

## A Living Leg-end

Broccoli Bill scuttled rapidly behind the sofa and covered his ears with his paws. In the corner of the room, there was a small puff of smoke, and little flash, like a light-bulb dying. And then silence. Bill opened one eye cautiously. Then the other.

“Stupid hamster!” he muttered. “You done it wrong again.”

“Me no done it wrong,” came a voice from behind a pile of cushions sensibly piled up in the farthest corner of the room. “Dodgy spare part from HamLabs™.”

“Sssh!” hissed Bill. “You want get into trouble or what? Keep voice down. HamLabs™ no do dodgy spare parts. That third set ignition plugs. Can’t all be dodgy!”

“Fourth set,” corrected the pile of cushions. “None work. All tracking. You ought complain, Bill.”

“Me no complain,” said Broccoli Bill uneasily. “More than job’s worth. No, no, no - must be way you put the plugs in. You sure you got them right way round?”

“Followed instructions, didn’t I,” said the cushions in a belligerent tone. “Took yellow collar out like what they said. Disconnected the earth wire. You such clever-clogs, you do next one. Here!” A small item hurtled over the top of the cushions and skittered across the floor.

“Careful!” hissed Bill, snatching up the item. “That our last ignition plug. Can’t ask for any more - HamLabs™ get suspicious, ask awkward questions.”

“Let them,” replied the pile of cushions airily. “Me no care. Me fed up with this lark anyway. Let skinny humans sort selves out.” Haricot Bert poked his nose out from his bunker and twitched his whiskers in an annoyed manner. “Where those yoghurt drops we promised?” He looked around short-sightedly.

“Me try one more time,” said Bill in a resigned tone. He approached the still-smoking corner of the room cautiously, ready to run away at the slightest sign of trouble. He blew gently on a small device that lay on the floor. Around it, the skirting-board was streaked with black soot and what looked suspiciously like burn-marks.

Suddenly the door to the room opened and Mrs D. poked her head in.

“How’s it going, boys?” she asked.

“Oh, fine, fine,” said Broccoli Bill hurriedly. “We just finalising preparations now.”

“But that’s what you said half an hour ago,” said Mrs D. “Is there a problem?”

“Only problem we got,” replied Bert grumpily, “is lack of yoghurt-drops.”

Mrs D. looked carefully at Bert, whose pouches were bulging beyond the point of decency. “Have you eaten them all already?” she asked. “I’ll hand out some more when the job’s finished.”

“Job almost finished, skinny human,” replied Haricot Bert. “My colleague only one more thing to do. Best get those drops now.”

“No,” decided Mrs D. “I’ll think I’ll stay and watch, and then I’ll go and get more drops. If you don’t mind.”

“Best not to,” muttered Bill, as he attached the final set of ignition plugs to the device. “No place for anyone except hamsters. Very delicate. Sometimes distressing.”

“I’ll wait,” repeated Mrs D. and sat down on a chair quite close to the scene of operations.

“Back a bit, back a bit,” said Bert bossily. “Instructions say not even operator within two yards. Children, idiots and skinny humans must sit at least five yards back.” He stood on his hind paws and bared his teeth. Mrs D. ignored him. Bert shrugged and went behind the cushions again.

“So,” asked Mrs D. chattily, “how does this work then? Ultrasound? Gas?”

There was a snort.. “What skinny humans know, eh, Bill? They not know nothing!” There was a sound of tittering from the bunker.

Broccoli Bill finished his preparations, scrubbed his nose, then paused. “Here go!” he muttered. He pressed a large red button on top of the device and then turned and scurried for

cover. There was a loud ticking sound. Mrs D. decided that the manufacturer's instructions were perhaps correct; she retreated to the far corner of the room, and sat down beside Bert.

"You scared?" asked the hamster interestedly. "Hamsters have no fear. We just clever."

"No, not scared," said Mrs D.

"You terrified, then," decided Bert. He smirked and turned his attention to a small pile of carrot-tops that Mrs D. did not remember giving him. But before she could ask, three things happened.

First of all, there was a fizz and a pop and then silence from the device.

Then there was a groan from Broccoli Bill.

And then there was a great commotion in the fireplace as something rattled down the chimney and landed with a thump on the carpet.

Bert looked up interestedly at the third noise. "Oh!" he said, suddenly alert. He even dropped his carrot-top. "Bill, Bill," he whispered urgently, "look! It wosisname!"

Bill, who was assiduously cleaning his fur while he reflected on the latest failure, glanced over. And then stopped what he was doing. "It Butch!" he exclaimed.

