

Secrets. Sorcery. Sabotage!

BRÖNTE TEMPESTRA

AND THE
WEATHER WITCH

Illustrated by
**Hannah
McCaffery**

BEX HOGAN



BRÖNTE
TEMPESTRA
AND THE
WEATHER WITCH

The Bronte Tempestra series

Bronte Tempestra and the Lightning Steeds

Bronte Tempestra and the Ice Warriors

Bronte Tempestra and the Weather Witch

Look out for more

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First published in Great Britain in 2025 by
PICCADILLY PRESS
an imprint of Bonnier Books UK
5th Floor, HYLO, 103–105 Bunhill Row, London EC1Y 8LZ
Owned by Bonnier Books
Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden

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A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

ISBN: 978-1-80078-493-2
Also available as an ebook and in audio

1

Typeset by Freencky Portas
Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.



bonnierbooks.co.uk/PiccadillyPress







SIR SEBASTIAN'S
SCHOOL FOR SQUIRES

THE OLD FOREST

FIRE CAT
CAVES

ANCIENT
RUINS

CHERRY

OAK

WILLOW

MAPLE

DINING HALL

WEAPON
TRAINING HALL

ARMOURY

ASSEMBLY HALL

HEADMASTER'S
TOWER

ENTRANCE

BOAR PENS

BOAR FIELDS

JOUSTING
FIELD

BOAR FIELDS

RIDING ARENA

TRAINING
GROUNDS

TRAINING
GROUNDS

TOURNAMENT
ARENA

Dear Diary,

It's great to be back at Sir Sebastian's after the winter break. Today, Sir Calliphus made us write down three memorable events from our first term and of course I couldn't say what really happened! I listed some boring things for him, but here's what I wanted to write:

One: Tonkins wasn't the only friend I made at my new school - I also befriended Lord Errol, a magnificent griffin!

Two: I stopped an evil scientist, Ackley, from turning all the woodland animals into monsters

so he could attack POOP and SICK.

Three Ackley's brothers, Elon and Hollis, stole the ice thistle from the Snow Kingdom and hid it beneath the school. Turns out Ackley is also a weather witch and he used the ice thistle's power to bring ice sculptures to life, which then attacked our school!

Phew! I really hope nothing so dramatic happens this term!

REALMS' ROUND-UP

ONCE IN A BLUE MOON

Stargazing enthusiasts are eagerly awaiting the appearance of a blue moon. The rare spectacle is a once-in-a-lifetime event. Nobody knows for certain if it will definitely appear, but if it does, it will be best viewed in the north. Many will be travelling to the Weather Kingdoms in the hope of glimpsing the celestial phenomenon – although

probably not to the Mist Queendom!

SICKNESS SWEEPING S.I.C.K.

The School for Independent and Courageous Kings has been quarantined since it was struck down by mumbleitis. The infectious illness is highly contagious, with symptoms such as sore throats and swollen tongues. It is expected that all students will recover within two weeks.

SCHOOL TRIP PERMISSION SLIP

Sir Sebastian's School for Squires has the unexpected opportunity to join the Palace for obedient and outstanding Princesses on their annual pilgrimage to the Stones of Forgotten Secrets. It will be a three-night camp, filled with fun and educational activities. Please sign the permission slip ASAP, along with the form stating that any harm that befalls your child is not the responsibility of the school or its teachers.

Ellie!

Are you going on the school trip? Please tell me you are! Can you believe it? We're going to have the most fun!

B x

B!

You bet I am! I wouldn't miss it for the world. I can't wait to meet Blue and Tonkins, and have the best adventures.

El x

P.S. Mariam says hi - she can't wait to see you either!

P.P.S. I have something super important to talk to you about too...

SIR PEN TINE – THE STORY BEHIND THE STORY

An Accurate Account by Sir Simpson Swain

It has long been believed that the many deeds of Sir Pen Tine, along with his firecat Firkle and battle boar Hurkle, were nothing more than stories told for children. But there is increasing evidence that these tales of heroics were far from just myths, and were in fact true. If proved, it would be the single most important historical discovery of our age, altering the lore of Everdale

entirely. In this book, I will explore the facts behind the legends, including the truth at the heart of many mysteries of the kingdoms, such as weather wraiths and the mighty Swirlebirdle itself.



A Rumble of Thunder

Bronte Tempestra, princess of the Storm Kingdom, was named after the thunder that could constantly be heard in her realm. And when she was really cross, she lived up to her name because her temper could be completely thunderous.

Today she was really, **REALLY** cross.

'It's just not fair,' she cried, slumping on a stool in the herbery, where plants and herbs were made into potions and concoctions, and reaching

for the nearest pestle and mortar. Crushing dew-dusk pods into powder was a good way to release her frustration.

Blue, her icekitten, nuzzled her comfortingly.

Miss Shine, the Chivalry and Medicine teacher, as well as school nurse, was watching the human storm cloud with mild amusement.

‘Would you like to tell me what’s wrong, or are you happy to keep taking it out on the pods?’

Bronte smashed them a little harder beneath the pestle. ‘Sir Calliphus gave us our projects back.’

‘Ah.’ Miss Shine pulled out a stool opposite Bronte and sat to listen.



It had been such a fun assignment to work on. They had been tasked to write about a famous knight from history and present their important deeds. Bronte hadn't hesitated for a moment – of course she would do hers on Sir Pen Tine. He was, after all, her favourite ever knight. She had written about Sir Pen Tine's many quests, focusing especially on his slaying of the Swirlebirdle – a mighty beast that had terrorised the kingdoms.

'I failed,' Bronte said, her anger giving way to burning disappointment. 'I worked so hard on my project, but Sir Calliphus said that because I hadn't written about actual history it didn't count.'

'I'm sorry,' Miss Shine said sympathetically. 'But what about all your research? The book you found in the archive tower?'

Bronte had been delighted to find a copy of an old book called *Sir Pen Tine – the Story Behind the Story* by Sir Simpson Swain, in which the knight made a very persuasive argument for Sir Pen Tine having existed. She had quoted it in her project, but it hadn't convinced Sir Calliphus.

'He said that Sir Swain was an old relic who nobody took seriously when he was alive, and that I should have written my project on him and the nonsense claims he made instead,' Bronte sighed.

'Oh dear,' Miss Shine said, before adding, 'At least the school trip is tomorrow, that will cheer you up.'

The thought did coax a small smile from Bronte. Her first Sir Sebastian's camp. They were visiting the Stones of Forgotten Secrets, outside of the Kingdoms and up in the mountains. Even

better, they were going with her old class from the Palace for Obedient and Outstanding Princesses (or POOP, as it was known) which meant she would see her best friend, Ellie! Bronte couldn't wait for Ellie to meet her other best friend, Tonkins. And Ellie's roommate, Mariam, a shy girl who was second in line to the throne of the Mist Queendom, was also coming on the trip. They were going to have so much fun together, exploring, adventuring, sleeping under the stars...

'And I thought you might like to borrow this,' Miss Shine continued, interrupting Bronte's daydream and sliding a dog-eared book across the workbench towards her.

Sir Pen Tine and the Swirklebirkle

'It's a compilation of all the many tales featuring the monster,' Miss Shine said, smiling as

Bronte gasped with delight. 'I'm sorry I couldn't find this old copy before your project – I was planning to give it to you to celebrate, but perhaps it might just cheer you up instead.'

'Thank you,' Bronte said, taking the book and staring at it in wonder.

'You should go and finish your packing,' Miss Shine said, standing up.

'Oh, I'm all ready to go!'

'Sunbeams, aren't you organised!'

Unfortunately, I still have a lot to do before morning ...' Miss Shine left the hint floating and Bronte caught it.

She tucked the book into her bag and hopped down from the stool as Blue leaped lightly to the floor beside her. Bronte had made it quite a habit recently to come and visit the new teacher. She was always willing to lend a supportive ear,

and Bronte was glad of it. She never wanted to outstay her welcome, and so bid her teacher goodnight, heading outside into the cool early evening air.

It was all thanks to Miss Shine that they were even going on this trip. It had originally been the annual joint school trip between POOP and SICK (the School for Independent and Courageous Kings) but then the boys at SICK had been struck down by an outbreak of mumbleitis. Miss Shine had been swift to suggest that the Year Four squires could go in their place, and everyone agreed it was a great idea.

The preparations had all been a bit of a whirlwind, but Bronte knew it would be worth it. The Stones were steeped in magical myths, as well as being a site of historical interest. Bronte was glad Sir Calliphus wasn't coming – he

would probably forbid them from talking to the Stones. Because that's what people did. It was a long-held tradition that people would travel to the Stones to whisper their secrets.

As Bronte walked towards her treehouse dormitory in the triple-trunk oak tree, she thought about what secret she should whisper to the Stones. She didn't really have any *total* secrets – she shared pretty much everything with her friends.

'Perhaps I'll tell the Stones that I think most stories are actually true,' Bronte said to Blue. 'Not just Sir Pen Tine tales, but all of them. Oh, wait, I just told you, so it's not a secret any more!' And she chuckled as Blue did a little skip in front of her.

But then Blue froze, and hissed out a little ice cloud.

Bronte frowned. 'What is it?' she whispered, looking for the danger.

And then she saw it. There on the grass, right in front of the triple-trunk oak, was a zombit!



Packing Problems

'Stay back,' Bronte warned Blue, who moved to stand protectively beside her.

Bronte's mind raced. If the zombit didn't notice them, she might make it to tell a teacher. But what if it got into the treehouses and attacked her classmates? She had to do something fast! But what?

'You all right, Bronts?'

Bronte screamed and spun round to see Tonkins standing there with a wide smile.

She gasped. 'What are you doing here?'

'Been in the archive tower catching up on homework,' he said. 'Why are you so jumpy?'

Bronte grabbed his sleeve and pointed.

'There's a zombit, over there by the tree.'

'What?' Tonkins shrieked, and clutched her back, staring into the evening gloom. But moments later he let go. 'Um, there's nothing there, Bronts. You sure you didn't just see a nibbit?'

'I think I know the difference,' she said, searching around for any sign of the scary creature. 'Where's it gone?'

The zombits had been created by Ackley, whose wicked machines had turned the woodland animals into monsters. The cute nibbits had been transformed into vicious zombits who had tried to eat Bronte and Tonkins – an experience

Bronte wasn't keen to repeat!

'I think you must have imagined it,' Tonkins said, trying to reassure her. 'Lady Fennel made them all nibbits again.'

'She must have missed one,' Bronte said, certain about what she'd seen.

'Look, Blue and Dotty aren't worried,' Tonkins said, pointing to the firecat and icekitten.

He was right. Gone was all Blue's concern – he was now booping noses affectionately with Dotty. Bronte looked back to where she had seen the zombit and frowned.

'Everything's fine,' Tonkins said soothingly. 'I promise, there are no woodland animals or



ice statues trying to kill us for once, so let's just look forward to having fun at camp.'

Bronte smiled. It *had* been an eventful first term, what with Ackley's evil schemes and his brothers stealing the ice thistle from the Snow Kingdom. But so far her second term was proving to be a quieter experience. Her friend, Nix, who was a few years older than Bronte, had convinced Sir Calliphus to give them both some extra lessons, and slowly Bronte felt as if she was catching up on all the work she'd missed before starting late at Sir Sebastian's School for Squires – even if she was going to have to redo her project after the camp.

She was settled, she was happy . . . Maybe she *had* imagined the zombit? Perhaps things were going so well that she feared something bad would bring it all crashing down?

She shook all her worries out of her head and linked arms with Tonkins to walk the rest of the way to the tree, giggling as Blue and Dotty tumbled and played beside them.

When Bronte reached the room she shared with Nix in the treehouse, all thoughts of zombits disappeared.

Nix was sitting on the floor, surrounded by what looked like every possession she owned. She looked up at Bronte.

'Stormy, help!' she said, as Blue dived into Bronte's hammock and buried himself under her blanket to escape the chaos.

'What's going on?' Bronte asked.

'Well, the good news is that Sir Calliphus has said that I can come on the trip with you as a helper, seeing as I've never been on one before.'

'Oh, that's brilliant!' Bronte cried.

'But the bad news is that I haven't packed a thing yet and we leave in the morning!'

'You're not planning on taking everything, are you?' Bronte asked. 'I'm not sure there'll be room in the carriage.'

'No, of course not,' Nix said. 'But what if I leave something super important behind?'

'I don't think you're going to need goggles,' Bronte said, holding them up in amusement. 'The weather in the mountains is always crisp and clear at this time of year.'

Nix snatched them from her. 'You never know,' she said, groaning. 'That's the problem. I want to be ready for anything.'

'I'm sure the teachers will make sure we have everything important,' Bronte said, before considering this a bit more and adding, 'well, Lady Fennel will. Sir Ripple will probably just

make sure there's plenty of copies of *Knights Weekly* to go around.'

'We won't run out of toilet paper then,' Nix said with a grin. 'What are you taking?'

Bronte gestured to her bag at the foot of her hammock. 'Just what was on the kit list,' she said, carefully stepping past all Nix's belongings to reach her desk. She grabbed the piece of parchment and passed it to Nix, who read it, her eyes widening.

'That's *it*?' Nix was horrified.

'Oh, and Sir Pen Tine of course,' Bronte said with a smile, pointing to her favourite knitted doll. 'I'll add him in the morning.'

'I can't possibly leave so much behind!' Nix buried her face in her hands.

'Why not take two extra things,' Bronte suggested. 'Your tool belt always comes in handy.'

And maybe . . . What's that?' She pointed to a strange looking device near Nix's knee.

'Oh, this is my latest invention,' she said, brightening up. 'A head lantern!' And she wrapped the strap around her head, so that a small version of a lantern dangled between her eyes.

'Wouldn't it just be easier to carry a lamp in your hand?'

'Would it though?' Nix asked. 'Not if you had a sword in one hand and a shield in the other.' She tapped the side of her head. 'I'm all about the forward thinking.'

'OK, that is pretty cool,' Bronte conceded. 'But I'm sure you won't need it at camp.'

Nix didn't look convinced. 'You should get some sleep,' she said to Bronte. 'I think I'm going to be a while.'



Bronte tiptoed across the floor, dodging all of Nix's things, and got ready for bed. Then she pulled the book Miss Shine had given her out of her bag and climbed into her hammock, snuggling down to read.

She knew every version of the Swirlebird tale like the back of her hand. It was mostly the same story told over again, just in different locations across Everdale. Bronte didn't mind – in fact, she loved the familiarity of it.

But as she flicked through, a heading caught her eye.

Sir Pen Tine and the Stones of Forgotten Secrets

Her heart beat faster with excitement. She had never seen this one before. Was it possible her hero had travelled to the very place she was about to go on camp?

Bronte forgot all about her failed project, the shocking appearance of a suspected zombit and Nix's chaotic rummaging, and lost herself to the story.



Squire Scores

'And so it turns out that when Sir Pen Tine slew the Swirlebirdle, he cut its head off and hid it.' Bronte looked triumphantly at Tonkins as they walked towards the carriages.

'Curly custard, Brontes, usually it's me who can't stop talking,' Tonkins teased.

'But don't you understand? This is huge!' Bronte exclaimed.

Tonkins looked at her. 'Why?'

Bronte sighed in frustration. 'Because

afterwards he travelled to the Stones of Forgotten Secrets, carrying the head with him!' She stared at him crossly. 'Have you not been listening?'

'I have,' Tonkins promised. 'I just don't understand why you're so excited.'

Bronte had been up half the night after reading the book Miss Shine had given her. She was exhausted but the seed of an idea had taken root. There had been several conflicting versions of where the heroic knight had buried the monster's head in the book, among other Swirlebirdle tales. But in all her research for her project, Bronte had never heard about Sir Pen Tine going to the Stones before. Sir Swain had never referenced it. This was Bronte's chance.

'If I can find the Swirlebirdle's skull, I can prove that Sir Pen Tine was real. And then Sir

Calliphus will have to give me a good grade for my project.'

Tonkins pulled a face. 'I dunno, Bronts. It sounds hard. How are you going to do that?'

'I'm not sure,' Bronte admitted. 'But I thought you could help me figure it out.'

The doubtful expression Tonkins gave her was far from reassuring. 'I'm not really a Sir Pen Tine expert like you,' he said. 'I don't even understand why he chopped the Swirlebird's head off after he'd already killed it!'

Bronte frowned as she tried to remember if that had been explained in the story. 'I think he was worried about it coming back to life or something.' She yawned, her tiredness catching up with her.

'Did you get *any* sleep?' Tonkins asked with a playful nudge.

'Not a lot. I was reading for ages, and then Blue kept waking me up, growling. I think Nix's chaos unsettled him.'

'Well, you can nap on the journey,' Tonkins said, positive as always. 'The firecats are flying, so they won't be in the carriage with us.'

