

'Hilarious and wild ...  
I love it!'  
LOUIE STOWELL

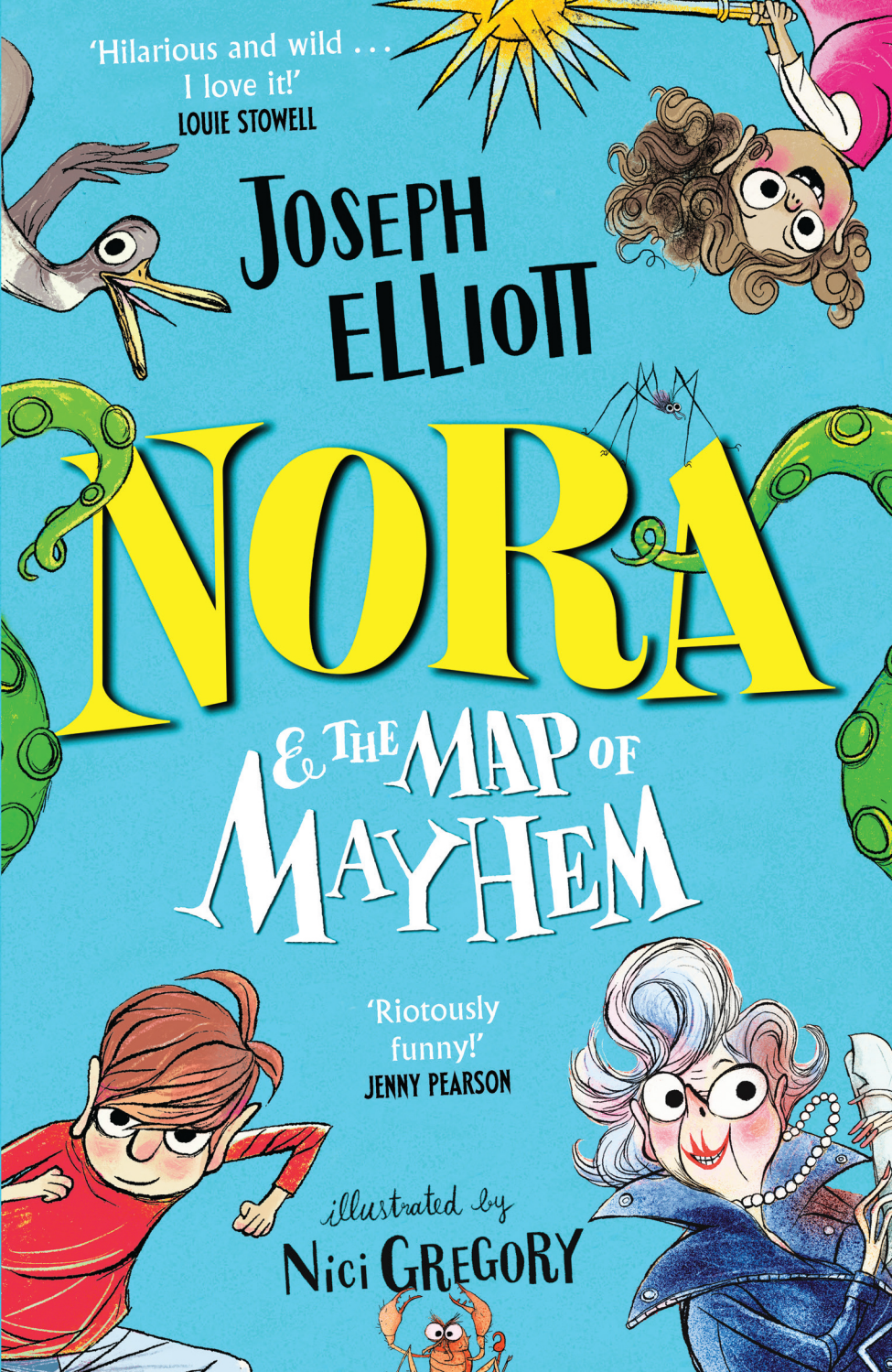
JOSEPH  
ELLIOTT

# NORA

## & THE MAP OF MAYHEM

'Riotously  
funny!'  
JENNY PEARSON

illustrated by  
Nici GREGORY



Oi. What do you think you're doing?

Yes, I'm talking to you.

Did I say you could read this book? No, I most certainly did not. So get your grubby little nose out of other people's business and stop reading RIGHT NOW.



NORA  
& THE MAP  
OF MAYHEM

Um, why did you turn the page?? I thought I told you to get lost!?

Well, if you're going to stick around, I suppose I'd better tell you a bit about myself. I'm not entirely without manners, you know, unlike *some* people I know (you).

My name is Nora. I live in that cottage up on the hill. You've probably passed it and admired my geraniums. If you haven't, you should have done, because they're stunning.

As you can see, I'm very lovable and incredibly charming. What else do you want to know?

What's that? You want to know how old I am?!

You can't hear me, but I. Am. Gasping.

You shouldn't be asking such RUDE questions, so I have no intention of answering. What I will say is this: I may be old, but I'm not one of those cutesy-wutesy, scarf-knitting old biddies you see on the television. Oh no. If you

could see me now, you'd probably say something like, 'Wow, you're so cool. I love your hair. Where did you get your leather jacket from? Isn't it a little early in the day to be drinking piña coladas?' etc.

Yeah, I'm *that* old person.

And now that you know a little bit about me (and I have no interest in you whatsoever) I suggest we never speak to each other again. So, close the book now and we can both be on our way.

The end.



JOSEPH ELLIOTT

NORA  
& THE MAP  
MAYHEM

Illustrated by  
Nici GREGORY



You have got to be kidding me . . .

WHY ARE YOU STILL HERE?!

I was getting ready to crimp my hair and head to the casino.

Okay, fine. FINE. You win this round, snotface. If you won't stop reading, I suppose I'm going to have to keep talking. (Don't think about the logic of that too hard, or it will make your brain explode.)

Here's the deal: I'm going to tell you a story, but it's going to be all about ME. The first thing you need to know about this story is that it is absolutely 100%, cross-my-heart-and-hope-not-to-fart, completely and utterly true. There

First published in Great Britain in 2024 by  
PICCADILLY PRESS

4th Floor, Victoria House, Bloomsbury Square, London WC1B 4DA  
Owned by Bonnier Books, Sveavägen 56, Stockholm, Sweden  
[www.piccadillypress.co.uk](http://www.piccadillypress.co.uk)

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

ISBN: 978-1-80078-499-4

Also available as an ebook and in audio

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Typeset by XXXX

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.  
(FSC LOGO HERE)

Piccadilly Press is an imprint of Bonnier Books UK  
[www.bonnierbooks.co.uk](http://www.bonnierbooks.co.uk)

For Red Grandma  
aka Janice Smith  
aka GG  
aka Great-grandmother to  
Jacob, Henrietta, Jessica,  
Oliver and Ursula.  
With love xx  
- J.E.

For my lovely brood of mayhem-raising monsters,  
you know who you are...  
I'm looking at you Colin, Georgie and Lottie XXX  
- N.G.

are some parts in the middle where you're going to be like 'Yeah, yeah, nice one, Nora, there's no way that really happened', but I promise you IT DID. I may be many things, but a liar I am not.

»→ *Not sure why that came out sounding like Yoda.*

*A Jedi also I am not.*

This story starts with a girl, a boy, and a glamorous older lady who very foolishly agreed to look after them (me).

I'm sure you're wondering how I – an intelligent and independent woman – ended up looking after two little weasels. Well, they're my grandchildren, so I didn't have much choice. Technically, they are my *great*-grandchildren, but admitting that makes me a *great*-grandmother, and that makes me sound **terrifyingly** old, so let's not go there.

The children are the property of my grandson, Liam. He's a *very* talented young artist and he had to go to Stockholm to discuss an exhibition

at some fancy-pants gallery. I can never say no to him, so when he asked me if I'd look after Atticus and Autumn for a couple of days, of course I said yes – a decision I would come to regret. Many times.

'What are you doing here?!' I asked, on the morning Liam and Niko came around to drop them off.

»→ *I've gone back in time now to when the story starts. Keep up.*

'You agreed to look after the kids, remember?' said Liam.

Of course I remembered, but I thought if I pretended I'd forgotten, I might get them to change their minds.

'But Mavis has got a new hot tub and she's invited me over for bubbles and bagels,' I complained.

There was an awkward moment during which no one spoke. Liam gave Niko a pained look.





‘Okay, okay, come in,’ I eventually said.

They all bundled into my skinny hallway.

‘*Efharistó*, Yaya Nora, thank you,’ said Niko, giving me a kiss on both cheeks. Niko is Liam’s husband. He’s 50% Greek, 50% Iranian and 100% gorgeous.

‘Don’t forget, Atticus doesn’t like sweetcorn, Autumn is allergic to horses, and we have a strict “no screens after 7 p.m.” policy,’ said Liam, placing two large suitcases at the bottom of the stairs.

‘Yes, yes, yes,’ I replied, not really listening to what he was saying. As much as I adore Liam, he does like to fuss.

‘Okay, I’m going to have to go or I’ll miss my flight,’ he said. ‘See you tomorrow night around seven.’

‘Off you go, then,’ I said, shooing them towards the door. ‘Say goodbye to your dads, kids.’

‘Goodbye, Daddiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!’ shouted Autumn, in that annoying way small children like to speak.

‘Bye, Dad. Bye, Pappá,’ said Atticus, barely looking up from his phone.

‘No, that’s not good enough for me,’ said Niko, wrapping his long arms around Atticus.

‘You hug too hard, Pappá!’

‘It’s the Greek way. It shows how much I love you.’ He planted a big kiss in the middle of Atticus’s forehead, then scooped up Autumn for a farewell squeeze.

‘Do I get one too?’ I asked.

‘Of course, Yaya, the biggest hug for you.’

Niko gave me a tight embrace (which was very lovely), then Liam gave me a hug and thanked me again. He kissed Atticus and gave him a hug, then Autumn gave Liam a hug but didn’t want to let go, so I had to take her and give her another hug . . . Basically there was a whole

lot of hugging until eventually Liam and Niko gave a final wave and left.

I shut the door and, after all the hullabaloo of the goodbyes, it was suddenly very quiet in my little cottage. Atticus was back on his phone – which was making tedious pinging noises – and Autumn was running up and down the hallway, occasionally head-butting the front door.

I got a squirming feeling in my stomach, like it was filled with prawns rolling around on little prawn roller skates. It was the feeling that I had made a mistake. A big one.

It was the first time I’d ever looked after the two children on my own. Niko had a conference in Birmingham on the same day that Liam had to be in Stockholm, which is how I ended up dumped with them. I can never quite remember what Niko does, but it’s something to do with the environment. Essentially, he’s one of the people who’s going to save us when the ice caps

melt and the world falls apart, which – at the rate we’re going – looks like it’s going to be sooner rather than later.

‘I need a poo,’ said Autumn, looking up at me with big, innocent eyes, as if she’d just told me she loved me. Those eyes don’t fool me.

‘Well, you know where the toilet is,’ I said, pointing at the doorway under the stairs.

‘You have to wipe my bottom afterwards.’

The prawns in my stomach were now doing double-speed somersaults. I’m too old and too dignified to be wiping little girls’ pooey bottoms.

‘Can’t your brother do it?’ I looked at Atticus.

He glanced up from his screen long enough to give a small, pained shake of his head, then wandered into the living room and plonked himself on my leopard-print sofa.

That pretty much tells you all you need to know about Atticus and Autumn, but to summarise:

Atticus: 10 years old. Dull. Annoying. Always on his phone.

Autumn: 3 years old. Wild. Annoying. Needs help wiping her bum.



Now can you understand why I was dreading spending the whole weekend with them? Of



course, at that point, I had no idea quite how catastrophic the next two days were going to be . . .

»→ *That was a little teaser, by the way – something to keep you interested, in case you got bored by that part where not much happened except a lot of hugging.*

I won't go into all the (smelly) details, but safe to say, Autumn had her poo (so very, *very* smelly. What does that girl eat?!), and I held my breath and did the necessary wiping. Don't worry, I'm not going to mention *every* time someone in the story has a poo, but in this case it felt necessary. There is one more instance of a lot of poo coming up later, but again, I only mention it because it's integral to the story. If you're averse to big piles of poo, I suggest you skip over pages 287-293.

Afterwards, Autumn informed me that she was hungry. Instead of just telling me, like any

normal child would, she let me know by opening and slamming all of my kitchen cupboard doors while chanting, 'Where the cookies?! Where the cookies?! Where the cookies?!' She sniffed the shelves as she went, like a hound on the hunt.

I'd finished off my last pack of ginger nuts the night before, so she had to make do with a Ryvita (which she did not enjoy) smothered in syrup-soaked plums (which she enjoyed a little too much). The plums were a gift from Uncle Edward about eight Christmases ago, which Autumn found by rooting around at the back of my odds-and-ends cupboard. They were a couple of years out of date, but that didn't seem to bother her.

She was just shovelling in the last mouthful when there was a loud thump on the front door. My first thought was that it was Liam or Niko – and my heart skipped a beat at the possibility

that I might be able to return the kids to them already – but neither of them would thump that hard. In fact, I'd never had *anyone* thump that aggressively on my door, so it was clear that it was Not Good News.

'Someone's at the door,' said Autumn, slurring her words slightly. She hiccupped and fell off her chair. I checked the label on the jar of plums, only to discover that they were, in fact, soaked in rather potent brandy. My bad.

'Get the door, would you?' I said to Atticus, picking up Autumn and plonking her back on her chair.

Atticus tutted and sighed to let me know just how unimpressed he was about being dragged away from his phone, but he did as he was told. Once you know who was at the door, you'll realise I definitely shouldn't have let a ten-year-old boy go and open it on his own. Luckily, by the time Atticus got there, the person had gone,

but they'd left something behind . . .

'Uh, GG, there's something on your door,' Atticus said from the hallway.

»→ 'GG' is what Atticus and Autumn call me. It stands for 'great-grandma', but we're not mentioning that word, remember? Also, this side note is ruining the dramatic tension of the moment.

I made my way from the kitchen to the door. Autumn followed me, bouncing off the walls and stumbling into the hall lamp as she went. Atticus was stood with the front door open, staring at the note that had been pinned to it. With a knife.

The knife was the length of my arm, with a golden handle and a curved blade, and someone had jammed it deep into the wood (totally ruining the paintwork). The note that was attached to it was brief and to the point. In thick black letters it said:

I KNOW WHERE YOU LIVE.  
RETURN TO ME WHAT'S MINE BY  
MOON-RISE TOMORROW  
OR THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES.

X



## Chapter 2

»→ By the look on your face (which really doesn't suit you, BTW), I'm guessing you're wondering why this is Chapter 2 when there was no Chapter 1. To be honest, I'm surprised you even noticed. It just is, okay? I didn't know I would be talking enough to need chapters when I started. There were all those pages where I was trying to get rid of you and you wouldn't take the hint, remember? So let's just assume that last chunk was Chapter 1 and this is now Chapter 2. Who knows, maybe the next one will be Chapter 7 just to confuse you even further. I'm a rule-breaker – get over it. Can I continue now,



please?

I pulled out the knife and whipped away the letter.

‘Who’s it from?’ Atticus asked.

‘No idea,’ I replied, because I genuinely didn’t.

‘What do they want?’ Atticus asked next.

‘No idea,’ I repeated. ‘I’m sure it’s just a practical joke, or maybe someone left it on the wrong door by mistake.’

‘Whoever it was, they don’t sound very friendly.’

‘Whatever gave you that impression – the threatening letter or the massive knife?’

Atticus pressed his lips together, pulled out his phone and slunk back into the house. That’s another annoying thing about children: not only do they say stupid things, but when you point out how stupid they are, they get all sensitive and upset about it. I haven’t got time for that.

Autumn was at my feet, reaching up towards

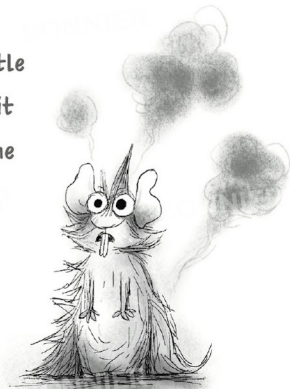
the knife in my hand.

‘I want to play with the sword,’ she said.

‘Absolutely not. After the amount of cognac plums you’ve just eaten, I wouldn’t trust you with a teaspoon.’

Which made me think of teaspoons, which made me think of tea, which made me think how nice it would be to have a cup of tea. So I went inside and made myself one. Tea always helps calm my nerves in stressful situations. I’ve relied on it many times in the past, such as the time I drank three bottles of cherry Coke and couldn’t stop burping for a week, or the time I accidentally blew up my next-door neighbour’s guinea pig . . .

»→ Don't worry, the little critter survived, even though it has the most ridiculous name the world has ever heard. I mean, who in their right mind calls



*their guinea pig Lord Fooofington? And the poor thing also happens to be exceptionally ugly. I'm not even joking; it looks like a slipper that's vomited on itself.*

The tea helped. Next, I had to decide what to do about the letter. One thing was for certain: the kids were not safe in the house.

'Ratty, Scrag, get your coats, we're leaving,' I said.

»→ *That's what I call the kids: Autumn is Scrag because her hair is always so seraggly, and Atticus is Ratty because when he was born he looked like a rat. When I came up with the names, I was trying to be offensive, but it turns out they both quite like them.*

'Leaving to go where?' asked Atticus from the lounge.

Autumn came running into the kitchen with her arms sticking out.

'I'm a plane,' she screeched.

'No, you're an annoying girl with her arms

sticking out. Now put your coat on, or whoever left that knife in my front door will come back here and chop your head off.'

Okay, perhaps that was a little harsh, but it did the job; Autumn put her coat on without another word, so . . . meh.

'Oi, Ratty, get off your phone and put your coat on.'

'This is important,' he said without looking up.

'More important than getting stabbed in the head?'

(Hey, it worked for one of them, so I might as well reuse it, right?)

Atticus's brow creased together like a smushed sandwich as he tried to work out whether I was being serious or not. Autumn thought the knife left in my door was a toy, but Atticus was smart enough to know that it was real.

'Are we in danger?' he asked.

'If it'll get your bum out the door any quicker, then yes, yes we are.'

That seemed to do the trick. I pulled on my leather jacket and the three of us bustled out of the cottage. It was a bright spring morning and the sun was out, but there was still a chilly bite to the air.



'Morning, Nora,' sang Mr Pomp from next door. He was stood on his front lawn, stroking his vomit-slipper guinea pig.

'Morning, Percy,' I replied.

'Mr Foofington says good morning too,' he said, raising the creature into the air.

'I couldn't care less,' I replied.

And that was that conversation over.

I considered taking my motorbike, but Autumn was still swaying about unpredictably from the cognac plums and, knowing my luck, she'd probably fall off, so

I decided we'd better walk instead. It wasn't far to my shop. We'd be safe there – for the time being, at least.

I own the florists on the high street. Perhaps you've been there sometime? It's called Bloomin' Nora's. I know, the name is genius.

»→ *If you don't get it, ask someone more intelligent than you to explain; it's very clever.*

I actually came up with the name first, many years ago, and I liked it so much, I decided I ought to be a florist, even though I knew next to nothing about flowers and had a severe allergy to pollen. Turns out I'm pretty spectacular at flower arranging, so that worked out well. Deaths are my speciality. If you ever need someone to spell out 'RIP' in quilled chrysanthemums, I'm your woman.

As we approached the shop, something awful like sick rose up into my throat. In fact, I'm pretty sure it was sick. (Let's be honest,

what else would it be?) I swallowed it back down again.

The reason for the sick was the knife I could see sticking out of the front of the florist's. It was exactly the same as the one that had been left at my cottage, and it pinned a similar-looking note to my shop door. (Two lots of paintwork ruined in one day. Humph.)

When we were close enough, I tore the letter from the door without removing the knife. This is what it said:

**I ALSO KNOW WHERE YOU WORK, SPIT-TOOTH.**

**AKA NORA**

**AKA GG**

**AKA GREAT-GRANDMOTHER TO**

**ATTICUS AND AUTUMN.**

**IT WOULD BE TERRIBLE IF SOMETHING WERE TO**

**HAPPEN TO THEM . . . I WANT WHAT'S MINE.**

**MOON-RISE TOMORROW — OR ELSE.**

**X**

I scrunched up the letter before Atticus had the chance to read it, but I didn't quite scrunch quick enough.

'That letter had our names on it!' he said.

He must have read it over my shoulder, gosh darn it.

'No, it didn't; you misread.'

'I didn't! It said "Atticus and Autumn".'

'Well, it must be referring to some other Atticus and Autumn,' I said with a dismissive wave of my hand.

'How many other Atticus and Autumns do you know?' he asked.

'Um, lots, actually . . . They're terribly common names.'

'Okay, who's Spit-Tooth, then?' he asked.

'No idea.'

'Who's the letter from?'

'Also no idea. No more questions.'

This is the point in the story where I probably

need to tell you that I lied. In fact, I've lied a couple of times since I started speaking to you. I know I told you right at the start that I never lie, but, well, that was a lie too.

I lie all the time. I lied to Autumn last week when she asked me if I liked her new leggings (they were hideous). I lied to Liam last year when I told him I liked the colour he'd painted the outside of his house (also hideous – yellow? Really?!). And I lied to my most recent date when he asked if I'd had a good time, when the truth was it'd been the most boring two hours of my life (and his breath smelled of regurgitated tuna).

What *wasn't* a lie was my assertion that everything in this story is absolutely 100%, cross-my-heart-and-hope-not-to-fart, completely and utterly true. I promise you *that* is still true, although now you know I'm a liar, it's up to you to decide whether or not to believe me.

There are a couple of other lies I've told during our short time together . . . Namely, when I said that I didn't know who'd left the letter pinned to my front door, or what it was they wanted. I knew both of those things perfectly well. I just didn't want Atticus to know, and I didn't want you to know either. (I haven't worked out if I can trust you yet.) What I will tell you is this: the person who left that note is the worst, most villainous person I've ever had the misfortune to encounter. They are the only person who has ever made me shiver in their presence, and I don't shiver easily. (Unless it's really cold and I've forgotten my cardie.)

»→ Yes, sometimes I wear a leather jacket, and other times I opt for a eardigan; I'm a woman full of contradictions.

'Are we in trouble?' Atticus asked.

'Get in,' I said, glancing over my shoulder as I unlocked the front door of Bloomin' Nora's.



The smell of a thousand flowers filled my nostrils. I bundled Atticus and Autumn inside and then followed them, swiping the knife out of the shop door as I did so. Now I had two knives, two letters, and two children looking at me with eyes like fried eggs.

I locked the door and flicked on the lights. All at once the shop came to life, full to bursting with an abundance of colour: pink peonies and lemon lilies, indigo irises and purple periwinkles . . .

»» I know it's not really the time to be pointing this out (given that we've just received two death threats) but isn't 'periwinkle' a funny word? Say it with me now. Periwinkle. Periwinkle. See – funny!

I tucked the knife behind the counter then opened the till and started taking out wads of cash.

'What's going on?' said Atticus as I stuffed a few tenners into my bra. 'You're acting weird.'



Weirder than normal, I mean. Who are those notes from? I know you know. You have to tell us.'

I stopped what I was doing and swiped a sweaty strand of hair off my face.

'Okay, fine,' I said. 'This is the truth, as much as I know. The letters were written by someone I knew a long time ago. Before you were born, before either of your daddies were born –'

'Before the dinosaurs were born?' Autumn butted in.

'No, Scrag, I'm not quite that old.'

'But you have so many wrinkles.'

'You try looking after two annoying kids all day, and you'll get this many wrinkles too.'

'I don't like wrinkles – they make you look yuck,' she asserted.

'Well, your face makes *you* look yuck,' I said, sticking my tongue out at her.

Autumn shrugged and wandered off to

admire the tulips.

'Who is this person?' asked Atticus, dragging us back on topic. 'And what do they want?'

'Trust me, the less you know about them the better.'

'Are they going to hurt us?'

'Not if I can help it.' I crossed the room and pushed my way through a wall of sunflowers and towering gladioli to the secret door that was hidden behind them. I pulled out a key – which I keep hanging from a necklace around my neck – and slid it into the lock. The lock turned with a belly-rumbling thunk. I gave the door a shove with my shoulder and it swung open. A plump cloud of dust and flies puffed into my face. I pulled down a wall of cobwebs and spat out a spider that had somehow found its way into my mouth. I'd not been in my secret store for years. I'd had no need to. But the threatening letters changed everything.

'Is that some kind of secret store?' Atticus asked.

'Yes,' I replied, blocking the entrance so he couldn't peer in.

'What do you keep in there?'

'Secret things.'

'Like what?'

'Like children who ask too many questions. Now, stay out here and keep an eye on your sister. I'll be back in a minute.'

I slipped inside, shutting the door behind me, and flicked on the light switch. All at once my treasures were illuminated: glimmering halberds and slender axes, spiked maces and giant crossbows, a sabre engraved with ancient runes and a war hammer that was once wielded by Barfoot the Rugged. On the other side of the room was a rickety shelving unit containing all sorts of other trinkets: a brass telescope, a three-horned skull, pouches filled with strange-



smelling herbs, coils of thick rope, odd-shaped bottles containing shimmering liquids . . .

'Wow,' said Atticus, who had sneaked in behind me, and was now staring around the room with his mouth open.

'I thought I told you to stay in the shop?' I said.

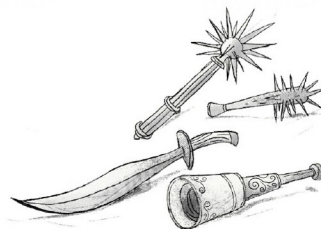
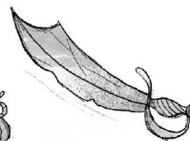
'Yeah, I guess you did say that . . . Oops,' he replied, with a sheepish grin.

'Hmmm.' I frowned. 'I suppose I can't really blame you; I'm not great at doing what I'm told either . . .'

He reached out to touch one of my favourite swords.

'Don't touch that!' I said.

He jerked his hand away. 'What is all this stuff?' he asked.





‘Just a few bits and pieces from when I was younger. I haven’t always been a florist, you know.’

‘What were you before?’

‘All in good time, Ratty. All in good time. Right now, we need to pack. Here, hold this.’ I tossed him an old bag made out of coarse, woven fabric, which hit him square in the face.

‘Oops,’ I said, with a sheepish grin of my own.

The bag was covered in dust, which made him cough and splutter as he opened it.

‘Put this in,’ I instructed, easing an extra-long axe from its place on the wall. Its maple handle was as smooth as ever and felt at home in my grip, even though my hand was considerably more weathered than the last time I’d wielded the weapon.

I handed it to Atticus, who wobbled under its weight. He looked from the axe in one hand to the modest-sized bag in the other.

‘That’s never going to fit,’ he said.

‘Guess again.’ I took the bag from him and opened it wide, offering it to him. With a sceptical look, he lifted the axe and slid it into the bag. Instead of hitting the bottom of the bag as expected, the axe kept on going, until the bag had swallowed it whole.

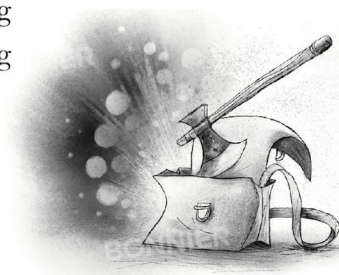
Atticus’s jaw was on the floor.

»→ *Not literally; the floor was far too dirty for that.*

‘H-how . . .?’ he spluttered. ‘I don’t . . .’

‘It’s called an infinity bag,’ I said. ‘But we haven’t got time for you to be confused or impressed. All we have time for is to shove as much of this stuff into it as possible.’

I started tearing items off the shelves and dropping them into the bag. It swallowed everything up as if I was plopping peas in a pond,



without getting any bigger or heavier. Once the majority of the store's contents was inside, I went back through to the shop. Atticus followed me like a lost puppy.

Autumn was over in the corner, eating a bunch of daffodils. At least it was keeping her quiet.

'Okay, we've got everything we need,' I said. 'Let's get out of here.'

Three loud bangs on the shop door stopped me in my tracks and made my blood turn cold. Through the textured glass, I could make out the dark silhouette of a mysterious figure.

The person who'd left the notes had returned, and there was nowhere for us to hide.







### Chapter 3

It turned out it wasn't my arch-nemesis after all. It was Doris from up the road. You know, the one with the dodgy perm and the cheap false teeth. We soon got rid of her, and then we were on our way.



## Chapter 4

With the infinity bag over one shoulder, I held onto the kid's hands and weaved us through the morning traffic to the local train station. All the while, I kept glancing over my shoulder for any signs that we were being followed.

'Yippee, we going to Cornywall!' said Autumn.

'No, we're not,' I said. 'Cornwall's miles away, in completely the other direction.'

'We going to Cornywall! We going to Cornywall!' Autumn sang, skipping around in a tiny circle.

‘What is happening?’ I asked Atticus/the Universe.

‘Our dads took us on a walking trip around Cornwall last summer,’ Atticus explained. ‘Whenever we get on a train, she thinks that’s where she’s going.’

‘Well, I hope she’s prepared to be disappointed.’

After a short wait for a train, we rode the seven stops into the nearest town. The whole journey, Atticus was back on his phone – head glued to the screen, eyes glazed, fingers frantically tapping the screen. When I asked him what on earth he was doing that was so enthralling, he replied, ‘Messaging friends . . .’ in a way that let me know that messaging his friends was a considerable amount more interesting than talking to me.

That left me with no one to talk to but Autumn, who doesn’t have great chat at the best of times. Our exchange went something

like this:

‘Are we nearly there yet?’

‘No.’

‘Are we nearly there yet?’

‘No.’

‘Are we nearly there yet?’

‘Yes.’

‘Really?’

‘No.’

After a while, I got bored of asking.

We finally arrived at our destination – a bustling town on the south coast of England, which has seen better days, to say the least. If you’ve ever been there, you’ll know it’s an odious place, filled with blaring arcade machines and sticky children eating even stickier sticks of rock. I had a date take me to the pier once. I told him, ‘Bernard, if you think knackered old dodgems and an overpriced bag of chips are going to win my heart, you’ve got another think

coming.’

There was a reason we had to visit that hell-hole, though. The object I took from my nemesis – the one they demanded I give back – was in that very town. I thought it’d be easy. My plan was to find the man I sold it to, get the object back, and be home in time for tea. Oh, how wrong I was. (And if you’ve got more than a couple of brain cells rattling around in that head of yours, you will have guessed as much, based on the number of pages still left in this book.)

As we got off the train, Autumn sniffed the air.

‘Cornwall smells different,’ she said.

‘That’s because this isn’t Cornwall,’ I replied.

‘Too much vinegar,’ Autumn continued, her nose still twitching.


I ignored her, and we set off on our way, hobbling down the cobbled street from the station towards the sea. We took a right at the

stinky fish shop, a left at the post box with the ugly grin, a ██████ at the ██████ and then two more ██████ before turning ██████ at the ██████, which was hilarious because it looked like a ██████ with a ██████ ████████████████████. Oh, did we laugh.

»→ Sorry, I had to black out a few of the words in that sentence; the location of this place is a secret punishable by death.

We were now in an alley – one of those twisty-turny, creepy ones you see in horror films, with algae growing up the walls and dirty water dripping from the drainpipes.

At the end of the alley was a set of double doors made out of thick oak, which filled a towering archway. Above the doors was a sign with a picture of a scorpion on it, that looked like it had been painted in blood. The sign creaked as it swung back and forth, even though there wasn’t a hint of breeze in the alley.



‘It smells of wee,’ said Autumn.

A charming observation, but not an inaccurate one.


Atticus raised his phone to take a photo. (Of the alley, not the wee.)

‘Absolutely not!’ I snapped. ‘This is the Rusty Scorpion – a secret tavern, the location of which is only revealed to those of great merit. Photos – and phones! – are not permitted under any circumstances. Put it away.’

Before he had the chance to obey, something scuttled down the wall behind him.

‘Don’t move!’ I said.

In one swift motion, I yanked off one of my clip-on earrings and slung it at the scurrying creature. As the earring flew, spikes shot out of its sides, which embedded themselves in the creature’s head with a satisfying crunch.



‘Hahaar!’ I said, giving a celebratory fist pump. ‘Still got it!’