Mrs D. stood up and looked aghast at the sooty mess on the carpet. A very shiny saucer was spinning slowly to a halt. It was all chrome and tail-fins, slightly retro in appearance. Red paintwork. Green flashing lights. When the saucer had finally wobbled and stuttered to a halt, the lid flipped open and a rather startled fat furry face poked out. "We there already?" it wanted to know.

"Who's this?" asked Mrs D.

"Sssshhh!" commanded Bert. "Pouchless humans not allowed to ask!"

"It only Butch van Rimbaud," announced Broccoli Bill proudly. "Most famous of all hamsters!"

"But - ." began Mrs D., about to say she had never heard of Butch van Rimbaud in all her years of dealing with hamsters.

"He a living leg-end," advised Broccoli Bill in awed tones.

"You mean a legend, don't you?" admonished Mrs D.

"You stupid or what?" growled Bert rather rudely. "Humans maybe no got ends to legs, but hamster have leg-ends. And Butch the leg-end of all leg-ends."

The newly-arrived hamster hauled himself from his saucer. He was certainly impressive. He wore a black eye-patch over his left eye, and a sort of piratical scarf tied round his ears. His fur was missing large patches here and there, and the exposed skin was covered with tattoos. He was decidedly overweight. With some difficulty, he slithered to the floor and looked around short-sightedly.

"What blazes going on here, then?" he grumbled. "That you, Broccoli Bill?"

Bill acknowledged nervously that it was. Bert also announced himself, but the older hamster ignored him.

"What you up to, young Bill?" he demanded.

"We selling mouse-catcher to skinny human," advised Bill proudly.

Butch van Rimbaud snorted derisively. "That no challenge. Hamsters sell anything to skinny humans. They got no brains."

Mrs D. coughed indignantly. "I don't believe we have been introduced," she said pointedly.

"Mighty nice..." Butch barely glanced in her direction. "Who got yoghurt drops, then?" he wanted to know. "You, what your name - you got drops? Then hand 'em over!"

Haricot Bert scampered across to Butch and deposited his secret cache of drops. The older hamster nodded and examined the offering disdainfully. "So, this mouse-catcher work, then?" he wanted to know.

"Some technical hitches," admitted Bill.

"Dodgy parts," muttered Bert.

"Ain't no surprise!" scoffed Butch, nibbling at one of the drops. "HamLabs™ gone downhill since my day."

The two younger hamsters nodded agreeably.

“ ‘Course,” Butch continued, “in my day we no need machines to catch mice. We do it ourself. Personalically.” He tossed two yoghurt-drops into the air, closed his one good eye and expertly caught the drops one after the other in his mouth.

“Really?” gasped Bill, his eyes bulging with excitement. “How you do that, then?”

“How we do it?” snorted Rimbaud. “We just lit out after them. Goddam,” he said, “them sure was the days! You young fellas got it too darn easy.”

“Tell us about them, sir,” begged Bert, pushing along a pile of broken biscuits that Mrs D. now recognised as having vanished from her kitchen a couple of days ago. Butch examined the biscuits with interest, and selected one carefully. He nibbled at it carefully, then pouched it. His next words came out rather muffled.

“There mouse-trouble, we get behind the skirting-board and sort ‘em out. Mouses, rats, all them sort of varmints. Pow, zow! Wham, bam, thank you, ma’am,” he added, as if to explain. He nodded in reminiscence. “Me and Sylvester, we sure was some hit-team.”

Broccoli Bill whistled. “You mean Sylvester Capone?”

“Sure thing, son,” said Butch agreeably. “Sylvester Capone and me - one helluva team. Poor old Sly - he in retirement home now, can barely eat his chittlins. Comes to us all.”

“But not you, sir,” said Bert respectfully.

“Me look after myself, son,” replied Butch smugly. “Keep self in trim. Don’t know about the hard stuff any more - stoats and badgers and suchlike. But mouses and rats - no problemo.”

“You fought stoats and badgers?” asked Mrs D., unable to restrain her incredulity.

Butch van Rimbaud turned his good eye in her direction and stared at her balefully for a few seconds. “Sure thing, Human. You got problem with that?” He drew back his lips and displayed a massive pair of incisors. One was rather badly chipped. Mrs D. raised her hands peaceably, and retreated a couple of steps.

“Stoats, they easy to see. They got white underpants,” continued Butch knowledgeably. “No hiding. Badgers got darn big white stripes. Behind the skirting board, under the floorboards - me and Sly, we done it all. And got the scars to prove it.” Proudly he turned himself round so that all the scars and missing fur could be seen. “Lost this here eye in a fight with seven rats,” he added.

“Seven rats!” gasped Bill in admiration.

“Sure as hell sent them packing,” announced Butch.