That was true. Although Blue wouldn't exactly be flying himself – his wings couldn't manage more than a short flutter, but the icekitten was always happy to hitch a lift on Dotty's back.

Lampton was strapping all the children's belongings onto the carriages. He glared at Nix when she passed him her bulging bag.

'Do you think you have enough?' he asked, raising an eyebrow.

'No!' she said, still panicked. 'Should I take another bag? I have one ready in the treehouse.'

'Absolutely not,' Lampton said. 'The carriage

hire company won't send us another if we break one. And think of the poor speed slugs.'

Nix groaned as she reluctantly climbed into the carriage.

The fourteen students from Year Four were travelling in two carriages, plus three teachers and Nix. Bronte and Tonkins checked to see which of the carriages they'd been assigned.

'We're in the same one as Nix,' Tonkins said, studying the scroll. 'Oh.' His voice dropped. 'And Sir Ripple.'

'Coming through!' Sir Ripple appeared at that very moment, carrying a chest on his shoulder like it weighed nothing.

Lampton stared at him, unimpressed. 'What am I supposed to do with that? There's no room.'

'But it's my travel essentials!' Sir Ripple said. 'Everything a knight needs for the road. Armour,

weapons, a moustache-care kit ...'

'It's a three-day camping trip,' Lampton said. 'I think you can afford to let the moustache grow a little.'

Sir Ripple gasped indignantly.

'It's all right, sir,' came a voice from behind them. Lance was striding over, followed as always by his bog-brush buddies, Leo and Pole. 'The carriages have room for ten and there's only nine of us in each. Your chest can come inside with us.'

'Ah, thank you, young man!' Sir Ripple beamed. 'Such initiative! You just earned the trip's first squire score!'

Lance smirked but Bronte frowned.

'What's a squire score?'

'A way for you all to earn points on the trip,' Sir Ripple said. 'Whoever finishes with the highest

tally wins an incredible prize!’

‘Don’t even bother, Poop-face,’ Lance said to Bronte. ‘That prize is mine.’

Tonkins saw that Bronte was about to retaliate, and stepped in.

‘How about we find our places?’ he said, steering her away to climb into the carriage.

Nix was shuffling on her seat, restless with anxiety. ‘What if I’ve forgotten something important?’

‘You won’t have,’ Bronte soothed her, stifling another yawn.

She leaned her head on Tonkins' shoulder and closed her eyes as the rest of the class boarded the two carriages.

She was asleep before they even left the castle. When she was jolted awake, a familiar view awaited her.

The Palace for Obedient and Outstanding Princesses was a dazzling sight to behold. Made of stone from the crystal caves of the Sapphire Kingdom, it shone in the sunlight, its brilliant blue gemstones gleaming. Each corner of the palace was marked with two towers twisting around each other, and long ribbons fluttered from the top of them. The roof of the palace itself acted as a giant nest for the large white birds that were the mascots of the school. With their fluffy feathers and long, elegant necks, the swomlings looked graceful and harmless, but they were strong and fierce. Every princess knew not to make them cross!

In front of the palace, grim gargoyles stood guard, patrolling up and down in a menacing fashion, daring anyone to attack the VIPs beyond.



The princesses' carriages were ready and waiting – two huge round balls covered in feathers that looked like massive dandelion clocks, with four swomlings perched on top of each of them.

Bronte grinned widely. Though she had no regrets about leaving POOP for Sir Sebastian's, she had nothing but fond memories of her time here. And she absolutely couldn't wait to see Ellie and her other old friends – Mariam, Fleur, Posy . . . All of them!

When the carriages came to a halt, Sir Ripple urged everyone to stay sitting in their seats, but Bronte was already halfway out the door.

She hopped lightly onto the gravel and sprinted off towards the gate where a class of girls was emerging.

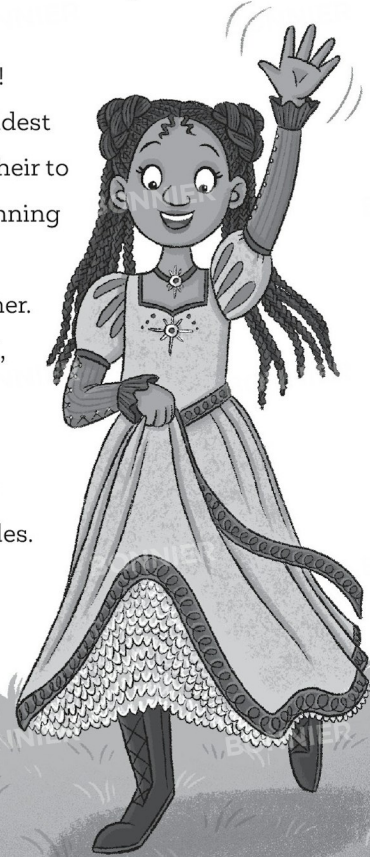
'B!' a voice called, and Bronte paused, raising

her hand to her eyes so she could see past the glare of the sapphires.

And then there she was!

Eliane Blaze, her very oldest and very best friend, and heir to the Sun Kingdom, was running towards her, ignoring the protests of her class teacher.

'Ellie!' Bronte screeched, and sprinted to meet her until their bodies collided with a smushy hug, and a flurry of shrieks and giggles.





POOP

‘Look at you!’ Ellie cried, standing back to admire Bronte. ‘Blazing beams, you’re a knight!’

‘And what about you?’ Bronte grinned. ‘You’ve grown and your hair looks breezy!’

Ellie touched the braids on her head and smiled.

‘Thanks! It’s **sooooo** good to see you, I can’t wait for –’

A sharp clap interrupted their reunion.

‘This is all very endearing, but we have a schedule to keep,’ said an older woman with

greying hair and a floor-length ball gown.

‘Mistress Moon!’ Bronte cried, delighted to see her old teacher.

‘Hello, Princess Bronte,’ the teacher said with a pleasant smile. ‘You look well.’

‘Thanks. It’s just Bronte now though.’

Lady Fennel, Bronte’s favourite teacher at Sir Sebastian’s, had now come to join them.

‘Tempestra, you were supposed to stay in the carriage,’ she said. Her voice was stern, but the twinkle in her eye betrayed her.

‘Sorry, I was just excited to see my friend,’ Bronte said. ‘Can she ride in the carriage with us? There’s a space, if Sir Ripple moves his chest.’

‘I wish I could say yes, but it wouldn’t be fair to the others,’ Mistress Moon said. ‘All princesses must ride together. It’s the rules, I’m afraid.’

Lady Fennel put a reassuring hand on Bronte’s

shoulder. 'You'll have plenty of time to catch up when we reach the Stones.' She smiled at Ellie. 'And it's a pleasure to meet you, Ellie.'

'Princess Eliane,' Mistress Moon corrected.

Lady Fennel gave her a tight smile. 'My apologies.'

'We must remember who is royalty and who is not,' Mistress Moon said sweetly. 'You understand, I'm sure.'

'Perfectly,' Lady Fennel replied, in a tone that Bronte recognised all too well. It meant Lady Fennel was saying one thing and meaning another. Lady Fennel and Mistress Moon didn't seem to like each other that much, Bronte realised. She wondered why.

'Come now, Princess,' Mistress Moon said, manoeuvring Ellie away from Bronte and turning her back towards the puff-ball carriages.

'See you at the Stones!' Ellie called with a wave, and Bronte grinned widely. She didn't care what the teachers thought. She was just happy to see her friend again.

'Right, back into your carriage, Tempestra,' Lady Fennel said. 'We're now officially on duty – the royal guard.'

'What, really?' Bronte asked in surprise. 'I thought we were just sharing the camp with them.'

'Well, yes, we are, but the princesses have to be kept safe, and who better to do that than the finest young knights?'

'Breezy!'

Bronte skipped back to her carriage, and didn't even mind when Sir Ripple told her off for disobeying him.

Tonkins was staring out of the window, gazing

at the palace in awe. 'It's so . . . clean!'

Bronte watched as the two puff-ball carriages were lifted into the air by the swomlings and then floated along like giant clouds in the sky.

The firecats swooped into formation around the carriages like a protective circle, although Bronte couldn't really see what danger they might be in other than falling – and she knew the swomlings would never let that happen.

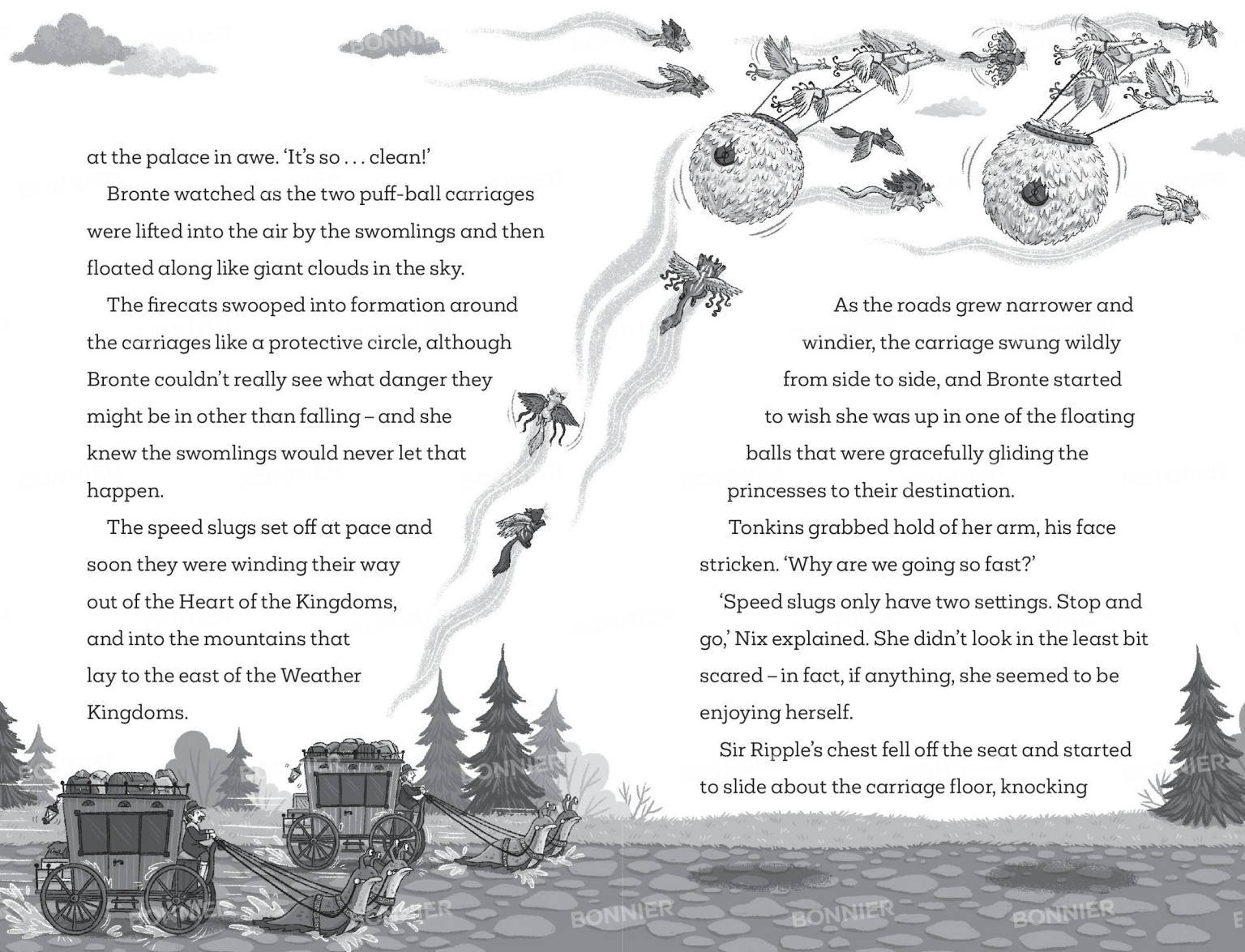
The speed slugs set off at pace and soon they were winding their way out of the Heart of the Kingdoms, and into the mountains that lay to the east of the Weather Kingdoms.

As the roads grew narrower and windier, the carriage swung wildly from side to side, and Bronte started to wish she was up in one of the floating balls that were gracefully gliding the princesses to their destination.

Tonkins grabbed hold of her arm, his face stricken. 'Why are we going so fast?'

'Speed slugs only have two settings. Stop and go,' Nix explained. She didn't look in the least bit scared – in fact, if anything, she seemed to be enjoying herself.

Sir Ripple's chest fell off the seat and started to slide about the carriage floor, knocking



painfully into everyone's feet and legs.

'Are we nearly there yet?' Tonkins cried. He gripped Bronte even tighter when the carriage lurched to the side as they took a tight corner far too fast.

'Still a way to go,' Sir Ripple said miserably. Bronte noticed he'd turned a strange shade of green, and hoped he wasn't going to be sick.

On they rattled over the rocky terrain, until at last Bronte caught sight of the Stones of Forgotten Secrets. They were huge! Towering on a mountain peak, the circle of nine massive stone pillars soared upwards into the sky.

The carriage shook a little as the squires all tried to snatch a glimpse out of the window. An excited chorus of **oohs** and **ahhs** rang out.

'Um, are we going all the way up there?' Tonkins asked, sounding rather nervous.

'No,' Sir Ripple said. 'We're camping further down.'

'Oh, good.' Tonkins wiped his brow in relief.

'We'll be walking up there tomorrow,' Sir Ripple added, causing a huge groan to pass through the carriage.

But not from Bronte. She couldn't wait. It was just like she'd imagined when reading the Sir Pen Tine story. She could almost picture him riding his battle boar Huckle up these treacherous paths, his firecat Firkle by their side. If only the Stones could talk, she thought. The stories they could tell her about her hero!

She sighed contentedly as she watched the princess puff-balls land in a swirl of smoke coming from the tired firecats. They'd be arriving at any moment – and then the fun could really begin!



Setting Up Camp

At last the speed slugs came to a halt. This time, Sir Ripple made sure the children waited for him to disembark first, and then one by one they climbed out, stretching after the cramped journey.

Bronte took in the sight before her. The campsite was a flat clearing carved like a shelf into the mountain range. On one side of it was a sheer drop down the mountainside, and on the other was a rockface, with many small tunnels

leading into it. Bronte was reminded of the caves back at Sir Sebastian's where the firecats liked to spend time – and not just because the tired animals were slinking into the holes now to rest.

Bronte looked around for Blue. Though she was sure he'd caught a ride on Dotty's back, she wanted to make sure he was OK. But when Dotty came trotting over to nuzzle against Tonkins's leg, Bronte frowned. Where could Blue be?

'Stop that, now!' Sir Ripple's voice boomed through the air.

Nix nudged Bronte with her elbow. 'Looks like Blue is bothering Sir Double R.'

'What's got into him?' Bronte wondered, going to retrieve her icekitten.

When Blue saw her, he stopped growling at Sir Ripple, who was unloading the luggage, and leaped lightly on top of her head.

'Hello to you too,' Bronte said, scratching under Blue's chin. 'Wouldn't you rather go somewhere more comfortable?' When he didn't move, she added, 'I mean more comfortable for me.'