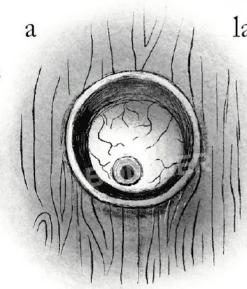
Atticus turned to look at the little beast, which was now skewered to the wall, inches away from his left ear. It twitched its long, spidery legs a couple of times and then was still.

‘What . . . on earth . . . is that?’ he said.

‘That,’ I replied, ‘is what’s known as a *sneazle*. Trust me when I say you don’t want one of those sucking your blood.’

Without taking his eyes off the splattered sneazle, Atticus slipped his phone back into his pocket. Satisfied, I turned to the door of the Rusty Scorpion and banged on it with my fist.

There was the sound of a latch sliding across and then a small circular hole appeared in the middle of the wood. A beat later, the hole was filled by a large eyeball, which was so bloodshot, it looked like it belonged to an ogre – one w h o ’ d





drunk too much. And been poked repeatedly in the eye.

‘What’s the password?’ asked the woman to whom the bloodshot eyeball belonged.

‘Let me in, you oaf,’ I replied.

‘Nice to see you too, Spit-Tooth,’ said the woman as she opened the creaky door.

‘I go by Nora these days,’ I said as I stepped past her. ‘And you should try drinking less, Pam. Your eye looks like it’s got worms.’

Pam – the bouncer of the Rusty Scorpion – is a stocky woman with hairy elbows and even hairier nostrils. It was obvious which eye she’d used to look through the hole in the door, because she only has one. The other is sewn up rather crudely – the result of a run-in with a nimphnorg.



At least, that’s what she told me.

»→ What’s that? You don’t know what a nimphnorg is? Look, it’s going to take me an awfully long time to tell this story if you keep interrupting. But since I’ve stopped, nimphnorgs are part-woman, part-snake, with long hissing tongues and spooky eat eyes. I could go on describing them, but it’s probably easier if I just draw you a picture. They look a bit like this:



I know, my artistic skills are astounding. There really is no end to my talents.

‘Whoa, wait a minute,’ growled Pam. ‘No kids allowed.’ She placed a meaty hand in front of Atticus and Autumn.

'They're not kids, they're pixies. This one's over four thousand years old,' I said, pointing to Autumn.

'No, I'm not, I'm three,' said Autumn, holding up two fingers.

'Shut up, kid – you're four thousand, remember?' I corrected her.

'Nope. I'm three. My name's Autumn and I'm a girl!'

I looked at Atticus for support.

'I can pretend to be four thousand if you want me to?' he said.

I rolled my eyes.

'Fine, they're not pixies, they're kids, but they're with me, so I'm sure Grizzler won't mind making an exception. What else do you expect me to do? Leave them in the alley to be eaten by sneazles?'

I pointed to the one I'd just skewered (which was oozing some sort of yellow gunk) to

emphasise my point.

'We promise to behave ourselves,' Atticus said, giving Pam his most charming smile. Pam eyed him as if he was a slug that had just trailed slime over her favourite lettuce. He smiled a little more.

'Okay, on your head be it,' Pam said to me. She removed her hand and let Atticus and Autumn enter. 'But if Grizzler has a go at me, I'm gonna tell him you threatened me with a flickblade.'

'It wouldn't be the first time, old friend,' I said with a wink. 'Come on, kids/pixies, whatever we decided you were – follow me.'

We walked down a mouldy corridor and through a chain metal curtain, and then the Rusty Scorpion opened up before us. Beside me, I heard Atticus gasp.

'Cooooool,' said Autumn.

The Rusty Scorpion is a tavern like no other – a cavernous place lit by a thousand candles.

Anchors hang from the ceiling, which the tavern's clientele use as seats, and crusty fishing nets and giant starfish decorate the walls. (When I say 'decorate', what I actually mean is 'contaminate', for they do very little other than make the place smell of rotten fish.)

The tavern was full, as it always is, with its usual rambunctious crowd. People swung across the room on the anchors, shouting at one another with aggressive affection. They brandished their tankards like lightsabres, sloshing grog all over the floor, which added to the establishment's unique stench.

It was good to be back.

A few people spotted me and shouted out greetings, which ranged in degrees of delight from, 'Hey, Spit-Tooth, you legend! We've missed you!' to, 'Oi, Spit-Tooth, you wench. You owe me three teeth.' Charming.

I waved at my old acquaintances and ushered

the kids to a table in the far corner. A waiter – covered from head to toe in octopus tattoos – came to take our order.

'I'll have the trout special and an extra-large grog, and I'll take two sandwiches for the kids,' I said to him.

'I don't like sandwich,' Autumn complained.

'What, you'll eat daffodils, but you won't eat sandwiches?' I said.

Autumn nodded, as if that made perfect sense.

'Okay, fine, forget the sandwich for her. Bring her half a squid head and a bowl of jellied whelks.' I was trying to teach Autumn a lesson by ordering her the most foul things on the menu, but when they arrived, she started gobbling them down without a blink.

Atticus nibbled at the end of his sandwich, while watching the mayhem



around us. Not far away, two women played a game of urchin darts, throwing the creatures at a pin board with exceptional skill. A man wearing eye make-up and big hoop earrings walked past and burped so loudly that our table shook. Then a long-haired woman with pitch-black teeth and knee-high boots started playing a song on an old accordion.

Atticus's hand crept towards his pocket, as if to pull out his phone.

'Don't even think about it,' I said, flashing him my sternest look. 'I told you: phones are banned. I'm sure your friends can last an hour without hearing from you.'

Atticus looked guilty and nibbled a bit more crust.

'Why are we even here?' he asked, in a voice that was so quiet, I could barely hear it over the rendition of 'Trumpety Bum Whistle', which half the room had started singing.

»→ If you haven't heard the song before, it's a good one, although the lyrics are far too rude for someone your age, so I couldn't possibly tell you what they are.

'We're here to speak to that man over there,' I said, pointing to the landlord. He stood behind the bar, which had been fashioned out of a shipwreck. Bottles of grog hung from its tattered sails and tankards adorned its crooked mask.

'Who's he?' Atticus asked.

'His name's Grizzler. He owns this place.'

Atticus paused before asking his next question. It teetered on his lips for a couple of seconds before tumbling out. 'Um . . . GG, are you a pirate?'

I actually laughed out loud at that one. The absurdity!

'Of course I'm not a pirate,' I replied.

'Okay . . . Well, then, did you *used* to be a

pirate?’

‘No, child, don’t be ridiculous!’

‘Are some of the people in here pirates?’

‘Do you always ask this many questions?’ I asked.

‘No,’ said Atticus, with a quivering sort of authority, ‘but you’ve dragged us all the way here to this weird place filled with weird people who keep calling you Spit-Tooth. We’ve got a magic bag full of weapons, your earrings turn into ninja stars, and you just killed some sort of weird creature right next to my head. Not only that, but someone’s leaving us threatening letters with our names on them, and you haven’t told us *anything*.’ He looked at me with determined eyes. ‘I want to know what’s going on, GG!’

I put a large piece of trout in my mouth and chewed it while I thought.

‘Okay,’ I said. ‘You’re right. It’s time I told you the truth.’



## Chapter 5

I took a deep breath. The truth. The truth . . . It was time to tell the truth.

I hadn’t spoken about my secret past for decades, and I’d certainly never mentioned it to anyone in the family.

‘I’m a . . .’ I began. ‘Well, you see, the thing is, I used to be a . . .’

But I couldn’t do it. For some reason, I still didn’t want them to know. Secrets hold great power, and I wasn’t ready to relinquish that power just yet.

»→ I’m sure you’re coming up with all sorts of



wild possibilities about my former life as well, but I can assure you that whatever you're thinking, you are **WRONG**.

I had to tell Atticus and Autumn something, though.

'A long time ago,' I began.

'Before the dinosaurs were born?' Autumn interrupted, licking squid gloop off her fingers.

'Don't start that again,' I said. I cleared my throat. 'When I was a little younger than I am now (or perhaps a lot younger than I am now), I took an item from someone and sold it to Grizzler, and now that person wants it back.'

'You mean, you *stole* it?' said Atticus.

Great. That was the last thing I needed – to be judged by a ten-year-old.

'It was more of a long-term loan,' I said. 'Where the other person didn't give permission . . . and I had no intention of giving it back. Okay, yes, I stole it, but they deserved it.'

'Pappá says stealing is the worst type of crime,' said Atticus.

'Well, I'm sure your pappá would reassess his priorities if someone were to stab him through the leg with a rusty cutlass.'

»→ *That happened to me once, so I'm talking from experience.*

'What was it you took?' Atticus asked.

'A map.'

'A map? What, like a pirate map?' he said.

'No, not like a *pirate* map at all,' I said. 'Like a normal, very boring, not-at-all-pirately map.'

'Well, you've got to give it back.'

'I told you, that's why we're here – to get it from Grizzler.'

'So go over there and ask him for it.'

Well, yes, that was the plan, but it wasn't quite as simple as that. See, what I hadn't told Atticus was that Grizzler and I used to be somewhat . . . romantically involved, and it didn't end well.

In fact, it ended with me smashing a teapot over his head and throwing him out of a bedroom window, so I'm not exactly his favourite person. But I couldn't put off seeing him forever.

'Okay, okay, I'm going,' I said. 'Keep an eye on your sister.'

I picked my way across the tavern – past the swinging anchors and sloshing grog – and leaned on the edge of the bar, trying to look alluring. Grizzler's double take when he saw me pouting proved that I haven't lost my charm.

'Spit-Tooth, is that really you?!

'As I live and breathe,' I replied.

'Well, I'll be darned.'



Grizzler was younger than me by about ten years, but he'd aged considerably since I last saw him. He hadn't lost his looks, however; if anything, he was more gorgeous than ever. His black dreadlocks had turned dark grey, and his beard was a wonderful shock of white. My heart fluttered.

After what happened the last time we were together, I expected him to either kick me out or put a sword to my throat, so it was quite the surprise when he trundled around the shipwreck and wrapped his beefy arms around me.

'You old hag,' he said affectionately. 'Where've you been? I thought the Gracken finally got you.'

'No, no, nothing as dramatic as that. I've been busy – mainly raising kids and selling flowers.'

'You're a *florist* now?' He spat the word out as if it was an insult. 'How did someone like you end up a florist?'

'Oh, you know, the usual: met a man and

settled down. Things changed. Of course, it would have been different if the two of us had stayed together . . . but we were never that compatible, were we, Grizzler?’

‘Oh, we had some fun, though! Remember that time you hid a tinglenerf in my dinner, and the blasted thing leapt out and bit my nose?!’

We cracked up at the memory.

‘I do remember that,’ I said, wiping away a tear. ‘And that time you drank firebrog and then breathed on me, and my eyebrows burned off!’

We laughed again.

‘Oh, we were wicked!’ said Grizzler.

‘We were, we were.’ I put a hand on my chest; the laughing had made me wheezy. ‘I’m sorry about throwing you out of that window, you know. I didn’t realise we were that high up. Or that you couldn’t swim. Or that there were crocodiles in the moat . . . To be honest, I didn’t think you’d be very pleased to see me.’

Grizzler shook his head. ‘That was all a long

time ago. I’ve learned to forgive since then. Life’s too short for fifty-year-old grudges. Besides, it’s not every day a woman as glamorous as you walks into my bar.’ He winked at me.

My wretched heart fluttered again. ‘Grizzler! If I didn’t know better, I’d think you were flirting with me.’ I tapped his arm, noticing there was still an impressive amount of muscle beneath his tight leather jerkin.

‘You think whatever you like, Spit-Tooth.’

We stood staring at each other for a couple of moments, small smiles dancing across our lips.

## **BANG!**

A loud blast burst through my ears. One of the bottles of grog behind Grizzler exploded into a thousand pieces, splashing liquid all over the bar. Everyone in the tavern fell silent and an electric energy filled the space, as if they expected a brawl to break out at any moment.



'Weeeeeeeee! I'm a piraaaaaaate!' called a voice from above.

I looked up to see Autumn swinging from an anchor way up in the rafters, with a huge grin on her face and a blunderbuss in her hand.



'Alright, which one of you loons gave the three-year-old a loaded weapon?' I asked the crowd of onlookers. They all shrugged and went back to their jeering and drinking.

'Scrag, get down here, you little beast!' I shouted up at her.

'Okay,' she said.

Without the slightest regard for her life, she leapt from the anchor. Luckily, Grizzler put his hands out in time and caught her, otherwise we would have had a very splatty Scrag.

'I got a bang-bang!' Autumn said, holding up the blunderbuss and firing it again. The bullet went straight through the bouffant of a flamboyantly dressed woman, ricocheted off the ceiling, pinged around the walls a couple of times, smashed the tankard of a moustached man who was just about to take a sip, then whizzed to the other side of the room and buried itself in a jellyfish, which a spindly couple were

about to tuck into. The jellyfish burst on impact, covering the pair in slimy goop. They blinked a couple of times then shrugged and started licking the goop off each other's faces.

'I'll take that, thank you very much,' I said, snatching the weapon out of Autumn's hand and tucking it in my belt.

Atticus came running up to us. 'Sorry, she ran away and I couldn't find her.'

'Grizzler, these are my grandchildren, Ratty and Scrag,' I said.

'*Great*-grandchildren,' Autumn corrected.

'Great-pain-in-the-bum,' I replied.

'Pleasure to meet you both,' said Grizzler, putting Autumn on the ground and ruffling her hair. He then held out one of his rough hands for Atticus to shake, which totally swallowed the boy's slender fingers. 'I don't usually let children in my tavern, but I'm happy to make an exception for your grandma.'



'Great-grandma,' Autumn corrected.

'Great-shut-your-mouth,' I replied.

'Did you get the map?' Atticus asked me.

'What map?' said Grizzler. He looked at me and raised an eyebrow. 'And there I was thinking you'd popped in to ignite an old flame.'

'Don't flatter yourself.' I flashed him a wicked smile.

'We need the map she sold you,' Atticus said. 'It's important.'

'I don't remember any map . . .'

'Yes, you do,' I said. 'Weathered leather, frayed at the edges, sold to you for five gold shillings and two bottles of grog.'

'Ahhhh, *that* map! Yes, I remember now, although it was five gold shillings, two bottles of grog and a kiss, if I remember correctly.'

I giggled like a little schoolgirl. Don't judge me.

'Eww, guys, get a room,' said Atticus.

I cleared my throat. 'So, the map . . . Can I have it back?'

'Uh, no,' said Grizzler.

'Why not?'

'Because I don't have it.'

My heart sank.

»→ I told you it wasn't going to be that easy.

'I've not seen it for years,' said Grizzler. 'Why do you need it?'

'Because of this.' I pulled the note out of my jacket pocket. Grizzler uncrumpled it and spread it out on the splintered slats of the bar. As he read it, a grim look settled over his face.

'This is bad. Really bad,' he said.

'I know,' I replied.

'This was written by –'

'I know.'

'And if you don't find the map –'

'I know.'

'Why is everyone so scared of this person,

anyway?’ asked Atticus.

Grizzler turned to him, his dark eyes catching the light from the thousand candles. ‘Because,’ he said, ‘she’s the most terrifying woman this world has ever known.’



## Chapter 6? 7?

»→ To be honest, I've lost track of which chapter we're on, and I'm far too lazy to flick back and check. Feel free to get a pen and write it in yourself.

Her name is Winifred Blossomhurst.

I know: not exactly a name that makes your knees tremble with terror, which is why she mostly goes by the pseudonym 'Ripclaw'.

»→ Now, 'pseudonym' may look like someone just sneezed a load of random letters onto the page, but I can assure you it is actually a real word. It's a fancy way of saying 'nickname'. Every day's a school

day. (Except the weekend.)

I always thought that Ripclaw was a bit of a pompous choice, but Winifred Blossomhurst was never the most subtle of people.

For the last fifty years or so, she's believed that I was dead, and I was very happy to let her think that. She also never realised that – right before she shot me in the chest and left me to die – I stole the legendary *Map of Mayhem* right out of her jacket pocket.

Now, however – if the notes pinned to my doors were anything to go by – she not only knew that I was alive, but had also somehow discovered that I was the map thief.

'She can't be that bad,' said Atticus. 'She put a kiss at the bottom of the letter.'

'That's not a kiss, Ratty, it's an X. Meaning death. It's sort of her trademark signature.'

'Oh.'

'Yes. Oh.' I turned back to Grizzler. 'So . . .

the map. What did you do with it?'

'I buried it,' he replied.

'You buried it?!' I squealed, in a voice that offended even *my* eardrums.

'I buried it,' he confirmed.

'Why on earth would you do a ridiculous thing like that?'

Grizzler shrugged. 'Because the stupid thing was driving me crazy. I couldn't make any sense of it, so burying it seemed like the most logical thing to do.'

'You couldn't have just stuffed it at the back of your underwear drawer like a normal person?' I asked.

'Where did you bury it?' asked Atticus.

'Um . . .' said Grizzler, followed by an ominous swallow. 'On one of the Craggenwich Isles.'

A cold shiver scuttled down my back, like a centipede fleeing a snowstorm.

'Well, that wasn't very sensible,' I said.

The Craggenwich Isles are a small archipelago in the English Channel, about fifty nautical miles south of the mainland. If you've never heard of them, it's because your geography teacher is terrible at their job and should probably be fired.

'That map has a cursed past,' said Grizzler. 'I thought the further away from me it was, the better. Besides, I didn't know the island was plagued at the time.'

'Plagued with what?' asked Atticus.

'Pray you never find out,' I replied. 'I'm going to need the exact location,' I said to Grizzler.

'You're not seriously thinking of –' he said.

'What choice do I have?'

'Not even smugglers go near the Craggenwich Isles, and for good reason.'

'Look, it shouldn't take long. A couple of hours there, a couple of hours back – bish bash bosh, job done.'

Grizzler and I stared at each other for a couple of moments, until Autumn interrupted by blowing a particularly wet raspberry.

'Fine, I'll write it down,' said Grizzler, wiping Autumn's spittle off his arm. 'Just make sure you arrive at the islands before dark, otherwise . . .'

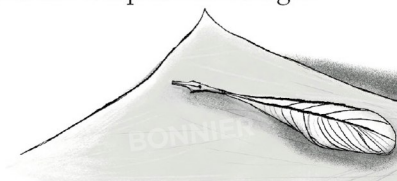
'I know, I know,' I replied.

'I mean it,' he said. 'Once it gets dark . . .'

He didn't need to finish his sentence; we both knew what happened on the Craggenwich Isles once it got dark.

He walked around the bar and took out a piece of paper and a long feather pen. While Grizzler was scrawling, Atticus picked at a splinter of wood on the front of the shipwreck. Autumn jumped up and down, trying to reclaim the blunderbuss in my belt.

'Stop it. Stop it. Stop it. Stop it,' I said, in time with her jumps. After as much jumping as I could take, I removed the weapon and slung it



behind the bar.

'Here,' said Grizzler, handing me the slip of paper. I took it from him and tucked it in my pocket.

'Thank you,' I said. 'One more thing: how d'you fancy looking after two delightfully well-behaved children for the afternoon?'

'What?' said Grizzler.

'What?' said Atticus.

'Spinny plop ploppity plop plopping,' said Autumn.

'You can't leave us here!' said Atticus. 'You're supposed to be looking after us.'

'I'm looking after you by leaving you here,' I told him. 'Where I'm going is far too dangerous.'

'Plop, plop, plop, plop,' sang Autumn.

'The kid's got a point,' said Grizzler.

'The one singing about plops?' I asked.

'No, the other one. This is no place for children.' Grizzler gave his head a rough scratch, making

his dreadlocks shake. 'Sorry, Spit-Tooth. I'd go to the ends of the earth for you, you know that, but I'm no babysitter.'

'Okay, fine, I'll find somewhere to ditch them on the way. Come on, kids, we're going.' I grabbed a child in each hand, then paused. 'It was good to see you again, Grizzler. Really good.'

Grizzler rubbed his chin with one hand. 'One question before you go,' he said. 'Is there a . . . *Mr Spit-Tooth* back at home?'

I pursed my lips and gave him a slow blink. 'There is not.'

'Good to know,' said Grizzler. 'Good to know.'

One long lingering look later, I tore myself away and led the kids out of the Rusty Scorpion, saying goodbye to Pam and her hairy nostrils on the way.

In the alley outside, my heart was still jittering,



but now was not the time to be distracted by fifty-year-old flings – I had an island to reach and a map to find. Pushing all thoughts of Grizzler aside, I bundled the kids back down the alley. As we went, Autumn ran her

hands along the wall, then smeared the algae she'd collected over her face as if it was war paint.

On the other side of me, a persistent pinging informed me that Atticus was already back on his phone, messaging his friends.

'Whatever you do, don't mention the Rusty Scorpion,' I said.

'I won't,' said Atticus without looking up.

I had half a mind to lead him straight into a brick wall, just to teach him a lesson, but we didn't have time for that. What I needed was a boat.

We picked our way along the winding streets,

weaving in between busy shoppers, stray cats, and a gaggle of women wearing matching pink T-shirts, who were bashing each other over the head with a balloon shaped like an enormous – well, suffice to say, it wasn't at all appropriate for daytime viewing.

'That lady's got a big shrimp balloon!' said Autumn.

'Yes. Yes, she does,' I replied. 'This way.'

I took a sharp right that took us all the way to the marina, where hundreds of boats bobbed on the water like rubber ducks in a bathtub. Seagulls screeched above our heads, on the prowl for loose chips. My original plan was to dump the kids in a café/public toilet/phone box before leaving, but that opportunity had not presented itself, so I was left with no choice but to take them with me.

'Yippee, we going to Cornywall!!' said Autumn when she saw the boats.



‘Still no, Scrag,’ I replied. ‘Still no.’

I led us down a gangway built over the water, which was slightly damp from the slopping waves. Boats were lined up neatly on both sides.

‘Are we getting on a boat?’ Atticus asked.

‘Yes,’ I replied.

‘Do you own a boat?’ Atticus asked.

‘No,’ I replied.

A pause. Then: ‘Are you going to *steal* a boat?’ Atticus asked.

‘Can I have a little bit less judgement from you, please?’ I snapped. ‘Maybe I preferred it when your head was stuck in your phone.’

‘Your bed was stuck in your bone,’ said Autumn.

‘Not helpful,’ I chimed.

Atticus glared at me, then dutifully obliged by diverting his attention back to his screen.

Meanwhile, I diverted *my* attention back to the boats around us, looking for a suitable

candidate. Not to steal, but to *borrow*.

»→ And you can stop judging me too. Needs must, alright?

As soon as I saw it, I knew it was the one. Not some shiny white monstrosity like the other boats, but a wood-panelled sailing boat with purple and red bunting hanging from its mast. It was about twenty-feet long with a cosy little cabin and majestic blue sails.

## The Wonky Goose

That was her name, written in curly black letters down her side. Not the most promising name, granted, but it didn’t detract from her beauty.

‘Okay, GG’s going to get on this boat and try to make it work,’ I said to Autumn. ‘What I want you to do is keep a lookout and scream really loud if you see anyone coming. Can you

do that for me?’

Autumn nodded and then screamed really loud.

‘No, no, not yet,’ I said. ‘Only if you see someone coming. Understand?’

Autumn nodded and then screamed really loud again.

‘You know what, forget it. Just stay here and try not to fall in the water.’

I clambered aboard the boat and pulled my set of skeleton keys from the infinity bag. A quick jiggle here, a little yanking-out-of-all-the-wiring there, and the engine of *The Wonky Goose* spluttered into life.

‘Okay, kids, get in,’ I shouted over the rumble of the engine.

‘But that would make us accomplices to a crime,’ said Atticus.

‘No, it won’t, it’ll make you hostages,’ I said, grabbing a fistful of his T-shirt and pulling him

on-board.

Autumn tumbled in after him and then – taking a brief glance over my shoulder to check no one was watching – I put the boat into drive and steered us out of the marina.

It felt so good to be at sea again!

The salty air peppered my face and the wind ruffled my already dishevelled hair.

I howled at the waves. ‘*Awwooooooooow!*’

Atticus and Autumn looked at me like I’d gone bananas. I gave them a toothy grin and pointed to the horizon.

‘To the Craggenwich Isles!’





## Chapter \_\_\_\_\_\*

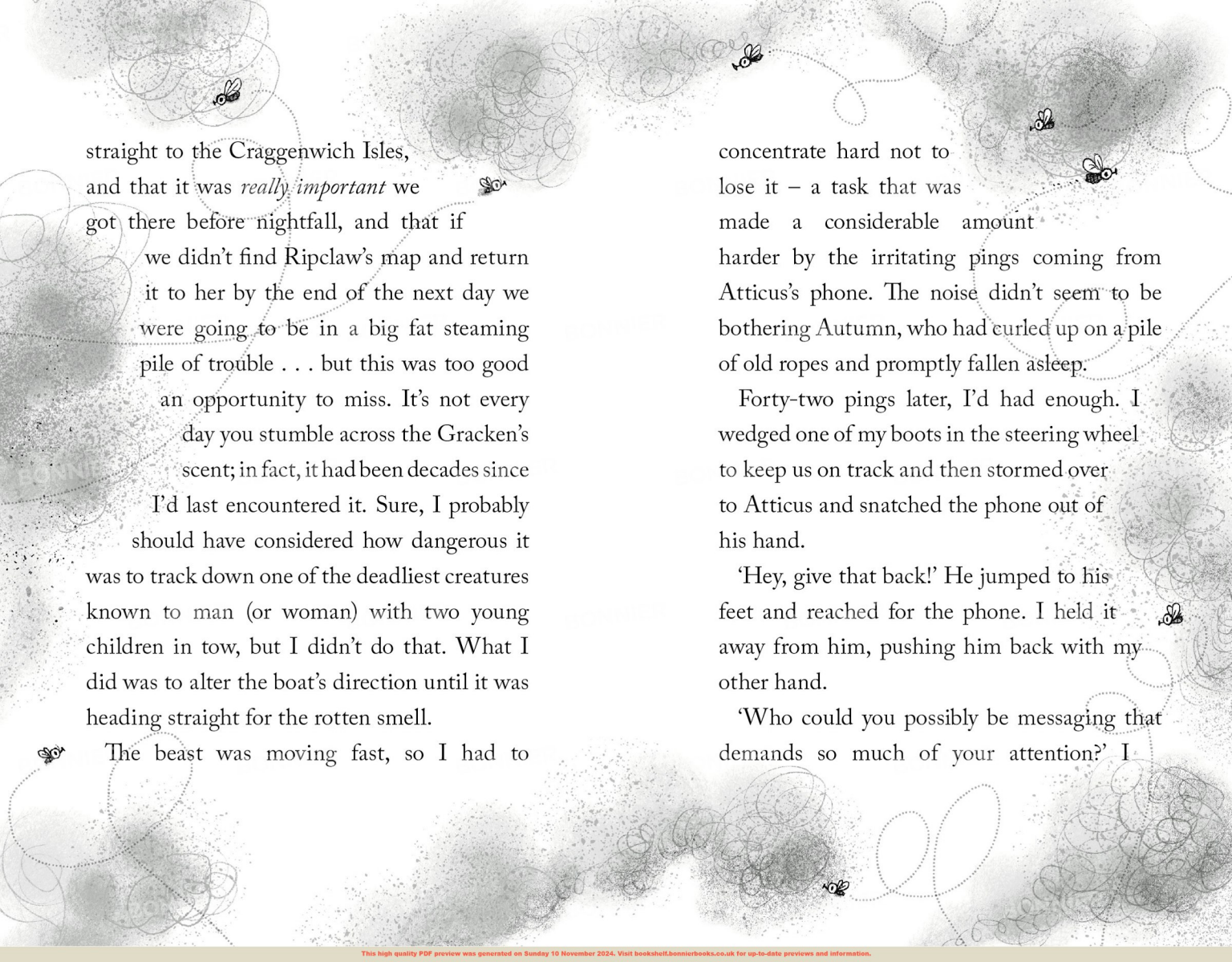
Oh, how I'd missed this! As we skimmed along the glinting waves, I couldn't help giggling with glee. It had been a long time, but I was finally back where I belonged – behind the wheel of a boat, off on an adventure on the open sea.

We'd been travelling for about an hour when I smelled it: a familiar waft hanging on the breeze. It was an unusual mix of sweet seaweed and rotten egg, and I knew exactly what it meant.

The Gracken.

Now, I *know* we were supposed to be going

\*insert number here



straight to the Craggenwich Isles, and that it was *really important* we got there before nightfall, and that if we didn't find Ripclaw's map and return it to her by the end of the next day we were going to be in a big fat steaming pile of trouble . . . but this was too good an opportunity to miss. It's not every day you stumble across the Gracken's scent; in fact, it had been decades since I'd last encountered it. Sure, I probably should have considered how dangerous it was to track down one of the deadliest creatures known to man (or woman) with two young children in tow, but I didn't do that. What I did was to alter the boat's direction until it was heading straight for the rotten smell.

The beast was moving fast, so I had to

concentrate hard not to lose it – a task that was made a considerable amount harder by the irritating pings coming from Atticus's phone. The noise didn't seem to be bothering Autumn, who had curled up on a pile of old ropes and promptly fallen asleep.

Forty-two pings later, I'd had enough. I wedged one of my boots in the steering wheel to keep us on track and then stormed over to Atticus and snatched the phone out of his hand.

'Hey, give that back!' He jumped to his feet and reached for the phone. I held it away from him, pushing him back with my other hand.

'Who could you possibly be messaging that demands so much of your attention?' I



asked. I glanced at the screen. ‘Oh.’

The screen was full of flapping animals that looked like they’d been brought back from the dead. The phone pinged three times – the same sound I’d been hearing all day.

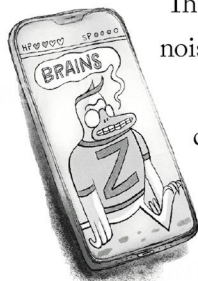
‘You said you were messaging friends,’ I said. ‘All this time you’ve been playing some silly game?’

The phone made a tuneful crashing noise.

‘Argh, GG, you lost me a life!’ Atticus complained. He ducked beneath my arm and made another grab for the phone. I let him take it. ‘And it’s not silly. It’s *Zombie Duck*.’

‘*Zombie . . . Duck?* And that’s supposed to convince me it’s not a pointless waste of time?’ I said.

‘I’m really good at it,’ Atticus mumbled, slumping back onto the bench.



‘I’m sure you are, but if it sucks you into your phone twenty-four hours a day, then it is most certainly not good for you.’

‘Whatever.’

»→ *Whatever?! Whatever?! Can you believe the cheek of this boy? It appears he learned his manners at the same establishment as you. Namely, a pig barn.*

‘Why did you lie and say you were messaging your friends?’ I asked him.

‘Dunno,’ Atticus replied, staring at his feet and looking glum.

Oh. There was something more going on here.

I sat down next to him, pretty sure I was supposed to put my arm around him or something. Instead, I pulled out my emergency hip flask and took a big swig.

‘Want some?’ I asked.

Atticus shook his head without looking up.

‘Wise decision.’ I took another swig. ‘Look, you don’t need that stupid thing,’ I said, pointing at the phone. ‘Take a look around you. We’re in the middle of the sea! Look at the way the sunlight hits the waves, breathe in the fresh air, feel the wind. The world is pretty spectacular, you know, if you take the time to really look at it.’

Atticus still didn’t look up. I decided to change tack.

‘Has something happened between you and your friends?’ I asked.

‘No.’

‘Are you sure?’

‘Yes.’

‘Do you want to talk about it?’

‘No.’

‘Good, because neither do I.’

»→ *Harsh, but true. Children are complicated enough without adding feelings and emotions into*

*the mix. I’d tried my best, but if he wouldn’t talk to me, what more could I do?*

‘What that smellllllll?’ said Autumn, waking up from her pile of ropes with a big stretch. She stood on her tiptoes and started sniffing the air like a meerkat.

The stench of sweet seaweed and rotten egg was stronger than ever, which meant the Gracken was close. Really close.

As if to prove my point, something thudded against the bottom of the boat. The deck juddered, making Atticus stumble into the bench and Autumn trip over the ropes and get her foot stuck in a bucket.

‘What was that?’ Atticus asked.

‘Was it a dolphin?’ said Autumn, a hopeful look on her face.

‘Better than a dolphin,’ I replied. ‘But also a smidge more dangerous . . . Why don’t the two of you pop yourselves into that cabin there?’

