



THE NEWS

The black-hooded loon descended rapidly, her checkered wings flapping hard against the warm evening wind. Her target, a once busy watering hole, was nothing more than a dried up pond these days. However, it sat deep within the coastal woodland, far away from the gossipers of the wide-open beach—and empty of creatures, save a gangly old wood stork.

A slight headwind forced the skilled flier to react. She stiffened her wings and dove hard, aiming straight for the unsuspecting wader below. The pond's surface came quickly. The loon raised her head and kicked her legs straight out in front of her until her webbed feet skimmed the watery plane. She slowly leaned forward, lowering her feathered underbelly. Seconds later, she was gliding across the water's surface in the stork's direction and calling his name. "They're here, Leggs! They're here!"

The bird's abrasive yodel shattered the pond's quiet. The stork, however, remained unmoved by the noise. "Who's here?" mumbled Leggs, refusing to look up. "Whatcha so excited 'bout, Topps?"

"The Solkreat, that's who!" replied the loon, slowing to a stop just shy of the mostly white-feathered bird. "They're here, Leggs. I saw 'em!"

"You saw 'em, huh?" asked Leggs, before quickly submerging his long, thick bill into the shallow water. The loon's drama would hardly distract the feathered hunter from his pursuit of a tasty meal.

Topps paddled closer to the fishing bird. “Oh, I saw ’em, alright. They’re in the ’Fuge, and I—”

“Well, of course they’re in the ’Fuge!” interrupted Leggs, pulling his empty beak out of the water. “There’s lots of Solkreat in the ’Fuge!”

“Yeah, but up pas’ the Sea Swamp—’long by the Hollow?”

The stork paused, his dusky, yellowish black bill partly submerged again. The loon’s words were a bit unexpected. Though commonplace in much of the great Refuge, the mysterious Solkreat were rarely seen out near the old Hollow.

Now had Topps not expected such a reaction from the old stork, she might have thought he’d gotten his thick beak stuck in the mud. Nonetheless, Leggs was soon swinging bill, neck—and the bald, black head connecting the two—in the quirky loon’s direction and speaking calmly once again.

“So, ya saw some Solkreat, huh? Now I’d think a traveler like you would’ve seen lots of the Big Animal ’round.”

“Oh, I have, Leggs ... I have,” replied the animated loon, ruffling her checkered feathers. “But I’ve never seen one with such a strange shiny thing around its neck.”

Leggs stiffened. This time the loon’s words were more than simply unexpected: they were downright startling. The stork contemplated the curious revelation. Then, turning his head slightly, he looked off into the surrounding pines and whispered quietly. “Shiny, huh?”

Topps nodded as if the stork’s whisper was intended for her. Leggs, meanwhile, turned back just in time to catch the loon’s affirming gesture. “So,” he continued, “just what did this shiny thing look like anyway?” A strange look accompanied Leggs’ question, a look that didn’t go unnoticed by Topps.

“Well, like I said,” began the loon, “it was real shiny, and—”

“And what?” begged the stork.

“I-I don’t know,” answered the suddenly nervous Topps. “It was kind of hard to see way up high.”

Leggs snapped. “Whatcha talkin’ ’bout, Topps? You’re not a hawk, for goodness’ sake—you’re a loon! You don’t fly *that* high. I dare say you’d have never even spotted the thing if you’d been up that high!”

Though it was the stork's impatience that had been put on full display, Topps was the one apologizing. "Gee, Leggs, I guess the old eyes just aren't what they used to be."

Leggs said nothing as the loon turned her gaze toward the quiet waters before her and continued speaking—only now, she did so in a much slower and calmer tone. "Anyway," she began, "I decided to get a better look. So, circling back, I landed in the nearby creek, not far from the Creature. From there, I swam toward some tall reeds and found a place to hide."

Topps paused, her eyes fixed on an imaginary stage which she watched intently with her mind's eye as the scene from earlier in the day replayed across it.