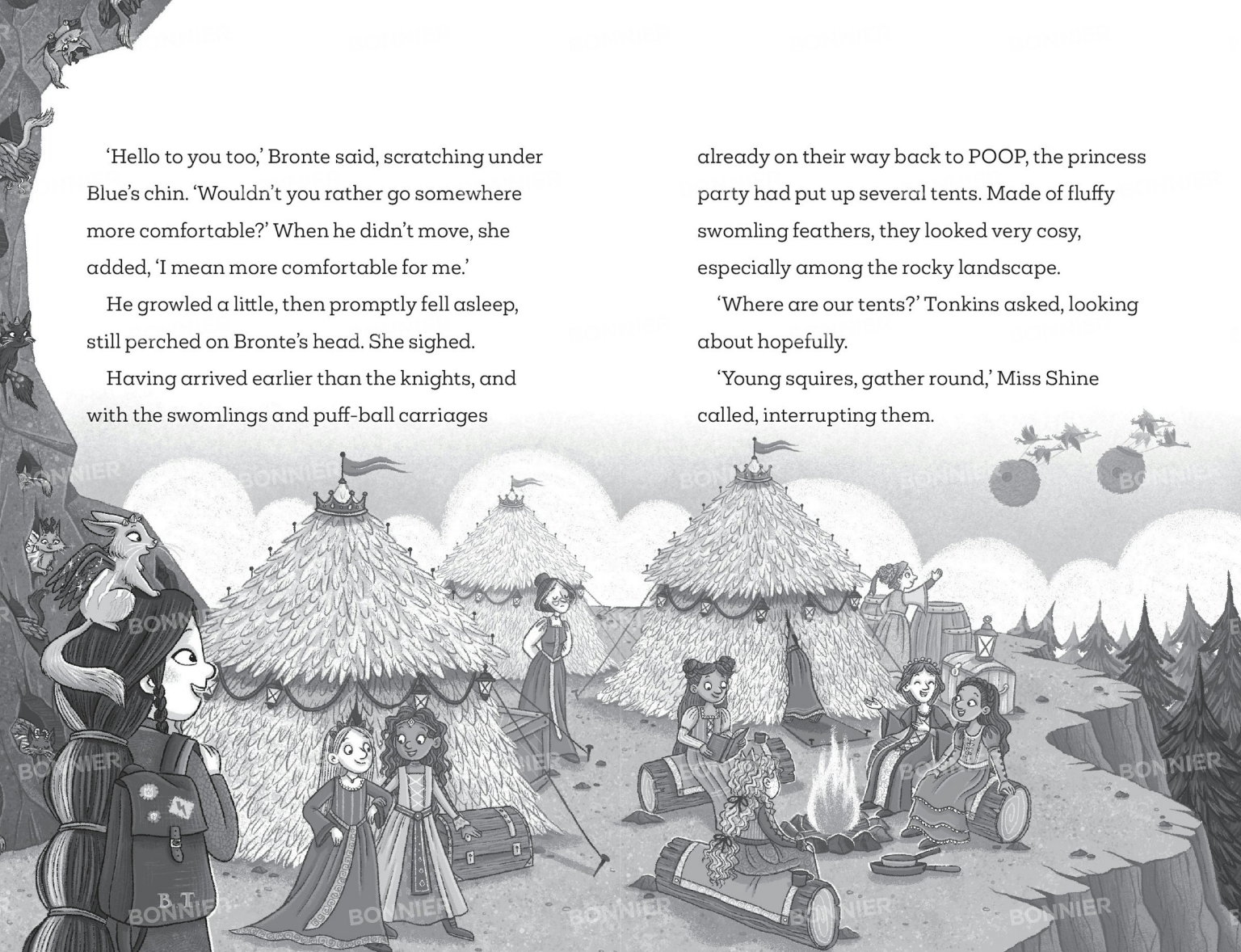
He growled a little, then promptly fell asleep, still perched on Bronte's head. She sighed.

Having arrived earlier than the knights, and with the swomlings and puff-ball carriages

already on their way back to POOP, the princess party had put up several tents. Made of fluffy swomling feathers, they looked very cosy, especially among the rocky landscape.

'Where are our tents?' Tonkins asked, looking about hopefully.

'Young squires, gather round,' Miss Shine called, interrupting them.



She was armed with a scroll of parchment and a quill, accompanied by Lady Fennel. When all the class were quiet, Miss Shine cleared her throat. 'Well, Year Fours, welcome to the mountains. I know it's already been a long day, but we have some ground rules to cover before we can settle for the night. First of all, if you have any problems or issues, myself, Lady Fennel and Sir Ripple are here to help you. We also have our Year Seven helper, Nix. Turn to her whenever you need. You are not to wander from the clearing unless expressly permitted by us teachers. You are not to enter the mountain tunnels, and I must request that you take care not to go near the cliff edge. Should you fall . . . Well, make certain you do not fall.'

There was an awkward silence, before Lady Fennel cleared her throat and picked up from

Miss Shine. 'Now, from this moment on, you are all to be partnered with a princess, who it will be your duty to protect for as long as we are here. Rather fortuitously, there are the same number of princesses as knights.'

Bronte gasped. She had to be partnered with Ellie. She just had to!

'It is important you take your role as knight seriously,' Lady Fennel continued. 'This is a unique opportunity for you to experience what awaits you in the future. Right, when Miss Shine reads out your appointed princess, make your way to their tent, and set up camp beside it.'

'I'm sorry,' Lance interrupted. '*Beside the tents? Don't we get our own?*'

Lady Fennel glared at him. 'No, you do not. You must be ready to defend at a moment's notice. The luxury of a warm, soft bed might prevent you

from carrying out your duty.'

Tonkins looked around anxiously. 'Are we lying on the ground then?'

Lady Fennel raised an eyebrow. 'Would you prefer to float?'

'Listen carefully,' Miss Shine said brightly. 'Lance, you are with Princess Fleur Tendril. Varney, you're to protect Princess Ailla Green. Tonkins, you're with Princess Eliane Blaze, Pole, you're –'

'Sorry, I think you've made a mistake,' Bronte said, hardly noticing she'd interrupted her teacher. 'I should be with Ellie. Not Tonkins.'

'There's no mistake,' Miss Shine said. 'Pole, you're with Princess Posy Thorne, Bronte, you're to guard Princess Mariam Haze.'

As Miss Shine carried on listing names, Bronte turned to Tonkins.

'I can't believe I'm not with Ellie,' she said sadly. 'Do you think we could swap?'

Tonkins glanced over at the teachers and then shook his head. 'I don't think so.' But then he smiled. 'Look on the bright side, you can be certain your friend is in the safest of hands with me.' And he bowed deeply, the feather from his hat tickling Bronte's face.

'You are the only knight I'd share her with,' Bronte said, looping her arm through his. 'Come on, I can't wait for you to meet her.'

They headed over to the tents, and Ellie appeared from one, waving happily as they approached.

'Ellie, this is my other best friend, Tonkins,' Bronte said, making the introduction. 'He's your knight for the trip.'

'It is an honour, Princess Blaze,' Tonkins said,

bowing low once more. 'There is no service too small, no trial too big. From this day forth, I live only to protect you, and I shall gladly lay down my life in place of yours –'

'Or,' Ellie said, gently taking his arm, 'we can just have a fun few days . . . No death required?'

Tonkins smiled, blushing slightly. 'Or yeah, we could do that.'



'We need to talk, I have so much to tell you,' Ellie said in an excited rush to Bronte. 'But first things first, who's your princess?'

'Mariam. Do you know which tent she's in?'

'Did someone say my name?' The tent flapped open, and Mariam Haze emerged, a nervous smile on her round face.

'Mariam!' Bronte rushed forward to hug her.

'Hi,' Mariam said, her cheeks pinking. 'It's nice to see you. Guess what, I just finished the *Realms'* Round-up brainboggler. Phew, it was a tough one!'

Bronte grinned. Mariam loved word puzzles and the brainboggler was notoriously difficult.

'Tonks, this is Mariam, who I'm defending while we're here.'

'Oh, really?' Mariam looked pleased. 'I was so worried I'd be with somebody mean.'

‘Feel sorry for Fleur then,’ Bronte said. ‘She has Lance and he’s the yuckiest. I’m so glad you and Ellie are sharing a tent.’

‘Yes!’ Ellie said. ‘The four of us can hang out!’

‘I wish we could sleep in your tent with you,’ Tonkins said, looking miserably at the rocky ground.

‘We get to sleep beneath the stars,’ Bronte said excitedly. ‘It’s going to be magical.’

‘Er, Bronts, what is that?’ Tonkins pointed to a big bug on the ground.

‘That’s a stonessquiggler,’ Ellie said. ‘They live up here! Don’t worry – they’re completely harmless.’

When Tonkins looked surprised by her knowledge, Bronte said, ‘Ellie has an amazing memory. If you tell her something, or she reads it, she never forgets. It’s annoyingly impressive.’

Nix bounded over with their bags. ‘Here you go,’ she said. ‘I asked Lady F if I could sleep with you, but I have to stay over there with the teachers. I’ll be back in a bit with some firewood though, and we can get a campfire going.’

Bronte took her bag from Nix with a groan. She didn’t remember it being this heavy! She was about to start unpacking, when the most welcome words rang through the air.

‘Dinner time!’



Campfire Stories

Soon, they were huddled around campfires lit by the firecats, eating stew that had been warmed over the flames.

Pole poked Bronte's leg with a stick. 'You're lucky we're here with our firecats to start the fires. How are you supposed to keep warm on quests with an icecat?'

Lance laughed. 'Trick question! She won't be on any quests because she's a girl.'

Bronte ignored them, but Ellie took a sip of

her stew and calmly said, 'Bronte would be welcomed by any of us to protect our realms. The same cannot be said for you.'

That wiped the smiles off the boys' faces and put one on Bronte's.

'How come you don't have a firecat or icekitten?' Mariam asked Nix, who was sitting beside Bronte and stroking Blue's chin.

'I'm still waiting for one to show up,' Nix said. She managed to keep her voice casual, but Bronte knew that her roommate was worried about it. She'd been checking the firecat caves ever since the new term had started.

'It's normal for squires who start mid-way through the year not to get their firecat until after the summer,' Bronte explained to the princesses. 'Lady Fennel says there's nothing for Nix to worry about.'

‘It’s fine,’ Nix said. ‘I’m happy to keep sharing Blue until mine turns up.’

Blue puffed some snowflakes towards Nix and gave a little purr as the older girl gave him an affectionate tickle.

The light was beginning to dim, and the sunset here in the mountains was deep red, casting an eerie glow over the campsite.

Bronte was about to ask Ellie what it was she’d wanted to tell her earlier, but Lady Fennel cleared her throat, demanding everyone’s attention.

‘I think such an atmosphere requires a story,’ the teacher said. ‘Who has a good one to share?’

‘I do,’ Lance piped up, raising his hand high.

‘Does anyone have any stories that don’t involve farts?’

Lance lowered his hand.



‘I have a story,’ Ellie said. ‘About this very place.’

Lady Fennel nodded, and an expectant hush fell as everyone turned to the princess.

‘Once, long ago, there were weather witches living throughout Everdale.’ Ellie’s dramatic voice instantly captured her audience, leaving them hanging on her every word. ‘Distant descendants of the Weather Kingdoms’ royalty, they had the power to control the weather with their magic.’

A shiver of excitement ran through Bronte. She’d always loved to hear Ellie tell stories.

‘Most of these witches used their abilities to serve the queens and kings, or to entertain the people. But there were some who sought power and craved control. One such weather witch was May. She believed there should be a ruler of

all the weather witches – and that it should be her. But the other weather witches didn’t agree. In fury, May cast a mighty spell, turning the weather witches into wraiths and trapping them within this very mountain.’

Nobody spoke as the last of the red sunlight faded.

‘Um, what’s a wraith?’ Tonkins asked nervously.

‘Like a ghost,’ Ellie replied spookily. ‘The weather wraiths are furious at having been imprisoned for so long. If you listen carefully, you might hear their desperate cries at night, as they search for a way to break free. But if they ever do escape, they will attack anyone in their path as they seek vengeance!’

‘My, my,’ Mistress Moon said, her voice strained, her eye twitching. ‘We don’t want to be

giving everyone nightmares, do we?’

But the children didn’t seem the least bit scared as they fired questions at Ellie.

‘Are the wraiths still here?’

‘Can we see them?’

‘What do they look like?’

Miss Shine laughed. ‘They’re not real,’ she said. ‘And nor were weather witches, it’s all just silly stories. Now, go and wash your bowls and then it’s time to get tucked up in your beds. We have lots to do tomorrow.’

The knights were supposed to clean their princess’s dishes, although some were reluctant to do so. Fleur practically had to chase Lance, who had attempted to sneak off without doing his chores.

‘How about I do your washing-up now, and you do the breakfast plates?’ Bronte suggested to

Tonkins, who readily accepted.

‘I won’t be long,’ she promised her friends, before heading to the buckets of water.

As she cleaned, Miss Shine joined her, a pile of the teachers’ dirty dishes in her hands.

‘So, Bronte, what do you think of the mountains?’ she asked, dunking a bowl into the warm water.

‘I love them,’ Bronte said. ‘I’m excited to explore tomorrow.’ She didn’t add that she meant to search for the Swirlebirdle skull.

‘Hopefully your friend’s story won’t keep you awake?’

Bronte laughed. ‘No, I’m fine.’

‘I was hoping to share a story about the Stones,’ Miss Shine said. ‘Maybe another time.’

‘Oh?’ Bronte looked up at her teacher in interest. ‘What was it?’

‘Well, we all know that people come to share their secrets with the Stones. But did you know there’s a tale that says if you ask the Stones to reveal a secret, they will speak back?’

Breezy! ‘Really?’ Bronte was mesmerised.

‘Yes! Let’s see, how does it go? *If answers from the past you seek, then to the Stones just gently speak. Hidden truths from long ago will whisper soft for you to know.*’ She paused. ‘Something like that, anyway.’

Bronte’s mind was racing. If the Stones could speak, they could tell her where the Swirlebirdle skull was! ‘So . . . do you just ask them? Is there a special password or anything?’

Miss Shine gave a light laugh. ‘Goodness, Bronte, it’s just a story. Stones don’t actually talk.’

But as Bronte finished up her chores and

headed back to the tent, a plan had formed in her head. Now she knew how to find proof of Sir Pen Tine’s existence!

She flung the tent flap open, excited to tell her friends, and walked straight into Mariam.

‘Sorry!’ Bronte giggled. ‘Where are you going?’

‘Mistress Moon asked me to help her with her hair curling rags.’ Mariam rolled her eyes.

‘Need me to come with you?’ Bronte asked.

‘No, I think this is my chance to protect you from one of her *in my day* stories!’

‘OK, see you later.’ Bronte grinned as she moved to let Mariam past, closing the tent flap behind her.

‘Bronts!’ Tonkins greeted her. ‘We were just talking about the weather wraiths.’

‘Oh yeah, that was such a cool story,’ Bronte said to Ellie. ‘Where did you hear it?’ She thought

she knew all the Weather Kingdoms' tales, but she'd never heard that one before.

'This is what I wanted to tell you,' Ellie said, lowering her head and whispering conspiratorially. 'After your *frosty* experiences at the end of last term, I decided to do some investigating. I've been researching weather witches!'

'Really?'

'I've found out so much! For example, there were once so many that they had their own council to govern them. How shiny is that? It was run by representatives from all four Weather Kingdoms and the decisions had to have a majority vote from three kingdoms. That was what the weather witch May wanted total control over. She thought she should be the one true leader.'

'Green gravy!' Bronte was fascinated.

'There's more,' Ellie said. 'In all my research, every weather witch I've found was a woman, so I'm not sure it's possible for Ackley to be one.'

Bronte frowned. 'But it's not *impossible*? I mean, after all, everyone used to think that only boys could be knights and that was wrong.' She was certain Ackley, the evil scientist who had been responsible for harnessing the power of the ice thistle last term, was a weather witch.

'No, it's not impossible,' Ellie admitted. 'We know that weather magic was involved in bringing the ice sculptures to life, so someone who was there at the time must be a weather witch. It just doesn't seem likely that it was Ackley. Is there anyone else it could be?'

'Not that I can think of.' Bronte scrunched her forehead as she thought. 'Sir Mallow arrived, but

he definitely isn't a weather witch. The only thing he's good at is admiring himself, plus he was terrified of the ice sculptures. That Year Seven teacher was new too, what's his name?

'Sir Mouse?' Nix laughed. 'No, it definitely isn't him. He wouldn't say boo to a goose. He has that nickname for a reason.'

'Well, apart from that, there was only Miss Shine, and it's not her either.'

'Why not?' Ellie asked. 'She *was* very dismissive of my story just then.'

Bronte stared at her and then laughed. 'Don't be silly, Miss Shine is lovely! And speaking of stories, I need to talk to you about Sir Pen Tine.'

She filled Ellie in on what she'd read, and how Miss Shine had just given her an idea of how she could prove the legendary knight had not only been real but had even come to this very place.

While Tonkins and Nix seemed excited to hear of her plan to ask the Stones where the Swirlebirkle skull was hidden, Ellie seemed oddly quiet.

'What's wrong?' Bronte asked.