Another thud rocked the boat. Autumn tripped over the ropes again, and – in a feat of flexibility that would impress the most seasoned of gymnasts – managed to transfer the bucket from her foot to her head.

The next thud knocked my boot from the steering wheel, causing *The Wonky Goose* to veer around in erratic circles.

It was all happening too quickly. Rule Number One was ‘Always be prepared’, yet prepared I was not. I’d fallen at the first hurdle. It had been too long; I was out of practice.

Something long and dark snaked out of the water and plonked itself on the side of the boat: one of the Gracken’s juicy tentacles. It was dark brown and as thick as a tree trunk. Fleshy pink suckers squelched along its underside.

I jumped over to Autumn, removed the

bucket from her head and shoved her in the cabin.

‘Uh, GG . . .’ said Atticus, eyeing up a second tentacle that was undulating through the air a little too close to his face.

»→ This was probably the moment when I realised that bringing my grandson’s precious children with me on this little venture might not have been the smartest move. But I hadn’t really expected the Gracken to reveal itself. It hardly ever does.

‘Get down!’ I yelled, leaping at Atticus and pushing him down to the deck. There was something dark and tatty at our feet. The infinity bag!

I rummaged through it, took out a spiked mace, then changed my mind and swapped it for a halberd axe and a bottle of urchin smulch. The halberd was much taller

than me, but lightweight and coated in frozen quicksilver. It glimmered in the sunlight as I spun it in circles above my head.

At the same moment, the boat sank a little as the Gracken heaved itself out of the water. The hull shook as an enormous head broke through the waves and then towered above us – a bulbous lump the size of a lorry, riddled with dark red veins. Its eyes were golden and as big as tractor wheels. Four more of its ten tentacles sprang out of the depths, sending water splashing in all directions.

There it was! The Gracken. In all its monstrous glory!

From inside the cabin, Autumn screamed.

‘Don’t worry, kids,’ I said. ‘This is what I do best.’ I stood up straight and pointed the halberd directly at the heart of the beast.

‘Your GG is a Monster Hunter.’



## Chapter Absolutely No Idea

»→ Well, I guess the cat's out of the bag. So now you know. Of course, technically I should have said that I *was* a Monster Hunter, since I'd not done it in many, many years. Back in the day, though, I was the greatest hunter of the Twenty-Three Seas. I'm sure you've got a thousand questions you're desperate to ask, but we're about to be devoured by a giant squid, so I think it's best we get back to the story.

I strode to the front of the boat and thrust my halberd at the Gracken, hoping to skewer it before it could do any real damage, but it's

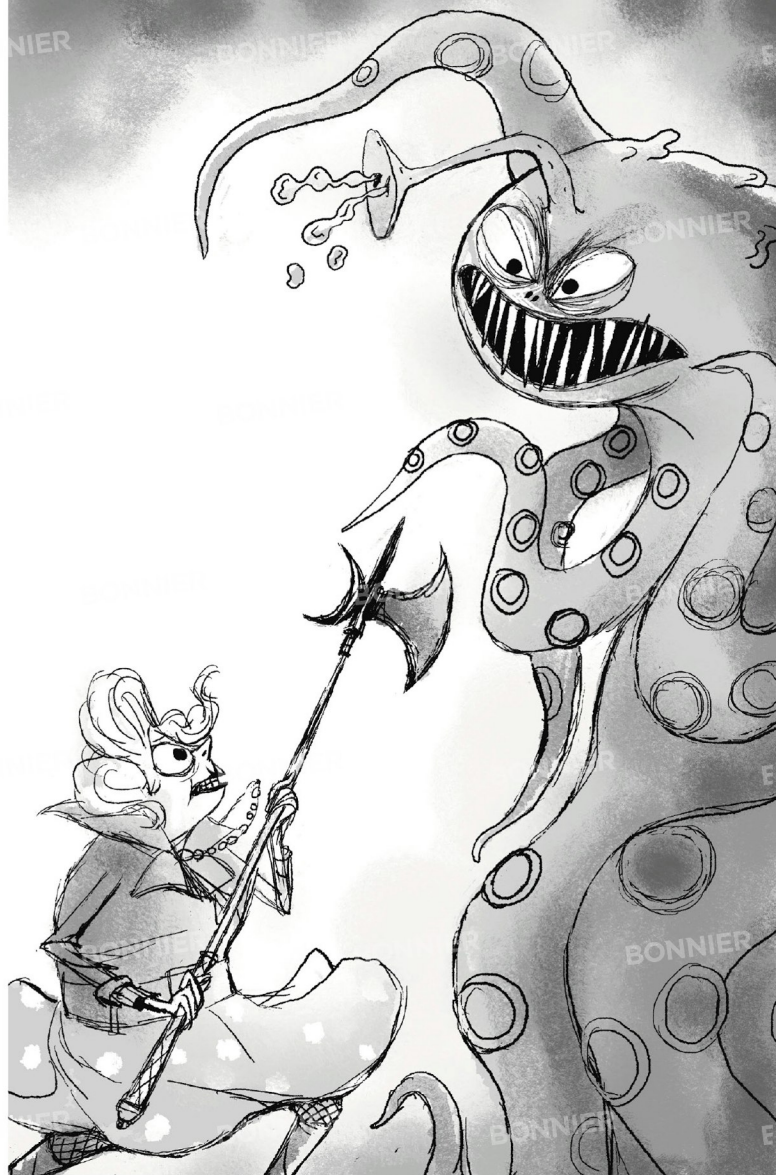


a slippery blighter and, despite its enormous size, it can move surprisingly fast. It dodged my strike, shifting its weight to one side. The motion caused the boat to lurch, and a large wave spilled over the side, soaking the deck (and my ankles).

'Ratty, get rid of some of this water or we're going to sink!' I shouted.

It was an effort for him to tear his eyes away from the beast, but with trembling hands he grabbed a bucket and started shifting water out of the bottom of the boat.

Satisfied we weren't going to drown just yet, I spun in a circle, twisting the halberd as I did so, ready for another attack. As I moved, pain shot through an old injury in my hip, reminding me that I'm not as young as I used to be. I sliced the halberd through the air once again, but the Gracken anticipated my move and wrapped one of its squelching tentacles around the weapon.





The next thing I knew, it had ripped the halberd from my grip, almost pulling me overboard with it. The Gracken slung the axe into the air, away from the boat.

‘Holy cockles!’ I swore.

»→ *In truth, I said something a little bit ruder than that, but what I actually said is not allowed to be written in a book for children.*

‘I need another weapon!’ I yelled. ‘Ratty, throw me the infinity bag.’

Atticus dutifully obliged. He picked up the bag and hurled it towards me, but his aim was terrible. I made a grab for the bag, even though I knew it was hopeless. It flew straight past my head and over the side of the boat. It hit the water with a gentle splosh and then sank.

‘Nooooo!’ I yelled, thinking of all the priceless weapons and irreplaceable tools that were sinking before my eyes, never to be seen again.

‘Sorry, sorry, sorry,’ said Atticus. He clenched his teeth together in an awkward grimace.

‘What sort of a throw was that?!’ I asked. ‘My dog Muttons could’ve thrown better, and he’s been dead for years.’

I knew that yelling at Atticus wasn’t going to help the situation, but I couldn’t stop myself. Why are children so hopeless??

A wet snort behind me reminded me of the imminent danger looming above my head. I may have lost the infinity bag, but I could still defeat the Gracken; I still had the urchin smulch and I also had a knife in my waistband – the one that Ripclaw had jammed into my front door earlier that morning.

Before I tell you what happened next, there are some things you ought to know about the Gracken:

● It is the biggest, most feared monster in all the Twenty-Three Seas. For good reason. It's massive.

Like size-of-a-house massive.

● Most people have no idea it exists.

● It lives in the deepest, darkest depths of the Atlantic Ocean, but occasionally pops into the English Channel, because it's rather fond of anchovies.

● There is only one in the entire world. That's why it has a capital 'G' at the start of its name – to show how important it is, like the King, the Pope, and the Beyoncé.

● No Monster Hunter has ever captured it, although many have tried. It is the holy grail of monster hunting – whoever defeats it will have fame and riches the likes of which have never been known before.

Supposedly, there are certain objects which possess the ability to overpower the beast, but none have ever been found.

● I dedicated nearly ten years of my life to tracking it down, and fought it on three occasions, but on all three of those occasions, I lost. Fourth time lucky?

»→ I say I lost, but I came away from each encounter with my life, so that's a win of sorts, right? Most people who take on the Graecken have a much worse fate. In short: they're eaten.

One of the Graecken's tree-trunk tentacles whipped around and smacked me in the back of my head. Fourth time unlucky, it seemed.

The urchin smulch was my only hope. If I could get close enough to the Graecken's nostrils to pour it in, it would freeze the monster's body and make it temporarily blind. That would give me the edge. The only problem was, a Graecken's nostrils are on the very top of its head – so far above us, I couldn't even see them.

I craned my neck and pursed my lips, weighing up the best route. If I timed it right . . .

The next time the Graecken swung one of its tentacles at me, I ducked and then grabbed hold of it, letting its momentum lift me high into the air. I swung from that tentacle to another, then

– as the Gracken twisted and flailed, trying to dislodge me – I jumped onto its head. I’d made it! My knees cracked as I landed; I’d feel that in the morning, that was for sure.

The Gracken’s head was so wet with slime that I nearly slid straight back off. I was on all fours. Far below, Atticus was still emptying water out of the bottom of the boat. He paused when he spotted me and dropped the bucket in surprise. I flapped my hand at him to tell him to keep going. That was a mistake; I lost my grip and started to slip. Acting on instinct, I shoved my hand into one of the Gracken’s mighty nostrils.

»→ *I'm not sure if you've ever put your hand in a Gracken nostril before (I'm guessing not), but let me assure you it is not a pleasurable experience. It is a) warm, b) sticky, and c) filled with an obscene amount of snot.*

The good news was, my quick thinking had prevented me from falling off the Gracken’s

head and plummeting to my death. The bad news was, the Gracken’s response to me shoving my hand in its nostril was to blow out really hard through its *other* nostril, sending a tsunami of mucus right into my face. There’s no point denying it, so here’s the truth: my mouth was open at the time and a large proportion of the mucus entered my mouth. Don’t ask me why because, to this day, I have no explanation for it, but for some reason what my body decided to do at that very moment was swallow. And that is how I ended up eating a substantial amount of squid snot. It was chewy, it was tangy, it was disgusting. Now, let’s never talk of this again.



Trying hard to erase the snot-eating from my memory, I pulled the urchin smulch from my pocket and removed the cork with my teeth. A rusty stink filled the air – somewhere between old car engine and sweaty cheese sandwich. I held my breath. Urchin smulch is dangerous enough for monsters – it can be fatal to humans.

Just as I was about to pour the contents of the vial into the Gracken's nostril, something caught my attention from the roof of the boat's cabin below: a flash of metal spinning in an unstable circle.

'Scrag, what are you doing?!

I knew very well what Autumn was doing. She was holding the spiked mace I'd pulled out of the infinity bag



and was spinning it around her head. Even from a distance, I could see how close she was to skewering herself.

'I'm a Monster Hunter too, GG!' she called up to me.

'No, you're not, you're a three-year-old girl who's about to do herself a serious injury. Put that down!'

Atticus was watching the whole thing play out, not knowing what to do.

'Come and get me, Squid Squid!' shouted Autumn. 'Whoooah!'

She lost her balance and fell over. The spiked ball landed inches from her face, creating a hefty dent in the roof of the cabin.

'Oops.'

Someone needed to take that weapon off her, and that person was me, but first I needed to finish what I'd come up here to do. I leaned over and emptied the urchin smulch into the



Gracken's nostril.

The effect was immediate. The Gracken made a sound like a sad belch, then rumbled and shook all over. Its clammy skin started to harden beneath me. This was it – I was going to do it. Today was the day I was finally going to defeat the Gracken!

I took the knife out of my waistband and prepared to finish the job. But before I had the chance, one of the Gracken's flailing tentacles gave a final flick – a flick that just so happened to thwack Autumn in the middle of her chest, sending her (and the spiked mace) over the side of the boat.

'Scrag!' I shouted.

'Autumn!' shouted Atticus. 'GG, do something!'

Now, what any sane child would have done in a similar situation is to let go of the extremely heavy metal weapon that was dragging them

down into the depths of the ocean, and start splashing about, hoping to be rescued. What Autumn did, however – either through shock or complete idiocy, who can say? – was to keep a firm grip on the extremely heavy metal weapon, which promptly sank her deeper under the waves.

As I knelt there, sword in hand, Gracken paralysed beneath me, I had a decision to make: should I fulfil my dream of being the first Monster Hunter ever to defeat the Gracken – to live a life of fame and glory, to have my name echoed through the annals of time . . . or should I save the life of my one and only great-granddaughter?

Autumn or the Gracken.

»→ I'm guessing you're thinking it was an easy decision to make. If that's the case, I clearly haven't emphasised just how much I wanted to be the one to take down the Gracken. I'd be a legend. A living legend.



A hero. People would write songs about me and sing my name as they did the washing-up. It would be **INCREDIBLE!** Have I emphasised my point enough now? Good, then I shall continue.

I hesitated for the briefest second, then chose the Gracken.

Joking! I chose the little scragbag, o b v i o u s l y. I dropped the sword and performed a flawless dive off the Gracken's head, shot through the air like a silver gannet, then slid gracefully into the water.

»→ Well, that's how it went in my head. In real life, it was a bit more like:

I dropped the sword and performed a wobbly dive off the Gracken's head, flailed through the air like a monkey with rabies, then crashed gracelessly into the water.

Either way, I made it down.

I've always been a good swimmer, but Autumn was already far beneath the surface and sinking

fast. Her eyes were closed, and her hair was spread out around her head like drifting kelp. She looked almost peaceful.

I swam towards her, staring daggers at the weapon that was still dragging her down.

*Let go of the mace, let go of the mace, let go of the mace,* I screamed in my head, wishing that I'd been gifted with the ability to communicate thoughts into other people's brains. Or gills. Or both.



I was running out of air. My lungs had shrivelled up into tiny little prunes. Then Autumn opened her eyes. Maybe I'd developed telepathic communication abilities after all, or maybe she'd just realised how stupid it was to keep hold of a giant steel ball while sinking underwater. Whatever the reason, she let go of the mace and started kicking towards me.

I grabbed her little wrist and pulled us up. Several desperate kicks later, we broke the surface with a lot of gasping and spluttering (and a little bit of sick).

We were both alive.

But the Gracken . . . was gone.



## Chapter Shmapter

I was now dressed as Father Christmas. It could have been worse: Autumn was wearing a sparkly sweater about twelve sizes too big for her with the words PARTY KWEEN emblazoned on its front in shimmering sequins. The word 'garish' doesn't even come close. They were the best options available from the bag of fancy-dress costumes we found tucked away in one of the storage units beneath the seats. They must have been left over from a Christmas party or something. Not ideal attire for mid-April – and there are plenty of monsters out there that are

obsessed with the colour red, so I was basically a big old come-and-eat-me beacon – but at least the Santa hat kept my ears toasty. Atticus had found some towels for us as well, so we were dry, we were alive, and we were back on course for the Craggenwich Isles.

The bad news was that we no longer had the infinity bag. Everything that would have been useful for this little jaunt – gone. It was disastrous. I tried not to be too mad at Atticus – he was only trying to help, after all – but every time he mentioned it, or tried to apologise again, I could almost feel the steam coming out of my ears. He eventually got the message and let the matter drop, although the guilt in his eyes remained. It wasn't long before he sought the comfort of his phone and dived back



into his dead-duck-filled world.

The *other* bad news was that our little diversion meant there was now no way we would make it to the Craggenwich Isles before dark and, as we've established, they're not somewhere you want to visit once the sun goes down. In truth, they're not somewhere you'd want to visit full stop, but there wasn't much I could do about that.

It meant we'd have to spend the night at sea. I, of course, was used to that. The kids, on the other hand, were not, and I wasn't sure how to break it to them. Autumn hadn't spoken much since the attack by the Gracken. I don't want to use the word 'traumatised', but she was certainly a bit shaky. She wasn't making any of her usual annoying noises or singing any annoying songs, which (to a more responsible adult) may have been a concern, but I was happy to consider it a silver lining.

The sun was low, casting a hazy golden light across the horizon.

‘I’m huuuuuuungryyyyyy,’ said Autumn, tugging at my jacket sleeve.

»→ **Clearly I spoke too soon about her no longer being annoying.**

Yes, the lack of food was a worry. In my haste to ~~steal~~ borrow a boat, I’d overlooked the rather important matter of needing to eat. Our thorough search of the boat had revealed nothing but half a jar of mayonnaise, a packet of cream crackers and a bag of Nice ‘N’ Spicy Nik Naks (which I wouldn’t touch with a bargepole). The kids had already demolished all of that (mayonnaise on cracker, anyone?), but even I knew that didn’t constitute a well-balanced meal. There was a large tank of water, so at least we weren’t going to die of thirst. What we might die of, though, was little-girl-complaining-that-she’s-hungry.

‘I’m huuuuuuungryyyyyy,’ Autumn said again.

There was only so many times I could ignore her. ‘Okay, Scrag, you hold the wheel, I’ll catch us some food.’

I’ve never been good at fishing; I don’t have the patience. What I did have, however, tucked away in one of my jacket pockets, was a small vial of ‘essence of winkle’. Cuttlefish go mad for the stuff. I switched off the engine, poured the whitish powder over the side and waited. Autumn didn’t seem to notice we’d stopped, and kept both hands firmly clutched on the steering wheel. Until she got bored, and then started spinning the wheel in wild circles.

A short while later, just as the sun was setting, the cuttlefish came guzzling, and I managed to snag a couple of them with a net. I presented my haul to the kids, who were unimpressed to say the least.

'Eww, what's that?' said Atticus, wrinkling his nose.

'It's dinner,' I said. 'Now put your phone away and we'll sit down like a family and eat our meal.'

With a huff, Atticus did as he was told.

We didn't have any means to cook the cuttlefish, so we had to eat it raw. I've had worse. Autumn guzzled hers without complaint (I'm starting to suspect that child will eat anything, so long as it has the consistency of bogies). She even tried to eat one of the ink sacs – I only just managed to whip it out of her hand in time. As I snatched it, I squeezed a little too hard, causing the ink to explode. All over my face. Thanks, Autumn. I wiped the ink away with my sleeve. On my other side, Atticus poked one of the jellied cubes with his tongue, before deciding against it and placing it on the bench beside him.



'What was that thing?' he asked.

'It's cuttlefish,' I replied. 'Full of vitamin D and omega-3 fatty acids which – despite sounding like they're going to dissolve your insides – are actually good for you. You should eat it.'

'No, I don't mean the food. I mean the



creature that came out of the sea. That . . .' he paused, as if considering whether he dared to say the word, '. . . monster.'

I scrunched my lips together. They'd already seen the creature, so there was no point denying it.

'It's known as the Gracken,' I said. 'There's only one in the entire world, and it's the biggest and most elusive of all sea monsters.'

Even Autumn was listening now, while slurping up another handful of cuttlefish guts.

'And you're a "Monster Hunter"?' Atticus asked, saying the words like they were in a foreign language.

'I am,' I replied. 'At least, I was. I retired when your dad's mum was born.'

'And what exactly *is* a Monster Hunter?'

I popped a chunk of cuttlefish into my mouth and let the juice ooze between my teeth.

'You probably think monsters don't exist . . .'

I began.

'They do exist!' Autumn piped up. 'There's one that lives under my bed. His name's Suzie.'

I tutted, annoyed that she'd spoiled my great reveal. 'Okay, well, other than Suzie – who you've definitely made up, by the way – you probably think that monsters don't exist, but . . .' I paused for dramatic tension, but don't know why I bothered – the moment was gone. 'You couldn't be more wrong. Monsters are real, and they live all around us!'

The two of them looked back at me with dull, unimpressed expressions. What was wrong with these kids?!

'If there are so many of them, how come no one knows about them?' Atticus asked.

Fair question.

'Well, there's a few reasons for that. First, they're excellent at hiding – lurking in shadows and concealed in cracks. You'd be surprised

what people don't notice, even when it's right in front of them – usually because they're walking around with their nose stuck in their phone . . .' I gave Atticus a pointed look, which he acknowledged with a scowl. 'The majority of monsters live in remote, unpopulated regions, like the top of the tallest mountains and the bottom of the deepest oceans. You will have noticed their presence, though. Ever felt the ground rumble beneath your feet? That was probably a *rhonarck* on the hunt for food. Ever been swimming in the sea and felt something brush against your leg? That could well have been a *slitherwhilp* stealing some of your body heat. And if you've ever lost a sock, never to see it again, that was almost certainly a *gondlephunk*, because they – for some unknown reason – are avid collectors of stray socks. Avalanches, tornados, dodgy Wi-Fi reception . . . more often than not, monsters are the cause of them. But

the vast majority of people have no idea, and we try to keep it that way.'

'Do Monster Hunters work for the government, then?' Atticus asked.

I spat on the wooden deck of the boat between our feet. 'Absolutely not. I'd rather clean my teeth with jellyfish squirt than work for the government. That place is full of liars and backstabbers – people who pretend they're helping others while taking sly deals for themselves behind closed doors. Don't get me started. No, Monster Hunters are lone agents. Many do it for financial gain, since people will pay a lot of money to get rid of a particularly troublesome monster that's causing havoc on their property. You can also make a pretty penny on the black market selling *daxxon* tongues, *chomeron* hooves, and the horns of *humphead wartlebums*.'

»→ Incidentally, 'humphead wartlebum' makes an

*excellent insult. Next time your mum/dad/brother/sister/teacher/best friend/nan annoys you, call them a 'stinking humphead wartlebum' and you'll instantly feel better.*

'Other Monster Hunters do it simply for the thrill of it,' I continued with a smirk. The sun had now disappeared, leaving a blood-orange sky which made the waves look like they were on fire. 'Lots of monsters live underwater, so I spent many happy years at sea. That was, until Ripclaw came along and put an end to it all.' I sneered at the memory.

'Is Ripclaw a Monster Hunter too?' Atticus asked.

'No, she is not! She has none of the patience, and definitely none of the skill. She's more of a thieving, stealing, shoot-now-ask-questions-later kinda fiend.'

'You mean a pirate?'

'They prefer the term "nautical marauder"

these days, but yes, if you want to think of her as that, I suppose it's accurate enough.'

'So,' said Atticus, preparing to summarise, 'we're in the middle of the English Channel – which is filled with giant monsters – on our way to a deadly island, while being chased by a crazy pirate lady.'

'That about sums it up,' I said, with a nod. 'Don't tell your fathers.'

'I miss my daddiiiiiiiiies,' whined Autumn. She farted and then started to cry, reminding me three times in one second why children are so unbearable.

'I should message them,' said Atticus, sliding out his phone. 'They can send help. The police or the coastguard or someone.'

'Don't even think about it! Put that phone away,' I said, commanding as much authority as I could while dressed as Father Christmas. That's not to say I wasn't tempted; I very much

did not want to be accompanied by the two little weasels, and the trip had already proved to be a tad more nearly-getting-eaten-kind-of-dangerous than I'd anticipated, so the thought of someone responsible swooping in on a speedboat and taking the kids off my hands sounded like absolute bliss. But it wasn't possible.

'If Ripclaw discovers we've alerted the authorities, she'll almost certainly hunt us down and make us suffer,' I said. I passed Autumn a cuttlefish gill to suck to stop her crying. 'Besides, the most important rule in the Code of the Hunters' Guild is that no one must ever find out about what we do.'

'We don't have to tell them the truth,' said Atticus. 'We could just say we got lost at sea, and need someone to rescue us.'

'We're not lost, and we don't need rescuing, thank you very much.' I shuffled in my seat and readjusted my hat. 'More to the point, I'm not

sure how understanding the police would be about the fact that I *borrowed* this boat.'

Atticus gave a reluctant nod. 'Okay, let's just get this map as quick as we can then, so we can all get back home.'

'I think that's what we all want,' I said, getting to my feet.

I switched the engine back on, and untied the sails to give us a bit more *woomph*. We travelled in silence, the only sounds being the chug of the engine and the gentle thwaps of the waves hitting the front of the boat. The sky above us was now a deep indigo, speckled with stars. So many stars. You can't beat a starry night sky while out at sea. I looked over my shoulder to see if the kids had noticed, but of course they hadn't. Atticus was playing his stupid game again, and Autumn was focusing all her attention on picking her nose. Their loss.

We heard the Craggenwich Isles before we

saw them – an eerie wail that echoed across the water. Atticus and Autumn joined me at the front of the boat, and the three of us watched as the islands came into view – a collection of indistinct shadows on the horizon.

The wailing grew louder.

‘What’s that noise?’ Atticus asked.

I switched off the engine and let the boat bob up and down on the waves.

‘That noise,’ I said, ‘is the reason no one comes here.’



## Chapter 9 (ish)

It was a long night. We fashioned a bed of sorts out of towels and a couple of blankets. The cabin was cramped, but warm. The kids slept fine, exhausted from the day’s events, but I couldn’t seem to drop off. It wasn’t helped by the fact that Autumn wriggled in her sleep like a worm with diarrhoea (at one point her toe was actually *in my ear*), and Atticus kept sleep-talking, the highlights of which included ‘You’re a very naughty noodle’ and ‘But I don’t want to eat the teabags . . .’

Not only that, but the wailing sound from





the islands continued throughout most of the night. Needless to say, I was grateful when the sun finally started to rise.

Our clothes were still damp, even though we'd strung them up around the cabin, so it looked like I was going to be Father Christmas for a little while longer. I ditched the jacket, though, and replaced it with my leather one, which was dry enough to wear.

It was a fresh morning, with a sky as bright as a mandrill's bottom.

»→ *In case you're wondering, a mandrill isn't a monster. It's a type of monkey – the biggest in the world, as it happens – and they have big, hairy, bright blue bottoms. Don't believe me? Google it.*

I took three deep breaths, savouring the brisk sea air, then started the engine. We'd drifted a little in the night, but I could still see the islands in the distance. The wailing had stopped by that point, but the creatures that had made the noise

were still very much there, waiting for us.

'Ahhhhhhhh!' came a shout from inside the cabin. 'Noooooo!'

I ran in, expecting to find one – if not both – of my great-grandkids in the hands (or mouth) of a hideous, flesh-eating monster. Instead, I found Atticus wrapped up in a blanket, holding his mobile phone in both hands, a terrified look on his face. Autumn was just waking up next to him. She made a feeble attempt at sweeping back her raggedy hair, then licked her arms like a cat.

'What? What is it?' I asked Atticus.

'My battery's low,' he lamented.

'Seriously?' I said. 'That's what that blood-curdling scream was about?'

He looked up at me in desperation. 'Do you have a charger? Maybe there's one in one of the cupboards.'

'Oh yeah, sure, and what are you going to

plug it into? Your face?’

»» I was tired, okay? I'm sure that if you'd slept in a miserable little cabin with a three-year-old's toe stuck in your ear all night, you'd have given a similar reply.

‘But I need it,’ Atticus complained, cradling the phone in his hands as if it were a terminally ill gerbil that he was desperate to nurse back to life.

‘Do you, Ratty? Do you really need it?’

‘Yes!’

‘No. Air you need, water you need, food you need. Your mobile phone device, you do not need.’

‘I’m hungry,’ said Autumn.

*Always* hungry, that child. Always hungry. I cursed myself for mentioning food.

‘Can you wait a bit longer?’ I asked her.

‘Nope nope nope nope nope nope noooooooooope.’

It was too early for this.

‘Poop poop poop poop poop poop pooooooooooop,’ she went on.

It was FAR too early for this.

‘Okay, both of you, out,’ I said. ‘We’re nearly there. We’ll get the map, hotfoot it back to the mainland, and then I’ll buy you whatever food you want.’

‘Chocolate and ice cream and lettuce and toast?’ said Autumn, jumping to her feet.

»» What three-year-old in their right mind would add lettuce to that list?! Everyone knows it's the wettest of all foods. Except for soup.

‘Whatever you want, Scrag.’

‘YippeeEEEEEEEE!’

‘And you’ll buy me a new phone charger?’ said Atticus, looking perkier than he had all weekend.

‘If that’s what your heart truly wants, your wish is my command.’

I returned to the helm and steered *The Wonky Goose* the last few miles to the islands. Most were small, little more than large rocks dotted with a few trees and measly shrubs. Others were a bit more substantial, casting ominous shadows over us as we nipped past them. We were heading for one that was south-east of the main clump, as per Grizzler's instructions, with a rocky hill shaped like a buffalo's head in its centre. It wasn't hard to spot.



The buffalo rock looked like it was crying out in pain, as if warning us to stay away. Unfortunately, that was not an option.

I kept going until we were right next to the shore, then killed the engine.

'Okay, we're here. You two stay in the boat and try not to die. I'll be back as quick as I can.'

'But what about the wailing things?' Atticus asks.

'What wailing things?' I replied.

'The things we heard last night.'

'I heard them, I heard them!' said Autumn. 'They went waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaa'

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eeeeeeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaawooo  
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eeeeeeeeee-’

I stuck my fingers in my ears. Several minutes later, I took them out again. She was still going.

‘Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhhhhhhhhahhha  
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ooooaaaaaaaaaaaaahh.’

She stopped, looking up at me.

‘Are you quite finished?’ I asked.

‘Waaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahh.’ She paused, then nodded. ‘Yes.’

‘Those ones,’ said Atticus. ‘What were those things?’

‘They’re called rot-wraiths,’ I explained, ‘and they make the sound of all the sailors that have ever died at sea. They’re spectral beings that feed on screams, so whatever you do, *don’t scream.*’

‘What happens if we scream?’ asked Atticus.

‘All rot-wraiths want the same thing: to claim a body for their own. Screams make them stronger, giving them the ability to grab hold of things and snatch other people’s bodies. But that’s not going to happen, because you’re going



to **stay on the boat**. Right?’

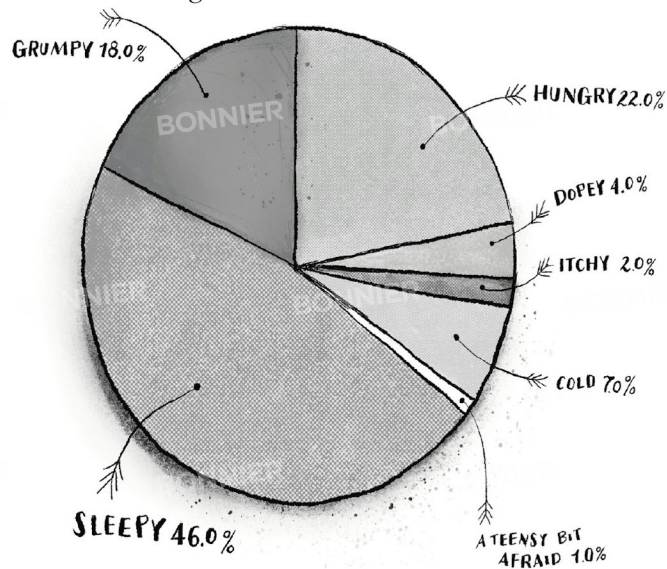
‘Right,’ said Atticus.

‘Good. I’ll come back soon.’

I took off my boots and socks and slipped into the water. It was freezing. Like, turn-your-toes-into-shrivelled-peas freezing. I hobbled to the shoreline and scanned the area for rot-wraiths. They’re trickier to see in the day, but they’re also nocturnal, so are more active – and therefore more dangerous – at night. I couldn’t spot any. The island was bleak, with gravelly sand and dense trees.



I took out Grizzler’s instructions and headed in the direction of the buried map. If I could sum up my mood at that moment, it would look something like this:



Basically, a big old mix of most of the Seven Dwarves.

» Was there a dwarf called 'Itchy'? I forget.



I'd been walking for a fair while, edging my way around the coastline, when I felt something cold brush past my side. I turned to see a few wisps of black shimmering in the morning sun. It had the vague outline of a human, but with skeletal hands and an elongated face. Where its eyes should be were two dark holes, and its mouth was a gaping void. It looked like a trick of the light – but it was definitely real.

I'm not a screamer, but the shock of the rot-wraith appearing so close to me caused me to let out the tiniest of whimpers. The monster sucked it in, and its outline immediately pulsed a little darker. Its bony fingers reached towards me as if to stroke my hair, but passed straight through my face. It wasn't strong enough to touch me, and I intended to keep it that way.

'GG, GG, GG, GG!'

Oh no.



