought. His mother should be the one to open the bottle and read the message first.