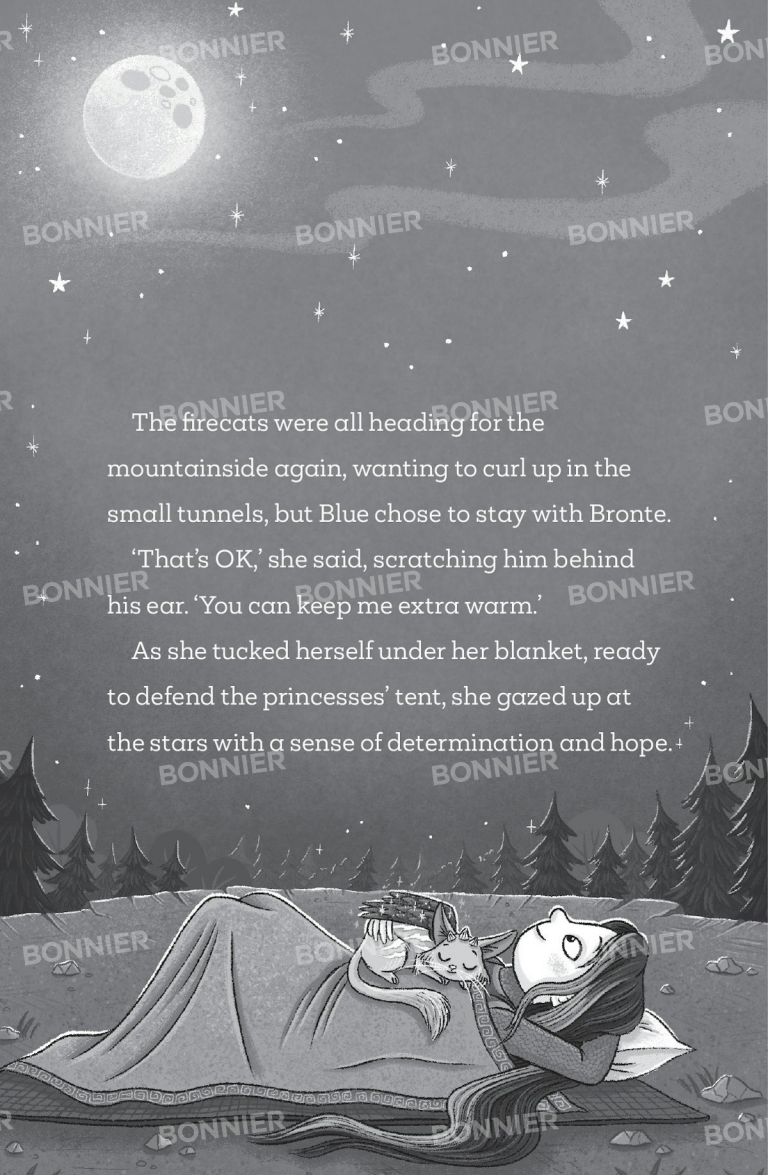
Ellie gave an awkward shrug. 'Are you sure that's the right thing to do?'

'What do you mean?' Bronte was confused.

'Nothing,' Ellie said. 'Forget it.'

There was an uncomfortable silence, before Tonkins changed the subject and the tension ebbed away.

Mariam soon returned from helping Mistress Moon, accompanied by Lady Fennel, who had come to fetch Nix and to tell them all to go to sleep. Bronte didn't even mind because she was so excited for morning to arrive.



The firecats were all heading for the mountainside again, wanting to curl up in the small tunnels, but Blue chose to stay with Bronte.

‘That’s OK,’ she said, scratching him behind his ear. ‘You can keep me extra warm.’

As she tucked herself under her blanket, ready to defend the princesses’ tent, she gazed up at the stars with a sense of determination and hope.

So what if Ellie wasn’t onboard? She was going to do it. She was going to prove Sir Pen Tine was real. They’d write books about her and she’d be praised for her stubborn belief. Sir Calliphus would have to honour her, not fail her. Perhaps they’d build a new wing at the school and name it after her!

And she drifted to sleep, lost to those happy thoughts.



Zombit

Bronte was awoken in the middle of the night by the sound of growling.

It was still dark, and it took her eyes a moment to adjust.

She could make out the shape of Blue, who was staring at her bag and growling. Again.

'Blue!' she hissed, trying not to wake Tonkins. 'Stop that!'

But her icekitten ignored her, and so Bronte was forced to leave the warmth of her bed.

'There's nothing in there but my clothes and stuff,' she reassured Blue.

The bag moved.

'What the green gravy?' she whispered. Holding her breath, she slowly approached it, and gave it a poke. It stopped moving.

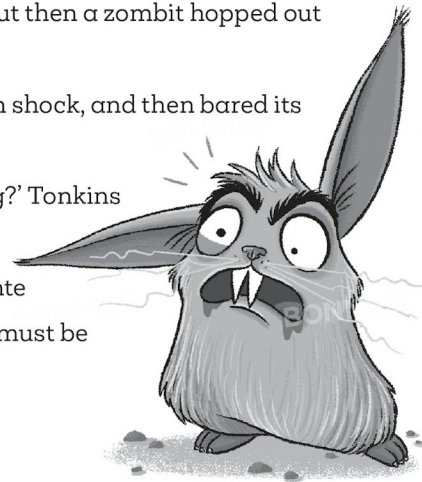
'Keep back,' she warned Blue, as she crouched down to slowly open the bag. 'Come on,' she encouraged whatever was in there. 'Come out.'

The bag shuffled again, and Bronte tried her best to stay brave. But then a zombit hopped out and she screamed.

The zombit froze in shock, and then bared its razor-sharp fangs.

'What's happening?' Tonkins said groggily.

'It's a zombit!' Bronte whispered loudly. 'It must be



the one I saw the other day! That's why Blue kept growling – it snuck into my room, climbed inside my bag, and now it's here!

Tonkins scrambled quickly to his feet, grabbing his flask and brandishing it like a weapon. 'What are we going to do?'

'We have to catch it,' Bronte said. 'Then we can tell Lady Fennel. She'll know what to do.'

'Catch it? How exactly are we going to do that?'

As Bronte desperately tried to think of an answer to his question, she gasped. 'Blue, stop!' she said in horror, as her icekitten approached the zombit.

The zombit didn't move as Blue crept closer, his growl a low rumble. Bronte held her breath, dreading the zombit attack that was surely coming, but helpless to stop it. The zombit

released a strange howl and Bronte frowned. Was it *trembling*? Blue paused, and tilted his head to one side. And then, to Bronte's complete astonishment, Blue skipped forward and rubbed his head affectionately against the zombit, his growl now shifting to a purr.

'Blue's not afraid of him,' Bronte whispered. 'I think the zombit might be harmless.'

'What?' Tonkins squeaked. 'Last time we saw zombits, they tried to eat us.'

'I know, but what if this one is like Pig. Changed but harmless.' Well, as harmless as he could be with those diamond tusks. She held her hand out to the zombit. 'It's OK. Don't be afraid.'

'What about me?' Tonkins cried. '*I'm* afraid.'

The zombit hopped towards Bronte, and she really hoped she wasn't making a mistake. As it reached her outstretched fingers, Bronte braced

herself. She used all of her willpower to stay still, hoping the zombit wouldn't bite them straight off.

But instead, it nuzzled into her, drooling onto her hand.

'Aw, you're so cute and not at all murderous,' Bronte said, stroking the creature. 'It's friendly, Tonks, don't worry.'

'Why would I worry?' he said sarcastically. 'You're only making friends with a killer!'

'No, he's sweet,' Bronte promised, as she picked up the zombit and it chirruped in her arms.

'What the soaked sausage is that thing you're holding?'

Both Bronte and Tonkins spun round to see Nix standing before them, looking incredibly confused.

'Nix!' Bronte exclaimed in surprise. 'What are

you doing up in the middle of the night?'

'You woke me with all your shouting! What is that thing?'

Bronte looked at the zombit, who blinked its big eyes back at her. 'Um, this is a zombit. It's a stowaway from school.'

'A mutated nibbit?' Nix eyed it cautiously. 'And we're not running away?'

'No, he's not dangerous, see?'

'Are you sure, Stormy?'

'Positive. Look, Blue likes him too.' And she placed the zombit back onto the ground to play with her icekitten. 'We can't let anyone find him,' Bronte said. 'They might not understand he's no threat to us.'

'If we're going to keep him, I think he needs a name,' Nix said, crouching down to look at him. 'What do you think? Fang?'

The zombit pulled a face.

‘OK, not Fang then. How about Snapper?’

Again, the zombit looked unimpressed.

‘What about Sir Humphelburt the Third?’

Tonkins suggested.

The zombit blew a raspberry.

‘Steve?’ Bronte tried.

The zombit hopped into the air and gave a little squeal of approval.

‘OK, Steve it is,’ Nix said with a smile. ‘Well, I think between the three of us, we can keep Steve hidden from everyone else. Can we trust your princesses to help us?’

Bronte nodded. ‘Definitely. For tonight, Steve can stay in my bag, and then after that we’ll hide him in Ellie and Mariam’s tent. We’ll have to sneak him out when we can so he can stretch his legs. Then as soon as we get home, we’ll

release him back into the forest.’

Nix seemed happy with the plan, Tonkins less so, but he didn’t have any other suggestions and so they all returned to their beds, hoping to get some sleep before morning.

As Bronte tucked herself under her blanket, Blue snuggling next to her, she marvelled at the stillness of the night now that they had settled back down. But then the strangest noise carried on the air, a distant metal **clink**. Bronte listened for a moment, trying to figure out what it was, but she couldn’t keep her eyes open any longer, and soon fell into a deep sleep.



A Ribbony Quest

Bronte was awoken early by Sir Ripple.

‘Come, young squires, we must prepare the day for our princesses. Let’s get fires lit and food made!’

‘Tonks, can you cover for me while I wake Ellie and Mariam up and tell them about Steve?’

Bronte asked.

‘Sure,’ he said. ‘Be quick though.’

Bronte grabbed her bag, checked Steve was still safely inside (he was snoring soundly) and

dived into the feathery tent.

The two princesses woke with a start.

‘Oh, B, it’s you,’ Ellie said with a relieved sigh, flopping back onto her feather mattress.

‘Wake up,’ Bronte said in a hushed whisper.

‘I’ve got something I have to show you.’

And she opened her bag.

Steve hopped out onto their blankets and let out a little yawn that sounded more like a growl.

Ellie and Mariam screamed.

Bronte gestured for them to be quiet, just as Nix poked her head through the tent opening. She quickly realised what was happening and winked at the girls. Wiggling back out she said loudly, ‘It’s OK, Lady F, it’s just a stonesquiggler! I’ve caught it.’

Nix had bought them some time, and

meanwhile, Ellie and Mariam had recovered from the shock of seeing a zombified nibbit in their tent.

‘He’s completely harmless,’ Bronte promised them. ‘But we have to keep him hidden from everyone else. They might not believe he’s friendly. Can we leave him in here?’

‘Of course,’ Ellie said, still regarding Steve with some suspicion. ‘Will he be all right while we’re out for the day?’

‘I hope so,’ Bronte said, not actually having the faintest idea if that was true or not. But they didn’t have a lot of choice.

The breakfast call came and, rather reluctantly, the girls left Steve alone in the tent.

Once they’d eaten and Tonkins was washing up, Bronte tried to sneak back and check on him again, but Sir Ripple called to her to stay with

the group. The teachers, it seemed, had a whole day of activities planned.

‘Right, princesses and protectors,’ Mistress Moon said, coming to stand before them with Miss Shine, who began to hand out maps. ‘This morning is an activity for the princesses. As you know, an important skill for a princess is the ability to create floral displays at a moment’s notice. Who knows when an important event might be unexpectedly scheduled, and require an arrangement to be hastily made? It could be a diplomatic disaster should a princess be unprepared!’

‘Yeah, imagine having to meet people without flowers. How would we cope?’ Ellie muttered under her breath, making Bronte, Tonkins and Mariam giggle.

‘Excuse me, Mistress Moon,’ Enya Ember

said shyly, 'but there aren't any flowers in the mountains.'

'Of course there are,' Miss Shine replied. 'Tiny blossomblooms are rooted through the rockface, and in the loose shingle you might find a scrappy little ditsydot.'

'But you're right,' Mistress Moon interrupted, clearly annoyed that Miss Shine had dared to answer on her behalf. 'There aren't any ideal specimens to make a bouquet, and so early this morning, Lady Fennel and Sir Ripple went out and decorated the landscape with ribbons for you to pick. You are to make your way up the mountain towards the Stones of Forgotten Secrets, gathering ribbons as you go. Once you reach the peak, you will make a ribbon arrangement with whatever you've collected.'

Bronte had to hold back a shriek of delight.

They were going to the Stones! This would be her chance to discover the location of the Swirlebirdle skull.

'And what are we supposed to do?' Lance asked.

'Why, you are to assist your princess, of course,' Mistress Moon said, slightly confused. 'Carry her wares, protect her from attack –'

'Attack? What kind of attack?' Tonkins asked in alarm.

Mistress Moon peered over her spectacles at him. 'We aren't anticipating any actual attacks, young squire, but that isn't the point. One must always be ready, and your cowardly reaction hardly fills one with confidence.'

'Actually, Tonkins is really brave,' Bronte said, wanting to defend him. 'Ellie will be safe with him.'

‘What, Snotkins? Brave? I don’t think so!’
Lance snorted.

Fleur Tendril, the princess paired with Lance, glared at him. ‘At least he cleans the dishes properly. You left bits of food on my plate.’

Lance blushed deeply as Mistress Moon scowled at him.

‘Right, off you go,’ she said, clapping her hands. ‘And remember, there are princess points and squire scores available to those who excel!’

Bronte and Tonkins turned to Ellie and Mariam, but Miss Shine came over to them. ‘I’m sorry,’ she said, ‘but you have to work in your pairs, not as a group.’

‘Oh, OK,’ Bronte said, disappointed.

‘Never mind,’ Ellie said, trying to cheer her up. ‘We’ll see you at the top of the mountain.’

‘Come on, Bronte,’ Mariam said with a smile.

‘We can beat them!’

Ellie and Tonkins ran off laughing, while Bronte looped her arm through Mariam’s.

‘Which path do you think we’re supposed to take?’ Mariam asked Bronte, as they considered the map and the five different routes from the camp up to the Stones.

‘I think we can choose,’ Bronte said. ‘We need to be strategic.’

‘Ooh, it’s like a puzzle,’ Mariam said. ‘We should go that way then.’ And she pointed to a path that would take them in a westerly direction.

‘Why?’ Bronte asked curiously.

‘It’s not the shortest, which won’t have as many ribbons, but it’s not the longest either.’ Mariam looked pleased. ‘It’s a good option.’

‘Breezy!’ Bronte was impressed with how Mariam’s mind worked.



Happy with their decision, they ran off, Bronte carrying Mariam's basket like a dutiful squire, until they found the first ribbon. It was tied up on a high branch of a skeleton tree growing out of the rockface.

'There's no way we can reach that! We should keep looking,' Mariam said. 'There can't be that many people ahead of us already, so I'm sure there will be other ribbons in less dangerous spots.'

'And leave this one for someone else to take? Not likely,' Bronte said. 'Do you think you could give me a boost? I'm sure I can reach that lower branch with a bit of help, and then I can climb up to it.'

Mariam stared at her. 'I don't think princesses are supposed to do that,' she said nervously.

'Why not? Mistress Moon may want you to be

helpless, but you're perfectly capable,' Bronte pointed out.

With an anxious glance around to check no one was watching, Mariam nodded. 'OK. What do you need me to do?'

'I think if you can lean against the rock, slightly bent so that your back is a ledge, then I can climb up and take it from there,' Bronte suggested.

Mariam did as she was told, and while Blue watched with a dubious expression on his face, Bronte scrambled up onto Mariam's back and reached for the lowest branch.

Mariam groaned while Bronte stretched, but then she managed to grasp hold of the branch and took her weight off the princess.

'You OK?' Mariam called up, as Bronte hung from the branch.

'Um, yeah,' Bronte said, not sounding very OK. 'I just need to swing ... my legs ...' She managed to bring her legs up around the branch and then was able to shuffle round, so that she could slowly raise herself up to reach the next one.

A few more similar manoeuvres later, Bronte made it to the branch with the golden ribbon flapping in the wind, and managed to untie it.

'You did it!' Mariam cried in delight, as Bronte began to make her way back down.

'All part of the service,' Bronte said, landing on the



ground, feeling more than a little wobbly.

They carried on up the path, gathering any ribbons they found.

‘How is school?’ Bronte asked her as they walked. ‘Are you enjoying sharing a dorm with Ellie?’

‘Oh yes,’ Mariam said. ‘We have a lot of fun together.’

An unfamiliar pang caught at Bronte’s heart. There was something about the thought of Ellie and Mariam together that made her feel funny. And not in a good way.

‘We’ve been doing dressage on the pronkets, and it’s awesome. Ellie is amazing, of course. Can you believe she won the school tournament, beating all the older girls? So hazy!’

The pang tightened. Bronte hadn’t known about that. Why hadn’t Ellie mentioned it?

Mariam didn’t notice anything was amiss, and kept chatting. ‘I’m not bad, but I do have to take extra classes, and Ellie’s been helping me. We’ve even been allowed to hack on the grounds! Oh, there’s another ribbon. Think that’s totally out of reach though.’

The golden ribbon was caught on a little narrow shelf jutting perilously out over the cliff side, and Bronte was glad of the distraction. She frowned as she thought about how to get it.

‘Blue, do you think you could fly to pull it free?’

The icekitten bounded on top of Bronte’s head and took a leap, flapping furiously towards the ribbon and grabbing it in his teeth before flying back down.

Bronte bundled him into a hug. ‘Well done, you clever thing,’ she said.