Autumn came running around the corner, with Atticus close behind. The rot-wraith turned in their direction.

'You stay away from them!' I said to it, although I have no idea if they even have ears.

'I saw a bug!' said Autumn, still running towards me, an excited look on her face.

'She wanted to tell you she saw a bug,' said Atticus.

'And you felt that was a good enough reason

to leave the absolute safety of the boat and step foot on this island filled with –'

That was the moment the two of them spotted the rot-wraith. They stopped in their tracks and stared at it. The monster looked down at them, its fingers twitching. Atticus gulped.

'That's a . . . ?'

'Yes,' I replied.

'So we shouldn't . . . ?'

'No,' I replied. 'I need you both to stay very calm. It can't hurt us if we don't scream, so all we have to do is keep quiet and keep walking. Easy, right? Now make your way over here.'

Without taking their eyes off the rot-wraith, Atticus held his sister's hand and led her towards me, whispering, 'Don't scream, don't scream, don't scream.'

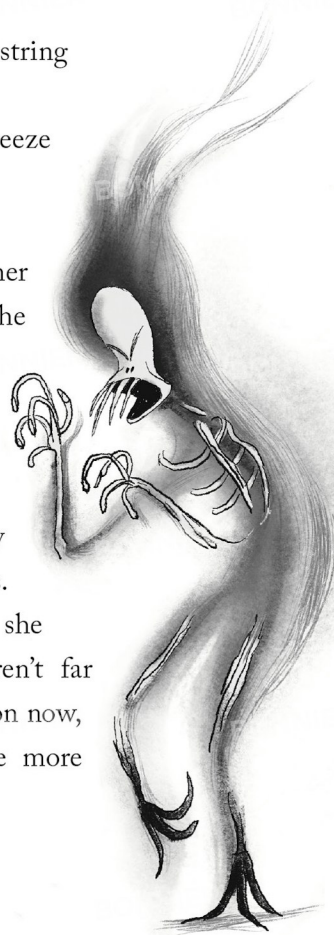
Autumn's eyes were as wide as lollipops. Given how much that girl likes screaming, I was *officially worried*. Here are some of the things I

have seen Autumn scream at in the past:

- a puppy
- a little piece of string
- a butterfly
- a very gentle breeze
- a paperclip.

So the chances of her *not* screaming at the sight of a ghost-like monster were very slim.

I took her other hand and put my finger to my lips. She nodded, as if she understood. We weren't far from the map's location now, so I figured it made more



sense to let them come with me than take them back to the boat. The rot-wraith followed us, occasionally leaning in, in an attempt to provoke a reaction.

‘Go away, stinky stink face!’ Autumn said to it.

Unsurprisingly, it did not obey her request.

After a while, more rot-wraiths drifted out of the trees until there was a pack of about twelve of them surrounding us. We pushed on, trying our best to ignore them. On the other side of Autumn, Atticus was physically shaking.

*‘Follow the shoreline past the knobby rocks until you reach the beach of a thousand crabs,’* I read aloud, trying to keep my voice chirpy. ‘Anyone see any crabs?’

‘I can smell some!’ said Autumn, sniffing the air.

‘Sure you can, Scrag,’ I said. ‘But can you *see* any?’

‘There’s a crab!’ she said, pointing.

‘No, Scrag, that’s a rock.’

‘Oh . . .’ She pointed again. ‘There’s a crab!’

‘No, Scrag, that’s a cloud. In the sky. Which looks nothing like a crab.’

‘Oh . . .’ She pointed again. ‘There’s a crab!’

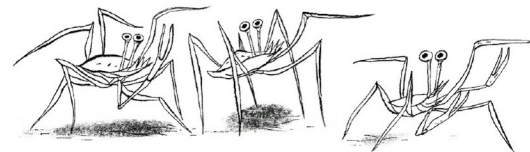
‘No, Scrag, that’s a – actually, I think that *is* a crab.’

Something scuttled past our feet. Yes, it was definitely a crab! It was about the size of my palm and had a translucent shell, tinged with orange. Two beady eyes stuck out the top of its head like puffed-up grains of rice.

‘There are loads of them,’ said Atticus.

He was right. They moved so fast, they were hard to spot, but as soon as your eyes adjusted to them, they were everywhere – popping out of the sand, dashing about and then disappearing again.

‘This must be the spot,’ said Atticus. ‘Where



do we go from here?’

The rot-wraiths started circling, sensing our excitement.

*‘It’s beneath a tree covered in yellow moss, with crooked branches that hang down like the legs of a giant spider,’* I read. ‘Could he not have been a bit more specific? There are hundreds of trees here, and they’ve all got crooked branches. How are we ever going to –’

‘That’s the one,’ said Atticus, pointing to a large tree in the distance. To be fair to Grizzler, it really did look like a giant spider.

The three of us jogged over to it, the rot-wraiths trailing behind us. Up close, the tree looked so much like a spider that I half-expected it to come to life and reveal giant poison-dripping fangs (I’ve encountered worse). The moss was thick, dotted with spongy mushrooms.

‘This must be the one,’ I said. ‘Now, we dig.’

Which is when Autumn noticed the worm

crawling across her shoe.

Which is when she bent down to pick it up.

Which is when she misjudged the distance from her head to the ground and head-butted a tree root that was poking out of the earth.

Tears filled her eyes and her bottom lip wobbled like a jelly balanced on top of another jelly, balanced on top of a rickety pile of Jenga blocks.

‘Whatever you do,’ said Atticus, ‘don’t –’

Too late.

Autumn opened her mouth wide and let out a piercing, gut-wrenching scream.

**Chapter We Don't Have Time To Be  
Worrying About Chapter Numbers  
Because Autumn Is About To Be  
Dragged Away By A Whole Load Of  
Hungry Rot Wraiths**

The second the scream left Autumn's lips, the rot-wraiths reacted. They dived towards her, their gaping mouths devouring the sound of her scream. Their hands creaked and cracked as they came to life.

The scream attracted yet more of the monsters, which glided towards us, wailing with jealousy. There were too many to count, but there must have been at least fifty of them.

'Stop screaming!' I screamed at Autumn.

'That's not going to help!' Atticus screamed at me.



The rot-wraiths must have thought all their Christmases had come at once. Especially since I was dressed as Father Christmas. If only I still had the infinity bag, I could at least have fended them off with a squirt of wart water or something. As it was, I had nothing.

I grabbed Autumn by the wrist and yanked her out of the way, just as a rot-wraith was about to wrap its hand around her ankle. Autumn took offence at being yanked and screamed some more. The rot-wraiths were now almost fully solidified, their bodies a collection of ill-fitting bones held together by a midnight-blue mist. Their mouths made a crunching sound as their gnarled teeth ground together.

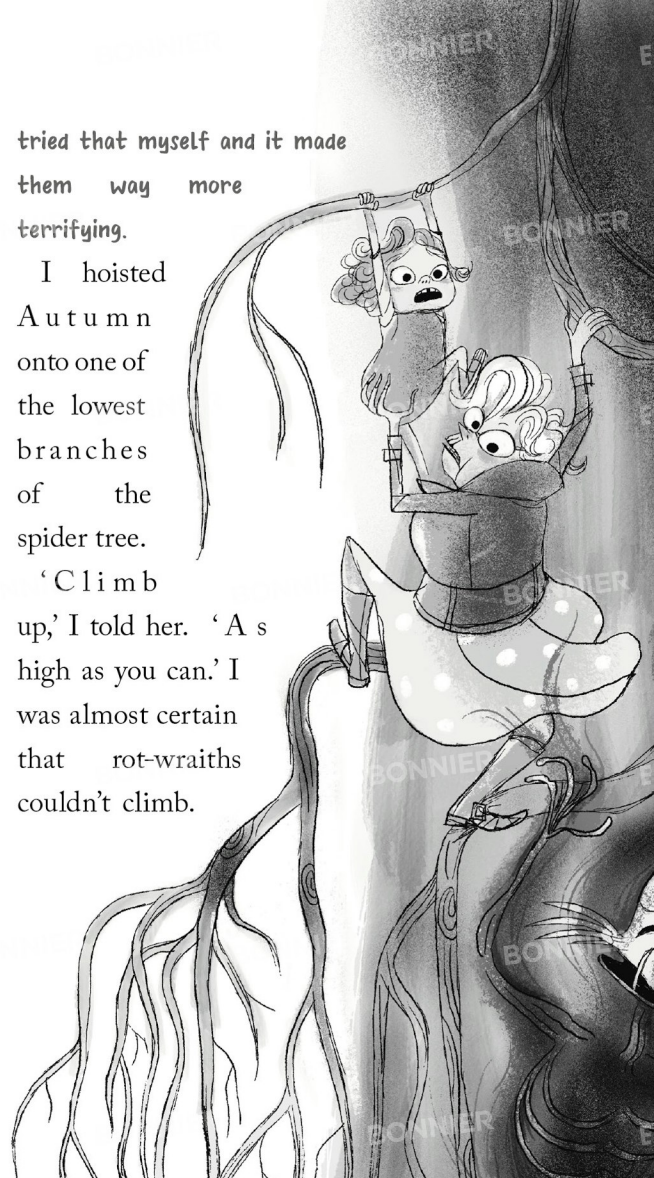
»→ I hope this section isn't going to give you nightmares, by the way. If you're finding the rot-wraiths a bit scary, maybe imagine them with bunny faces and candyfloss hair . . .

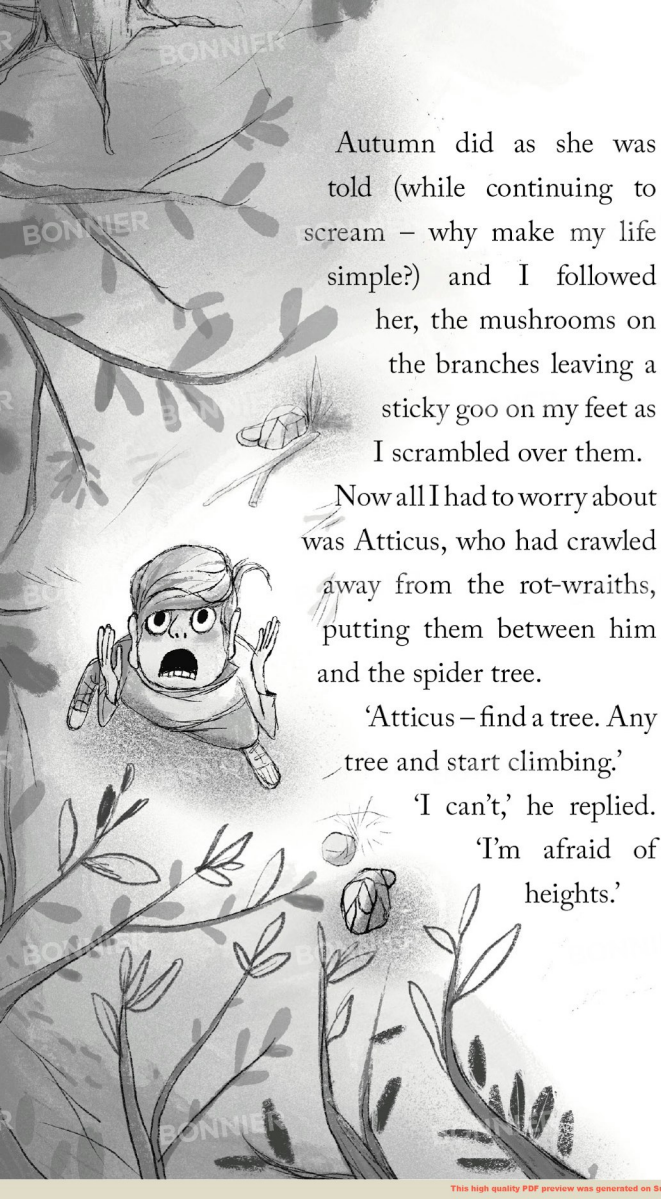
YEESH! On second thoughts, maybe don't – I just

tried that myself and it made them way more terrifying.

I hoisted Autumn onto one of the lowest branches of the spider tree.

'Climb up,' I told her. 'As high as you can.' I was almost certain that rot-wraiths couldn't climb.



A black and white illustration of a forest scene. In the foreground, a character with a determined expression is running away from the viewer. Behind them, several rot-wraiths are crawling on the ground, some with their arms raised. The background shows trees and foliage. The name 'BONNIER' is visible in the top left and bottom left corners of the illustration area.

Autumn did as she was told (while continuing to scream – why make my life simple?) and I followed her, the mushrooms on the branches leaving a sticky goo on my feet as I scrambled over them.

Now all I had to worry about was Atticus, who had crawled away from the rot-wraiths, putting them between him and the spider tree.

‘Atticus – find a tree. Any tree and start climbing.’

‘I can’t,’ he replied.

‘I’m afraid of heights.’

‘More than you’re afraid of being possessed by a rot-wraith?’ I asked.

He got to his feet and started looking for a suitable tree. It didn’t take him long to find one, but a couple of branches up, he started shaking his head, unable to go any further.

As it turns out, climbing a tree wouldn’t have saved him anyway, since my ‘almost certain’ belief that rot-wraiths can’t climb was, as it turns out, entirely incorrect. Rot-wraiths *can* climb. Alarmingly well. (In fact, now I come to think of it, I vaguely remember them being known as ‘climbing assassins’, so I couldn’t have been more wrong . . .) The ones nearest the base of the spider tree dug in their sharp nails and used them to claw their way up the trunk.

‘Higher,’ I yelled at Autumn. ‘And faster! Keep climbing.’

But no matter how high we went, and how fast we climbed, the rot-wraiths kept coming. We



Before I reached the end of the beach, Atticus reappeared, a little dazed, with a few stray leaves in his hair, but no longer being chased by the rot-wraiths and very much alive.

‘You’re alive!’ I said, relief flooding through me. ‘Perhaps we’ll make a Monster Hunter out of you yet.’

At the time, I was joking, but it did make me wonder . . .

‘What happened to the rot-wraiths?’ I asked. They were nowhere to be seen.

‘I managed to distract them,’ he said. ‘But we should find the map and get out of here as quickly as we can.’

‘Couldn’t have said it better myself.’

We hurried back to the spider tree. By this point, Autumn had found her way back down, plucked a slimy and particularly poisonous-looking mushroom, and was about to shove the whole thing in her mouth.

I batted the mushroom away and squished it beneath my toes.

‘How about we try really hard *not* to kill ourselves, just for, like, the next ten minutes or so?’ I said to her. ‘That would be a real treat.’

‘Bokay,’ she replied. ‘Bi can boo bat.’

‘Bood,’ I said. ‘I mean, good. Now, let’s start digging. That spot there, at the base of the tree, where the grass is slightly darker.’

The three of us dropped to our knees and started pulling up clumps of grass and scraping away the gravelly mud. The deeper we dug, the harder the soil became. Our nails were filthy and the ground was tough.

Atticus found a thin, pointy stone and started using it as a spade, which sped things up a bit. Before long, the hole was as deep as a kitchen sink. Just as I was beginning to despair that we weren’t in the right spot after all, the stone hit something hard and metallic.





Clink!

‘That must be it!’ I exclaimed.

With the treasure in sight, the three of us dug with renewed vigour until the hole was big enough to pull out the box that was buried there. It was an old biscuit tin, with a picture on the lid of a lady in a posh frock eating a Jammie Dodger.

» True fact about Jammie Dodgers: I can fit thirteen in my mouth at once, a discovery I made after making a bet with Doagy Pete. (A bet I won, I hasten to add.)

The tin was battered and filthy, but that didn’t matter, so long as the map was inside. I held my breath and slid open the lid . . .

At least, that’s how it will go in the film adaptation of this book. The reality was not quite as smooth, because one of the corners got stuck, so I had to dig in my nails and use my teeth a bit. It got quite slobbery, there was some frustrated banging, Atticus had to help out . . . But that’s all by the by. The fact is, we finally got it loose and *then* we slid open the lid in a perfect Hollywood moment of tension.

The three of us peered in.

There, folded twice, at the bottom of the tin, was the Map of Mayhem.

‘Oh, you little beauty,’ I said as I lifted it out.



The map was made out of a thin piece of leather that had been bleached a pale yellow. Its edges were frayed and it smelled of goat breath and old turnips. But I didn't care how it smelled. We had the map, that's all that mattered. Finally, we could all go home.

'Hello, old friend,' said a chilling voice behind us. 'I believe that belongs to me.'



## Chapter Oh Dear

This time, it turned out it was my arch-nemesis.  
And we were now in a whole heap of trouble . . .



## Chapter The Next One

‘Hello, Winifred,’ I said, trying to keep my cool.

‘You know I don’t like it when you call me that, Spit-Tooth,’ said Ripclaw. ‘I hope you’re not deliberately trying to antagonise me?’

‘I wouldn’t dream of it,’ I replied. I put my arms out to protect Atticus and Autumn, although quite what use my flabby old arms were going to be against the ruthless Ripclaw was anybody’s guess.

‘Any particular reason you’re dressed as Father Christmas?’ Ripclaw asked.

‘Long story,’ I replied.

'That lady's got an ugly nose,' said Autumn.

'I don't disagree with you, Scrag, but she also has a rather terrifying temper, so it's probably best not to say that out loud, while in front of her, while she's holding a gun.'

»→ *Oh yes, I forgot to mention that part: she was holding a gun. And she was pointing it straight at me. I can assure you, at the time, it was very much at the forefront of my attention.*

She was dressed in a maroon-and-gold waistcoat over a baggy, weathered shirt, with velvet pantaloons tucked into leather-high boots. A turquoise bandana kept her fair hair from blowing in her face. Her crooked grin had a few more gold teeth than the last time I'd seen her, and she also had a lot more wrinkles (but then, don't we all?).

'How did you find us?' Atticus asked.

'I followed you here, of course,' said Ripclaw. 'I see your grandkids have inherited your

intelligence, Spit-Tooth, or lack thereof.'

'Great-grandkids,' Autumn corrected her.

'Great-shush-your-mouth,' I replied. 'Well, the good news is we've found the map, so how about we hand it over, you go off on your jolly in search of whatever it leads to, we go home, and everyone's happy?'

'Agreed,' said Ripclaw. She held out her hand, the gun in her other hand still aimed at my heart.

I hesitated for the briefest moment. Was it really going to be that easy? The one thing everyone knows about Ripclaw is that she is **NEVER TO BE TRUSTED**. But when someone is pointing a gun at your chest, your options become severely limited.

I handed over the map.

Ripclaw sniggered. One of those unnecessarily cruel ones, you know, that only villains seem capable of pulling off.

‘Why did you snigger?’ I asked.

‘Why do you think?’ Ripclaw replied, tilting her head like an evil turkey.

‘Because now you’ve got the map, you’re *not* going to let us toddle back to our boat and sail off on our merry way?’

‘Correct!’ said Ripclaw, shoving the map into the pocket of her pantaloons.

‘But that’s not fair!’ shouted Atticus.

‘Life’s not fair, kid,’ said Ripclaw. ‘The sooner you realise that, the better.’

‘So what *are* you going to do?’ I asked.

‘I’m going to smash your boat to pieces, then I’m going to sail off and leave you here.’

To be devoured by rot-wraiths, I thought. Which made me wonder once again where they’d got to, and how Atticus had managed to keep them away for so long . . .

‘What do you want the map for, anyway?’ I asked. I’ve watched enough movies to know

that, in situations where the villain has the hero at their mercy and is about to do something dastardly, the best thing you can do is keep them talking.

‘You really don’t know?’ Ripclaw replied. ‘All those years in possession of the map, and you never tried to find its treasure?’

‘I’ve never cared much for shiny things,’ I said.

‘So why did you steal it from me??’ Ripclaw’s eyes were burning with rage.

‘Because I knew it would annoy you! Which only seemed fair since you were about to shoot me in the chest and leave me on a deserted island to die. Oh, wait a minute – that sounds eerily similar to what’s happening *right now*. You should really look into varying your punishments every once in a while.’

‘So the map is a *treasure* map?’ asked Atticus, butting in to defuse the tension.

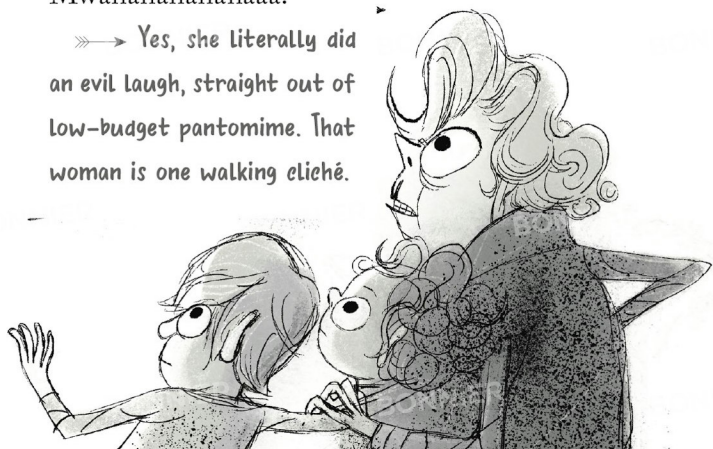
‘Of course it’s a treasure map!’ said Ripclaw.

‘What’s the point in a map, if it doesn’t lead to treasure?’

‘What treasure does it lead to?’ said Atticus.

Ripclaw’s crooked smile was back. ‘Something very ancient and *very* powerful. In fact, it’s the most powerful artefact ever known, and once it’s in my possession, I will be utterly unstoppable! I’ll be the most feared and revered nautical marauder of all time. I’ll hijack cruise ships and commandeering submarines. I’ll blow up whole islands *just because I can*. Anything I want, I’ll take. Anyone who gets in my way, I’ll destroy. And no one will be able to stop me! Mwahahahahahaaa!’

»→ Yes, she literally did an evil laugh, straight out of low-budget pantomime. That woman is one walking cliché.



‘Anyway,’ she said. ‘Enough chit-chat. It’s high time I –’

‘Autumn, when we get home, I’m going to sneak into your room and eat your secret stash of sweets,’ said Atticus.

Autumn looked outraged. ‘No, you’re not,’ she said.

‘I am.’

‘You’re not.’

‘I am.’

‘You’re not.’

‘I am.’

‘You’re not.’




‘I am.’

‘You’re not.’

‘What are they doing?’ said Ripclaw. ‘Make them stop.’


‘Actually,’ said Atticus, ‘you’re right. I’m not going to eat your sweets . . . because I’ve EATEN THEM ALREADY!’








That was the final straw. Autumn opened her mouth – distraught at the thought of Atticus eating all her sweets – and screamed at the top of her lungs. It was exactly what Atticus was hoping for. He started screaming too, and then I joined in for good measure.

→ My scream actually harmonised with Atticus's, which isn't an integral part of the story, but something I feel compelled to mention, because I was quite proud of it at the time.




'Why are you screaming? Stop screaming!' said Ripclaw, waving the gun at us, but she soon had bigger fish to fry as the horde of rot-wraiths came drifting towards us.



'What the devil?!' said Ripclaw. She fired her gun at the rot-wraiths, but the bullets went straight through them.



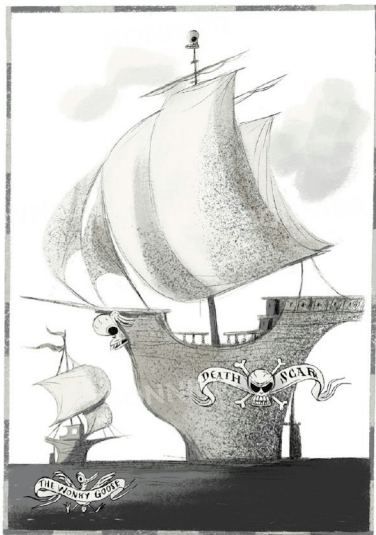
The distraction was perfect, and we took it as our cue to leave. We pelted towards our boat, but Ripclaw soon noticed we were escaping and fired at us instead. Bullets whizzed past my ears. She usually has a deadly aim, so I can only thank the surprise of the rot-wraiths for putting her off.



We eventually made it to *The Wonky Goose* and splashed our way over to it. It was right where we'd left it, although it looked much smaller than before, lost in the shadow of Ripclaw's mighty ship, which was moored next to it. Atticus was ahead and jumped over the side first. I scooped up Autumn and plonked her in, before clambering in after her. My dodgy hip gave another twinge in protest, but I chose to ignore it.



Ripclaw's ship was dark and beautiful – made of sleek mahogany and decorated with pure gold. *The Death Scar*, she'd named it. (Like I said, she's not the most subtle of people. Also: big fan of *Star Wars*.) Several cannons lined its sides and pitch-black sails hung from its mast. If our boats were dinosaurs, Ripclaw's would be a T-Rex, and ours would be one of those scrawny little ones that look like a pigeon.



More bullets whizzed in our direction. 'You'll never escape me!' Ripclaw roared from the top of a nearby hillock.

Actually, that was exactly what we were planning to do. The rot-wraiths had cut off her route, making it much harder for her to get to us. I started the engine and rammed *The Wonky Goose* into the side of *The Death Scar*. It took a couple of rammings, but the wood panelling eventually cracked and water started to spill in. Turns out, even a scrawny pigeon can have a powerful peck.

Ripclaw screamed, much to the delight of the rot-wraiths that surrounded her. With a squeal of glee, I set *The Wonky Goose* at full speed and we whizzed away from the Craggenwich Isles, leaving the rot-wraiths, Ripclaw and the sinking *Death Scar* far behind us.



## Chapter?





## Chapter The One After The Next One

(Yes, those pages are deliberately blank. I thought that maybe you could do with a little rest. I mean, that last chapter was A LOT. And if you thought it was exhausting to read, just imagine how exhausting it was actually living it. So why don't you stare at these blank pages for a bit until you've calmed down? That's what I'm currently doing. Maybe get a pen and doodle something relaxing, like a duckling with a hot chocolate or a puppy having a bath. Doodle done? Then let's continue . . .)

'Well, that was THRILLING!' I boomed, when we were some distance away from the island.

'We nearly died,' said Atticus, deadpan. 'Multiple times.' He was stood next to me at the stern, which was an appropriate place to be, given the look on his face. Autumn was at the far end of the boat, leaning over the edge with her mouth open and her tongue stuck out, trying to catch splashes from the waves.

'Yes, but wasn't it exciting?' I said to Atticus. His lips twitched, as if he was fighting a smile.



‘Maybe a little,’ he replied. ‘Did you see how I led all those rot-wraiths away?’

‘Yeah – how did you manage to keep them away so long?’

‘It was pretty simple, really,’ said Atticus, bouncing up and down on his toes. ‘I used my phone to record myself screaming and played it on a loop. And then I left the phone in a hole in a rotten tree trunk. The rot-wraiths were all trying to get to it, but they couldn’t reach, and because it was a recording, I don’t think it made them any stronger.’

‘I see,’ I said.

He paused, as if expecting me to say something more, then carried on. ‘I got the idea from *Zombie Duck*, because the zombie goat boss on Level 29 can only be defeated if you make enough noise to lead away the undead piglets first.’

‘And there I was thinking computer games

were a waste of brain,’ I said. ‘But hang on a minute, does that mean you left your phone on the island?’

He looked genuinely heartbroken.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘Sacrificed for the greater good, I suppose. It was nearly out of battery anyway. I’m hoping that, because I used it to save our lives, my dads might buy me a new one.’

‘I’m sure they will,’ I said. ‘If not, I’ll just steal you one.’

‘GG!’

‘Joking! I was joking . . .’

The boat leapt into the air as we went over a particularly high wave.

‘So, without your phone, I suppose you won’t be able to *message your friends* any more,’ I said, giving him some serious side-eye.

‘I guess not,’ he said, not taking the bait.

‘You want to talk about messaging your friends? Or about not messaging your friends?’

Or about the fact that you don't have any friends . . .? Anything like that?

'I have friends!' Atticus said, a little too forcefully.

'Okay, okay,' I said, holding up my hands, before realising that wasn't a very sensible thing to do while steering a boat. I put my hands back on the wheel.

Whatever secret he was hiding, he didn't want to tell me, and that was *fine*.

Autumn stumbled her way over to us.

'How you doing, Scrag?' I asked her. 'Not too traumatised by all the monsters that have tried to kill you in the last twenty-four hours, are you?'

'Nope,' she replied in a chirpy voice. 'I'm hungry.'

'Of course you are. Well, we're heading back to the mainland for breakfast, so just hold your horses.'

'What horses?' she asked.

'It's an expression,' I told her. 'Hold your horses.'

'I don't have any horses,' she said.

'I know, it's an expression.'

'What's an expression?'

'Hold your horses.'

'But I don't have any horses.'

'Yes, I know, I'm trying to tell you that it's an expression.'

'What's an expression?'

'HOLD YOUR HORSES!'

'I don't like expressions . . .'

'What do you mean, you don't like expressions?'

'They make me sneeze.'

'Expressions make you sneeze?'

'No, horses do.'

»—> If you're confused, for once I'm not going to blame that on your lack of intelligence; it was

a very confusing conversation. Thankfully, Atticus changed the subject by asking:

‘What about Ripclaw?’

‘What about her?’

‘Do you think she’s . . .’

‘Dead?’ I said. ‘Unlikely. It’ll take more than a horde of rot-wraiths to end the likes of her.’

‘What if she comes after us again?’

Yeah. I’d been trying not to think about that.

‘I’m hoping if she escapes the rot-wraiths, she’ll leave us alone, now she has the map.’

‘This map?’ said Autumn, holding up a piece of folded yellow leather that looked an awful lot like the Map of Mayhem.

‘How . . . Um. How did you get that?’ I asked her, agog.

‘When we ran past the gun lady, I took it out of her pocket,’ Autumn replied.

I rattled through a thousand different emotions – from anger to disbelief via frustration

– before settling on pride. My little Scrag, the map thief!



‘What did you do that for?’ Atticus said to Autumn. ‘Now Ripclaw’s going to come after us again.’

‘She was a mean mean lady lady,’ said Autumn.

'And how mean do you think she's going to be when she finds out you've stolen her map?' Atticus asked. I'd never seen him this agitated.

'It was *our* map. *We* found it,' said Autumn. 'I did the scraping with my hands.' She held up her dirty fingernails as proof.

'Yes, but we found it to give it back to her, because it was *hers*,' said Atticus. 'Have you not listened to a single thing GG's said over the last two days?'

'Nope,' said Autumn, as if she was extremely proud of that fact.

Atticus yelled in frustration.

'Okay, okay, enough,' I said. I took the map out of Autumn's hand and held it in the air. 'We'll just keep it somewhere safe, so if she ever does return, we'll be able to give it back to her. End of.'

'Hmmm,' Atticus hmmed.

'What do you mean "hmmm"? Don't

hmmm. It makes people think that you're thinking, and thinking makes people nervous.'

'I *am* thinking,' said Atticus. He chewed his bottom lip, unsure. 'What if we used the map to find the treasure ourselves?'

'And why would we want to do a silly thing like that?' I asked. 'Your dads are coming home tonight, which means I can finally get rid of you. Who knows how long some foolhardy treasure quest is going to take?'

'But remember what Ripclaw said? The map leads to the most powerful artefact ever known. We can't let her find it!'

'Can't we?'

'No! You heard about the rampage she's got planned. What if people get injured or . . . or killed?'

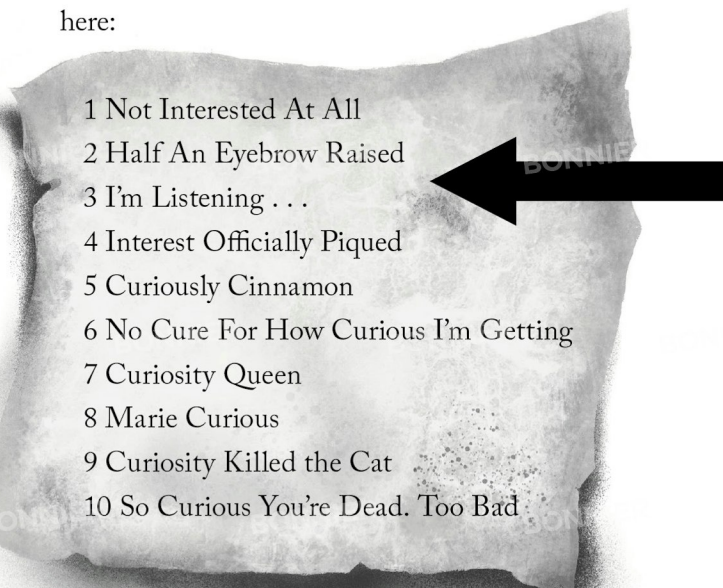
'Hmmm.' It was my turn to hmmm. 'What do you think, Autumn?'