"I don't think the Creature ever saw me," she continued, her voice soft and low. "Its eyes were fixed on the trees behind me as it moved up and down the path that ran along the creek. It was looking for something. I thought about turning around, but before I could, I saw it again—that shiny thing. It sparkled so bright in the sunlight. I immediately remembered why I had come back." The loon closed her eyes and focused hard on the summoned vision. The glistening object around the Creature's neck shone as brightly in her memory as when she'd first seen it.

"So, did you get a better look or not?" The stork's impatience threatened to return.

"Well, it was pretty small...flat on one end," said Topps, still speaking slowly. "The other end was kind of round...you know, like —"

"Like what? What'd you see?" pleaded Leggs.

"I-I don't know," said Topps, clearly unnerved by the stork's pushiness.

The enchanted reverie threatened to fade, making Topps work hard to keep the memory in tact. "I tried to get closer," she went on, "but by the time I walked up the creek bank, the Creature had gotten back into... into..." The loon struggled. The memory was all but gone. Leggs opened his bill to speak, but Topps cut him off. "—Into one of those big old wheelie things!" she exclaimed, finishing her own thought. Then, with the trance fully broken, the loon looked up at the stork and added, "That's it! That's what I remember!"

“What?” begged Leggs.

“A wheelie!” cried Topps. “That’s what was on the other end of the shiny thing!”

The loon’s sudden recollection was all that Leggs needed. In a flash, the tall, skinny stork was spreading his long white wings, flapping them feverishly, and taking flight across the great Woode. The news was urgent. The Glade must be warned!

However, neither he nor his feathered companion ever took notice of the slithering eavesdropper that quietly swam through the tall reeds along the far side of the pond. He too must relay the curious report: the magic hogseye had at long last returned to the Refuge.



The sun had all but disappeared over the marshy woodland, settling in behind towering pines and outstretched palms. A kaleidoscope of blues, purples, and oranges remained—vivid shades of dusk that would soon give way to the dull shadows of night. The magic of sunset was once again at work, stirring the creatures of the Refuge to action. For the day-movers, the arrival of dusk marked a cautious return to the den for some well-earned rest. For the night-walkers—those who’d waited patiently for the sun to go down—it was time to step out onto the dimmed Refuge stage and enjoy all that the darkness had to offer.

Now, for every rule, Reader, there is said to be an exception. In this case, his name was Thutter McClutter. He might be a night-walking critter who had waited for the sun to disappear, but little Thutter was anything but patient. In fact, if you had asked him on that night, he’d have said that he had already waited far too long. In any case, pushing away the soft leafy bedding that he shared with his family in the cool, dark underbelly of the Glade, the young least shrew quietly moved to the edge of the grass-strewn nest and dropped one paw onto the burrow floor.

As he did so, a tiny voice broke the silence. “Where ya goin’?”

Thutter jumped. He had hoped to escape his baby sister's notice, but clearly she had sensed his movement from across the nest.

"None of your business, Nutter!" snapped the slightly older shrew as he stepped out of the nest and onto the moist dirt.

Nutter sat up and rubbed her tired eyes. "Can I come with, Tut-Tut?" she whispered.

"Come with? What d'ya mean?" said Thutter.

"Well, you're goin' out in the Glade, aren't ya?" said Nutter.

Thutter scanned the dark corners of the earthy den. He doubted they were alone. "You know you can't leave the nest without Mama," he replied, never looking in his sister's direction.

Nutter's chin dropped. She slowly shook her head from side to side. "Thath not fair!" she said. "I never geth to go anywhere!"

A reply would take way too much effort. Thutter turned to make his getaway down the corridor and up through the small hole that led to the Glade. A few steps, however, was all he would manage as a more mature voice immediately stopped the young shrew right where he stood.

"So, uh, where ya headin' in such a hurry?"

Thutter turned around and stared into the darkness of the burrow's far end. "I don't know yet, Mama," he said, trying hard to see his mother in the blackness. She was there somewhere, her velvety auburn coat blending with the shadows.

"Now, child, you know the rules," replied Mama McClutter. "You may not leave this den without telling me where you're going. I know the Glade's a pretty safe place, but I still want to know where I can find you." Her voice was firm but tender as she laid down the law.