But as she passed Mariam the ribbon to place

into the basket, she caught sight of Ellie and Tonkins coming up another path that would join with theirs. They were giggling and chatting, with Dotty making smoke shapes in the air.

The same nasty feeling curled in Bronte's chest. She remembered the last time she had felt like this. It was when her brothers had all been allowed to stay up late to watch a star-storm, but her parents had made her go to bed.

She hadn't liked this feeling then and she didn't like it now. She was definitely jealous.



The Stones

Bronte and Mariam reached the Stones of Forgotten Secrets with a basket half full of ribbons, mostly golden, but with a few other colours scattered in for good measure.

Lance wandered over to them, his firecat looking as smug as he did. 'Bit late, aren't you, Poop-face?' he said to Bronte. 'We got here first. Guess you lost.'

Bronte ignored him. She was too busy gazing at the Stones. They were spectacular!



Nine vast pillars, positioned in an almost-circle, in a seemingly impossible location. How could anyone have put them here? Where did they come from? Or had they always been here, she wondered, arriving with the mountains at the beginning of all things?

In the middle of the almost-circle was a stone table that Bronte could easily imagine Sir Pen Tine standing on top of, majestically, after his victory against the Swirlebirdle.

But today, it was covered in baskets and ribbons, while Sir Ripple patiently allowed some of the princesses to decorate him with bows and flourishes. Lady Fennel was trying her best not to laugh at the sight of him.

The firecats were enjoying flying up to perch on top of the great Stones, while some ventured even higher, tumbling through fizzy

clouds that popped and hissed.

‘Fancy foglings,’ Mariam breathed, staring up at the Stones. ‘They’re so much bigger close up.’

The two girls wandered towards the nearest one, mouths open in awe.

‘Totally worth the climb,’ Bronte said, to which Mariam nodded her agreement.

It wasn’t long before Tonkins and Ellie joined them at the Stones, still laughing about something.

‘Did you find many ribbons?’ Mariam asked.

‘No!’ Ellie laughed. ‘They were all gone by the time we passed.’

Mariam took a handful of hers and shoved them into Ellie’s basket. ‘Here, we can share.’

Ellie gave her a squeeze hug and Tonkins beamed.

The nasty knot tightened in Bronte’s chest.

Why did this bother her? These were her friends, her best friends. So why did she feel oddly left out and sad?

‘You don’t mind, do you?’ Tonkins asked her, noticing her quiet mood.

‘No,’ she said, a bit too brightly. ‘I’m glad you and Ellie are getting along well.’

Tonkins’s face lit up. ‘She’s so funny! I definitely want to be a knight in the Sun Kingdom when I grow up.’

‘Don’t sound so surprised. I do have the best taste in friends,’ Bronte said, giving Tonkins an affectionate nudge.

‘Right, gather round,’ Sir Ripple said, looking splendid in his many colourful bows and assorted ribbons. ‘It’s time to hand out some princess points and squire scores. You’ve all done very well, I’m sure there can’t be many

ribbons left unfound. The first princess point goes to Princess Skye Aura for the most ribbons collected.'

There was a polite scatter of applause.

'And another princess point for Princess Fleur Tendril for being the quickest to reach the Stones, aided by Lance, who receives his second squire score.'

There was slightly less applause this time.

'And lastly, there is one final squire score, for the person who was brave enough to find a way to reach the more challenging golden ribbons. These required thought and determination to claim, and only a special squire would be willing to go so far out of their way to serve their princess. Congratulations to Tonkins, for retrieving so many for Princess Eliane Blaze.'

Tonkins looked mortified as everyone clapped

for him, glancing guiltily over at Bronte. Both Ellie and Mariam looked worried too. Bronte didn't want them to be upset though, and she certainly didn't want Lance to have any excuse to be horrible to Tonkins, and so she clapped the loudest, doing her best to ignore the little voice in her head whispering that the squire score should have been hers.

'Princesses, it's now time for you to prepare your ribbon arrangements. Squires, you are to study the Stones, and make some notes,' Lady Fennel said, gesturing to a bag full of parchment and quills. 'I'd like you to draw a diagram, and please describe both what you see and how the Stones make you feel. Later, we'll be taking your notes and turning them into a piece of creative writing, so be as detailed as possible.'

This couldn't be any more perfect! Bronte had

expected that she would need to sneak away to talk to the Stones, but here she was being presented with the perfect opportunity.

‘Oi, Snotkins.’ Lance crept up behind them. ‘There’s no way you earned that squire score. You’re a cheat.’

Tonkins blushed a deep red.

Bronte slipped her arm through Tonkins’s. ‘No, he’s not. He spent the whole morning looking after his princess. Tell me, what did you do for Fleur? Because I’m betting you didn’t fetch her any ribbons, or tell her stories, or make her laugh.’

Lance narrowed his eyes. ‘I carried her stupid basket. That’s all we were supposed to do.’

‘Of course it wasn’t,’ Bronte said. ‘You’ve missed the point entirely.’

‘Really? Well I got a squire score and you

didn’t. So I think that means I’m winning.’

Bronte’s temper soared. She hated to lose, especially to a bog brush like Lance. She’d show him. She’d show all of them. Once she’d proved that Sir Pen Tine was real and become renowned as the young squire who’d made such a momentous discovery, no one would doubt who the true winner was.

Yanking Tonkins with her, Bronte quickly gathered their supplies and hurried to the furthest Stone.

She took a beat to breathe away her anger. She didn’t want anything to ruin this moment.

Staring up in wonder at the Stone, Bronte reached her hand tentatively to the cold rock. She wasn’t sure what she’d been expecting; perhaps the hum of great power, but it didn’t feel different to any other stone she’d ever touched.



Lost in the Mist

‘OK, Tonks, keep watch,’ she said. ‘This is my chance! Make sure no one bothers us.’

Leaning close, Bronte whispered softly, ‘Could you please tell me where the Swirlebirdle skull is buried?’

Nothing happened.

Perhaps she’d asked the wrong question. ‘Is the Swirlebirdle skull here?’

The only sound to be heard was the happy chattering of squires and princesses.

Disappointment rising, Bronte tried again. ‘Did Sir Pen Tine ever come here? Is he real?’

She strained to hear, in case the reply was barely audible, but there was no denying it.

The Stones weren’t talking.

‘Did it work?’ Tonkins called.

With a heavy sigh, Bronte dragged herself away from the Stone. ‘No.’

Tonkins gave her a comforting pat on the shoulder. ‘Never mind. We’ll think of something else.’

But Bronte wasn’t sure what. When they’d set off from Sir Sebastian’s, she’d imagined digging for the buried skull, but having arrived here and seen the rocky ground, narrow paths

and slim ledges, it was clear that that would be impossible. And where would she start?

‘Come on,’ she said, daunted by the task still facing her and taunted by the Stones for failing so far. ‘Let’s finish our work quickly and then ask Lady Fennel if we can go back to camp. We should check on Steve.’

She hastily scribbled down some notes, describing the Stones as best she could and remarking on the peaceful atmosphere, which surely was part of the reason so many travellers came here. Then she drew a swift diagram of the stone circle and hurried over to Lady Fennel.

‘Tonkins and I have finished,’ she said. ‘Could we go back down to the camp? We can make a start on lunch.’

Lady Fennel gave her a suspicious look. ‘You’re very keen,’ she said. ‘What are you up to?’

‘I’m always keen,’ Bronte said, choosing her words carefully. She didn’t want to lie to Lady Fennel.

‘That’s true. All right, you and Tonkins may be excused, but go straight back to camp, understood? Nix is already there preparing food, I’m sure she’ll be grateful for some assistance.’

With a wave to Ellie and Mariam, who were busy transforming ribbons into incredible displays, Bronte and Tonkins took the nearest path back down the mountain.

As they walked, the pair threw stones for Dotty and Blue to chase, several tumbling over the edge, only for Dotty to swoop after them and bring them back. Blue, it would seem, was too lazy to use what little flying energy he had to dive over the cliff edge for the sake of a pebble.

‘Um, Bronts,’ Tonkins said after a while. ‘Is it

me, or is it getting a bit misty out here?’

He was right. A fine haze was sweeping up from below them, curling about their feet and concealing the path ahead.

‘Feathers, I thought it was meant to be sunny in the mountains,’ Bronte said. ‘We should hurry.’

But the mist grew thick and fast. Within moments, Bronte could barely see her hand held out in front of her, and Dotty had to produce little blasts of flame to help light the way.

‘Curly custard, this is strange mist,’ Tonkins said, clutching Bronte’s arm.

‘I know,’ Bronte agreed. ‘It came out of nowhere! I hope the others are all right.’

When they reached a fork in the path, Bronte looked at Tonkins. ‘I don’t remember which way to go, do you?’

Tonkins shook his head. ‘I left the map with Ellie.’

‘Mariam has ours too.’

‘Um, let’s take this one,’ Tonkins suggested, pointing to the path that appeared to head downwards.



But as they went, the route twisted and turned, and a sinking feeling in Bronte's chest told her they'd chosen poorly. They kept taking different tracks to try and find their way back, but it wasn't long before they had to face the truth.

They were lost.

'What are we going to do?' Tonkins asked, his panic rising.

'We're going to stay calm,' Bronte replied. 'We're knights. We can cope with a bit of mist.' But inside, her heart was racing with worry.

And then she heard it. The same metallic clinking that had carried on the air last night.

'Do you hear that?' she asked Tonkins, who paused and then nodded. 'What do you think it might be?'

'A weird tapping noise in the middle of nowhere? It's not going to be anything good,' he

replied, before sighing deeply. 'Which means you're going to want to investigate, aren't you?'

'We might as well,' she said. 'We're already completely lost anyway.'

They were guided entirely by the sound, and as they walked, the clanking became louder.

It was almost deafening when they reached a jagged rock, and as they peered over, Bronte gasped. Before them was a clearing, quite free from mist, in which they could see precisely what was making the noise.

Gnomes.



Mountain Gnomes

As always, the gnomes were entirely naked, their trailing floor-length beards offering them some modesty. They looked very similar to the gnomes Bronte had seen back at Sir Sebastian's, only their features were all angular and jagged like the mountain rock, their noses were longer and pointier, and their skin was grey and wrinkly, giving them all the appearance of being old. Most of them were holding pickaxes and were striking the ground, while others were digging

with shovels. A few others wandered around with armfuls of scrolls and maps.

'Mountain gnomes!' Bronte whispered. 'I've read about them in the library.'

'They live up here?' Tonkins asked in surprise. 'What are they doing?'

'I have no idea.' Bronte squinted, leaning as far forward as she dared without being seen.

'What do you reckon they're digging for?' Tonkins wondered out loud, before giving Bronte a pointed look.

'No,' Bronte said, shaking her head as she realised exactly what Tonkins was thinking. 'They can't possibly be looking for the same thing we are!' But even as she scoffed at the idea, she wondered whether it was true. Could it be a coincidence that in the very place where she had been planning to dig to uncover the Swirlebirdle

skull, the mountain gnomes were mining too?

‘What do mountain gnomes eat? Could they be looking for food?’ Tonkins asked.

‘Or treasure?’ That was a more exciting prospect, Bronte thought.

Something in the distance caught her eye. At the far end of the clearing, on the rocks above the gnomes, there seemed to be a thicker cloud of mist drifting around the edges without floating over the area where the gnomes were digging. It was so peculiar and unnatural that Bronte squinted to get a better look.

That was when she saw it. A figure.

The figure was wearing a long cloak, the hood concealing their face, and they were holding something in their hand from which the smoky mist was spilling.

‘Look!’ Bronte nudged Tonkins.



He followed her gaze and shrank slightly backwards, not wanting to be seen.

'I think that smoke is what's causing all this weird mist,' Bronte said.

'And I think that person is the one conjuring it,' Tonkins added.

They looked at each other and said simultaneously, 'A weather witch!'

'It must be!' Bronte exclaimed. 'And that would explain the gnomes! We know Ackley worked with the gnomes back at Sir Sebastian's too. Let me see if I can catch a glimpse of his face.'

But when they looked again, the figure was gone.

Bronte gasped. 'They've disappeared.'

'Do you think they saw us?'

'I'm not sure,' Bronte said. 'But I think we should go. We have to tell the others.'

As Bronte and Tonkins made their way back to the path, the mist seemed to become even thicker. They walked and walked, for what seemed like an eternity, and eventually they had to admit that they were totally exhausted and completely lost.

On top of that, now Bronte was worrying about what the gnomes were up to – was it possible they were digging for the Swirlebirdle skull and, if so, why would Ackley want it?

'What are we going to do, Bronts?' Tonkins asked, coming to a halt. Dotty and Blue collapsed gratefully at his feet. 'We've been walking for ages and we're no closer to knowing where we're supposed to be.'

'Maybe they'll send out a search party for us,' Bronte said. 'Lady Fennel will realise we're not there and come looking.' But the mountains

were big, and they were very small. How would anyone locate them?

‘Perhaps we should stay still,’ she suggested. ‘So if anyone comes to find us, we won’t miss them?’ She was tempted to add *and so we don’t accidentally fall off the edge of the mountain*, but didn’t think Tonkins would appreciate the reminder of their precarious situation.

Tonkins didn’t object and they sat down on the stony path, leaning against the rockface, with Blue and Dotty pressing close into them for comfort and warmth. The mist had brought a chill wind with it and dimmed the light so much that Bronte wasn’t entirely sure whether it was still daytime or not.

‘I wish we had some snacks with us,’ Tonkins said, as his stomach growled loudly.

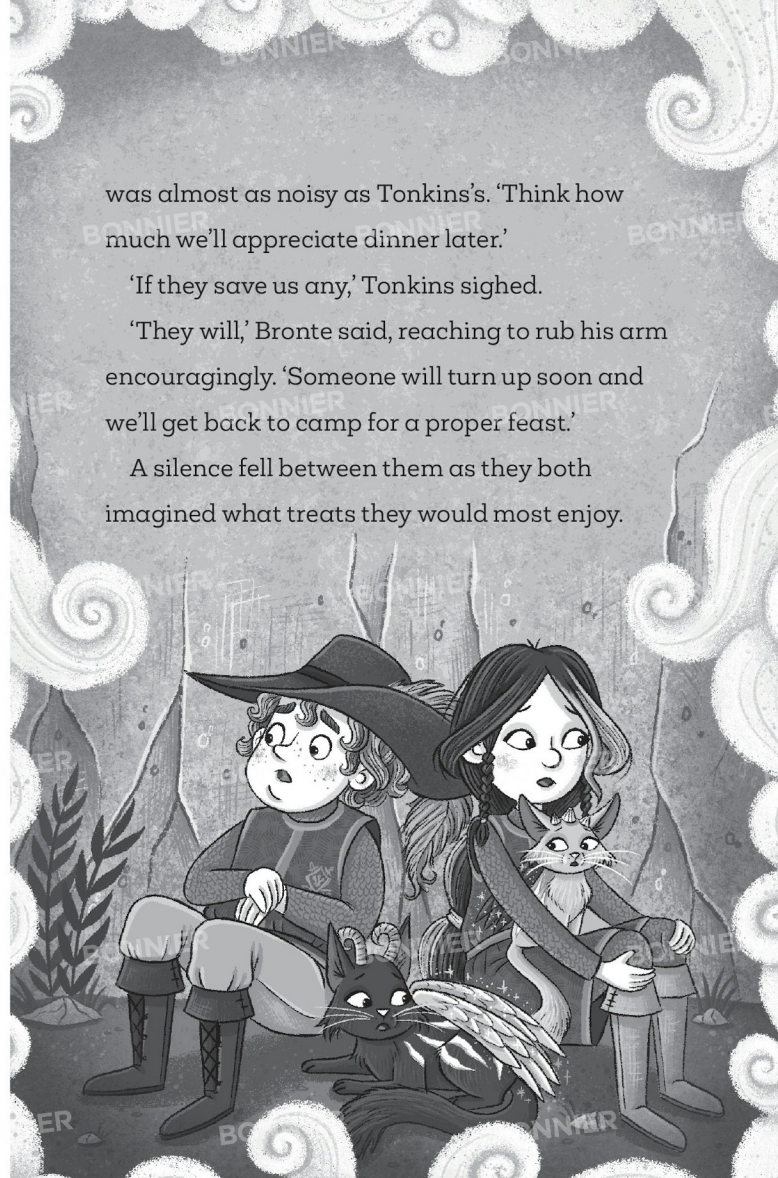
‘Me too,’ Bronte agreed. Her grumbling tummy

was almost as noisy as Tonkins’s. ‘Think how much we’ll appreciate dinner later.’

‘If they save us any,’ Tonkins sighed.

‘They will,’ Bronte said, reaching to rub his arm encouragingly. ‘Someone will turn up soon and we’ll get back to camp for a proper feast.’

A silence fell between them as they both imagined what treats they would most enjoy.