'Don't hold the horses,' she said with a nod.

'Wise as ever,' I replied.

'Aren't you curious what the treasure might be?' Atticus asked. 'It could be anything! A magic sword, a mystical gemstone, a special orb that turns you invisible . . . !'

I suppose I was a smidgy bit curious. On a scale of 1 to Curious, I was somewhere about here:

- 
- 1 Not Interested At All
  - 2 Half An Eyebrow Raised
  - 3 I'm Listening . . .
  - 4 Interest Officially Piqued
  - 5 Curiously Cinnamon
  - 6 No Cure For How Curious I'm Getting
  - 7 Curiosity Queen
  - 8 Marie Curious
  - 9 Curiosity Killed the Cat
  - 10 So Curious You're Dead. Too Bad

'Do you even know how to read a map?' I asked. 'Don't you kids rely on the Google to take you everywhere these days?'

'GG, everyone who plays computer games knows how to read a map,' Atticus said, as if I was terribly old and knew nothing at all. 'It's an essential skill. We could at least open the map and see where the treasure's hidden.'

'Impossible!' I replied.

'Why's that impossible? You've got the map there – just open it and take a look.'

'I'm not talking about the map, I'm talking about *that*,' I said, pointing to the enormous ship that was heading straight for us. Atticus turned around and gasped. It was *The Death Scar*, and at its helm – looking as fierce and loony as ever – was Ripclaw.

'I guess she survived the rot-wraiths then,' Atticus said.

'I guess she did. Although goodness knows



how she patched her ship up so quickly.’

‘It’s gonna hit us,’ said Autumn.

‘Not if I can help it,’ I replied.

*The Death Scar* was at least ten times the size of *The Wonky Goose*, by which I mean it could eat us for breakfast, by which I mean it could smash us into a million pieces, by which I mean the situation was not looking good.

HOWEVER, this was not my first rodeo, by which I mean all was not lost, by which I mean we still had a chance, by which I mean I had every intention of outsmarting my arch-nemesis and getting us out of this rather sticky situation.

I spun the wheel hard to the left and dodged *The Death Scar* by the narrowest hair. *The Death Scar* may be big, but *The Wonky Goose* was nimble, and I was a maverick behind the wheel.

What we didn’t have was cannons. And what *The Death Scar* did have . . . was cannons. Now that we were tearing past its side, the cannons

were directly in line with us.

**BOOOOOOOOM!!**

The first wave of cannonballs exploded out of *The Death Scar*. They landed either side of us, creating mighty splashes that soared above our heads. *The Wonky Goose* dipped and nearly capsized. We all grabbed the sides to stop ourselves from being thrown overboard. One of the sails tore and the wind whipped it around the mast, rendering it useless.

‘What do we do?’ shouted Atticus.

‘I need you to unravel that sail, or we’re not going anywhere,’ I said.

Atticus looked up at the mast, a pained expression on his face. He shook his head. ‘I can’t,’ he said. ‘It’s heights. I can’t . . .’

‘Move aside, useless boy. I’ll do it myself.’ (If I’d known how hurt he was going to look when I called him ‘useless’, I might have chosen a different word. ‘Hopeless’, perhaps.) ‘You hold the wheel and do exactly what I say.’

**BOOOOOOOOOOM!!**

More cannonballs, even closer this time. Ripclaw had turned her ship one hundred and eighty degrees, exposing its opposite side – the one I’d crashed into back at the Craggenwich Isles. The hole I’d hoped would sink the ship was covered in seaweed, held together by sporktopus dung – the stickiest and most waterproof of all the dungs.

»→ *Spare a moment for the scientist who had to test all the different types of dung in the world before arriving at that conclusion.*

Ripclaw must have had some of the dung on-board *f o r* that very reason. Darn her for *being so* prepared! Well, there was nothing I could do about that now.

**BOOOOOOOOOOM!!**

We were not going to survive the onslaught for long.

‘Scrag, I need you to watch those cannons and tell me the second they turn red. Can you do that for me?’

She nodded. It might give us a couple of seconds’ warning.

I held on to the mast with both hands and hoicked myself up.

Yeesh, my upper body strength was not what it used to be. After a couple of false starts, I slowly made my way up the wooden pole. High above me, thick grey clouds rolled in, covering the sky.

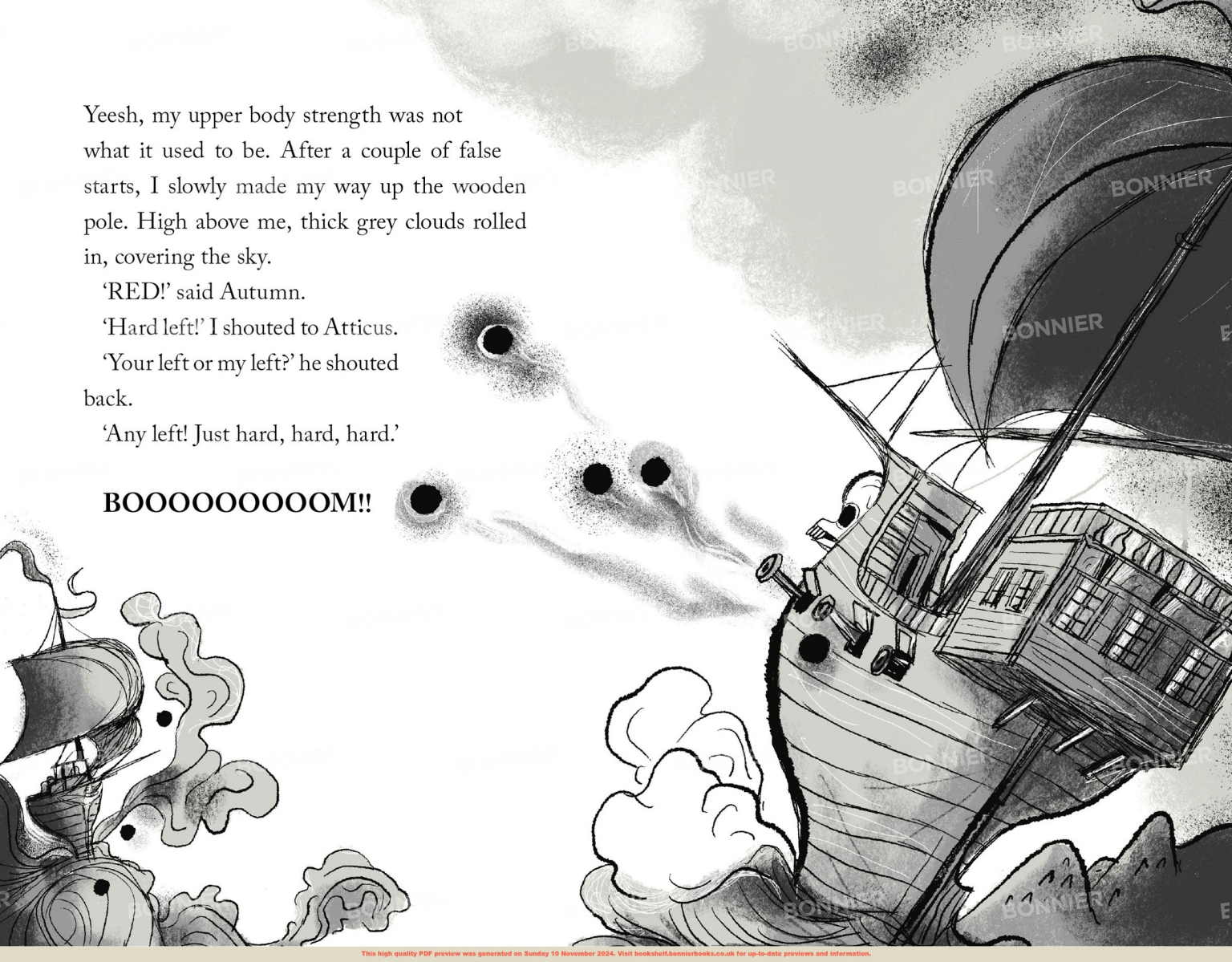
'RED!' said Autumn.

'Hard left!' I shouted to Atticus.

'Your left or my left?' he shouted back.

'Any left! Just hard, hard, hard.'

**BOOOOOOOOOOM!!**



Atticus turned the wheel as fast as he could and we swerved out of the cannonballs' path in the nick of time.

By this point, I'd reached the sail. I unwound it from the mast while balancing on the yardarm. The ripped parts of the material flapped about in my hands. I needed something to tie them together . . . Balancing with all the grace of a flamingo on ice, I took off my Santa hat, ripped off the fluffy trim, and used it to tie the sail back together. It had started to rain and my hair stuck to my face like soggy pasta.

'RED!' – Autumn.

'Hard right!' – me.

'On it!' – Atticus.

**BOOOOOOOOOOM!!**

Another near miss, although now the sail was fixed we at least had some speed behind us again.

I spared a glance at Ripclaw, who was fuming at our refusal to be blown to pieces. It can't just have been luck and Atticus's erratic steering that had caused us to survive this long. My guess was that Ripclaw didn't have any crew, meaning she was having to steer and fire at the same time, running back and forth from the helm to the cannons, making it much harder to aim.

»→ I heard a rumour a few years back that Ripclaw's entire crew walked out on her, on account of poor working conditions. Complaints included weevils in the bread, bed bugs in the hammocks, and a lack of quilted toilet paper in the lavatory.

A flash of lightning lit up the sky, followed by an almighty crack of thunder. Rain was really bucketing down now. The clouds in the distance were so dark they were almost black.



It went against every nautical instinct I had, but if we were to shake off Ripclaw, it might be our only hope.

‘Ratty, aim for those dark clouds over there,’ I yelled.

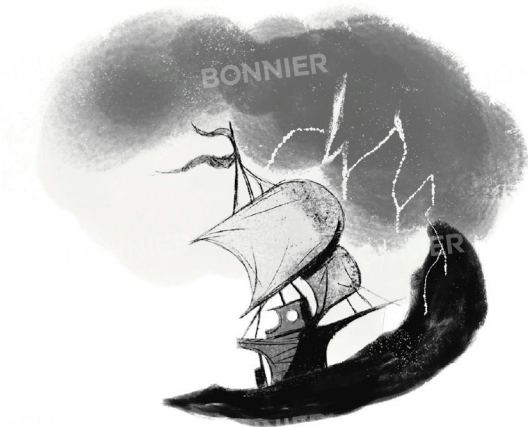
I was going to take us right into the eye of the storm.



## Chapter McChapter Face

The rain was lashing down in an endless torrent and the waves were so strong we were lifted high up into the air one moment, then plummeted back down again the next. It felt like we were on a log flume at a particularly dodgy theme park – one where the designer had got massively carried away and had absolutely no regard for health and safety – and I was **LOVING EVERY SECOND OF IT.**

‘Wahoooooooooooooooo!’ I said as we fell from the top of the biggest wave yet. The dark blue of the sea raced up to meet us. ‘Hey, kids, put your





hands in the air! It makes it way more fun!

'I'm good, thanks,' Atticus shouted over the sound of the rain. He was still at the wheel, and I was beside him. It took our combined strength to steer against the battling waves. Sea water and rain battered my face, and I'd never felt so alive.

I'd given Autumn the job of 'staying in the cabin and not moving', which she'd taken to mean 'run up and down the length of the boat, pretending to be a mermaid'. There was a big smile on her face, though, so I thought I'd leave her to it.

The next time a wave launched us into the air, I snatched a glance behind us. Ripclaw was still in pursuit, but the distance between us was increasing. She was too far away now to use her cannons. I yelled instructions to Atticus and together we yanked the wheel first one way then the other, dipping in and over the waves,

using them to hide us from sight. The next time we looked back, *The Death Scar* was nowhere to be seen.

Lightning flashed twice in close succession, then a mighty thunder rumbled, like someone rustling a particularly crinkly crisp packet right next to my ear hole. That's when I realised this was no ordinary storm. You've probably been taught that storms happen when clouds smush together and electricity particles rub each other up the wrong way.

» → **I'm not entirely sure on the science of that, so maybe don't quote me in an exam situation.**

However, the biggest, wildest storms are caused by something entirely different altogether. Have you ever been in a storm so wild you thought your head might split open and your clothes might blow off? Well, *those* storms are not caused by science at all. Those storms are caused by a teeny tiny monster known as

an *elektrosquib*. Again, it's probably easier if I draw you a picture rather than try and describe it. They look like this:

(Actual size)

»→ What do you mean, that's too small for you to see?! Blimey, you're so demanding. Okay, fine, here's what one looks like if you put it under a super-doooper, fancy-pants microscope:



(The reason she looks grumpy is because she doesn't want to be under a super-doooper, fancy-pants microscope. She'd much rather be flying high on the ocean winds. Or playing croquet.)

Elektrosquibs may be tiny, but they are certainly not to be underestimated. The females have large antlers on their heads and, whenever they get into a row with another female (usually over which male they want to mate with), they fight it out by flying into each other and ramming their antlers together. If they do this too many times, a storm starts to brew. The longer the fight – and the more berserk the elektrosquibs – the more brutal the storm. The one we were currently in obviously involved two *very* angry females.

»→ Even more angry than the two women I once saw arguing over a pair of flip-flops in Primark, and they were **FIERCE**.

This was bad news for several reasons:

**Reason Number 1:** Elektrosquib storms have been known to last for several days, or even weeks. I was pretty sure *The Wonky Goose* would not last that long.

**Reason Number 2:** During the most violent storms, the lightning produced by raging elektrosquibs is so intense it will instantly set anything it touches ablaze.

**Reason Number 3:** If you enter the eye of an elektrosquib storm, the chances of making it out alive are about one in a billion. And the eye of the storm was precisely where we were currently heading.

Luckily for Atticus and Autumn, their GG was one of the greatest Monster Hunters ever known, and I'd encountered elektrosquibs before. All you have to do to make them stop is give them a sacrifice. And all they demand as a sacrifice is a small child. Luckily for me, I had

two of those on board, one of which was at that very moment pulling at my trouser leg, telling me how much she needed a wee . . .

'How'd you fancy being sacrificed to an elektrosquib, Scrag?' I asked her.

'Can I wee first?' she replied.

We crashed over another mountainous wave. As much as I was enjoying the roller-coaster ride, I was also conscious of how much water we'd let in. *The Wonky Goose* looked set to sink at any moment. I needed to end this storm NOW.

I looked from Atticus in front of me to Autumn by my side, wondering which would make the best sacrifice. Autumn was still pulling at my trousers, which made her the most obvious candidate. Pulling at my Father Christmas trousers. Pulling at my red Father Christmas trousers. Which is when I plucked another little-known fact about elektrosquibs from the depths of my extraordinary brain:



they're one of the monsters that are obsessed with anything red.

I pulled off my trousers faster than you could say 'Are you sure it's the weather for naked legs?', exposing my knickers to the world.

»→ *Luckily, I'd put on a clean pair that morning, because that's not something I always do.*

'GG, what are you –' said Atticus, desperately trying not to look at my frilly undercrackers.

'Trust me,' I said. 'I need you to take these trousers and wave them above your head as fast as you can. Autumn, hold the wheel!'

(Asking a three-year-old to take control of a boat in the middle of a storm, while two elektrosquibs waged war above our heads, may seem to some like irresponsible grandparenting, but to those people I say . . . 'You're absolutely right. But that's what I did, so get over it already.')

Atticus did as he was told and, for once, so

did Autumn. Now all I needed was something to catch the elektrosquibs in. I fumbled my way to the cabin, where everything was floating in a pool of water. Bobbing on the top was the empty jar of mayonnaise the kids had eaten the night before. Perfect.

I returned to the stern, where Autumn was doing a surprisingly good job (for someone who couldn't even see over the wheel), and Atticus was still flapping the Father Christmas trousers.



I stood next to him with the mayonnaise jar in one hand, the lid in the other, and one foot on the steering wheel, in case Autumn tried to capsize us.

The sound of the storm intensified, until it was so loud there was no space in my head for anything else. A high-pitched whine pierced the cacophony.

**The elektrosquibs were coming.**

‘Not to worry you, but two elektrosquibs are flying directly at you,’ I yelled in Atticus’s ear.

‘What’s an elektrosquib?’ Atticus yelled back.

‘Well, all you need to know is that if they collide with you, you’ll probably explode.’

‘Right,’ said Atticus, while his face said *Whaatttayyaaaahhhawwwaaaaaahh?!*

‘Don’t worry, I’m going to try really hard to make sure that doesn’t happen,’ I said, holding the jar of mayonnaise above his head. ‘Here they come.’

The high-pitched whine got even louder as the elektrosquibs sped towards us. Lightning blazed, thunder crackled, and the waves continued to roar.

‘Brace yourselves!’ I yelled, as two almost invisible sparks flew closer and closer. This was it; there was no going back now. ‘Three! Two! One!’

I slammed the lid onto the mayonnaise jar and twisted it shut. The second I did, the rain stopped, the waves settled and the maelstrom of noise disappeared. All that could be heard was the sound of our heavy breathing. From behind the clouds, a glorious sun emerged and beamed down on us.

‘We’re alive,’ said Atticus, somewhat in shock.

I peered into the jar in my hand, which suddenly felt unnaturally warm. Inside, two tiny sparks fizzed and crackled.

‘We did it! I caught them! We stopped the



storm!' I said, scooping up big handfuls of water from the boat and throwing them into the air with glee. The water rained down on me, cool and refreshing.

'I weed myself,' said Autumn, looking at the water around her feet, which I was currently splashing all over myself.

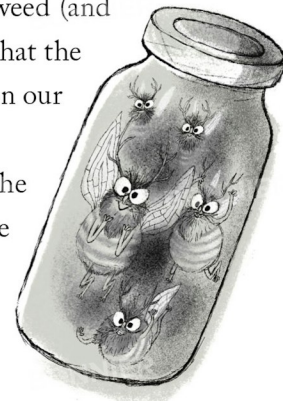
'Oh,' I replied, as wee water dripped from my face. 'Of course you did.'



## Chapter Spleventeen

The sun was so hot, we soon dried off, and so did our old clothes, meaning the world no longer had to be exposed to my nearly naked bottom (and I no longer had to be dressed as Father Christmas). Between us, we emptied the water out of *The Wonky Goose* and got rid of all the scraps of rotten seaweed (and one very confused lobster) that the storm had kindly dumped on our deck.

I placed the jar with the elektrosquibs in it in the



boat's tiny fridge, thinking that might cool them down a bit. There were still scrapings of mayonnaise around the edges which they could snack on if they got hungry. Autumn took it upon herself to sit outside the fridge with her legs crossed and her arms folded, keeping guard.

Now that the sea was flat again, we could see for miles, but there was no sign of Ripclaw or *The Death Scar*. Maybe the storm had sunk them. Or maybe she'd got bored and gone home for tea and cake. Who knew?

'I think you're right,' I said to Atticus, who was lounging in the sun at the bow of the ship. He sat up and squinted in my direction.

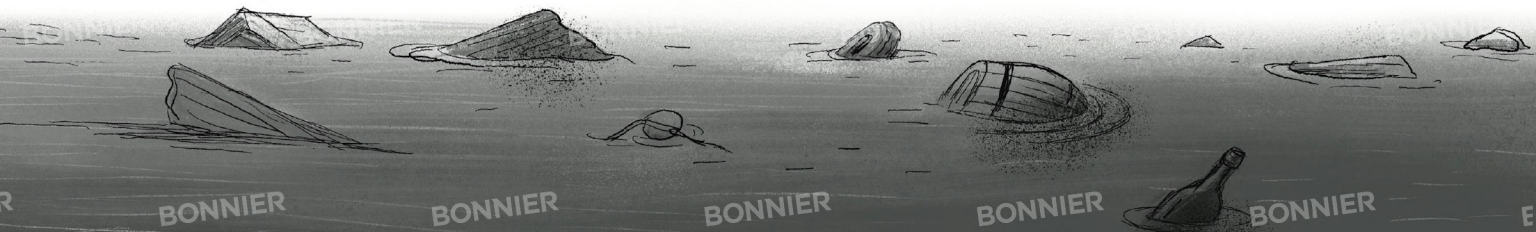
'Right about what?' he asked.

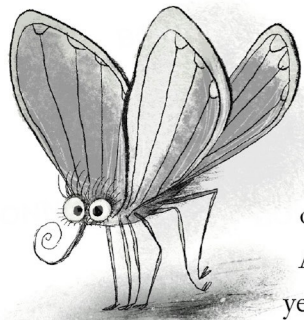
'About finding the treasure before Ripclaw gets her hands on it. Whatever it is, she

thinks it's worth nearly dying for, so it must be pretty special. And anything that powerful in Ripclaw's hands is big-time bad news.'

I'll admit, by this point my curiosity level had definitely increased. (If you can be bothered to flick back and look at the chart on page 93, I was now somewhere between Curiosity Queen and Marie Curious.) There were all sorts of lost artefacts rumoured to have special powers: rings that allow you to see through solid walls, spears with the ability to turn back time, a fork that makes your hair look salon-ready in less than thirty seconds . . . What was it that Ripclaw was so desperate to find?

'So we're going to find the treasure?' asked Atticus, with what looked like the faint flickerings of excitement. If I didn't know





better, I'd think he didn't want this little adventure of ours to end.

A bright blue butterfly with yellow markings fluttered around his head, before landing on the side of the boat right next to him. He stared at it for a couple of moments as it opened and shut its delicate wings.

'It's so beautiful,' he said.

'See all the things you notice when you don't have your head glued to your phone?' I said.

He rolled his eyes and smirked.

It was the most stunning butterfly either of us had ever seen.

I slammed my hand down on it and smushed it to a pulp.

'GG!' Atticus cried.



'Yeah, so *that* wasn't a butterfly. It was a *shnordlewootsit*. Very dangerous. And very good at disguise . . . But don't let that stop you from looking at pretty things in the future.'

Atticus looked at the smushed shnordlewootsit and sighed. 'GG, can I ask you something?'

'Of course, Ratty,' I replied, being the dutiful older relative that I am, while inside thinking, *Oh, God, here it comes, what am I going to have to deal with now?!*

'Do you think *I'm* weird?' he asked.

'Of course I do.'

He looked crestfallen.

'In a good way,' I added, in a feeble attempt to backtrack.

'How can you be weird in a good way?'

I had to think about that for a moment.

'Well, look at me,' I said. 'Do you think I'm weird?' I threw my arms up into the air and flashed my most showbiz smile.

Atticus gave a sad little laugh. 'You're the weirdest person I know,' he said.

'Exactly!' I replied. 'And also the most amazing, right?'

He gave a response that was somewhere between a nod and a shrug – a little less enthusiastic than I would have liked, but I still took it as a yes.

'You see, being weird is just another way of saying "being different". People say it like it's a bad thing, but being different is great. Imagine how boring it would be if we were all the same?'

'I s'pose.'

A gust of wind sneaked its way around us, ruffling Atticus's hair. It carried with it the fresh, salty smell of the ocean.

'Why'd you ask, anyway?'

Atticus scratched the back of his neck and looked at the deck. 'No reason . . .'

Hmmmm.

'Did someone say you were weird?' I asked.

'No,' he replied.

'Okay . . . Well, is there anything else you'd like to talk about?'

'No,' he replied again.

Well, no one could say I didn't try. That was more than enough adulting for one day, and I think I'd done quite well.

We sat without talking for a while, until another butterfly drifted past and landed on the seat between us. Atticus opened his eyes wide and raised his hand, ready to strike.

'Is that another shnordlewootsit?' he said. 'Do I need to smush it?'

'Nah, that one's just a butterfly,' I said. 'And a very beautiful one at that.'

The butterfly stretched its wings, catching the sun's rays across its bronze and scarlet markings. It then launched itself into the air and was taken away on the breeze. Atticus watched it in

silence until it disappeared from sight.

‘Well,’ I said, slapping my hands on my thighs, ‘if we’re going to go find the treasure, it’s probably time we took a look at this map.’

I took the Map of Mayhem out of my jacket pocket. It was silky smooth to touch. Atticus leaned in as I gently unfolded it, and we were once again hit by the distinct aroma of goat breath and old turnips. I hadn’t looked at the map for over fifty years, but it looked exactly the same as the first time I’d unfolded it.

Completely blank.

‘Uh, where’s the map?’ Atticus asked.

‘You’re looking at it,’ I replied.

‘But there’s nothing on it.’

‘Correction: there’s nothing on it *yet*,’ I said. ‘We need something we can use as ink. Don’t suppose you’ve got a fountain pen on you? Or a teabag? It’s either that or we slice you open and use your blood . . .’

Atticus flashed me a horrified look.

‘Ha! I’m joking. Although it would probably work . . .’

‘As fun as that sounds,’ he said, ‘I’ve got a better idea.’ He scooted into the cabin and rifled through the little bin, before emerging with something small and squishy. *Of course!* It was an ink sac from one of the cuttlefish I’d gutted the night before.

‘Perfect,’ I said. ‘Squeeze it onto this.’

I spread out the map, and Atticus squeezed the little sac until a stream of thick, black ink squirted out of it. As soon as the ink splattered onto the leather, it disappeared, absorbed by the material. For a brief moment, nothing happened, and then the ink reappeared and took on a life of its own, swirling in circles before settling in a mess of shapes and lines. It looked like a splodge of spaghetti that had been scribbled by a two-year-old (with their eyes closed).



‘Woah,’ said Atticus. ‘Is this map . . . magic?’

‘What it is, is very annoying,’ I replied. ‘All it ever shows is this big mess of jumbled lines. That’s why they call it the Map of Mayhem: because people go crazy trying to work out what it means.’

»→ *That was one of the reasons I ended up selling it to Grizzler – because I had no interest in trying to work it out myself, and thought my time was much better spent drinking grog.*

‘I wonder if you can . . .’ Atticus placed his finger in the middle of the squiggly lines, and they started to move about, responding to his touch.



‘Oh,’ I said. ‘I did not know you could do that.’

‘It looks like some sort of puzzle,’ he said. ‘My dad’s got an augmented reality jigsaw app on his iPad that works in a similar way.’

‘I didn’t understand about half the words you just said, but something seems to be working, so keep going.’

Atticus took the map and laid it flat on the deck of the boat. His fingers worked fast and furious, sliding the lines over the leather, twisting them this way and that, looking for ways to slot them together. Piece by piece, an image started to form, and it wasn’t long before we could both tell what it was.

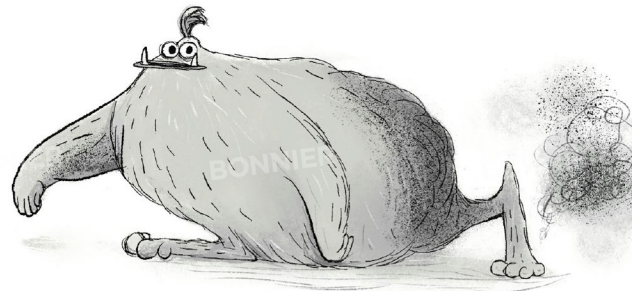
A human skull.

Atticus slid the last piece into place. As he did so, the map hummed and vibrated, and the skull’s eye sockets glowed bright red. Atticus recoiled, as if the skull might come to life and bite his fingers. The ink then swirled like

a whirlpool and changed shape – one minute a raging sea, the next a flock of fleeing birds, followed by a rainstorm of tiny flowers. The ink then settled into a series of distinct lines, clearly depicting the details of a map and – most importantly – the location of the treasure.

‘Well, blow me down with a feather,’ I said. ‘It’s the actual map – the true Map of Mayhem!’

I’d heard rumours about the map for as long as I could remember. No one knew who’d made it or why they’d buried the treasure, but it was said to be centuries old. Ripclaw had always been obsessed with it, and she spent the best years of her life trying to find it. Sadly for her, the day she finally found the map, she also found me. I was on the same island, hunting a skorbletron (small brains, cheesy feet – that’s about all you need to know).



We’d crossed paths many times before, and Ripclaw had somehow got it into her head that I was always trying to thwart her plans, when the truth was I cared very little about her, or her scheming, villainous ways, or hunting lost treasure, or any of that piratey nonsense. There was that one time I *may* have accidentally-on-purpose sneezed in her face . . . and that other time I *may* have let a *tinkleglöp* loose on her ship just for fun . . . and that *other other* time I *may* have called her a ‘washed-up old maggot-brain’ . . . but was that really justification to shoot me through the chest and leave me for dead?

»→ 'No' is the answer to that question, by the way. If you answered it any other way, then SHAME ON YOU.

Well, I got the last laugh because, as Ripclaw leaned over me and raised her gun, I whipped the map out of her belt without her noticing. She fired the weapon and abandoned me there, but fortunately for me, the bullet missed every single one of my vital organs. Even more fortunately for me, I also happened to have a small bottle of *pookychit* spit in my back pocket (in those days, I never left home without it). I smothered the wounds with spit, then lay there panting while it sealed me back together again. Not a pleasant experience, I can assure you. Even with the *pookychit* spit, it still took me a good few weeks to recover. Only then did I have the strength to flag down a passing fishing trawler and convince its crew to take me back to the mainland.

The whole time I was on that island – cold and miserable and living off sand grubs – I took pleasure in knowing that I'd taken from Ripclaw the one item she valued most in the world. And now here it was, back in my hands, revealing its true form.

Atticus and I stared at it in silence. The details were sparse: a few black lines, a couple of squiggles to represent some water, a line of trees, a square that could be a church or a castle or something, and a big red cross to mark where the treasure was hidden (an essential requirement for all treasure maps).

There was also a couple of sentences, written in dark green. They said:

*Beware, beware, their snapping jaws,  
I'll be within your clutch.  
Buried deep within the mound  
That no one else would touch.*



→ I have zero patience when it comes to riddles. Why can't people just say what they want us to know, and then we can all move on with our lives?

I turned the map one way then another, trying to make sense of it all, then let out an impatient sigh.

'This is hopeless,' I said. 'It's just a wiggly bit of coastline jutting out into the sea, with an old building plonked on it. That could literally be anywhere. Where would we even start? And the riddle is nothing but a bunch of nonsense words, so maybe it's best if we just forget this whole crazy –'

'Um, GG,' said Atticus, peering down at the map. 'I think I know where this is.'

'What? Really?'

'Yeah,' he said, tracing his finger along one of the black lines. 'This coastline – it looks the same shape as one of the places we visited in Cornwall last year. I recognise it from when Dad

made us go on this epic walk around the cliffs, and at one point we passed an old lighthouse, which could be what *that* is.' He pointed to the castle/church-like symbol. 'I dunno. Maybe.' He shrugged, seeming to doubt himself now that he'd said it out loud.

'Well, I'd say that was as good a place to start as any,' I said. 'Perhaps you'll make a good Apprentice Monster Hunter after all.'

'Apprentice Monster Hunter?' said Atticus, a little unnerved.

'Don't get your knickers in a twist,' I said. 'I'm only joking.'

Was I joking? I'd never taken on an apprentice before, but the thought of training up my great-grandson to carry on my legacy did have a certain appeal . . .

'Yippee, we going to Cornywall!' shouted Autumn from inside the cabin, where she was still sat guarding the fridge.

‘Actually, Scrag, this time that’s exactly where we’re going.’ I took another look at the Map of Mayhem and smiled. ‘Time to go treasure hunting!’



## Chapter Plopter

I sailed *The Wonky Goose* in the direction of Cornwall, full of high spirits. We were making good time and, by my reckoning, probably somewhere along the Dorset coast, when the engine started to make a gruff chugging noise.

‘That doesn’t sound good,’ said Atticus.

‘No, it does not,’ I agreed. I looked at the fuel gauge. Empty. Why had I not thought to check it before? There was no chance we’d make it all the way to Cornwall.

‘We’re going to have to find somewhere to refuel,’ I said. ‘But that’s not necessarily a bad



thing. Perhaps we can use it as an opportunity to get some breakfast at the same time.'

No sooner had I said the word, Autumn's face appeared inches from mine.

'Breakfast?' she said, her eyebrows so high they looked ready to pop right off her face. 'I like breakfast.'

'Then let's go get us some!' My stomach grumbled in agreement. We'd been up for hours and already been through so much – and all on an empty stomach.

I scanned the coastline for somewhere suitable to pull in. The engine was really spluttering now, so we had to make do with the first place we found: a tiny village somewhere in between a big craggy mountain and absolutely nowhere.