"Yes, Mama," said Thutter.

"And one more thing," added the shrew mother. "I do not appreciate how you spoke to your little sister."

"I know, Mama. I'm sorry." The young shrew had disappointed his mother, but nothing else needed to be said on the subject. Thutter turned quietly and made his way down the short corridor that ended with a tiny dirt hole in its ceiling. It was the only entrance to the McClutter nest from above. And yet, perhaps more importantly, it was Thutter's only path to the Glade and to his waiting friends.

Speaking of friends, it would be fair to say that, while young Thutter McClutter had many acquaintances throughout the Glade, only two critters had ever really laid claim to the shrew's attention, a beach mouse and a mole. The first was a proud little rodent of rather unexceptional size and incomparable audacity. His name was Scruffy, and he had met Thutter during the dark hours of a terrible storm. The two had huddled together for much of the night under the shelter of a palmetto bush, becoming fast friends in the process.

As for the mole—a gentle old insectivore named Patch—he too had met Scruffy first, but he did so in a very different place: his very own den. It happened when the tiny, sandy-haired mouse with the unusual black-tipped ears and tail was out one night hunting for food. The beating of the predator's wings came out of nowhere, but fortunately, so did a rather large hole in the ground. Scruffy dove down the convenient opening, narrowly escaping the owl's sharp talons.

The mostly blind mole had no idea who had entered his friendly abode in such a tizzy. And he wouldn't have, either, had Scruffy not felt somewhat guilty about his sudden intrusion and returned the next evening with a few grub worms. Needless to say, it wasn't long before Scruffy was introducing the much larger Patch to his only other friend in the Glade, another young insectivore named Thutter McClutter.

From then on, both the mouse and the mole nightly made for the cozy Knoll-of-the-Glade, home of the McClutters and other shrew families. Scruffy usually arrived first to win the ear and curiosity of young Thutter, while Patch, carefree and agenda-less, strolled up shortly after the mouse and awaited the evening's itinerary. This night, of course, was no exception.

"Hey, Thutter! C'mon, let's go!" Scruffy's cry into the hollowed-out log which sat just above the McClutter hole was rarely heard, let alone responded to—well, not by any creature under the log, anyway.

"Good evening, Scruffy." The deep, monotone voice of the silvery-gray mole was the only response the tiny beach mouse would receive.

Scruffy turned and gave a quick nod in the mole's direction. Then, returning his attention to the shrew's imminent arrival, he quietly poked his head through a small hole and looked around the hollow log.

“Oh, there you are, Thutter. It’s about time,” said the mouse, staring at the tiny cone-shaped nose and glass-button eyes peering out at him from a most inconspicuous breach in the log’s bottom.

“Sorry, Scruff!” said Thutter as he made his way out of the well-concealed opening and onto the rotted floor of the empty log. “You know my mother,” he sighed. “She won’t let me out ’til it’s completely dark.” The young shrew shrugged and then shook his cinnamon coat, freeing it of the moist dirt he’d gathered during his climb up through the dark tunnel.

Scruffy didn’t reply. Instead, he just quietly backed out of the log, leaving the shrew to follow.

“Good evening, Thutter.” The mole’s slow, Southern drawl always made Thutter feel at ease. The smile on his face said as much.

“Hi ya, Patch!” replied the tiny shrew.

Scruffy, however, had little interest in chitchat. “Listen, I hear there’s a crowd gatherin’ over at the Dunes,” he said. “It seems somethin’s happened in the ’Fuge.”

Thutter looked over at the mole. “What do ya say, Patch?”

“I’m a comin’, Tut-Tut. I’m a comin’.” The much larger insectivore turned as he spoke and ambled after the two small critters, humming some old ditty about friends along the way—something he did often these days.

Now, Reader, the series of fairly large sand heaps known as the Dunes was not a place that Thutter and his friends frequented much, as they hardly had reason to go there. But tonight, it was as if they were being called. For the Dunes—considered an extension of the Glade and a place where the fair-weather fowl flocked to spread the day’s gossip—were all abuzz with the most exciting hearsay that the Glade had heard in quite some time.