‘I don’t want to cause any alarm,’ Tonkins said after a while, immediately causing Bronte alarm, ‘but what’s that?’

Bronte squinted into the dense mist and realised there was a faint glow up ahead. ‘I have no idea,’ she said nervously, edging closer to Tonkins. ‘Something’s moving, look there!’

Tonkins shrieked as a zombit emerged, followed swiftly by Nix, illuminated by the lantern attached to her head.

‘There you are!’ she exclaimed. ‘I was getting worried.’

‘Nix! It’s so breezy to see you! How did you find us?’ Bronte said in relief.

‘I didn’t, it was all Steve. Turns out he has a brilliant nose.’

Bronte crouched to scratch Steve behind the ears in thanks, wondering whether this skill was

a lingering effect of Ackley’s machine, in the same way that Pig still had diamond tusks. ‘I hope we didn’t cause too much panic,’ she said to Nix. ‘We were trying to make our way back to camp, but the mist confused us and we got completely lost.’

‘No one has noticed you’re not there apart from me and your princesses. This mist has caused chaos.’

That was unexpected. ‘It’s everywhere?’ Bronte asked in surprise.

Nix nodded, the lantern wobbling in front of her eyes. ‘Mistress Moon is freaking out – apparently the walk back from the Stones was an experience. But when I realised you weren’t with Ellie and Mariam, and they realised you weren’t with me, I thought I’d better come and look. I wasn’t sure whether Steve would be much

help, but I gave him your blankets to sniff and he sped straight off!’

Tonkins stepped forward and gave Nix a huge hug. ‘Thank you.’

Nix smiled. ‘No problem. But we should try and get back before anyone realises we’ve disappeared, and you can tell me how you ended up all the way out here.’

Bronte sighed. ‘It’s a long story!’



A Falling Out

Steve’s nose lived up to its remarkable reputation, and he led the group straight back to the camp, which remained shrouded in mist.

Lady Fennel had taken charge and suggested that everyone stay by the tents until the bad weather passed.

Ellie and Mariam were relieved to see Bronte and Tonkins safely back with Nix, and the five of them, plus Blue, Dotty and Steve, bundled into the tent, where Bronte told them all about the

gnomes and the weather witch.

‘Perhaps the gnomes were digging a garden – and maybe the figure was someone searching for the Stones,’ Mariam said when Bronte had finished. She had one of the golden ribbons tied in her hair. ‘Why are you immediately jumping to dangerous conclusions?’

‘Have you not told her what happened last term?’ Bronte asked Ellie, who shook her head.

‘You swore me to secrecy, so no.’ She hesitated. ‘This is what I meant before, when you said you wanted to ask the Stones to reveal their secrets. When you promise to keep a secret, that’s an oath that shouldn’t be broken. People come here to share things with the Stones that they wouldn’t tell anyone else. I don’t think it’s right to ask them to break that trust.’

Bronte hadn’t thought of it like that, and

perhaps it was guilt that made her defensive. ‘I hardly think telling me where a bone is buried is a big deal,’ she said.

‘You said Sir Pen Tine hid it because he was worried that the Swirlebirdle might come back to life,’ Ellie pointed out.

Bronte had forgotten quite how clever Ellie was, and how sometimes that clashed with her own determination to be right all the time. ‘Well, lucky for you, I tried asking the Stones and they said nothing. So, no secrets have been betrayed.’

She became very interested in a speck of dirt on her boots, not wanting to look at the others. Anger, guilt and sadness mingled like a horrid potion in her chest. The last thing she wanted was to fall out with Ellie.

‘I think we should tell Mariam everything that happened last term,’ Tonkins said, clearing his

throat. 'Because whenever there are gnomes and weird weather, something bad is happening.'

He started to bring her up to date on Ackley, the lightning steeds, Elon, Hollis and the ice warriors. Bronte joined in after a while, pushing her frustration away. Halfway through, Nix dipped out of the tent to fetch them all some food, and they tucked in to some bread and cake, as they spoke in hushed voices.

'OK,' Mariam conceded, when she had heard the full story. 'I can see why you're suspicious. But there still might be a very simple explanation for all this.'

Her calm logic poured cold water on Bronte's anxious enthusiasm.

'You're right,' Ellie said. 'We have to find out whether the gnomes are just going about their business, or if they're up to no good.'

'And we need to prove whether the mysterious figure is Ackley or not,' Bronte added. 'We could be in real danger if so.'

'Now that we know Steve can take us there and back safely, we should go and have another look at the site you found,' Ellie said, causing Tonkins to groan.

'We only just made it back in one piece,' he objected. 'Shouldn't we at least wait until the mist has gone?'

'No, we can use the weather to our advantage,' Bronte said. 'No one will know we're gone, we'll sneak off and be back for tea.'

She poked her head out of the tent. The campsite was now dimly lit with lanterns, but it was still virtually impossible to see through the mist. She beckoned to the others.

'Come on.'

They tiptoed out and crept through the camp, letting Steve find the scent that would lead them back to the gnomes.

‘Stay close to me, Ellie,’ Tonkins said. ‘I’ll keep you safe.’

Part of Bronte felt really proud of Tonkins, because she knew him well enough to know he would be afraid. But the other part of her prickled with envy that he could summon his courage for Ellie and not for her.

They moved slowly through the mist, often tripping over each other as they struggled to see. Bronte suggested that they all hold hands

so they didn’t lose each other, and they formed a long snake-like line, keeping close to the cliff face to avoid the steep drop off the edge of the path.

‘I’ve been thinking,’ Bronte said after a while, ‘I don’t think the weather witch we saw could be Ackley. Miss Shine told me that Sir Ripple sent for knights to take him away to the Deep-Down Dungeon with his brothers. I think there must be another one.’

‘That doesn’t seem very likely,’ Ellie said thoughtfully. ‘Barely any escaped being turned into weather wraiths by May. All my research suggests that if any weather witches still exist, there can’t be many.’



Bronte huffed in frustration. 'So?' Why did Ellie have to keep challenging her?

'Well, does it not seem a bit strange for you to meet two different weather witches in an extremely short space of time?'

'It's a coincidence, but so what? That's why they're called coincidences.'

'Is it not possible you made a mistake before, with the ice warriors?' Ellie pushed. 'You thought it was Ackley, but it wasn't.'

'Then who?' Bronte's temper was hotting up. 'And don't say Miss Shine again.'

'Why not? I know you're very loyal, it's one of the things I love about you, but it does mean you don't always see the obvious.'

'Such as?'

'Well, that Miss Shine is *here* for one. And that she arrived just as the snow did last term.'

'COINCIDENCE!' Bronte shouted.

'I dunno, Bronts, it does seem a bit odd,' Tonkins said. 'Perhaps it's worth considering?'

Bronte's jealousy burst out before she could stop it. 'I should have known you'd take her side,' she snapped, snatching her hands free and bringing the line to a halt. 'Just because she's your new best friend, doesn't mean she's right and I'm wrong.'

A strained silence fell.

'Well, this is awkward,' Nix said. 'Do you want to keep going?'

'I think we should go back to camp,' Mariam said. 'This is far too risky – and for nothing.'

'For nothing?' Bronte stared at her faint outline. 'There's a weather witch lurking about who's probably responsible for this strange mist! What if the gnomes are looking for the

Swirlebirdle skull? What if someone else proves
Sir Pen Tine is real first?

There was a tense pause.

‘Is that why you wanted to come out here?’

Mariam cried in frustration. ‘I thought we were
risking our necks because we might be in danger,
not because of some silly story!’

‘It’s not just a story, that’s the point,’ Bronte
said, feeling embarrassed at being caught out.

‘Yes, it is,’ Mariam argued. ‘It’s all made up.
I’d like to believe it too, really I would, but some
things just aren’t real. Like your campfire tale,
Ellie. The weather wraiths are an idea out of
a book. My queendom has its own stories too.
Have you heard of mist maidens? Ethereal
beings who can be summoned by royalty in a
time of danger. It’s a lovely idea, but it’s not real.’

‘How do you know?’ Bronte challenged her.

‘Stories have to come from somewhere.’

‘Well, let’s find out, shall we?’ And Mariam
cupped her hands to her mouth and shouted,
*‘Mist maidens, mist maidens, hear my plea. I’m
in danger, rescue me!’*

Nothing happened.

‘See?’ Mariam said. ‘So can we all please stop
arguing and go back to the camp?’

‘That doesn’t prove anything,’ Bronte said.
‘Of course it won’t work if you’re not actually in
danger.’

But suddenly the mist started to swirl around
them, the air grew colder, and Blue pressed
against Bronte’s leg.

‘What’s happening?’ Nix asked, moments
before the mist began to gather into a shape.

And then a floating woman appeared within
it. She had a small crown upon her head and

glowed with a bright light that made Bronte feel warm and safe.

‘I’m here to amaze, since you called, Princess Haze.’



The Mist Maiden

‘Fancy foglings,’ Mariam whispered. ‘I don’t believe it, you’re real!’

‘I come when I must,’ the mist maiden said. ‘When the peril is just.’

‘Peril? Oh no, we were just having an argument,’ Mariam stuttered. ‘I’m sorry I disturbed you.’

The mist maiden gave an indignant spin. ‘I do not appear without good reason. There hasn’t been need for many a season. I never came when

you were a child, and called for me when peril was mild.'

'Ha, so you did believe in the stories once then,' Bronte said to Mariam, thrilled to be proved right. But she shrank back under the mist maiden's scrutiny.

'And who might you be, all spiky and frowny?'

'I'm Bronte – a squire, to serve I aspire.' Bronte caught herself badly attempting to copy the mist maiden's rhyme and blushed.

The mist maiden stared as though she could see straight into Bronte's head and heart, but at last she smiled. 'An honourable knight, and linked to the weather. You're stronger when you all work together.'

'I still can't believe it,' Mariam murmured. 'I thought you were made up.'

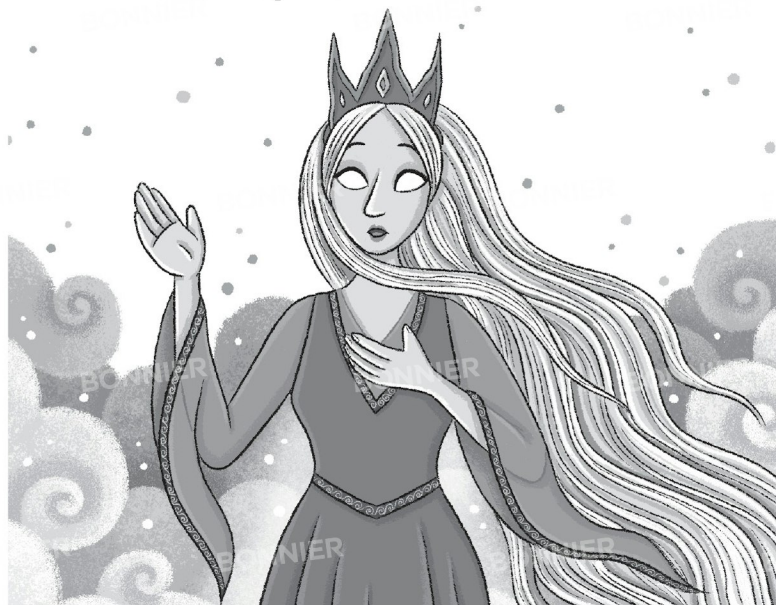
Ellie bowed before the mist maiden. 'May I

please ask you a question?'

The mist maiden nodded.

'Does this mean all the stories we've grown up with are real?'

The mist maiden blinked. 'You ask strange questions, of course they are not. Some tales are simply a jolly good plot. But legends are different, for within lies the truth, and stories are all that remains of the proof.'



‘So it’s possible that Sir Pen Tine really *did* exist?’ Bronte breathed.

‘The knight, he was real, and he fought with such zeal,’ the mist maiden said, with a small bow of respect.

Bronte’s legs almost gave way and Mariam put a supportive arm around her. She could hardly believe it.

‘I’m so happy for you, B!’ Ellie cried, their previous argument forgotten. ‘You were right to believe in him all this time.’

‘Um, excuse me, sorry,’ Tonkins interrupted nervously. ‘I’m pleased for you too, Bronts, but unless I’m imagining things, this very lovely mist maiden just implied that Mariam is in danger, or she wouldn’t be here.’

The mist maiden swooshed about him. ‘Wise boy, have a care. There is threat in the air.’

‘Do you mean the mist?’ Mariam said. ‘We are walking around rather recklessly.’

‘Perhaps we *should* turn back,’ Ellie said. ‘If we’re in so much danger that the mist maiden came.’

Bronte didn’t want to give up, but she was tired of fighting with her friends, who all seemed in agreement.

‘Come with me, I will help you see,’ the mist maiden said, parting the cloud enough so that they could see the path and leading them safely back towards the camp.

When they were close, the mist maiden paused to face them.

‘Here I shall leave you,’ she said. ‘But this I must warn – the mist isn’t natural, of magic it’s born.’

‘So it is the weather witch causing it!’ Bronte

exclaimed. 'Do you know who they are?'

'Who *she* is,' Ellie interjected, causing Bronte to glare.

'Beware the one who wears a mask,' the mist maiden said. 'Prevent them from their deadly task.'

Before they could ask her what she meant, the mist maiden vanished.

Tonkins frowned. 'I haven't seen anyone wearing a mask, have you?'

They exchanged confused looks, but no one really knew what the mist maiden's warning meant. Lost to their thoughts, they didn't talk much as they traipsed back to their tent. After a moment of holding their breath to see if anyone had noticed their absence, they relaxed. Most of the other princesses and squires were hanging about by the tents and chatting, and no one

seemed to have realised they hadn't been there.

Bronte didn't feel like talking to her friends, so she decided to fetch them some water. She hated how her insides practically itched after their quarrel. And the jealousy gnawing away at her wasn't helping either. She gave a big sigh as she headed for the water barrel – she had been so excited for the camp, and now it felt like everything was going wrong.

'Are you all right?'

Miss Shine's voice made Bronte jump, and she sprayed herself with water. She thought of Ellie's accusations against the teacher and blushed.

'I'm fine,' she said.

'Not too bored in this weather?' Miss Shine asked.

'No,' Bronte said, not making eye contact.

'Are you sure everything is OK? You haven't

fallen out with your friends or anything?' Miss Shine pressed.

At that, Bronte did look up at her. She didn't need to say anything, her face totally gave her away.

'Never mind,' Miss Shine soothed. 'Whatever's happened, I'm sure you'll fix it. Talking can help – I'm here to lend an ear if you ever need me. Or else, you could share your worries with the Stones! Which reminds me, I remembered another line of that rhyme I was telling you, about the Stones speaking? Now, how did it go...? Oh, yes! *Underneath a moon so blue, will secrets be revealed to you.* So these things only happen once in a blue moon, it would seem.'

So *that's* why the Stones hadn't answered her! That was oddly comforting.

'It's probably a good thing it doesn't happen

often,' Bronte said, causing Miss Shine to look surprised.

'Oh? And why is that?'

'It's something Ellie said. That people shouldn't ask to hear secrets that haven't been shared with them. I think she's right.'

'Hmm.' Miss Shine seemed thoughtful.

'Perhaps only in an emergency?'

Bronte considered this. 'I suppose. Though I can't imagine what that might be.'

'No.' Miss Shine's smile faded briefly, before flickering back to life. 'Right, I have things to do.'



And she patted Bronte's shoulder before leaving her alone.

How could Ellie think Miss Shine was the weather witch? She was so nice. But someone was definitely lurking in the mountains, using weather magic to disrupt their trip. So the question remained, who was it and what were they up to?

Someone had conjured this mist – but why? And what did they have the gnomes digging for?

Bronte thought that perhaps it was Ackley after all. Yes, he was supposed to be in the Deep-Down Dungeon – and she had thought that it would be impossible to escape from there. But it *had* to be him, surely?

There was something she was missing. If only she could think what.



Caught in a Lie

After they'd eaten their dinner, Mistress Moon made the princesses sing to everyone.

Princesses of the kingdoms, one day we shall be queens

Outstanding and obedient, we always eat our greens.

High up here in the mountains, we like to sing and dance

Beneath the stars so shiny gives us the perfect chance.

Bronte caught Ellie's eye and stifled a giggle when she pulled a pained expression. It was a truly terrible song and the applause they received at the end was mostly to celebrate it being over.

Before Mistress Moon could suggest another one, Lady Fennel quickly proposed they have an early night and hope that the weather would improve by morning.

Bronte thought it was doubtful, considering the mist had been summoned by a weather witch, but she could hardly tell Lady Fennel that. She had no proof to support her claim anyway.

The firecats loped sleepily to the mountainside, curling up in the tunnels for the night. Sir Ripple was trying to encourage everyone to join him in a bedtime stretching class, and he cornered Bronte as she was

washing the dishes.