The village consisted of a small huddle of ramshackle buildings, which toppled over one another in a haphazard sort of way. Some had been painted bright colours – pinks and

mint greens and pale blues – but they'd been weathered by years of exposure to the bitter sea air, giving them a drab appearance, as if they belonged to a time long forgotten.

You could tell that the people who lived in the village were not used to visitors; they stopped what they were doing as we approached and eyed us with a mix of alarm and suspicion (with a sprinkling of repulsion) as we moored and set foot on the gangway. I couldn't quite put my finger on it, but something about the place put me on edge.

'*Hola, amigos,*' I said (for some reason opting for Spanish). 'We come in peace. Is there anyone here who can sell us some fuel, and maybe a spot of grub?'

One charming fellow snorted and then spat on the ground, while the lady next to him had a good old scratch of her giant chin. They were all still staring at us, unblinking, with heavy

frowns on their faces. The place was a fishing village, by the look of it. Frayed nets and menacing-looking hooks were strewn about the ground, and the air had the distinct smell of recently gutted fish. Despite the sunshine, most people were wearing mud-spattered wellies and waterproof smocks, as if they were used to sudden changes in the weather.

‘I’ve got some food ye can ‘ave,’ said a man with a face like a blobfish. ‘But it’ll cost ya.’

‘Well, yes, I have money. I wasn’t expecting to get it for free.’

‘I don’t want yer money,’ said Blobfish Man. ‘I’ll take yer boat.’ At that, he started laughing, which sounded like a cross between a wheezy cough and a balloon deflating.

‘As tempted as I am to trade this £10,000 boat for a couple of ham sandwiches, I think I’ll pass on your generous offer, thanks all the same.’



I was beginning to lose patience, but we didn't have enough petrol left to try anywhere else. A woman in a faded floral dress appeared next to Blobfish Man.

'Don't mind old Barf,' she said, indicating the man.

»→ His name – just so we're clear – was Barf. Barf. That was his name. Barf . . . . . His name was Barf.

'He's always out for a hustle,' the woman continued, 'but he's harmless enough. Come with me, I'll sort ya some food.' She smiled at us, in a way that should have been reassuring, but was tinged with a hint of creepy.

So far that day we'd been hounded by rot-wraiths, held at gunpoint by a megalomaniac pirate, and almost died in an elektrosquib storm, but for some reason, following that woman into her house felt like the biggest risk we'd taken so far . . . But I was hungry, so follow her we did.

The woman introduced herself as Wendie. At a guess, I'd say she was somewhere between thirty-five and sixty (it was hard to tell). She had long, willowy arms and straight hair that couldn't quite decide if it wanted to be blonde or brown. She lived in a hobbledy little house with uneven floorboards and wonky stairs. From the moment we stepped over the threshold, it was clear that Wendie was a fan of china cats. Now, I don't mind people collecting things (I, for one, am an avid collector of ex-boyfriends), but for some people, it can tip over into obsession. For Wendie, it was less that she'd tipped over, and more that she'd been shoved really hard into the unfathomable depths of Coo-Coo Obsession Land.

THERE. WERE. CHINA. CATS. EVERYWHERE.

They were in the hallway, on the stairs, in the cupboards, on the mantelpiece, in





the fireplace, on the fridge, in the plant pots, on the – I mean, I don't think I need to mention every single place they were, but – on the bannister, under the rugs, on the lampshades, in the kettle, on the windowsills, under the sofa, on the – I'm sure you're getting the idea, so I can probably – on the toilet, next to the toilet, under the toilet, in the toilet – EVERYWHERE.



And they weren't cutesy little cats with fluffy faces and innocent eyes. Far from it. The china cats in Wendie's house all looked like they wanted to eat us. PSYCHOTIC CHINA CATS. And they *watched* us, everywhere we went.

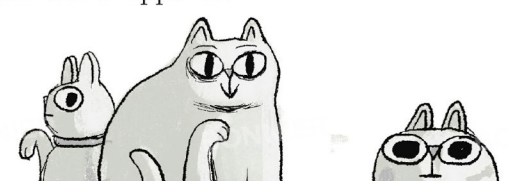


'Welcome to my home,' said Wendie with a smile.



'Cats,' said Autumn, which about summed up what we were all thinking.

'Would you like a cuppa tea?'



'How much is it going to cost me?' I asked. I was gagging for a brew, but thought it was best to check prices before committing.

'Both your socks and a £10,000 boat,' said Barf, appearing from behind the fridge.



'Aahh!' I yelped, caught off-guard by his sudden appearance. (I never did find out whether he lived there and was related to Wendie in some way, or whether he was just the kind of person who turned up, unannounced, at other people's houses and lurked behind the fridge.)

Wendie tutted at Barf. 'I'll settle for a tenner for all three of you, for whatever you want,' she said to me. She looked me up and down before adding, 'And your socks.'

'Deal,' I said.

Turns out Wendie was a really good cook, and – if it wasn't for the thousands of psychotic china cats peering down at us as we ate (and the fact that Barf kept doing little sick burps in his mouth) – it would have been an extremely pleasurable experience. By this point it was nearer lunchtime, so we ate burgers and chips and chocolate cake and lettuce (yes, Autumn got her lettuce, sniffing each piece like a ravenous

rabbit before shoving it in her mouth) and pizza and Party Rings and something called a poppadom, which I'm still not convinced is real food but was tasty all the same.

I washed it all down with the most divine cup of tea I've ever drunk.

Once we'd had our fill, I handed over my slightly soggy socks and a crisp £10 note. Wendie even made us a couple of food parcels to take on our journey with us, so it was worth every penny/thread. She informed us there was a man called Spam (who is naming these people?!) down by the water who'd be able to sell us some petrol for the boat so, all things considered, I was feeling very positive. Maybe I'd been too quick to judge this kooky little village. We thanked Wendie heartily, said goodbye to all the creepy china cats (Wendie insisted on that), then headed back down to the seafront. Barf followed us, whistling a merry



tune as he walked. I was so pleasantly full from all of our feasting, it wasn't until we reached the gangway that I realised that something was very, very wrong.

*The Wonky Goose* . . . was no longer there.



## Chapperty Splapperty

‘Where’s *The Wonky Goose*?!’ I shrieked.

‘There,’ said Barf, pointing to a wonky goose that was pecking at crumbs on the harbourside.

‘No, not *a* wonky goose, *the* wonky goose. As in, our boat. Our boat, *The Wonky Goose*!’

‘Dunt look much like a boat to me,’ said Barf, still looking at the actual goose.

‘Boat went that way,’ said Autumn, pointing away from the harbour.

‘How could you possibly know that?’ I asked.

‘I can smell it,’ she said, taking a couple of big sniffs. ‘The boaty-boat smell.’

'You can *smell* the boat?!' I'd never heard of anything so absurd.

Autumn cocked her head and took another really big sniff. She then nodded and started to run along the shoreline, hopping from rock to rock.

'Oi, Scrag, come back!' I said, doing my best to follow her.

'Can I have this goose then?' Barf called after us. He was still staring at it, licking his blobfish lips.

'It's not mine – do what you like,' I yelled back.

Autumn scrambled across the rocks for a solid five minutes, while Atticus and I tried to keep up. She eventually came to a stop outside a sketchy-looking warehouse. It was built right on the shoreline, half on land and the other half resting on stilts over the water, allowing boats to be driven straight into it from the sea.

'You really shouldn't run off like that, you know,' I said, trying to catch my breath.

Autumn tilted her head and took one final mini-sniff.

'Boat's in there,' she said, pointing to the warehouse.

'Sure it is,' I said. 'And what else can you smell – a bath full of custard and some flying unicorns?'

'Nope. A big group of meany men with big knives. And smelly armpits.'



'That doesn't sound good,' said Atticus.

'And just to be 100% sure I'm not misunderstanding you, you're claiming you can smell all of that from out here?'

'Yep,' Autumn confirmed.

'She has overactive nostrils,' Atticus explained.

'Well, that's definitely not a thing,' I said. 'But since we're here, I suppose we might as well take a look.'

I crouched down and crept along the side of the warehouse while trying really hard not to hum the theme tune from *Mission Impossible*.

The door to the warehouse was open a crack, and the three of us peered in. And what a shock I got when we did! To my utter bewilderment, there were indeed many smelly-armspitted men inside, all of whom had knives in their waistbands. Some were packing items into wooden crates, and others were loading the crates onto a boat, which rested on the water at

the far end of the warehouse. And guess whose boat it was they were loading the crates onto?

»→ If you guessed it was our boat, sorry, but you were **WRONG**. It was a trick question! We stole borrowed the boat, remember, so technically it wasn't ours. I've never told you who the boat belonged to (because I never found out), so there was no way you could have guessed it right. Ha!

Unless you're the person we stole the boat from . . . in which case, I'M SORRY, OKAY?!?!?!?

I couldn't believe it! Autumn really *did* have overactive nostrils. How was I only discovering this invaluable monster hunting skill now? Well, I didn't have time to think too much about it, for it was clear that *The Wonky Goose* had been taken by these unscrupulous individuals, and we had to find a way to take it back. I'd seen people like these men before, so I knew exactly what kind of people they were.

Smugglers.

‘Right, here’s the plan,’ I whispered to Atticus and Autumn, still eyeing up the smugglers. ‘Ratty, you go in, pretending to be drunk on grog, fall in the water and splash about a bit to cause a distraction. While they’re fishing you out, I’ll grab those two fuel canisters, sneak on board *The Wonky Goose*, start the engine, scoop you out of the water then burst through the doors on the other side to make our escape. Scrag, you wait here and try not to cause any mischief. We’ll pick you up once we’re out. Understood?’

I looked over my shoulder at Atticus and Autumn – but Autumn was no longer there.

‘Where’s Scrag?’ I asked Atticus.

‘She left already,’ he said, pointing inside the warehouse.

I looked back in. Indeed, Autumn was inside the warehouse, on her haunches, waddling towards *The Wonky Goose* like a wonky goose.



‘Scrag!’ I hissed in my quietest hiss. ‘Scrag, get back here.’

She either didn’t hear me or did a very good impression of pretending not to hear me. The knives in the smugglers’ waist belts suddenly looked a whole lot sharper.

‘Shouldn’t we, like, help her or something?’ Atticus asked.

‘I suppose so,’ I replied. ‘Still up for pretending to be tipsy and falling in the water?’

‘Not really . . .’

‘What the devil –’ came a man’s voice from inside the warehouse. ‘There’s a kid in here!’

Autumn had been spotted.

‘Smelly smelly bum bum men,’ said Autumn.



‘What did you call us?’

‘Smelly smelly bum bum men,’ Autumn repeated.

I made a mental note to teach her not to call ruthless smugglers with sharp knives ‘smelly smelly bum bum men’.

‘Get her!’ shouted another of the smugglers.

Time for my grand entrance.

I flung open the warehouse doors. ‘Gentlemen!’ I bellowed. ‘Welcome to your worst nightmare!’

The smugglers stopped in their tracks and turned their heads in my direction.

I stood there with an awkward look on my face. ‘That’s it, I’m afraid,’ I said. ‘That’s all I’ve got.’

‘Who the blazes are you?’ said one of the smugglers, the biggest and ugliest of the lot.

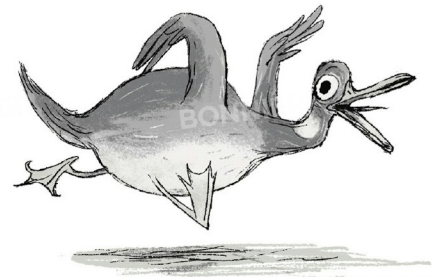
‘My name is Spit-Tooth,’ I said, ‘and *The Wonky Goose* is mine!’

‘You said I could have it,’ said Barf, doing his trick of appearing out of nowhere, holding the wonky-looking goose in his arms.

‘No, not *that* wonky goose, *THE Wonky Goose*. The boat. That boat right there. The one these dunderheads stole, with the words ‘*The Wonky Goose*’ very clearly written on its sides!’

The goose in Barf’s arms wriggled and squirmed (perhaps in response to how many times I’d shouted the word ‘goose’), and he couldn’t hold on to it any longer. It leapt from his grasp and started honking and flapping around the warehouse in a very wonky sort of way.

‘My goose!’ said Barf, chasing after it.





‘Catch that thing and get these people out of here,’ said the big, ugly man.

The smugglers started chasing the poor goose, but their bird-catching skills were even worse than their personal hygiene. The goose ducked and dived under their arms, outsmarting them at every turn.

‘Quick, Ratty, grab those two fuel cans over there, and I’ll meet you at the boat!’

‘But how are we gonna pay for them?’ he asked.

‘Really, Ratty? Are you *really* going to make me . . . You know what? Fine.’ I took a couple of tenners out of my bra and shoved them in Atticus’s hand. Satisfied, he nipped off, weaving in and out of the stacks of crates in the direction of the canisters. In all the mayhem of the goose chase, most of the smugglers had forgotten about us, but one man approached me now with a fierce look in his eyes and grabbed me by the

arm.

‘How dare you!’ I said, followed by, ‘I’m just a little old lady . . .’ I gave him my most pathetic, vulnerable look.

He hesitated, as if unsure what to do with me, then let go of my arm.

‘Oh, um . . . sorry,’ he said.

‘You will be!’ I kicked him hard between his legs.



He let out a pained ‘Ouff’ and fell to his knees, giving me the opportunity to slip past him. Classic under-estimation technique! (Classic dim-witted smuggler.)

By this point, Autumn had sneaked all the way to the boat and jumped on board.

*Great!* I thought. She’s going to start the engine, steer the boat out of the warehouse, pick us up outside, and we’ll all be on our way.

However, that is not what Autumn did. What she did was go straight to the tiny fridge, take out the jar of mayonnaise with the elektrosquibs inside and stand on the roof of the boat’s cabin.

‘Autumn, what are you doing?’ I called over the honking and the shouting and the flapping.

‘I want to play with my friends,’ she said.

‘No!’

Too late. She twisted the jar of mayonnaise and took off the lid. As she did so, out popped two teeny tiny sparks and a whole ton of prickly

energy. Goosebumps broke out up and down my arms, which felt appropriate given the number of goose-related things in the room. The actual goose felt the shift in atmosphere first, and turned its wonky neck in the direction of the minuscule monsters. The smugglers were next to turn around in confusion, as thick black clouds formed across the warehouse ceiling. The air crackled with sparks of lightning. The elektrosquibs were still angry. Perhaps even angrier than before, as a result of being trapped in a jar of mayonnaise for the best part of three hours. My bad.

Rain burst around us and thunder boomed – so loud it cracked the warehouse door, which hung off its hinges.

Now, I don’t know if you’re ever been in an elektrosquib storm contained within a warehouse before (I’m guessing not), but I can tell you now that it is not something I would

recommend. Take the worst storm imaginable, add the stench of a dozen smelly smugglers and one very flappy goose, and then multiply the rain, the lightning and the sound of the thunder by about 3000% and you'll have some idea of what we experienced that day. It was like being stuck in a washing machine on triple speed, with salty fabric softener and a jet engine thrown in for good measure.

It was also a perfect distraction. Atticus and I looked at each other from across the warehouse and nodded. We knew what we had to do. He snatched the two fuel canisters and, half-running, half-swimming, half-slipping over on the sodden ground (I know that's too many halves. Shush) the two of us made our way to the boat and fell inside. What happened next was such a blur of *rain-storm-smuggler-goose* that I have no idea how we made it out alive, but somehow Atticus



poured the petrol into the engine, Autumn balanced the mayonnaise jar on her head (useful as ever), and I steered us full speed at the wooden gates that led out to the open sea. The gates were shut but we crashed through, splinters of wood flying in all directions, and then we were free, leaving the storm-filled warehouse behind us.

**Chapter Wow That Last Chapter Was  
So Great I Wonder What Exciting  
Things Are Going To Happen In The  
Next Chapter Let's Read On And  
Find Out Shall We Ooooh  
Yeah Good Idea**

Once we were a safe distance away from the warehouse, I let out a satisfied sigh. Atticus grinned at me, and I grinned back.

'That was kinda cool,' he said.

'Yeah,' I agreed. 'It was.'

'Can we keep it?' asked Autumn, who was sitting at the front of the boat.

'Keep what?' I asked.

'The goose.'

'What goose?'

'This one.' She leaned back to reveal the wonky-looking goose on the bench next to her.



'Honk,' honked the goose.

'That's mine,' said Barf, stepping out of the cabin.

'What -? How do you keep doing that?!' I said.

Barf did a little sick burp in his mouth.

'I think that goose has been through enough,' I said to Autumn. 'Go on, goose, fly away, you're free.' I stepped towards it and made some flappy motions in its face. It stared back at me, unblinking.

'He wants to stay,' said Autumn.

'His name's Norbert and he's my friend.' She put her arms around the goose, which seemed perfectly content to be hugged.

'Okay, fine, the goose stays, but you've got to go,'



I said to Barf. 'How good are you at swimming?'

'Actually, pretty -'

'Bye then!' I said, as I pushed him over the side of the boat.

There was a big splash and then, a couple of seconds later, he resurfaced, coughing and spluttering and shaking his fist at us.

'It's wet in here!' he yelled.

*Really, Barf?*

'Sorry, no room for stowaways,' I said. 'You'll have to swim back.'

It's fine, we weren't *that* far out . . .

With one last fist-shake in our direction, Barf turned around and started swimming back towards the shore. Good riddance, Barf, good riddance weird little village, hello sweet sweet freedom. We had fuel in our boat and burgers in our bellies – all in all, a job well done!

'Uh, GG . . .' said Atticus, who was standing next to a crate on the other side of the boat.



I'd forgotten about them. Most of the crates that the smugglers had put on board had fallen out during the storm-inside-the-warehouse situation, but one remained, which Atticus had opened and was now rummaging through. He looked up at me, his face full of concern. 'I think we may have a problem.'

I joined him by the crate and pushed the wooden lid aside. The first thing I saw was lots of skull and crossbones and the words **DANGER OF DEATH** in thick red writing. The crate contained several black boxes, all covered in the same warning.



'What do you think they are?' Atticus asked. I lifted out one of the boxes and opened it up. 'Oh,' I said, my eyes lighting up. 'Looks like someone was planning one almighty hunt.'

'What do you mean?'

'They're fireworks,' I said.

'Fireworks?'

'Yes. But not just any old fireworks. These boxes contain Explosivos – a type of firework that's so dangerous, it's banned in all 195 countries of the world. They explode with real fire, in a burst of every colour imaginable. Very beautiful – and *very* deadly.'

'Me want to play with them,' said Autumn, pulling a firework from one of the boxes and trying to feed it to Norbert the goose.

'First, speak properly or don't speak at all, and second, not on your nelly.' I snatched the firework out of her hands.

'Why were the smugglers putting them on

our boat?’ Atticus asked.

‘My guess is that they were shipping them to a secret buyer – a Monster Hunter, most likely. When Explosivos explode, they’re so loud and so bright, they can be used to attract some of the most elusive monsters. They’re almost impossible to come by, though, because they’re so illegal, which means they’re extremely rare and very expensive. I wonder who could afford to buy this many of them, and what monster they were hoping to capture . . .’

‘What should we do with them?’ Atticus asked, interrupting my musings.

‘Probably throw them overboard, if we know what’s good for us,’ I replied. ‘But then again, I have always wanted to set one off and see what it looks like.’ I put the box back in the crate and returned the lid. It couldn’t harm to keep them for now, surely? ‘Right, on to more important matters. Namely, the treasure.’ I took the

Map of Mayhem out of my pocket. It flapped in the afternoon breeze. ‘Atticus, you’re chief navigator. I’ll steer us in the general direction of Cornwall, and you shout if you see anything familiar.’

‘What’s my job?’ asked Autumn.

‘You can be chief goose watcher,’ I said to her.

‘What does a goose watcher do?’

‘I’ll give you three guesses.’

‘Watch the goose, watch the goose, watch the goose,’ she said.

‘Got it in three.’

She stood in front of Norbert with her hands on her hips, staring at him intently. The goose stared back at her, and neither of them blinked for the best part of an hour.

The winds were favourable and we whipped along at an impressive pace. Atticus took his role almost as seriously as Autumn did. He stood at the side of the boat, squinting at the

mainland for signs of anything familiar.

‘Look at those cliffs, GG!’ he called out a little while later. He turned around and flashed me a smile.

I could see why he was so impressed. The cliff face was covered in a blanket of bright pink flowers.

‘Sea thrift,’ I said. ‘It’s a type of weed you often see at the coast. I think it likes the salt.’

‘A weed?’ Atticus replied. ‘But it’s so beautiful.’

‘Well, weeds are just flowers that have got a bad reputation. They’re the same thing, really; the only difference is how we think of them.’

»→ *Don't tell anyone, but I often stick weeds in the bouquets I make at work. The customers never notice (and they're also a lot cheaper).*

Atticus nodded, as if I’d said something really wise. He kept his eyes on the sea thrift until it disappeared from view.

We kept going, past rugged peninsulas and

turquoise lagoons. Just as my eyes were starting to grow tired (I’d had the World’s Worst Night’s Sleep, don’t forget), and I was beginning to think we might never find the right spot, Atticus called out, ‘That, there.’

He was pointing at a structure on the top of the cliff – an old lighthouse, which was so crumbled it looked like a sack of sad potatoes.

‘That’s the lighthouse we walked past,’ he said. ‘On one of the walks Dad made us go on. Although there were a lot more people around last time . . . Do you think it could be the place?’

I held up the map and compared it to the landmarks in real life.

‘You know what?’ I said. ‘I think it just might be.’

I altered the boat’s course in the direction of the lighthouse. The map seemed to indicate that the treasure was buried right underneath it. The silver cliffs rose up in violent chunks, and waves

crashed into their base in an explosion of foamy spittle. It was not an ideal spot for parking a boat, but I'd find a way.

*Honk! Honk! Hoooooonk!*

Norbert was causing a flap (both literally and metaphorically). He'd broken away from Autumn's steely glare and was honking in alarm.

'Norbert's not happy,' said Autumn.

'I guessed that,' I said. 'Any idea why?'

'Probably because of them,' said Autumn, pointing up at the sky.

I looked up.

'Oh dear,' I said.

For above our heads, circling us in a menacing manner, was a whole load of giant weepies. And if there's one thing you should know about weepies, it's that they are most definitely **NOT FRIENDLY**.



## Chapter 20 Possibly Maybe

»→ At this point, I was well and truly wondering what I'd done to deserve such an unfortunate weekend. **WHY DID THE UNIVERSE HATE ME?!** Was it because I once licked a random kid's ice cream when his mum wasn't looking? Or because I thought it'd be fun to send my cousin Judith a tarantula in the post? Or maybe it was because of that time I ate all the cake at Mary's funeral, and then blamed it on her miniature schnauzer . . . Or it could have been because . . . Okay, okay, the list of possible reasons is quite long, but *still*

The weepies dipped lower, baring their razor-

sharp teeth in a warning not to come any closer. This is one monster I don't need to draw: imagine a seagull, then take off its head and replace it with the head of an alligator. What you're now imagining is a weepie.

I picked up an oar and waved it in the air, trying to shoo the weepies away. They responded by screeching their distinct cry, which is somewhere between a hissing cat and a lorry with dodgy brakes. I replied by screeching *my* distinct cry, which is somewhere between an angry cockerel and a (glamorous) woman on the edge of a nervous breakdown.

*'Beware, beware, their snapping jaws!'* said Atticus.

*'I am beware-ing their snapping jaws!'* I replied. *'I don't need to be told to beware their snapping jaws!'* I swung the oar again as a particularly bold weepie made a dive for my head.





‘No, it’s the riddle from the map,’ said Atticus. ‘*Beware, beware, their snapping jaws, I’ll be within your clutch.* It must be referring to whatever it is they are.’

‘They’re weepies,’ I said. ‘You’ll need to know that if you’re going to be my apprentice. Although all that’s in my clutch is this oar, and I’m pretty sure that’s not the treasure we’re looking for.’ This is why I hate riddles so much. Give me some good old-fashioned, *clear* and *specific* instructions any day of the week (and if there are diagrams, even better).

‘Weepie! Weepie! Weepie!’ the weepies screeched.

»→ *When flustered, they like to say their own name on repeat. Vanity, if anything. Also: very annoying.*

‘I think I might’ve seen one last time we were here,’ said Atticus, keeping his eyes on the weepies. ‘But I presumed it was just a gull or

something.’

‘I told you – people only see what they want to see,’ I replied.

More of the creatures pushed off from their hiding spots on the cliff edge and joined the throng circling above us. One broke away and launched itself at Autumn, perhaps thinking she’d be an easy target. Autumn saw it coming and screamed.

‘Oh no you don’t!’ I yelled. I aimed the oar as if it was a spear and hurled it at the diving weepie. It struck the monster square in the face, causing it to spin around a couple of times, shrieking wildly and shedding feathers.

‘Nice shot, GG!’ (I said to myself.)

Another weepie swooped down and caught the oar in its mouth. One bite from its monstrous jaws and the oar shattered into a hundred pieces. *Darn it!* Now we were weaponless.

‘What if we used the Explosivo fireworks to

scare them away?’ said Atticus.

Okay, turns out we weren’t weaponless after all. I hadn’t thought of that.

‘Good plan! Do you have some matches?’ I asked.

‘No.’

‘Or a lighter?’

‘No.’

‘Or any means of making fire with which to light the Explosivos?’

‘Uh . . . no.’

‘In that case, not such a good plan.’

Turns out we were weaponless after all. What a roller-coaster. I hope you’re keeping up.

The weepie I’d hit with the oar shook its wings and flew back up to join the others. As it did so, it opened its rear end and defecated on the roof of the cabin.

»—> *‘Defecated’ is a polite way to say ‘pooed’, but since I don’t need to be polite with you, let me put it*

*this way: the wretched creature opened its bottom and splatted brown sloppy muck all over the boat.*

The mess was dark and thick and disgusting. I was outraged. Trying to eat us was one thing, but unloading faecal matter over us was a step too far.

‘We have to get out of here, before any more of them think it’s funny to try and poo on our heads,’ I said.

‘And before any more of them try to eat us again, surely?’ said Atticus.

‘That too,’ I said. ‘Look, there’s a spot over there where the waves aren’t as violent. Maybe we can moor there and climb up the cliffs to the lighthouse.’

Atticus gave me a look which was less ‘Great idea, GG!’ and more ‘You crazy, girl!’, but I aimed for the place I’d spotted all the same. All I knew was that we had to get away from the weepies, and at that point in time, it was the

best plan I had.

The weepies, however, had a plan of their own: namely, to get in our way and stop us from reaching the cliffs. Were they protecting the treasure? Were they trying to stop us reaching the lighthouse? Or were they just territorial and protective of their home? These were the questions that were racing through my mind as the whole wollock of them swooped down in front of us.

»→ *That's the collective name for a group of weepies, by the way: a wollock. A herd of cows, a flock of birds, a boring of teachers, a wollock of weepies.*

There was now a wall of weepies between us and the cliffs, all of them beating their giant wings and snapping their scaly mouths.

'Weepie! Weepie! Weepie!' they screamed, the sound deafening. Then, as one, they moved in our direction, preparing for a coordinated

attack. I wrenched the wheel sharply to the right. *The Wonky Goose* responded by swerving out of their path just in time. There was a cave in front of us – it would have to do.

'We're going in!' I shouted.

*The Wonky Goose* skipped along the water, through splashes of foam from the waves that smashed into the rocks, then dived headfirst into the dark mouth of the cave. The second we entered, all light was sucked away and the sounds from outside – the crashing waves and the screeching weepies – took on a hollow, distant quality. As I hoped, the weepies didn't follow us in. We were safe. For now. The boat turned a corner then hit the stony shore and came to a stop. I killed the engine. It was pitch-black inside the cave and deathly still. Water dripped off the walls, the sound echoing around us.

'Atticus, find the torch,' I whispered,

remembering there was one tucked away under the sink in the ship's cabin.

While he was searching for it, I peered into the darkness. I couldn't be sure, but it looked like there was something hanging on the cave ceiling.

'Found it!' said Atticus, holding up the torch.

The second before he flicked it on, I knew what we were going to see.

'Wait!' I said, but it was too late.

Atticus switched on the torch, and its light bounced off the cave walls. He gasped.

'Uh-oh,' said Autumn.

'Uh-oh,' I agreed.

We had not escaped the monsters after all, for surrounding us – hanging from the walls and dangling upside down like bats from the ceiling – were hundreds of sleeping weepies. This cave was their home, and we had sailed straight into it.





To make matters worse, the light from the torch – which Atticus was so dutifully waving around – was waking them up.

‘Switch off the torch,’ I whispered out of the corner of my mouth.

‘What’s a dorch?’ Atticus whispered back.

‘*Torch*, Ratty, *torch!*’ I replied, far too loud. If the weepies weren’t awake before, they definitely were now. Their yellow eyes sparkled in the darkness. One by one they dropped onto the floor with a series of loud thuds. Then they started to creep towards us on their crooked seagull feet.

‘Hang on a minute!’ I said. ‘What’s the second part of the riddle?’

‘I’m not sure now’s the time, GG,’ said Atticus, the torch in his hand shaking as he watched the weepies edge closer.

‘Yes, it is. Quick, remind me what it said.’

*‘Buried deep within the mound that no one else*

*would touch,’* said Atticus.

A couple of the nearest weepies opened their jaws wide then snapped them closed again.

‘Just what I thought!’ I said. ‘*Buried deep within the mound.*’ This cave is directly below the lighthouse, and the mound must be the cliffs. No one else would go near this place, because it’s full of weepies! I think the treasure is in this cave!’ I let out a little squeal of glee. I’d solved the stupid riddle!

The weepies hissed and ruffled their feathers.

‘That’s great,’ said Atticus, ‘but, um, how are we supposed to search the cave when it’s full of so many weepies?!’

He had a point. The weepies were now very close, and there was an awful lot of them.

‘We’ll think of something,’ I said, really hoping that would turn out to be true.

One of the weepies flew up onto the side of the boat and grinned its wide-mouthed grin.



'No pressure, but we might need to think of something pretty quick,' said Atticus.

Another few weepies jumped onto the edge of the boat. Others flew up to the mast and leered at us from above. They sniffed in our direction and licked their teeth. I scanned the boat, looking for something to throw at them.

'GG . . .' said Atticus.

'Weepie!' said one of the weepies.

'Pee pee!' said Autumn, who really knows how to pick her moments. She hugged Norbert a little tighter.

*HONK!* went the goose.

The *honk* was so loud, it echoed around the cave, sounding like it came from a creature much larger than the scrawny goose in Autumn's arms. Spooked, the weepies flapped away and backed off a little.

'Make him honk again!' I said to Autumn.

'How?' asked Autumn.

'I don't know! Ask him nicely?'

'Can you honk, please, Mr Norbert Goose?' said Autumn.

'No, I didn't mean . . . I was being sarcastic,' I said.

'What's scarfastic?' Autumn asked.

'Even if we weren't about to be eaten by a wollock of weepies, I wouldn't have the patience to explain it to you.'

The weepies, regaining confidence, started edging towards us again.

'Poor goose,' said Autumn, and gave Norbert another squeeze.

*HONK!* went Norbert.

The weepies flapped their wings in alarm again.

'That's it – he likes it when you squeeze him!' I said. 'Squeeze him again!'

Autumn obliged.

*HONK! HONK! HONK!* went Norbert.

The weepies were really in a fluster now; they did not like Norbert's honking one bit.

'I've got an idea!' said Atticus, switching off the torch (only about ten minutes after I'd asked him to). We were plummeted into darkness, which made the squeals of the weepies even more intense. 'Autumn, when I say, hold Norbert up in the air and give him a squeeze. At the same time, we all need to honk as loud as we can. Ready? Now!'

The torch came back on, shining directly at Norbert, casting an almighty goose-shaped shadow onto the cave wall. Autumn gave Norbert another squeeze.

***HOOOOONK!***



We all joined in, making the biggest honk yet. That, plus the sight of the giant goose monster on the side of the cave, was enough to send a ripple of terror through the weepies. One of them bolted for the exit, then another and another until the whole lot of them had flown away, in a big fluster of feathers and shrieks.

‘Well done, Norbert!’ I said, once the last of them had gone and the noise had died down.

‘Good goose!’ said Autumn, tapping Norbert on the head.

‘And well done me and Autumn for our quick thinking and bravery?’ said Atticus.