Mrs D. looked sceptically at the living leg-end. “Small rats, were they?” she asked rather unkindly, ignoring the looks of horror from Bill and Bert.

“Me say seven?” asked Butch. “Me mean ten. Ten big ‘gators. Breathin’ fire.” He stared at Mrs D., daring her to contradict. Since she said nothing, Butch continued to look at her, but addressed Broccoli over his shoulder: “Listen, kid, where these mouses? Human want this fixed? Me show skinny human how it done.”

Broccoli Bill pointed to a tiny hole between the skirting-board and the carpet, in the corner where the HamLabs™ device still winked and steamed. “Skinny human says they come out of there.”

“Move that heap of junk,” ordered Butch. “Me going in!”

In the twinkling of an eye, the two younger hamsters had shoved the smoking machine to one side. Butch van Rimbaud sleeked down his fur, adjusted his headband and ambled over to the hole. And then he went in. To Mrs D’s surprise, he managed to squeeze into the tiny gap without too much difficulty, albeit with a great deal of huffing and puffing. And some unsuitable language. Then he vanished suddenly. There was a scrabbling and a rustling, and then a silence. Three pairs of eyes watched the hole for a while.

“That Butch, he a hamster’s hamster!” said Broccoli Bill in awed tones.

“They no build them like that any more,” agreed Haricot Bert.

“Rats, stoats and badgers!” exclaimed Bill, gazing in wonder at the hole.

“Me heard he do dragons and cats too!” added Bert.

“Wow,” sighed both hamsters.

Mrs D. just shook her head in disbelief and set about the carpet with a dustpan and brush.

“Hey!” exclaimed Bert outraged, “you be careful with living leg-end’s flying machine! You no scratch chrome, clumsy-clogs!”

“That flying machine very first built by HamLabs™,” Bill pointed out. “It living leg-end’s living leg-end!”

“I’ll be very careful,” promised Mrs D.

They settled down to wait.

“He chase those mouses out in no time,” announced Bill confidently. “It all gone quiet back there already.”

“Mouses stand no chance,” advised Bert.

“Nor rats neither,” agreed Broccoli Bill.

After a lengthy five minutes, there was a sudden distant crash, the sound of scurrying; and then two small dark mice burst out of the hole in the skirting board and hot-footed it for the door. Mrs D. hurried after them, just in time to see them vanish through the back-door into the garden. When she returned to the living-room, Bill and Bert were hauling Rimbaud out of the hole.

“Ooof!” puffed Bill. “Uff!”

“Ouch!” complained Rimbaud. “Ow!”

“Nnnrghhh!” groaned Bert.

At last, with a final scrape and the skittering of toenails, Rimbaud popped from the hole. A dusty and battered-looking sight he was. His head-band was half-way down his bottom. He was covered with ancient cobwebs. But, as far as Mrs D. could tell, there was no blood: which was a great relief.

Butch van Rimbaud lay panting for a few minutes. “Not so young any more,” he wheezed when he managed to get his breath back a little. He smoothed out large folds of fur

“Nonsense, sir,” encouraged Haricot Bert, fanning the living leg-end with a lettuce-leaf.

“Don’t flatter me, boy,” sighed Butch. “Maybe pay a visit to Sly now.”

“Nonsense!” said Mrs D. encouragingly. “You’ve done a great job - I don’t think I’ll be bothered by those mice again!”

“You bet your bottom dollar!” acknowledged Butch graciously. “All in day’s work.” He accepted a chocolate-drop which Mrs D. had been saving for a moment such as this. “Maybe there one more battle in this old soldier.”

“Me think so,” affirmed Bill.

“Me think so too,” said Bert hurriedly. “Maybe two.”

“Um - was there,” asked Mrs D. tentatively, “was there anything - big, you know: large - down there? Apart from the mice?”

“No, ma’am,” said Butch rather nostalgically. “Just two no-account mice.”

“Well, that’s nice,” said Mrs D., relieved.

“Darn tootin’, that ain’t nice,” replied Butch crossly. “No goddam challenge for fierce warrior such as like what I am. Hell no! Bring on rats - where they are? Bring on stoats! Bring on - ”

“Badgers!” shouted Bill and Bert excitedly, dancing from side to side on their little legs.

“Now, hold your horses there, fellas,” said Butch satisfied, holding up a paw. “Time for me to be movin’ on! Adios amigos! Via con dios!” With that, he clambered laboriously back into the saucer, closed the flap and slumped down in his nest. Then, humming ‘South of the Border, Down Mexico-Way’, he pressed a few buttons and his chrome-covered saucer hurtled back up the chimney.