'How about it, Tempestra? Want to ease those aching muscles and strengthen your torso? There might be a squire score in it for you?'

That was tempting. She had no interest in the stretching class, but she hadn't won a single squire score yet and her competitive nature fought to be heard.

'I thought I might persuade the lovely Miss Shine to take it with me, but I can't see her anywhere. Curse this confounded mist!'

The mention of her teacher's name jogged Bronte's foggy memory. Perhaps Sir Ripple



could help with her mystery. 'Sir, can I ask you something? Do you remember last term, when the ice warriors attacked?'

Sir Ripple's moustache quivered. 'I try not to,' he said. Apparently, being attacked by your own ice replica wasn't something to dwell on.

'Well, afterwards, was it just Elon and Hollis you sent to the Deep-Down Dungeon, or was it Ackley too?'

Sir Ripple looked at her blankly. 'I'm sorry, I have no idea what you're talking about. Who are those people?'

Now Bronte was the one to stare. 'They ... I'm sorry, I thought Miss Shine asked you to send for knights to take the villains away when the fight was over?'

'What villains? The only problem was those awful ice warriors.' Sir Ripple shivered as if the

snow had returned. 'Now, are you joining me for the stretching class? I don't seem to have any other takers.'

'Oh, no, sorry, sir. I have to, um, check on my princess.' And Bronte hurried away, searching for Miss Shine. She needed to talk to her as soon as possible.

But there was no sign of the teacher anywhere.

Bronte's mind raced. Perhaps she had misunderstood Miss Shine when she'd explained what had happened to Ackley and his brothers last term? But in her heart, she knew she hadn't.

Why would Miss Shine have lied? Was she simply trying to reassure Bronte? Bronte remembered how she and Nix hadn't told anyone but Miss Shine about the tunnels where Elon and Hollis were digging. How her eyes had lit up when they showed her the ice thistle.

And the sinking feeling in her tummy told her everything she needed to know. She didn't want to admit it, didn't want to have been wrong. But this was more important than her pride.

She made straight for the tent, bursting in to see all her friends laughing at Blue and Dotty playing with Steve.

'What's wrong?' Tonkins and Ellie asked at the same time, reading her expression.

Bronte took a deep breath and faced Ellie. 'I think you're right about Miss Shine.' And she told them all about her conversation with Sir Ripple.

To Ellie's credit, she didn't gloat. 'At the very least, you've caught her in a lie.'

'Do you really think Miss Shine could be a weather witch though?' Nix asked. 'It's a big leap from not telling the truth to being a villain.'

'That's true,' Bronte admitted. 'But she turned

up right before the snow did last term. If she is a weather witch, she could have stolen the ice thistle and then hidden it underground to be looked after by Elon and Hollis. And if they were working for her, then of course she wouldn't hand them over to the knights from the Deep-Down Dungeon.'

'Why though?' Tonkins asked. 'Why would she want to attack the school she worked at?'

'I think we should focus more on why she's summoned the mist now, and what she's making the gnomes search for,' Mariam said, her fingers picking anxiously at her lips. 'Her plans for your school failed. But what's she doing now? That's what I'm worried about.'

The group fell silent. Mariam made a good point.

'I think we have to tell Lady Fennel,' Bronte

said. 'She'll know what to do.'

The others nodded in agreement and with Bronte leading the way, they emerged from the tent.

The camp was quietening down for the night, though the lanterns still illuminated it despite the mist. Sir Ripple was doing some exercises with a rather unwilling handful of squires and princesses. Mistress Moon was helping Fleur fix a tear in her dress. Lance, Leo and Pole looked to be sneaking up on Varney to slip a stonessquiggler down his back while he fetched himself some water. Lady Fennel was at the far side of the camp, reading a book, but as they headed towards her, Tonkins tugged Bronte's sleeve.

'Is it me, or is the mist . . . blue?'

They paused and looked around.

'That's weird,' Bronte said.

'Forget that,' Mariam said. 'Can anyone else hear that sound?'

The group froze. Mariam was right – the mountain was . . . humming.

Everyone else in the camp had noticed too, pausing what they were doing to stare at the rock face.

'Could it be the gnomes?' Ellie asked.

'No.' Bronte stepped in front of Mariam. 'This is something else.'

Seconds later, the firecats all flew out of the tunnels in the mountainside, hissing angrily.

'What the green gravy?' Bronte breathed, staring at the wall of mist. And then she screamed as hundreds of small, black wisps began swarming out of the mountain.



Elemental Attack!

‘What the curly custard are those things?’

Tonkins cried, as the black creatures continued to pour out of the mountain like lava from a volcano.

Bronte stared at them in wonder. They were about the same size as Dotty and floated like little ghosts. They wore wispy black hats and had spindly arms, but no legs. They looked as if they were made of sooty smoke and could almost be described as cute.

Soon the strange creatures filled the campsite,



floating around the confused students.

‘Stay back!’ Lady Fennel cried, her swords drawn. ‘Ripple, Shine, where are you?’

‘Never fear,’ said Sir Ripple. ‘I excel at hand-to-hand combat. I have won many a tournament armed only with my blade.’ But his sword trembled as he held it aloft.

‘What are they?’ Lance asked. ‘Are they friendly?’ He stretched his hand out to touch one.



Lady Fennel's cry of warning was too late. The wisp hissed loudly, sending out a shot of lightning from its fingers.

'Ow!' Lance cried, and the noise seemed to act as a signal to the other floating creatures, who spread out, surrounding the camp.

And then they attacked.

Sir Ripple groaned in horror as he was peppered with ice shards, his arm looking like a strange pin cushion. Pole was hit by a blast of water, soaking him as if he'd been caught in a torrential rain shower. Mistress Moon shrieked as one of the creatures took aim at her, and a thick fog tangled around her arms and legs, binding her like rope. Others were emitting a blinding, hot light from their fingertips and were targeting the straggles of gorse growing among the stony gaps, bursting them into flames.



Bronte gasped. 'They have weather powers!'

When one tried to shoot Ellie with its burning light, Tonkins leaped in front of her.

'Hey, that's my princess,' he said angrily, lifting his arm up to block the attack and receiving a singed sleeve in return.

'Retreat!' Lady Fennel shouted, trying to ward off the ghostly beings. 'Take cover!'

'Quick, to the tent!' Nix shouted.

The friends ran as fast as they could away from the creatures, Blue and Dotty doing their best to fight back. Steve tried to launch his own attack, gnashing his fangs, but the creatures dissolved, only to reform unharmed moments later.

The children reached the tent, wet, soggy and sore.

'I think the weather wraiths might be real,' Bronte said, catching her breath.

'You *think*?' Nix said sarcastically.

'I sort of imagined they'd be bigger,' Mariam said.

'They're plenty big enough,' Ellie said, rubbing her hand where she'd been zapped. 'What are we going to do? There are so many of them!'

'In the story you told us, was there anything to say how they could be sent back to the mountain?' Bronte asked her.

Ellie shook her head. 'Just that the weather witch May put them there, and if they were ever released, they'd seek vengeance on anyone they saw.'

'So if a weather witch imprisoned them, a weather witch must have let them out,' Nix said. 'And guess who was nowhere to be seen out there.'

'Miss Shine,' they all said together.

'Why would she want them to attack us?' Mariam cried. 'What have we done?'

'I don't think we can worry about that right now,' Ellie said. 'We just have to stop the weather wraiths before someone gets badly hurt.'

'I have an idea,' Bronte said. 'I'm not sure whether it will work though.'

'Any plan is worth hearing,' Mariam said.

'Miss Shine told me how the Stones only reveal their secrets during a blue moon.'

Tonkins gasped. 'The blue mist!'

Bronte nodded. 'I think there's one tonight. I know what you said, Ellie, about not asking to hear someone else's secrets, and I agree. But perhaps the Stones will know how to stop the weather wraiths.'

Outside, Lady Fennel roared and Tonkins looked panicked. 'It has to be worth a try. I'm not sure how we can put up a fight against these wraiths. The tents aren't going to protect us for long!'

'We have to help Lady Fennel,' Nix said. 'Even with Sir Ripple and the firecats, she's outnumbered.'

'What can we do?' Ellie asked. 'They'll attack us as soon as we step outside.'

Nix reached for her bag, which she'd left there that morning. 'I might have some things that will help us,' she said. 'Hmm, what about this? I call it the rain defender. Like a princess parasol that you attach to your head.'

She held out a strange helmet, that she strapped to Ellie's head, lifting a dome so that it curved over her.

Nix rooted around a bit more. 'Well, there's my lantern,' she said, and she threw it to Mariam. 'That will help you see if they puff that fog in your face.'

Tonkins was staring at her in amazement. 'You made all this?'

‘Yup, bet you’re glad I overpacked now, eh? This might be useful,’ she said, passing Tonkins a strange glove with lots of small wooden circles on it. ‘Use that as a shield against the lightning zaps, I reckon.’

‘Maybe Dotty can help us fight off the icicles?’ Tonkins suggested, pulling the glove on and admiring it.

‘Good idea,’ Nix said. ‘Ellie, pass me that ribbon flower you made earlier.’

Ellie did as she was told, and they all watched as Nix pulled it apart, taking the finest strip and tying it onto the goggles she’d extracted from her bag. Covering the lenses with the ribbon, she slipped the goggles onto her head.

‘These will protect me from that awful shining light the weather wraiths are blasting out.’

She looked at Bronte in concern. ‘I don’t have

anything left for you.’

‘It doesn’t matter. Hopefully the wraiths won’t be anywhere near the Stones. Steve can guide me to them with his clever nose.’

‘Here,’ Mariam said, untying the ribbon from her hair. ‘Sniff this, Steve. It’s probably faint now but should have the scent of the stone table where we were doing the arrangements.’

Nix nodded. ‘OK, so does everyone know the plan? We’ll stay here and help Lady Fennel defend the camp, while Stormy races up to the Stones and asks them to reveal the secret of how to stop the weather wraiths.



Are we all ready?’

As *we’ll ever be*, Bronte thought, as the group reached out their hands for a group shake.

She was staking their survival on a story being true. And unlike proving whether Sir Pen Tine was real or not, or discovering a Swirlebirdle skull, this *really* mattered. This wasn’t about having her name in the history books. This was about saving her friends.

Tonight, she needed the legend to be real.



Attack!

On the count of three, the group burst from the tent.

The campsite was pandemonium. Lady Fennel and Sir Ripple were hugely outnumbered by the weather wraiths, who continued to blast them with their weather powers. The firecats were growling and trying to catch the wraiths with their paws, but the eerie creatures easily evaded them.

Fleur and Posy were holding their skirts out

to shield Varney and Higgles from lightning attacks, while Lance, Leo and Pole had climbed into the water barrels for shelter. Mistress Moon was guarding a tent, brandishing a saucepan at any wraiths who dared attack.

Rufus Ranger and Skye Aura were valiantly beating a tent that had gone up in flames with their cloaks. The other squires who'd been inside were now cowering in a huddle.

Bronte was going to have to hurry!

Their plan was to protect her as far as the pathway up to the Stones, and then the others would join the fight.

But they hadn't gone far before a huge swarm of wraiths descended on them, unleashing mini bursts of all the weathers of the Weather Kingdoms. The children used Nix's defences and managed to hold back the worst of it to begin

with, but soon began to struggle.

'There are too many of them!' Tonkins shouted, as he flung his arm in front of Bronte to stop her getting shot by lightning.

'We need reinforcements,' Bronte said. She turned to Mariam. 'How about the mist maidens?'

Mariam was picking her lip frantically. 'Right, yes, good idea.' And she rattled off the rhyme which had brought help before.

As they defended against icicles and torrential rain, Bronte thought for a moment that they might be swept away. But then it was as if someone had wrapped a blanket around them, shielding them from all the elements.

When Bronte lowered the arm that was protecting her head, she smiled. It wasn't just one mist maiden who had come this time. It was

a whole host of them, and they were blocking the wraiths' attacks like wispy warriors.

'You called once more,' said the mist maiden they'd met earlier, who it was now clear was the leader. 'Tell me, what for?'

'Can you help us fight the weather wraiths?'

Mariam asked.

'They cannot be fought, they can only be freed. For peace and rest their souls do plead,' the mist maiden said mysteriously.

'Oh.' Mariam looked at the others for guidance.

'Could you protect us while Bronte goes to ask the Stones for help?' Ellie asked.

'Should you need us, here we'll stay. At your word, then we'll away.'

That sounded like a yes.

'OK, I'll be back as soon as I can,' Bronte said.

'Good luck,' Tonkins said. 'And take care.'

Bronte nodded. 'You take care too. And of Ellie and Mariam,' she said to him with a smile, 'Brave Squire Tonkins.'

'I'm not half as brave when you're not around,' he said quietly. 'I know you were mad at me for taking Ellie's side before, but I didn't want to let you down. I know you wanted to be her knight and I didn't want to disappoint you.'

All the knots of jealousy in Bronte's tummy loosened.

'You could never disappoint me, Tonks,' Bronte said. 'You're an amazing knight, and I'm sorry I was silly.'

The two friends hugged, and then Ellie joined in, swiftly followed by Nix and Mariam. None of the squabbling or envy mattered any more. They were all friends, and that was that.

Together, anything felt possible.



‘Good luck, team,’ Nix said as they broke apart.
‘And Stormy, hurry back.’

With a look of determination, Bronte nodded.
Then she headed off, up the misty path.

It was eerily quiet as she and Blue followed
Steve up the twisting track towards the Stones.
She was very glad the clever zombit was there -

the last thing she needed was to get lost in the
mist.

It was a long way up the mountain to where
the Stones were, but the thought of her best
friends fighting the angry wraiths pushed her
on, even though her legs were tired and her chest
tight. What if it didn’t work again? If the Stones
stayed silent, how would she save the camp?

Please tell me what I need to know, she silently
pleaded to the Stones as she hurried along the
steep path. *Please*.

Just when she thought she would never reach
the end, she rounded the bend. Here the mist was
pulled back, like a curtain around a stage, and
the astonishing blue moon shone full in the night
sky.

Bronte skidded to a halt as she stared in horror
at the scene before her. Sitting on the stone slab

in the centre of the almost-circle was Miss Shine, who smiled brightly.

‘No need to be shy, Bronte,’ Miss Shine said.
‘I’ve been waiting for you.’



The Weather Witch

Bronte stared at her teacher in confusion.

‘You were expecting me?’

‘Of course,’ Miss Shine said. ‘I knew your need to save the day would bring you up here.’

Bronte glanced about nervously. ‘So you *are* the weather witch,’ she said, wishing she’d never come.

‘Of course. For such a bright girl, you certainly took your time figuring it out. I was certain you’d recognised me with the gnomes earlier.’



‘And it was you last term. You stole the ice thistle and used its power to attack Sir Sebastian’s. Why would you do that?’

Miss Shine considered Bronte for a moment. ‘You know, I am not the villain you think I am.’

‘Oh, really? So you didn’t sabotage SICK so they couldn’t come on this trip?’

Miss Shine grinned. ‘A teeny little illness – no harm done.’

‘All so you could come here?’

At this, Miss Shine jumped lightly off the table. ‘To ensure I was here at a very specific time, Bronte. Do you know how rare a blue moon is? I couldn’t risk missing the chance to talk to the Stones.’

‘What could be so important to ask them?’

Miss Shine tutted. ‘Oh, really, Bronte, I expected better from you. Have you not realised yet

how similar we are? That we share a common purpose?’

Bronte glanced at Blue. What the green gravy was she talking about?

Oh.

It hit her like lightning. All the long talks about Bronte’s project. The tips for what to search for in the archive tower. The book Miss Shine had let her borrow.

‘You’re trying to prove Sir Pen Tine is real too!’

‘I couldn’t care less about him,’ Miss Shine said dismissively. ‘It’s the Swirlebirdle skull I’m after. I’ve been seeking it for many years, in all the various sites recorded in the tales. It is proving most elusive. I thought I had worked out where it was at last, but the mountain gnomes have found nothing. It is not here. My research is exhausted, and the Stones are my last hope.’

‘Why do you want the Swirlebirdle skull so much?’ Bronte asked suspiciously.

Miss Shine’s smile faded. ‘I am something of a collector, shall we say, and this would be the crown jewel of my collection.’

‘You’re not a collector, you’re a villain. You stole the ice thistle and used its power to make the ice statues attack Sir Sebastian’s.’

‘True,’ Miss Shine said. ‘And you forced me to do it sooner than I wanted. I wasn’t ready, and I’d hoped those buffoon knights would have carved more statues before I launched the attack.’

‘Why would you want to attack the school in the first place?’ Bronte still didn’t understand.