‘Yes, yes, whatever,’ I replied. ‘Now, let’s go and find that treasure before those wretched creatures return.’

The three of us stepped out of the boat and, without looking back, we ventured deeper into the pitch-black depths of the weepie cave.



## Chapter Splenty-Sploo

The cave was much bigger than it looked from the outside. It twisted and turned in all directions. The walls were as lumpy as scrambled eggs, and stalactites hung from the ceiling like broken fingers. Atticus shone the torch around us as we went, but there were no obvious hiding places for the treasure. Unless there was a secret lever or a hidden panel . . . I pressed every lump and bump we passed, and stood on my tiptoes to pull any stalactites within reach, in case one of them sprang open a hidden compartment, but nothing worked. We were running out of time.

The weepies could come back at any moment, and the further inside the cave we were, the less likely it was that we'd make it out again.

Beside me, Autumn kept sniffing the air, exploring the cave's many smells, none of which were pleasant.

'I'm hungry,' she said, for about the umpteenth time that weekend.

'When are you ever *not* hungry?' I asked her.

'When I'm eating,' she replied, which I thought was fair enough.

'We've got leftovers in the boat. You can have some when we get back.'

'But I'm hungry nowwwwwwwww,' she complained.

'Shhh, you'll bring back the weepies.'

She crossed her arms and stuck out her lip, but carried on walking.

Towards the rear of the cave was a small opening, which led to a separate cavern.

Atticus and I lowered our heads and squeezed through, and so did Norbert, who Autumn was still cradling in her arms. As soon as we were through, Atticus pulled a face and lifted his hand to his nose.

'Eww, what is that stink?' He stopped dead when he saw.

Piled up in the middle of the cavern, illuminated by a shaft of light that poured down from above, was the most enormous pile of excrement you've ever seen in your life. Thick, brown, and as stodgy as manure. It was huge – twice my height, maybe three times.

So. Much. Poo. And it *STANK*.

»→ *These are the pages I warned you about right at the start, so if you're averse to big piles of poo and you're still reading, the fault is entirely yours.*

The cavern was clearly where all the weepies went to do their business. To give them credit, at least they did it all in one place, away from



where they slept. And for good reason. I've never smelled anything so bad in my entire life. (Except maybe Grizzler's feet that time he got a fungal infection and didn't change his socks for a month. Oooh, what a *stench*. But this was a very close second.)

If there was a mathematical formula for the smell in that cavern, it would look something like this:

beefy dog breath + rotten fish + soiled  
nappy + gloopy bin juice +  
a hint of lavender  
(surprising, that one, but true)  
= weepie bum-waste stench

In short, it was disgusting.

*'Buried deep within the mound that no one else would touch,'* said Atticus.





'Yes, I was very clever and worked out the second half of the riddle already, remember?' I said. 'The mound is this cave and the reason no one would touch it is because of the weepies, which is why we're here looking for the – Oh.' I looked from Atticus to the giant mound in front of us. 'Oh,' I said again. '*The mound that no one else would touch.* You think it's referring to...'

'Yes,' said Atticus.

'Which means the treasure is hidden in the...'

'Yes,' said Atticus.

'How the blazin' gazebos are we supposed to get it out then?'

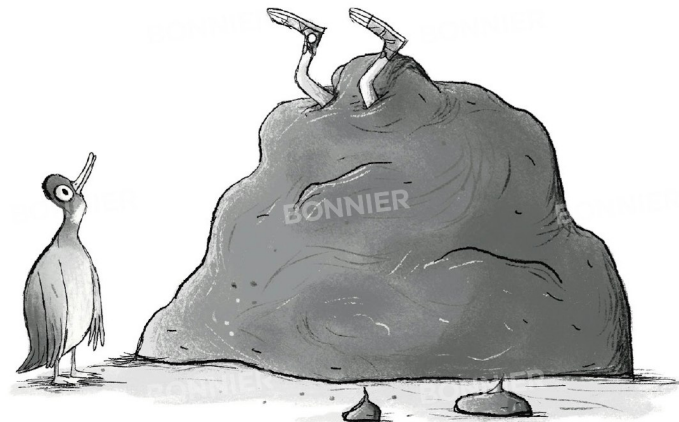
'I don't know,' said Atticus.

'CHOCOLATE!' said Autumn, who'd been so distracted by a fly that she'd only just noticed Poo Mountain. She smiled a hungry smile.

Quite how someone who claims to have

'overactive nostrils' could mistake the most putrid stench of weepie poo for the divine aroma of chocolate is beyond my comprehension, but that is precisely what happened with Autumn. My best guess is that, in that moment, her insatiable hunger won out over her mighty nose; her eyes saw one thing and her brain forgot to consult her nose for a second opinion, because the next thing Autumn did – so convinced was she that the mound was full of chocolatey goodness – was fling Norbert aside and dive headfirst into it.

'No, Scrag, that's not –' I said, but it was too late. She was already deep inside the mound.



All Atticus and I could do was stare, open-mouthed.

A beat later, Autumn emerged, gasping for breath. She wobbled to her feet, brown muck dripping from her face.

‘Not chocolate,’ she said, with a deep sadness.

‘No, Scrag, I’m afraid it isn’t,’ I replied.

‘Poo,’ she said, with an even deeper sadness.

‘Yes, Scrag, I’m afraid it is,’ I replied.

‘What’s that in your hands?’ asked Atticus.

Autumn shrugged. ‘Dunno,’ she said. ‘Found it in the poo.’

My heart leapt. Autumn was clutching some sort of small box, although it was so filthy it was hard to make out exactly what it was.

‘I think she’s found the treasure!’ said Atticus.

‘I think she has!’ I replied.

»→ I know, weirdest way of finding treasure ever. You couldn't make this stuff up.

‘Scrag, if you weren’t so covered in excrement,

I would kiss you!’

‘Weepie! Weepie!’ came an echoey call from a distant part of the cave.

‘The weepies are coming back!’ I said. ‘We need to get out of here.’

‘Follow me,’ said Atticus, leading the way.

I took the box from Autumn and tucked it under one arm, then scooped up Norbert, guessing he’d prefer to be held by me now that Autumn was . . . a smidge muckier than before.

‘GG, hold my hand,’ said Autumn, stretching her muck-smearred digits towards me.

‘Really?’ I said. ‘Really? Two full days we’ve been together and not once have you shown any interest in holding my hand, and now – right now – is when you decide it’s something you want to do?!’

‘Uh-huh, yep,’ she said with a nod.

‘Weepie!’ cried one of the weepies, getting closer.

‘Okay, fine,’ I said, taking her hand, trying my best to ignore the squelch as our fingers interlocked.

With Atticus in front and Autumn in tow, we slid back through the opening into the main cave then stumbled over the uneven ground towards the boat. The weepies’ cries continued to echo around us, but there was no sign of them yet, and we made it back to *The Wonky Goose* unscathed.

Atticus leapt on board and started the engine, while I bundled Norbert and Autumn in after him, wincing slightly as Autumn covered the inside of the boat in weepie muck.

‘Try not to touch every *single* surface if you can, Scrag,’ I said, as she wiped her arm along the entire length of one of the benches.

I took my position at the wheel and manoeuvred the boat back the way we’d come, but as we turned the final corner, the sound of

the weepies reached a cacophonous crescendo. A thousand or more of them hovered in the entrance to the cave, completely blocking the way. It was a total mess of wings and teeth and eyes and feet and wild, wild weepie screechings.

*‘WEEPIE! WEEPIE! WEEPIE! WEEPIE!’*

»→ Top tip: If you ever want to really annoy your teacher, take a leaf out of the weepies’ book, and shriek nothing but your own name to any question they ask you. For example:

TEACHER: “Have you finished your homework?”

YOU: “BARNABY!”

TEACHER: “What’s the capital of Peru?”

YOU: “BARNABY!”

TEACHER: “Are you pretending to be a weepie again?”

YOU: “BARNABY! BARNABY! BARNABY!”

Obviously, this example is specific to someone called Barnaby, so you’ll need to change the response to your own name. Or, if you want to really confuse

*your teacher, shout 'Barnaby' instead and see what they do with that.*

Norbert started to honk at the weepies, but the monsters' collective sound was too loud for him to be heard. I brought the boat to a standstill.

'What do we do?' shouted Atticus.

I looked from him to the wollock of weepies before us.

'What we Monster Hunters do best,' I replied. I stood up tall and raised my fist in the air. 'We fight!'

At that moment, I was hoping for some sort of rousing cheer from the kids. You know, to show me they were with me, ready to dive into battle by my side, but the cheer never came. Atticus was too busy looking uncertain, and Autumn was too busy picking clumps of crusty poo out of her hair.

The weepies flapped their wings a little harder and bared their teeth.

'On second thoughts, let's just ram through them and get the heck out of here,' I said. 'Hold on to your horses, kids, this is going to be one wild ride!'

'I don't have any horses,' said Autumn, which I chose to ignore.

I shifted the throttle to full speed and drove straight into the heart of the screeching weepies. Atticus grabbed Autumn and pulled her into the relative safety of the cabin, shutting the door behind them. Sensible; I probably should have thought of that.

The noise as we passed was almost too much to bear. I elbowed one weepie in its snout and head-butted another as their snapping jaws got a little too close for comfort. I then kicked off my boot to hit a third, which was making its way towards Norbert.

'Is that all you've got?!' I shouted at the weepies, quite frankly having a whale of a time.

*The Wonky Goose* burst through the other side of the flock and we were out of the cave, back on the open water. I kept the boat going at full speed. The weepies were fast, but *The Wonky Goose* was faster, and soon the monsters were nothing more than an angry swarm, flapping in the distance.

‘Ratty, Scrag, you can come out now!’ I called.

‘Are we still alive?’ said Atticus, creeping out of the cabin.

‘More alive than ever,’ I replied. ‘And smellier than ever, too,’ I added, getting another whiff of Autumn. ‘Let’s get you cleaned up.’

Cleaning Autumn was no easy task. It involved me dunking her, fully clothed, over the side of the boat several times, like a teabag. Once she was de-pooed (and dressed, once again, in oversized fancy dress – this time as a giant Christmas cracker), we had to clear up all the muck she’d managed to smear over the

inside of the boat. We worked as a team (one where I gave most of the orders and the kids did most of the cleaning, i.e. my sort of team) and eventually *The Wonky Goose* smelled tolerable again. Only then did I allow us to look at the object that Autumn had pulled out of Poo Mountain.

I started by giving it a quick rinse over the side of the boat, then we all gathered round to inspect it. It was a wooden chest, about the size of a punnet of grapes. Patterns were engraved across its lid – swirls and ships, flying birds and hollow skulls. A small, rusted clasp kept the chest locked, but one hard whack on the side of the boat was enough to loosen it. Atticus was on one side of me and Autumn was on the other, both peering over, eager to know what was in the chest.

‘Who wants to guess what’s inside?’ I asked.

‘Chocolate!’ said Autumn.



'If it is – given what just happened in the weepie cave – maybe don't eat it until I've confirmed,' I said.

'I reckon it's some sort of weapon,' said Atticus. 'Something really epic!'

'Well, let's find out, shall we?'

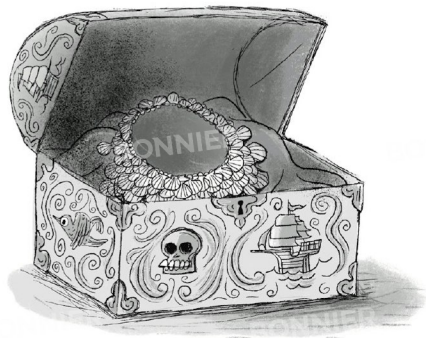
They peered in as I lifted the latch and opened the chest.

As soon as I saw what was inside, I let out a gasp. 'No, it can't be . . .'

'What is it, GG?' Autumn asked.

I couldn't believe my eyes. I was staring at the most valuable, most sought-after treasure in all the Twenty-Three Seas.

The Necklace of Never.



## Chapturty Plumtittle

»→ I'm not going to lie, I was expecting a bigger reaction from you at the end of the last chapter. In my head, it went more like this:

ME: 'I was staring at the most valuable, most sought-after treasure in all the Twenty-Three Seas . . .' (Dramatic pause) 'The Necklaee of Never!'

YOU: Gasp! Shoek! Possible faint.

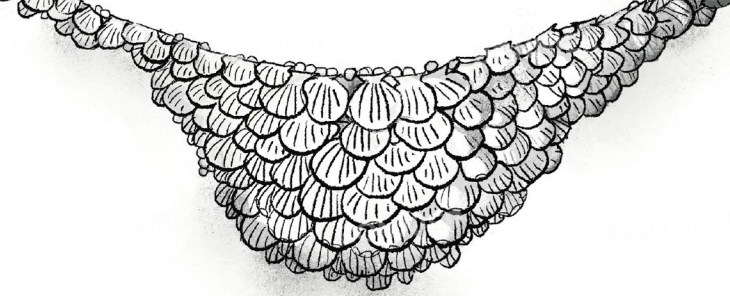
The only reason I can think of for your lacklustre response is that you've never heard of the Necklaee of Never. First of all, where have you been the last

hundred years? (And don't say 'not born', because that's a rubbish excuse.) And second of all, trust me when I say this was a **BIG DEAL**. I've underlined that and made it bold, just to emphasise how much of a **BIG DEAL** it was.

To say that the Necklace of Never is legendary is a massive understatement, like saying piranhas are a little bit dangerous, or Marmite tastes a little bit like eating a car tyre. People have written poems about the Necklace of Never, they've sung about it, they've dedicated their whole lives to finding it, but no one has ever succeeded. Until now. Right now, it was in a chest in my hands. And my hands were shaking.

'What is it?' Atticus asked.

I lifted the necklace out of the chest. It was made of a thousand cockle shells, covered in bronze and gold speckles that glittered in the sunlight.



'This,' I said, in my most epic voice, 'is the legendary Necklace of Never!'

(I'd been expecting a gasp/shock/possible faint reaction from them too, and again I was disappointed.)

'The Specklace of Spevver?' said Autumn.

'No, it's called the Necklace of Never,' I replied.

'The Specklace of Spevver!' said Autumn.

'No, the Necklace of Never.'

'Specklace of . . . Spevver?'

'Necklace. Of. Never.'

'Specklace. Of. Spevver.'

'You know what? Yes, why not. The Specklace of Spevver; call it whatever you like.'

‘That’s a silly name,’ said Autumn.

‘YES!’ I replied. ‘*It is.*’ Oooh, that girl knew how to press my buttons.

‘Why’s it so special?’ asked Atticus.

‘Because this necklace bestows upon its wearer the most incredible and unstoppable powers: the reflexes of a hummingbird and the speed of an emu, the agility of a flying squirrel and the strength of a bear. Powers beyond your wildest imagination!’

‘Cooooo!’ said Atticus. ‘Can I try it on?’

‘No, you cannot,’ I said, plonking the necklace back in its chest and shutting the lid. ‘Rumour has it, the necklace has a will of its own, and if the wearer is too weak, it will take over their body and control their mind. In other words, it’s VERY DANGEROUS.’

Atticus scrunched up his nose in disappointment.

‘Besides, I can barely control the two of you

without the necklace. Think of the mayhem you’d cause if I let you wear it.’

I wasn’t sure if I believed the stories about the necklace’s ability to manipulate people, but it was enough to stop me from trying it on myself. I was tempted, though. Unstoppable powers? Beyond my wildest imagination? Who *wouldn’t* want that? And I wasn’t weak, so surely I would be fine wearing it . . .

‘So what are we going to do with it?’ Atticus asked.

‘I haven’t decided yet. In the wrong hands, this could cause a lot of trouble.’ (And in the right hands, it could make me an awful lot of money, I was also thinking.) ‘We should take it to Grizzler – he’ll know what to do with it. The most important thing is that we prevent Ripclaw from getting hold of it.’

‘So, we’re going home?’ Atticus almost sounded disappointed.

‘Via the Rusty Scorpion, but yes,’ I said. ‘You can get a new phone, play your silly game, and everything will go back to normal. Isn’t that what you want?’

‘I suppose so,’ he said.

I returned to the wheel and set a course back the way we came. The chest containing the Necklace of Never was too big to fit in my pocket, so I stashed it under my arm. No way was I letting it out of my sight; it was far too valuable.

I couldn’t quite believe what we’d achieved: we’d outsmarted Ripclaw, found the treasure, and were now speeding home like heroes. As we passed the strange little village where we’d eaten lunch, I gave it an extra-wide berth, all too aware that we still had a crateful of the smugglers’ precious Explosivos on board. I half-expected Barf to still be bobbing around, with his blobfish head poking out of in the water, but

he was gone, and no one spotted us, so I think we got away with it.

Once we were a safe distance from the village, I took out an apple from the supply of food Wendie had given us and started munching it. It was crisp and juicy – just the way I like them. Atticus had gone for a lie-down in the cabin and Autumn was at the front of the boat playing Duck, Duck, Goose with the goose. Which meant . . . neither of them would see me if I tried on the necklace.

I finished the apple and chucked the core over the side of the boat.

»»» *That's not littering, it's feeding the fish. Entirely different. So quit your judging.*

I then took the chest from under my arm, lifted the lid and scooped out the necklace. The shells tinkled against one another and shimmered with magic. I could almost feel the necklace’s power coursing through my fingertips.

There was one other fact I knew about the necklace that I hadn't mentioned to Atticus – something that entered my thoughts the second I laid eyes on it and had been niggling away at me ever since. Legend had it that whoever wore the Necklace of Never would have the power to defeat the Gracken! I now had the necklace, so what if that person was . . . me?

My life's ambition. The one thing I'd dreamed of achieving my whole life. The deed that would ensure I would be remembered and revered forever – and the necklace could help me do it. I'd almost captured the Gracken once before. With the necklace, it would be easy. It was my destiny! I took a deep breath and raised the necklace above my head . . .

'Are you going to try it on?'

Atticus. Who was supposed to be napping. Who wasn't napping. Who was standing in front of me.

'Maybe,' I said, still holding up the necklace (and definitely *not* blushing at being caught in the act).

'I thought you said it was dangerous?' said Atticus.

'It is,' I replied.

'Very dangerous, you said. And that it can take over your body and control your mind?'

'Alright, alright, I'm not going to try it,' I said, plonking the necklace back in its chest, although I hadn't given up hope of defeating the Gracken just yet. 'I thought you went for a lie-down?'

'I did, but, um . . . I couldn't sleep.'

'Why's that then?' I said. (I was getting really good at pretending to care.)

'I couldn't stop thinking about something . . .'

Oh, here we go. I sensed another heart-to-heart coming. I took a moment to mentally prepare myself.



‘Okay . . .’ I said.

‘Do I have to go to school tomorrow?’ he asked.

‘Well, it’s Monday tomorrow, so if you go to school on Mondays, then yes.’

‘Oh.’ He chewed on his bottom lip for a bit, then said, ‘You know yesterday, all those times I told you I was messaging my friends?’

‘Yes.’

‘Um, I actually wasn’t.’

‘Right.’ (\*Shocker!\*)

‘I was playing *Zombie Duck* the whole time.’

‘Uh-huh.’

‘Because . . . um . . . well, my friends don’t really message me any more. Or reply when I message them. I dunno . . . I’m not even sure they *are* my friends any more.’

‘I see. And is there a particular reason for that?’

Atticus took a deep breath then let out a sigh,

like he was carrying the weight of the world on his shoulders.

‘It was Nancy who started it,’ he said. ‘She sent Arlo this message saying I was boring because I didn’t want to climb onto the roof at lunchtime, even though the roof is *really high up*. Then Arlo sent the message to Finn with three crying laughter emojis. Hannah told Jessica it was because I was scared of pigeons, which isn’t true, then Teddy sent a gif of a pigeon flying into someone’s face to the whole class with the words ‘Atticus in a Flapicus’ underneath it. Everyone was laughing at me, GG. It was . . . horrible.’ He shook his head, then buried it in his hands.

‘And that’s when you started playing that game on your phone?’ I asked.

He shrugged without looking up. ‘I’d already downloaded it, but I started playing it more – at break and every lunchtime. Then before school

and after school too, but it only made things worse. Nancy found out and told everyone I was a weirdo for loving dead ducks so much, then Teddy sent everyone a picture of my face pasted onto a zombie goose, and Finn said I wanted to marry a zombie goat, which doesn't even make sense . . .'

His body shuddered as he tried to hold in a sob. He looked up, and two parallel tears escaped his eyes. He quickly wiped them away with his hands.

I reached over and gave him a couple of pats on his head. (To try and comfort him, not because I thought he was a dog.)



'Children can be so mean,' I said. 'But it's nearly always because they're feeling insecure themselves. It's actually nothing to do with you. You're a good kid, Ratty. Everyone gets scared at times, you know – even me, if you can believe that. And sometimes that fear causes people to act like prize buffoons. They find comfort in banding together and belittling someone else, but that doesn't make it right.'

»» I know what you're thinking: where did that little pearl of wisdom come from?! Turns out I'm better at this whole comforting-children thing than I'd realised.

'So what do I do?' Atticus asked.

'Well, you've already made a HUGE first step in telling me. Well done for that. And now, first thing tomorrow morning, I'm going to march into your school and take Neddy and Farlo and whatever the rest of them were called, and I'm going to let *squigglesnips* loose in their pants so

they'll be itching for a week!

Atticus looked up in alarm, as if I might actually be telling the truth. (To be fair, if he'd asked me to, I would have done.)

'Only kidding,' I said. 'I'll do whatever you want me to. I'll speak to your dads, speak to your teacher, speak to no one at all – it's up to you. Sometimes just saying the problem out loud helps make it go away. Or at least make it not seem quite so life-and-death important.'

Atticus gave a little nod.

'One thing I will say, though, is that hiding away in that computer game of yours is most definitely not the answer. I'm not saying that *Zombie Duck* is bad – it helped us escape the rot-wraiths, after all – but play it for fun, not to escape the world, alright?'

'Yeah, okay,' said Atticus.

'And remember what I said before: being weird is good. If your friends can't see that, they

don't deserve to be your friends.'

Atticus gave a sad little nod. 'Thanks, GG.'

I patted him on the head again, feeling proud for having delivered some top-notch grandparenting. Atticus rubbed his face with his hands, then looked out to sea. He squinted.

'What's that?' he said, peering towards the cliffs.

'What's what?' I asked.

'Over there. There's something in the water.'

I peered in the same direction and smiled. 'Seals!' I said. 'So many of them. Autumn, come and see.'

I steered us a little nearer, then all three of us went to the side of the boat to get a closer look.

There were at least twenty seals, and the water was so clear, we could see them beneath the surface as they weaved and twisted, curling past one another in a joyous dance that only they knew the moves to. Every now and then, one



would pop its head out of the water before diving back under again. With the towering cliffs in the background, and the sun shimmering on the water like scattered diamonds, it was a wondrous sight.

Next to me, Atticus smiled.

'I like them,' he said.

'Me too,' I said.

A seal that was a lot smaller than the rest spun in circles, chasing its tail.

'Boat,' said Autumn.

'No, they're seals,' I replied.

'No, boat. Over there,' said Autumn.

Autumn wasn't looking at the seals at all. I followed her gaze. Sure enough, a large ship was looming towards us, a dark silhouette on the bright water.

'Oh no,' I said.

It was Ripclaw.

She'd found us.



## Chapter Nearly At The End Now, Surely?

There was nowhere for us to run. Well, we could have run up and down the boat, screaming and waving our arms, but that wouldn't have got us very far. The sky was clear and the sun was bright, so there was no chance of another elektrosquib storm. We couldn't even sail to shore and dump the boat, because we were surrounded by towering cliffs for as far as the eye could see. The way I saw it, we had three options:

1. Sail directly at Ripclaw. Probably get hit by one of her cannonballs. Explode into lots of

tiny pieces.

2. Sail in the opposite direction. Wait for Ripclaw to catch up with us. Probably get hit by one of her cannonballs. Explode into lots of tiny pieces.

3. Jump overboard. Splash around for a bit. Wait for Ripclaw to realise that was the sole extent of our plan. Probably get hit by one of her cannonballs. Explode into lots of tiny pieces.

I'm going to be honest, none of those options was particularly appealing. There was a fourth option, however . . . One that involved the Necklace of Never. What if I put it on and used its power to disarm Ripclaw and take over her ship? I know it was risky, given the necklace's reputation for controlling its wearer, but given the other three options (outlined above), I didn't see that we had a whole lot of choice.

I explained my plan to Atticus, Autumn and

Norbert. Out of the three of them, only Norbert seemed to think it was a good idea, which wasn't a great confidence boost.

'Trust me, this is going to work,' I said (based on no evidence whatsoever).

I took the necklace out of its box and slipped it into my pocket. I didn't want Ripclaw to see it until I was within striking distance.


'How are we going to get on her ship?' Atticus asked. 'She's not just going to let us climb aboard, is she?'

'We'll pretend we're surrendering,' I replied. 'It's a classic pirate move.'

I stood at the front of the boat, with Atticus and Autumn on either side of me, and waved a white flag in the air.

»→ *Actually, it wasn't a white flag, because I didn't have one. All I had was an off-white towel that had recently been used to wipe smears of weepie dung off the seats, so that had to do.*



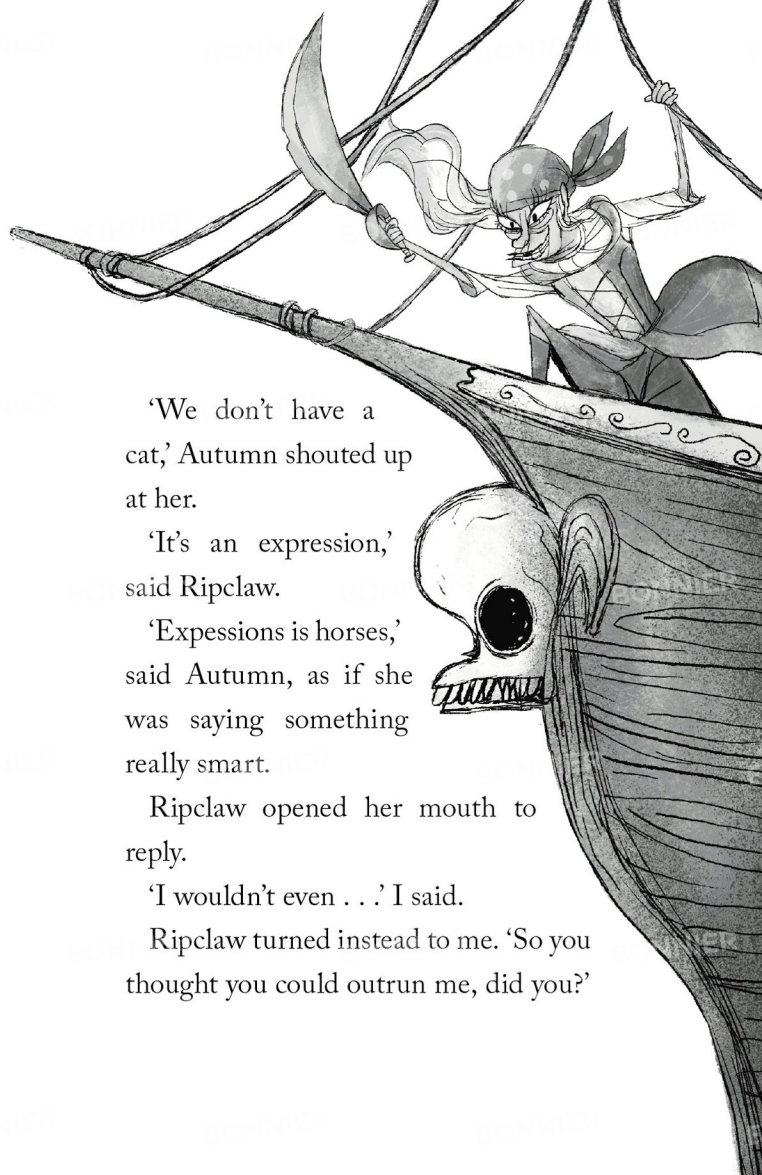


We held our ground while *The Death Scar* approached.

It was a bit more battered than the last time we'd seen it – damaged in the storm that had thrown it off our trail – but it still looked majestic in the afternoon sun.

Once she was close enough, Ripclaw left the helm and walked to the ship's figurehead, which was carved out of black wood and shaped to look like the neck and head of an angry giraffe. An unconventional choice, but intimidating all the same.

'Well, look what the cat dragged in,' said Ripclaw.



'We don't have a cat,' Autumn shouted up at her.

'It's an expression,' said Ripclaw.

'Expressions is horses,' said Autumn, as if she was saying something really smart.

Ripclaw opened her mouth to reply.

'I wouldn't even . . .' I said.

Ripclaw turned instead to me. 'So you thought you could outrun me, did you?'

‘I did,’ I replied, ‘but now we wish to surrender.’

Ripclaw laughed, which sounded like a weepie weeping. ‘And how do I know you’re not just pretending to surrender?’ she asked. ‘It’s a classic pirate move.’

Ah, yes. I should have known she might suspect that; she’s been a pirate for the best part of sixty years, after all.

‘Surrender or not, I think I’ll blast a hole in your boat and watch you sink,’ Ripclaw continued, pulling out an ivory-handled pistol and aiming it at the deck of *The Wonky Goose*.

My hand reached into my pocket and my fingers curled around the necklace.

*No. Not yet.* Ripclaw was still too far away, and much higher up than us on her far larger ship. If I put the necklace on now, I’d lose the element of surprise.

‘Goodbye, Spit-Tooth,’ said Ripclaw, flashing me her rotten smile. She pulled back the

hammer of the pistol, ready to fire.

‘Wait!’ said Atticus. ‘We have treasure!’

‘What are you doing?’ I said, thinking he was about to tell her about the Necklace of Never.

‘Trust me,’ he said under his breath.

‘What treasure?’ Ripclaw asked.

‘A box of the finest – and most expensive – Explosivos money can buy,’ Atticus replied. *Clever kid!* He lifted the lid off the crate to show Ripclaw. Her eyes widened at the sight of them.

‘If you sink our boat now, you’ll lose it all.’

Ripclaw hesitated, the cogs in her brain whirring as she weighed up her options.

‘Bring them on board,’ she said. ‘But one wrong move and *BANG!* You’ll regret it.’

She went to the side of her ship and threw down a rope ladder. I steered *The Wonky Goose* until we were in line with it, then picked up one side of the crate. Atticus picked up the other side.

'The kids stay on board,' Ripclaw shouted down.

I looked from the crate to the rickety ladder, then back up at Ripclaw.

'Winifred, darling,' I said. 'I'm very old and I've got arthritis in both knees. You really think I can carry this hefty crate up a rope ladder on my own?'

*'I told you before, don't call me Winifred!'* she shrieked, waving the gun around like an absolute loon. 'Fine, the boy can help, but the other one stays in the boat. Any funny business, and I sink her.'

»→ *You heard it here first: she was prepared to sink a boat with a three-year-old on it. That's the kind of evil we were dealing with.*

'Stay here with Norbert,' I said to Autumn. 'We'll be back soon.'

Autumn smiled and gave me two thumbs up, oblivious as always as to just how much danger

we were in.

With a lot of huffing and puffing, Atticus and I managed to heave the crate up the ladder and onto The Death Scar. I dragged it to the centre of the deck then stood up straight, stretching my back and brushing dust off my hands.

'Now get off my ship,' said Ripclaw. She was only a few paces away from me. Now was the time.

'Sorry, Winnie, dear, but this ship belongs to me now,' I said. 'Because I . . . have this!' Quick as a flash, I whipped the necklace out of my pocket and swung it over my head. The magical shells tinkled and shimmered. I took a deep breath, waiting for the power to seep into my bones, ready to feel strong, invincible, unstoppable . . .

But nothing happened.

I didn't feel any different at all. No bear-like strength, no emu-like speed, and definitely no

hummingbird-like reflexes. What was wrong?  
Why wasn't it working?

In that moment, the voice in my head was screaming something along the lines of:

*Ahhhhhhghghghghghhfhfh fhfhfhsLUKKADUfjs;  
iewjurrgfioejfussdyknurrghhhjuddvrrr\*@£\$^@  
£\*yaaaaarsfLukyaggg"!@(urrgghh£\*!\_aef  
hgegargarhuuuuuugwaqwad@\*\*\*&£!!!*

Luckily, I kept my cool enough to say, 'I feel so powerful!'