‘Because you ruined my plan to attack POOP and SICK!’ Miss Shine cried. ‘I thought if I could rid myself of the knights, there would be no one left to stop me from reclaiming what’s rightfully mine.’

At last, the final pieces of the puzzle fell into place. 'You're the boss that Elon and Hollis were talking about,' Bronte said. 'Ackley worked for you too.'

'Yes, my idiot brothers always did need someone to tell them what to do,' Miss Shine said.

'You're their *sister*?' Bronte's mind was racing. 'Which means you are descended from the Tree Kingdoms, just like Ackley. You want to reclaim the throne, don't you?'

'Of course I do.' She smiled. 'You say it like it's a bad thing, but why shouldn't I? You know, we're related, you and I. Very distantly. I believe it is thanks to one of my ancestors marrying Mabel Mizzle of the Storm Kingdom that I, Rainey Shine, possess my weather witch powers.'

'Your name is Rainey Shine?' Bronte

asked in surprise, before remembering her priorities. 'But how does retrieving a skull from the Swirlebirdle help you take back your kingdoms?'

'All you need to know is that soon my collection will be complete,' Miss Shine said. 'Because the Stones are going to tell me where the skull is hidden.' She paused before adding, 'More precisely, they're going to tell you where it is, and then you are going to tell me.'

'What?' Bronte could hardly believe it. 'No, ask the Stones yourself.'

'I did!' Miss Shine's frustration rang around the clearing. 'But there's one part of the story I didn't tell you. *Only to those who are pure of heart, shall the secrets of the Stones impart.* And as you have hopefully finally realised, I am far from pure!'

A wave of relief swept over Bronte. 'Well then, you should surrender now. Because I'm not going to help you. The only question I'm going to ask the Stones is how to stop the weather wraiths from hurting my friends.'

Now Miss Shine stepped closer, her eyes flashing fiercely, her lips pursed tight. She was so terrifying that Bronte wondered how she had ever thought the teacher was kind. That's what the mist maiden had meant about a mask – Miss Shine had been hiding behind her smile for a long time.

'I was counting on you being prepared to do anything to prove your beloved Sir Pen Tine was real. Only for you to decide to be all honourable and decent. That's why I had to release the wraiths, because I realised it would take something truly perilous to bring you here.

So really, if you think about it, the attack is all your fault. Now, if you do as I ask, then I will stop the weather wraiths. And if you do not, then your friends cannot be saved. So you'd better hurry, don't you think?'



Secrets of the Stones

Blue hissed at Miss Shine, and Steve gnashed his pointy teeth, but she wasn't scared. She simply stared expectantly at Bronte. She knew the young squire would do as she was told, because what choice did she have? There was no way Bronte was going to let her friends suffer any longer than they already had.

'What do I have to do?' Bronte asked, bending to stroke Blue reassuringly as he clawed at her boot.

Miss Shine gestured for Bronte to approach the nearest of the towering Stones. 'You must be specific about what secret you wish to be revealed. Choose your words carefully, for I do not believe you will be granted a second question. We shall hear their answer together.'

Bronte held Miss Shine's challenging gaze before she gave a deep sigh and walked towards the Stone.

The last time she had pressed her palm to the rock, it had been cold, rough and unremarkable.

Tonight though, under the light of the blue moon, she could hear a humming from deep within the stone. Just as she had imagined it, she thought bitterly. But she'd pictured a moment of triumph. She had not guessed that this would be more awful than anything she'd faced since joining Sir Sebastian's. When she touched the

rock, she could hear the sound of thousands of faint whispers. There was magic in the air.

‘Hello, Stone,’ Bronte said, feeling it was only right to introduce herself if she was going to ask it to share a secret kept for long years. ‘I’m Bronte Tempestra. I was wondering . . . if the legendary Sir Pen Tine entrusted you with the location of the Swirlebird’s head, would you share the secret with me?’

The chorus of whispers swept around the circle of Stones, an indecipherable noise, until one voice seemed to rise to the surface, and very clearly the words could be heard.

‘Sacred Stones, I have done it. At last, my foe is vanquished – the Swirlebird is dead. But I remain afraid. For it is said the beast will rise again one day. And so I have removed its head from its body and buried it in the place where it

all began, to remain hidden forever.’

The voice became lost once more to the other whispers which slowly died away now that the secret had been shared.

Bronte looked over at Miss Shine, to see if the words had made any sense to her, but the weather witch looked as confused as Bronte.

‘Where it all began . . . What does that mean?’ Miss Shine cried in frustration.

But even if Bronte had known, she wouldn’t have said.

‘Think, Tempestra, what could it mean?’ Miss Shine pressed her hands to her temples, striding up and down.

‘Please, Miss Shine, call off the weather wraiths,’ Bronte begged. ‘Forget about Sir Pen Tine and the Swirlebird.’

Miss Shine ignored her though, until after a

moment she cried out, inspiration hitting her. 'I know where it is!' she exclaimed. 'At last! It shall be mine!'

She pulled a bottle from her pocket and chanted some words as she brushed her hand over it, speaking in a language that Bronte didn't recognise. A wild wind whipped up, and a gust swept down beside Miss Shine, who sat upon it like it was a broomstick.



'Where are you going?' Bronte shouted.

'As if I would tell you! Goodbye, Bronte Tempestra. We shall not meet again, of that I'm certain. You and your pesky friends won't survive the weather wraiths. You see, I lied before. While my powers allowed me to call them from their prison in the mountain, I do not command them, and cannot stop them. I think, at last, I have found a way to keep you from meddling in my business.'

She laughed as the gust of wind soared upwards, carrying her away from the mountain and leaving Bronte staring after her, speechless.

For a moment, she didn't know what to do. Usually, she was good at finding a way forward. At being brave.

Miss Shine had escaped. She knew where the Swirlebirkle skull was, and whatever her

intentions were for it, Bronte couldn't imagine they were good.

And worst of all, her friends and the camp were still in danger from the weather wraiths. If a weather witch couldn't stop them, then who could?

'What are we going to do, Blue?' Bronte asked, stricken. 'If we don't defeat the weather wraiths, we may very well never leave this mountain. And then what? Will the wraiths float across the kingdoms attacking everyone they pass?'

Blue puffed snowflakes in response.

Frantically, Bronte pressed her hand to the Stone once more. 'I'm sorry to ask again, but could you share a secret that will help me stop the weather wraiths?'

Now though, the Stones remained as silent as the first time she'd asked. Miss Shine had been

right that only one secret would be offered.

'Come on, Bronte,' she said to herself. 'Feet firm, head high. Be brave. What would Sir Pen Tine do?'

The truth was, she had no idea what he'd do. But she knew what *she* would do. Her friends had told her before – she was stubborn. She didn't give up. Sometimes that could be a bad thing, but right now it was just what she needed. She may not have been able to stop Miss Shine, but she could do her best to save everyone from the weather wraiths.

'Think, Blue,' she said. 'What was it the mist maiden said? Something about the wraiths not being fought, but freed?'

A seed of an idea took root in her mind. She didn't know if it would work, but it was the best she had.

‘We better hurry!’ she said, scooping Blue into her arms. ‘Come on, Steve, I need you to guide me back to camp!’



Three Princesses and an Icekitten

With Miss Shine gone from the mountain, the mist was fading as Bronte hurried to join the others.

Her idea was spinning round and round in her head, and she only hoped it would sound as good when she said it out loud.

Although the mist had gone everywhere else, the presence of the mist maidens at the camp

meant that it was still cloaked in cloud.

Bronte shielded her eyes as she ploughed in, only to be immediately attacked by a lightning bolt from a nearby weather wraith.

‘Protect Bronte!’ Mariam shouted from further in the mist, and two beautiful mist maidens came to escort Bronte to her friends.

They were standing in a circle, back-to-back for extra protection, and all looked exhausted.

‘Where are Lady Fennel and Sir Ripple?’ Bronte asked, unable to see much through the thick mist.

‘Helping the mist maidens protect the tents,’ Ellie said. ‘Well, Lady Fennel is. Sir Ripple disappeared a while ago, we think he’s hiding somewhere. Please tell us you know how to stop these things!’

‘Do you want the good news or the bad news?’ Bronte asked.

‘Good,’ Tonkins replied. ‘Always good.’

‘Tough, you’re getting the bad news first. Miss Shine was waiting for me at the Stones. It’s a long story, but the main thing for now is that she wouldn’t let me ask the Stones for help.’

The others all stared at her in horror.

‘No!’ Mariam gasped. ‘What are we going to do? The mist maidens can’t protect us for ever.’

‘That’s the good news,’ Bronte said. ‘I have an idea.’

Ellie smiled. ‘I knew you would. What is it?’

‘Well, it was your story that inspired me,’ Bronte said. ‘The bit about how the wraiths were originally weather witches, descended from Weather Kingdom royalty.’

Ellie nodded, catching Bronte’s train of thought. ‘Like us.’

‘Exactly! We may not be weather witches, but

we are weather princesses. I think maybe we can set them free by releasing them from the spell they're under.'

'It's worth a try,' Nix said with a sage nod. 'But wait, you're representing the Storm Kingdom, Ellie is the Sun, and Mariam the Mist. What about the Snow Kingdom? We don't have anyone here for that.'

'We have Blue,' Bronte said. 'I know it's a bit of a long shot, but he does embody ice very well.'

No one else looked convinced, and Bronte felt deflated. If they couldn't make this work, then she was out of ideas.

The mist maiden leader floated over to them. 'Don't be sad, don't be low, the answers you seek, you already know.'

Ellie frowned before lighting up. 'That's it!' she

cried. 'Back when there was a council of weather witches, they only needed a majority of three votes from the representatives of the Weather Kingdoms. Perhaps this could still work?'

'Yes!' Bronte clapped her hands in excitement. 'You're so clever!'

'How exactly are we going to do this?' Mariam asked. 'I mean, I have no idea how to command ghosts, have you?'

Bronte considered this. 'Maybe we need to call a council meeting and cast our votes?'

'Ooh, I do love a good vote!' Mariam said with a smile.

Bronte held out her hand. 'Stronger together, remember?'

Ellie and Mariam both placed their hands on top of Bronte's and chanted the words back before they broke the handshake.

‘Let’s do this,’ Bronte said, more determined than she’d ever been.

The three princesses broke away from the circle to face the nearest wraiths, who were dodging the firecats’ best attempts to pounce on them by disappearing and reappearing close by.

The girls held hands, while Blue perched on Bronte’s head. His vote might not count, but he was still a Snow Kingdom representative.

‘I call this emergency meeting of the weather witch council to order!’ Bronte shouted, gaining the wraiths’ attention and trying to sound fittingly regal. ‘We, the royal representatives of the four Weather Kingdoms, would like to put forward a motion to free the weather witches from the curse that has turned them into wraiths.’



The wraiths hesitated, pausing their attack as they regarded the girls.

Ellie cleared her throat. 'We shall now take a vote to see if this is the will of the council.'

'As second in line to the Mist Queendom's throne, I vote in favour of the wraiths being freed from the curse,' Mariam said.

'As heir to the Sun Kingdom, I too vote in favour.'

'And as a Princess of the Storm Kingdom, I also vote to end the curse,' Bronte said, as Blue finished with a blast of ice to make his feelings known.

'The motion carries with a three-vote majority,' Ellie said. 'The curse must be broken.'

Nothing happened.

'It hasn't worked,' Bronte said, slightly panicked.

'Try saying it at the same time,' Tonkins suggested. 'You know, stronger together.'

'The curse must be broken,' Bronte said, and she started to chant the words, the other girls joining in, and Blue providing as much ice and snow as he could muster. 'The curse must be broken, the curse must be broken.'

It was working! The weather wraiths clustered together and gave a deep sigh of relief. Slowly they floated upwards, fading as they went, like smoke curling away into the air. The girls kept chanting until the last wisp was gone, and peace fell over the mountains – in more ways than one.



Peace at Last

With the danger passed, the mist maidens began to disperse too.

‘The threat is gone, the fight is won,’ the mist maiden leader said to Mariam. ‘And so, Princess, farewell for now, I leave you with a humble bow.’

And then, having done so, she scattered on the air, along with the last of the mist that swept away.

For a moment the friends all stared at each other, and then they burst out laughing. They

couldn’t believe they had done it.

‘Are you hurt?’ Lady Fennel came running over.

‘No,’ Bronte said. ‘But I do need to talk to you.’

‘All in good time, Tempestra,’ Lady Fennel said.

‘I must ensure everyone is safe and accounted for.’ And she hurried off to the next tent.

‘It’s been an interesting camping trip,’ Nix said, with a smile. ‘I think we might be leaving early. Something tells me Mistress Moon won’t want to hang about.’

‘Which means that Lance will win the squire score competition.’ Tonkins sighed.

‘Who cares?’ Ellie said. ‘I am the future queen of the Sun Kingdom, and I say you are a thousand times the knight he is.’

‘Ellie and I will have to fight over which of us gets you to defend our realms in the future,’ Mariam teased.

'Well, I'll be available to hire first,' Nix said. 'If you need any new inventions.'

'You'll be in demand,' Ellie promised with a grin.

'Perhaps we should help Lady Fennel?' Tonkins suggested. 'She looks like she needs a rest.'

They all agreed, but Bronte took a moment to hang back and help Ellie remove the rain defender from her head.



'I'm sorry we didn't get partnered up,' Ellie said to Bronte. 'I really hoped we would.'

'It doesn't matter,' Bronte said, but Ellie gave her a knowing look. Bronte decided to be honest. 'I guess I was a bit jealous that you and Tonkins got to hang out. And then Mariam was telling me about how much fun you both have together at POOP. I suppose I felt a bit left out.' She paused, before adding, 'Why didn't you tell me you won the dressage tournament?'

'Because it seemed so unimportant compared to all the amazing adventures you were having!' Ellie exclaimed. 'You were fighting villains while I was just prancing about on pronkets.'

'It's important to me,' Bronte insisted. 'I want to know everything you do. I don't want us to drift apart.'

Ellie reached forward to give Bronte a big hug.

'I am best friends with Mariam, just like you're best friends with Tonkins. It's nice that we both have someone while we don't have each other. But us? We're *best* best friends. It doesn't matter what else happens, that will never change.'

Bronte squeezed her friend back. 'And now there's just more of us to save the world,' she said. 'Which is always a good thing. Especially the way this term has gone.'

Ellie laughed. Then she looked worried. 'What happened with Miss Shine?'

Bronte's mood instantly darkened as she told Ellie what had happened. 'I need to tell Lady Fennel. I think the grown-ups should take over worrying about Miss Shine's plans to restore the Tree Kingdoms and figuring out how the Swirlebirdle skull fits into it all. I don't think there's much I can do about it.'

'Oh, I don't know,' Ellie said with a grin. 'We did just break an ancient curse and save the day!'

'True,' Bronte said, feeling a little lighter.

'Can you believe it?' Ellie asked. 'After all this time, you've discovered that Sir Pen Tine was real!'



Bronte looked around at her friends, who were trying to put right the havoc that had swept through the campsite, and smiled. 'It doesn't matter as much as I thought it would,' she said. 'So what if he was a legendary hero? I'm friends with a whole lot of them.'

Ellie smiled. 'Well my *best* best friend is the knightiest knight of them all.'

'What were those things?' Sir Ripple's voice rang through the air as he finally emerged from wherever he'd been hiding. 'Have you seen what they've done to my hair? And don't even get me started on the state of my moustache!'

Bronte and Ellie shared a look and laughed.

Did they have a tale to tell!



SIR SEBASTIAN'S SCOOP

THE SCHOOL'S FORT-KNIGHTLY NEWSLETTER

SLEEPING BENEATH THE STARS

Last week several of our teachers took the Year Four students on a school trip to the Stones of Forgotten Secrets. The children participated in a variety of activities and had an opportunity to experience the many unique qualities of the mountains. They all had the chance to earn squire

scores while away, and the winner was Lance Arrowwood. Congratulations to Lance for winning a bonus handwriting lesson with Sir Calliphus. Time to perfect that cursive writing!

JOB OPPORTUNITY

An unexpected vacancy has opened for a new school nurse. Additionally, they will be required to teach Chivalry and Medicine classes. Start date: immediately. To apply please contact the headmaster.

NOTICES

Lady Fennel would like to request that whoever is leaving rubbish in the firecat cave to please stop. Anyone caught littering will be dealt with severely.

Fixels are coming out from their hibernation and are particularly grumpy, so take care not to disturb them during your Forest Care classes.

A new reading club is starting on Mondays after school. Please

report to the Archive Tower if you wish to join.

Sir Ripple is running extra jousting practice every day for anyone wanting to brush up on their skills before the upcoming tournament in a few weeks' time. He asks that everyone brings a change of clothing as the field is exceptionally muddy at the moment and you are more than likely to land in it.

JOIN BRÖNTE ON ALL HER
ADVENTURES!