I didn't mean for it to come out as a question, but Ripclaw was too enraptured by the necklace to notice.

'It can't be . . .' she said.

'It is!' I said, trying not to ignore the voice in my head that had progressed from panicked gibberish to:

**The necklace has no power. It was all a lie; the legend was made up. There's no way to defeat Ripclaw without the necklace**

**WE'RE DOOMED WE'RE DOOMED WE'RE DOOMED**  
(I wonder if this necklaee would go well with my zebra-print blouse . . .)

**We're definitely doomed!**  
(etc.)

'Necklace of Never . . .' whispered Ripclaw, sounding like a sugar-hungry kid who'd just stumbled across a sherbet fountain. She snapped out of her hypnosis, and her face turned hard. 'Give it to me.'

'I am the wearer of the necklace, so I have the power!' I said, in my best Gandalf voice. I raised my hands in the air and gave them a little shake, to add to the effect. Atticus gave me a 'why are you being weird?' face.

'Oh, yes,' I went on. 'I can really feel it now! The power . . . oooh, yes . . .'

'Hand over the necklace, and I may let you live,' said Ripclaw.

'May?' I replied. 'May? You *may* let us live?'



Well, that's not very encouraging, is it?'

'Give me the necklace now, or I'll shoot your boat and sink your granddaughter.'

'Great-granddaughter,' Autumn shouted up from the boat.

'Not the time,' I shouted back.

Ripclaw held her hand out towards me and ground her teeth. Her nails were gnarled and thick. 'I'll give you to the count of three,' she said. 'One. Two. Thr—'

I took off the necklace and held it over the side of the boat.

'NO!' shouted Ripclaw.

'Throw the gun overboard, or I drop the necklace in the water and you'll never see it again.'

'You wouldn't dare! It's far too valuable.'

'Try me . . .'

Waves of anger rippled over her face.

'Okay, I'll make you a deal,' she said. 'You

throw me the necklace, and I'll toss the gun.'

'Deal,' I said. 'But we do it at the same time.'

'Alright.' She lowered the gun a little. 'Ready and . . . throw!'

I tossed the necklace up into the air, and at the same time Ripclaw threw the gun, which sailed over the side of the ship and hit the water with a satisfying *plop*. I wasn't really expecting Ripclaw to stick to her word – notorious as she is for being such a lying, cheating rat – which proved just how much she wanted the necklace.

The Necklace of Never sailed over her head, for I'd deliberately thrown it long, and skidded across the deck.

'Quick, Atticus, grab it!' I shouted.

'Oh no you don't!' said Ripclaw.

They both dashed for the necklace at the same time. Atticus was further away, but his legs were nimble (and seventy years younger), and he reached it first. He ran in a circle around



Ripclaw and looped back to me, holding up the necklace with pride.

'I got it, GG!'

'You sure did, kiddo,' I replied.

'You tricked me!' said Ripclaw, her face turning a dark shade of red.

'It's not my fault you're bad at catching,' I said.

That may have been one provocation too many. Ripclaw reached behind her back and pulled out two cutlasses – one in each hand. She sliced their blades across one another, which made a sharp screeching sound and caused sparks to fly in all directions.

'No one makes a fool of me,' she said, taking a step towards us. 'Play-time's over.'

Well, I'd got rid of the gun, which was a good start, but now I needed a new plan. One that didn't involve me using the necklace, because for some reason it wasn't working. I scanned the deck of the ship for items that I might be able

to use to my advantage. In no particular order, I saw:



I honed in on items 3 and 7 as an idea started to brew in my brain. I turned to Atticus and leaned towards him so Ripclaw wouldn't hear us.

'Okay, Ratty, this is what I need you to do,' I said, talking fast as Ripclaw stalked towards us. 'Grab one of those cannonballs, climb that mast, drop the ball on the crate of Explosivos, then jump overboard before it explodes. Got it?'

'But . . . But . . . ' said Atticus.

At that moment, Ripclaw leapt, swinging the cutlasses in wild circles, aiming for our heads. I pushed Atticus aside and ducked into a barrel roll. Ripclaw's blades struck the deck and lodged themselves in the wood, which gave me the ten seconds I needed to stand back up again.

»→ *Standing up takes longer when you're my age, okay? One day you'll know what I mean.*

By the time I was back on my feet, Atticus had reached the pile of cannonballs and picked

one up. They were small – so it fit comfortably in his outstretched hand – but they were also extremely heavy. He looked up at the crow's nest at the top of the mast.

'What are you waiting for?!' I said, giving him an encouraging shooing motion.

'It's heights,' he said, with an awkward grimace. 'You know I don't like heights.'

Ah. One thing I had not factored into my already rather sketchy plan.

Ripclaw came at me then, both arms swinging wildly. I snatched up the crusty old mop and held it in front of my face. The blades crashed into the handle. Splinters flew, but the mop held. I pushed Ripclaw back, spun the mop above my head, and used it to combat four more of her strikes. On the fifth strike, I dodged to the right and used the filthy end of the mop to poke Ripclaw hard in her stomach. She made a dull grunting sound, like a rhino with constipation,

and staggered backwards.

I took the opportunity to glance over at Atticus, who was dithering at the base of the mast. In his other hand, he was still holding the Necklace of Never.

‘Put the necklace on!’ I yelled.

Atticus looked at the object in his hand, as if he’d forgotten he was holding it.

‘What?’ he said.

‘Put it on,’ I replied. ‘It’ll give you the power you need to climb the mast!’

The necklace had done nothing for me whatsoever, so I doubted it would do much for Atticus either, but it was all I could think of.

‘But what about it taking over my body and controlling my mind?’

Ripclaw came at me again. I flicked the mop up to block a strike from the cutlass in her right hand, but it was one hit too many, and the mop handle shattered. The impact made me stumble

backwards. I tripped over and landed on my backside.

‘No time!’ I yelled to Atticus.

Ripclaw towered over me, the twin cutlasses raised above her head in an ominous cross. I was weaponless and at her mercy. She grinned her gold-tooth grin.

‘I’m going to take real pleasure in –’

***BANG!***

I never found out what Ripclaw was going to take real pleasure in, because she was interrupted by the ear-shattering sound of a gun being fired.

***BANG! BANG! BANG!***

More bullets whizzed through the air, but I couldn’t make out where they were coming from.

Then a wild and slightly crazed three-year-old leapt over the side of the boat, dressed as a Christmas cracker and holding Ripclaw's ivory-handled pistol in her left hand. She was closely followed by a very flappy goose.

'I'M A PIRAAAAAAAAAAAAATE!' shouted Autumn, waving the pistol in the air. Norbert joined in with some enthusiastic honking.

For once, I was grateful that Autumn hadn't stayed put. She fired a couple more shots willy-nilly.

»→ *Yes, please do take a moment to enjoy the phrase 'willy-nilly.'*

Ripclaw didn't know what to make of her. She stared, open-mouthed. I made the most of the distraction and swiped at Ripclaw's feet, taking her legs out from underneath her. She hit the deck and one of the cutlasses fell out of her hand. It went spinning down the length of

the ship, and I went chasing after it.

'This evens things out a little,' I said, picking it up. I scanned the deck for Atticus, but he was nowhere to be seen. Then I looked up. He was halfway up the rigging, with the Necklace of Never around his neck!

'Yes, Ratty – keep going!' I said before turning to Autumn. 'And, Scrag – it's time for you to do some of your finest steering!'

'Aye, aye, captain!' she replied, before dutifully racing to the wheel.

Ripclaw got to her feet and spat out a tooth that had come loose when she hit the deck.

'Still living up to your name, Spit-Tooth,' she said.

The tooth rolled towards me. I picked up and gave it a little wipe before putting it in my pocket.







‘Old habits die hard,’ I replied. I weighed up the cutlass in my hand. It had never been my favourite weapon, but it was a darn sight better than a crusty old mop.

If Ripclaw had been angry before, she was positively fuming now. She ran towards me, and our blades clashed with a dull *thunk*. Ripclaw was the more skilled fighter, for sure – and I was fifty years out of practice – but I still held my own, defending blow after blow, helped by Norbert, who danced around Ripclaw’s feet, pecking at her toes.

Ripclaw and I parried each other’s strikes up and down the length of the ship. We jumped over barrels, ducked under sails and leapt around ropes, all the while slashing and blocking and jabbing and slicing. I was out of breath and could feel my arms starting to weaken, but Ripclaw kept coming, enraged and relentless. Just when I thought I couldn’t take any more, I

glanced up and saw that Atticus had made it to the crow’s nest.

‘Scrag – now!’ I shouted to Autumn.

She fired Ripclaw’s gun into the air three times, then gave the wheel one of her special mega-spins. Even though the ship was barely moving, the spin caused it to careen sharply to the left. I grabbed hold of the rigging, but the move took Ripclaw by surprise, knocking her off her feet.

‘Ratty, drop it!’ I called up to Atticus.

He nodded, lining up the cannonball with the crate of Explosivos. I ran to Autumn, scooping up Norbert on the way. As soon as I reached the wheel, I grabbed Autumn’s hand and leapt overboard. As I fell, I turned back just in time to see the cannonball smash into the crate. There was the briefest moment where nothing happened, and then the whole world exploded.



## Chapter Wee And Tea Break

»→ This is less of a chapter and more of a chance for you to have a quick wee break. It's all been very exciting, so I'm sure you're probably bursting. And while you're gone, I'm going to make myself a nice cup of tea; I've been talking for ages and I am **PARCHED.**

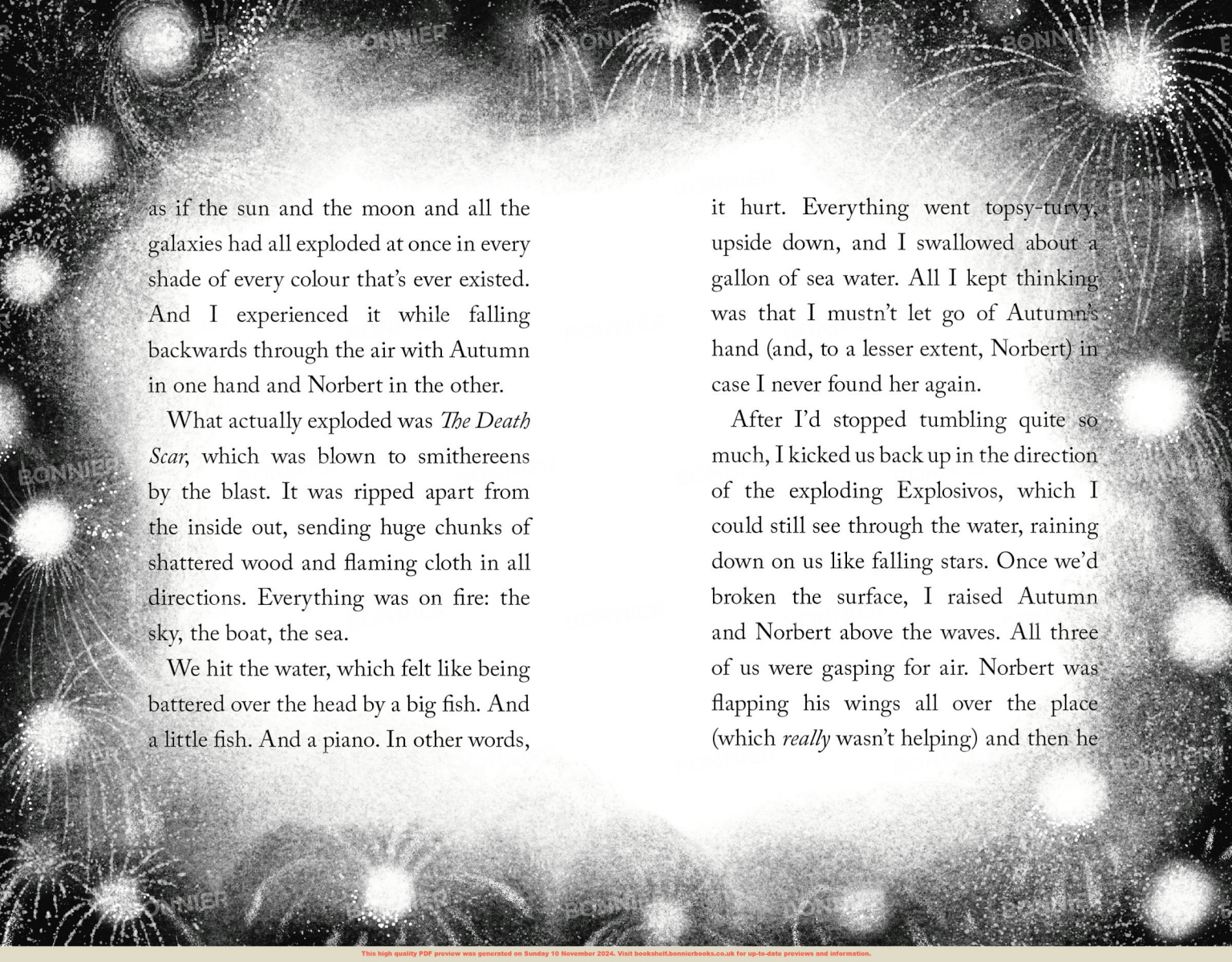


## Chapter The One Before The Last One

*Okay, I'm back. Did you wee? Good. Then let's get back to it.*

I'd always wanted to see what Explosivos looked like when they went off, and that day I found out. BIG TIME.

You've been to a fireworks display, right? Take a moment to remind yourself how big, loud and colourful it was, then imagine it a hundred times bigger, a thousand times louder, and a million times more colourful, and you'll be close to picturing what a crate-full of Explosivos looks like when it's set alight by a spark-fire cannonball. It was bright and bold and beautiful, and hot and roaring and intense,



as if the sun and the moon and all the galaxies had all exploded at once in every shade of every colour that's ever existed. And I experienced it while falling backwards through the air with Autumn in one hand and Norbert in the other.

What actually exploded was *The Death Scar*, which was blown to smithereens by the blast. It was ripped apart from the inside out, sending huge chunks of shattered wood and flaming cloth in all directions. Everything was on fire: the sky, the boat, the sea.

We hit the water, which felt like being battered over the head by a big fish. And a little fish. And a piano. In other words,

it hurt. Everything went topsy-turvy, upside down, and I swallowed about a gallon of sea water. All I kept thinking was that I mustn't let go of Autumn's hand (and, to a lesser extent, Norbert) in case I never found her again.

After I'd stopped tumbling quite so much, I kicked us back up in the direction of the exploding Explosivos, which I could still see through the water, raining down on us like falling stars. Once we'd broken the surface, I raised Autumn and Norbert above the waves. All three of us were gasping for air. Norbert was flapping his wings all over the place (which *really* wasn't helping) and then he



did a little anxious fart in my face (which really, really wasn't helping) but, as luck would have it, we'd popped up not far from *The Wonky Goose*, which had come out of the blast pretty much unscathed.

I kicked us over to it and chucked girl and goose inside, before heaving myself in after them. We were surrounded by the shattered carcass of *The Death Scar*. Most of it had sunk, but tatty shards still littered the surface. The air smelled of bitter smoke and scorched wood, as well as something else that I couldn't quite place.

'Ratty!' I called. 'Ratty, where are you?'

I scanned the burning debris for Atticus and Ripclaw, but there was no sign of either of them.

The crow's nest bobbed past us, having been detached from the rest of the ship when the mast was blown to pieces. What if Atticus hadn't been able to jump clear of the ship in time? He'd

been so high up when the Explosivos went off. What if he'd been . . . What if he was . . . ?

'Ratty!' I yelled again, starting to panic. This was all my fault. How was I ever going to explain this to his dads?

A feeble hand reached out of the crow's nest.

'Over here,' came a faint reply.

Thank the heavens! He must have crouched inside the crow's nest as it flew through the air, and that had protected him from the Explosivo flames. I steered the boat over to him and scooped him out of the water. He was shaking all over, either from shock or the cold or both.

'Explosivos . . . pretty cool . . . right?' he stammered.

'They sure were!' I replied. 'Now let's get out of here.'

'Wait!' A cry from the other side of the rubble. It was Ripclaw. She was trying to climb onto



a piece of driftwood, but it wasn't big enough, and she kept slipping under the water. Her bandana had come loose and a few streaks of hair were plastered over her face.

'You can't leave me here!' she cried.

'I'm pretty sure I can,' I shouted back. 'Think of it as poetic justice for that time you left me.'

I turned our boat away from her.

'But GG, she'll drown,' said Atticus.

'It's what she deserves,' I said.

He looked at me with a pained expression on his face.

'You really want me to go back for her, after all she's done to us?'

He shrugged. 'I dunno,' he murmured.

I should have left her there. I knew what she was capable of, so could've predicted what would happen next, but Atticus was right: as awful as she was, she was still a human being. If I left her, it'd make me no better than she was.

'Please,' she said, her eyes pleading. 'I don't want to drown!'

I had never heard Ripclaw beg for anything before.

'Okay, fine,' I said as I steered cautiously towards her. 'But first you have to get rid of all your weapons.'

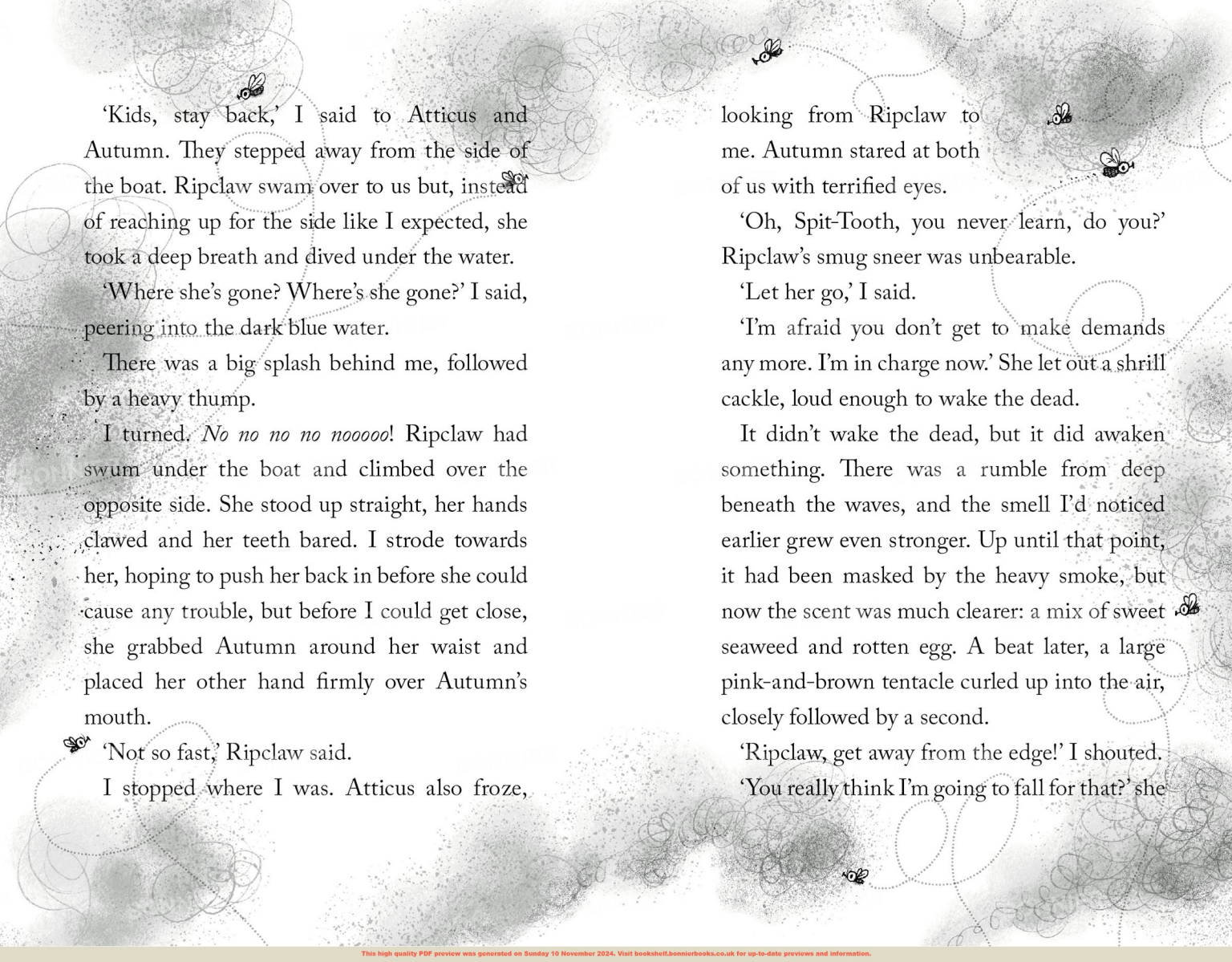
'I don't have any,' she replied.

'Liar,' I said. 'You always keep a knife in your boot. Show it to me and then sling it.'

With a sour expression, Ripclaw reached into the water, withdrew the knife from her boot, waved it in the air, then tossed it over her shoulder.

'Very good,' I said. 'Okay, you can climb on. But keep your hands where I can see them. The slightest hint of any trouble, I push you straight overboard and we leave without you, understood?'

'Understood.'



'Kids, stay back,' I said to Atticus and Autumn. They stepped away from the side of the boat. Ripclaw swam over to us but, instead of reaching up for the side like I expected, she took a deep breath and dived under the water.

'Where she's gone? Where's she gone?' I said, peering into the dark blue water.

There was a big splash behind me, followed by a heavy thump.

I turned. *No no no no nooooo!* Ripclaw had swum under the boat and climbed over the opposite side. She stood up straight, her hands clawed and her teeth bared. I strode towards her, hoping to push her back in before she could cause any trouble, but before I could get close, she grabbed Autumn around her waist and placed her other hand firmly over Autumn's mouth.

'Not so fast,' Ripclaw said.

I stopped where I was. Atticus also froze,

looking from Ripclaw to me. Autumn stared at both of us with terrified eyes.

'Oh, Spit-Tooth, you never learn, do you?' Ripclaw's smug sneer was unbearable.

'Let her go,' I said.

'I'm afraid you don't get to make demands any more. I'm in charge now.' She let out a shrill cackle, loud enough to wake the dead.

It didn't wake the dead, but it did awaken something. There was a rumble from deep beneath the waves, and the smell I'd noticed earlier grew even stronger. Up until that point, it had been masked by the heavy smoke, but now the scent was much clearer: a mix of sweet seaweed and rotten egg. A beat later, a large pink-and-brown tentacle curled up into the air, closely followed by a second.

'Ripclaw, get away from the edge!' I shouted. 'You really think I'm going to fall for that?' she

said, as the Gracken lifted its gargantuan head out of the water. It must have been attracted by the blast from the Explosivos.

‘I’m being serious,’ I said. ‘Behind you, it’s –’

I didn’t finish my sentence. The Gracken wrapped one of its juicy tentacles around Ripclaw’s body. Ripclaw looked around, confused and alarmed. Autumn took the opportunity to sink her teeth into the hand that covered her mouth. Ripclaw yelped and dropped her. I dived towards them and pulled Autumn out of the way, just as the Gracken lifted Ripclaw off the deck.

‘No!’ said Ripclaw. ‘This isn’t how I –’

The Gracken swung her high into the air and opened its mighty jaws. Golden saliva dripped from its teeth. With one swift flick, it whipped Ripclaw into its mouth, and then she was no more.





## Chapter The Last One

Ripclaw was gone.

Eaten. Devoured. Deceased.

No matter how I put it, I still couldn't quite process what had just happened. Winifred Blossomhurst, known to most as Ripclaw the pirate, scourge of the Twenty-Three Seas and my nemesis for over six decades, was finally gone.

There was no time for rejoicing just yet, however, as the gelatinous mass of the Gracken was still towering above us. Autumn stared up at it, unblinking, aware of how close she'd



been to being swept into its mouth. Three of its tentacles flopped across the boat, and it lounged off to one side, as if eating Ripclaw had pacified it somewhat. It was now just floating there . . . digesting her?

This is my chance, I thought.

Not only was the Gracken in chill-out mode, but I also had the necklace – the one that legend said would help defeat the Gracken. I could do it. This was my moment.

‘Quick, Ratty, pass me the necklace,’ I said to Atticus.

He looked a little reluctant, but handed it over.

‘What are you going to do?’ he asked.

‘Fulfil my destiny!’

Without taking my eyes off the Gracken, I slipped the necklace over my head. It hadn’t done anything the last time I’d tried it on, but being in the presence of one of the largest and

most infamous monsters ever known would jump-start its magic, for sure. This time its powers would course through my veins – I’d feel incredible, invincible, unstoppable . . . right?

Wrong.

I paused and did a little wiggle, to see if the necklace needed some time to warm up.

. . .

Still nothing.

Nada.

Zilch.

Diddly-squat.

Well, I didn’t have time to figure out why it still wasn’t working. I didn’t need some stupid necklace to defeat the Gracken, anyway; I’d come close without its help before, and the monster had never been as docile as it was right now.

I picked up the only weapon I could find – a jagged piece of black wood that had landed in



our boat after the explosion of *The Death Scar* – and started to crawl up one of the creature’s slimy tentacles towards its head. It was slippery and squelchy and not at all pleasant, not to mention the smell, which was eggier than ever. I held my breath and kept going. The Gracken began to stir, as if awoken from a deep sleep, very much *not* impressed that I was using its tentacle as a stepladder. It whipped at me with another arm, but it was sluggish after its big meal, making it easy to dodge. I weaved my way past several more tentacles, jumping, scrambling and hauling myself (rather inelegantly, if truth be told) from one to the next, until I was finally high enough to flop onto its big, squishy head. I’d made it! Now all I needed to do was slide the shard of wood into one of its giant nostrils. I lifted up the wood, ready to strike.

‘GG, wait!’ said Atticus from below.

‘Kind of busy right now,’ I said back, trying

to keep my balance as I wobbled about on the Gracken’s head.

‘But do you really have to kill it?’ he asked.

‘Yes,’ I replied. ‘It’s my life’s ambition, remember?’

‘But why?’

‘Fame, notoriety, respect . . . It’s quite a long list,’ I said. ‘If you’re going to be my apprentice, you’re going to have to learn not to ask inappropriate questions at inconvenient times.’

»→ I should mention here that the Gracken was trying to remove me from its head throughout this conversation, so make sure you’re imagining lots of swooshing/ducking/jumping/trying not to fall over, etc.

‘What’s the difference between an animal and a monster, though?’ Atticus asked.

‘I don’t know . . . Monsters try to eat us, given half the chance?’

‘So do lots of animals. Lions, tigers, bears . . .’

‘What’s your point?’

The Gracken changed tack then, snorting mucus out of its nostrils, aiming for my face. A Snot Fountain, if you will. Delightful.

‘Isn’t it like what you said about the weeds and the flowers?’ said Atticus. ‘When you look at the Gracken in a certain way, it *is* kind of beautiful.’

I looked at the big undulating beast beneath me. I suppose there was a certain grotesque beauty to it.

I was torn. This was the moment I’d been waiting for my whole life – my biggest dream, my greatest ambition. All I had to do was make the final strike and the beast would be slain. But what Atticus said had got me thinking . . .

I let out a little groan, followed by a heavy sigh, then I slung the broken piece of wood away. Atticus was right. The Gracken was not that different from any other animal, trying its

best to survive. Besides, I didn’t need to slay a monster to prove my worth; I already knew how great I was.

I jumped off the Gracken’s head, using one of its tentacles as an icky sort of slide to make my way back down to the boat. Once safely on board, I poked at the tentacles that still lay across the deck until the Gracken got the hint to leave and slid back into the water. I watched with a heavy heart as it sank into the midnight depths.

Atticus came and stood next to me.

‘I think you made the right decision,’ he said.

I gave a slow nod.

‘I think I did too,’ I replied.

We stood staring at the water for a long time.

‘Turns out we both did something unexpected today.’

‘What do you mean?’ Atticus asked.

‘Well, I let the Gracken go and you climbed

all the way up that mast.’

‘Oh yeah,’ he said. ‘I couldn’t have done it without the necklace, though.’

‘What, this old thing?’ I said, taking off the Necklace of Never and spinning it around my finger. ‘Tell me: when you put it on, did you feel any different?’

‘Uh, not really. I just knew it made me stronger.’

‘That’s what I thought. Well, I hate to break it to you, but it turns out the necklace doesn’t have any power after all. It’s just a collection of old shells.’

Atticus looked like he’d been squirted in the face with cuttlefish ink. ‘But that’s impossible,’ he said. ‘How could I have climbed the mast if it wasn’t for the necklace?’

I rubbed my neck a couple of times and smiled. ‘I guess there was some pretty powerful magic inside you all along. You just didn’t know

it was there.’

» I suppose that’s what the person who buried the necklace was trying to teach us. He could have just written a note – it would have saved us a whole lot of trouble.

Atticus blushed. ‘So I . . . did good?’ He looked up at me, nervous hope brimming in his eyes. ‘With the cannonball and the Explosivos?’

That was the moment when I realised just how much my opinion mattered to him, how much it had mattered the whole time.

‘You did really good, Ratty,’ I said. ‘I’m proud of you, kid.’ I pulled him towards me and gave him in an enormous hug.

‘Best Apprentice Monster Hunter ever.’

Wrapped up in my arms, Atticus beamed.





## Chapter The Actual Last One

The doorbell went.

‘Me get it!’ said Autumn, running down the hallway, still dressed as a Christmas cracker.

We were back in my cottage. We’d showered, changed our clothes (except for Autumn, who had grown attached to her new fancy-dress costume) and eaten a hearty meal, which contained neither cognac plums nor jellied whelks. The journey back had – thankfully – been uneventful. We’d returned *The Wonky Goose* to its place in the harbour, after cleaning it up as best we could. Given everything we’d put

it through, it was in surprisingly good shape. I took the remains of the money out of my bra and left it in one of the drawers in the cabin, along with the gold tooth Ripclaw had spat out during our fight, which I thought might be worth a bob or two. The owners would be confused, for sure, but it's important to show one's gratitude after one steals borrows a boat and nearly demolishes it numerous times.

'Daddieeeeeeees!' said Autumn, opening the door.

'Oh, I missed you!' said Niko, picking her up and spinning her around.

»→ *There was a lot more hugging again at this point, but I'm not going to bore you with all the details. Just imagine everyone hugging each other, and then skip to us all in the kitchen with mugs of tea in our hands.*

'So, how was your weekend?' Liam asked. 'What did you get up to?'

'We went on a boat and I had a gun and there was a monster and it ate the lady!' said Autumn.

I laughed, a little too loud. 'Kids and their imaginations!' I said. 'We've had a lovely couple of days, though, haven't we?'

'Yeah,' said Atticus. 'We have.' And I really think he meant it. Since coming back, he hadn't mentioned getting a new phone once, although I'd secretly already made plans to buy him a really special one – an Apple i-Doober Wotsit or whatever they're called.

*Honk! Honk!*

Norbert came waddling into the kitchen.

'Oh yes, and you've now got a pet goose,' I said.

Liam and Niko exchanged a look, unsure how serious I was being. Before either of them could ask for clarification, the doorbell went again.

'Who could that be?' I said, getting to my feet. My mind rattled through the possibilities:



**Option 1:** Mavis, wanting to reschedule our ‘bubbles and bagels’ session.

**Option 2:** Doris from up the road (the one with the dodgy perm and the cheap false teeth), come to complain about something I’d ‘supposedly’ done to her precious mulberry bush.

**Option 3:** The ghost of Ripclaw, come to haunt me forever.

As I walked to the door, I crossed my fingers, hoping it wasn’t option 3. (And *really* hoping that it wasn’t option 2. I’m never in the mood for Doris.)

‘Oh,’ I said, as I opened the door. It wasn’t option 1, 2 or 3.

‘Hello, Spit-Tooth,’ said Grizzler. He smiled. His dreadlocks were tied back in a loose ponytail and he was holding a bunch of gold-tipped roses.

‘Grizzler!’ I said, my wretched heart doing all sorts of flutters. ‘What are you doing here?’

‘I just thought I’d pay a visit to an old friend,’ he said.

»→ Now I'm sure you're not interested in this part AT ALL. You're probably heaving in your mouth and thinking it's all soppy and romantic and gross, but I've got to tell the story how it happened, and this is what happened.

I invited Grizzler in, and he joined us for tea. As we sat around the kitchen table, Atticus told his dads about all the animals we’d seen (which they believed), Autumn told them about all about the monsters we’d defeated (which they didn’t), Norbert honked, Grizzler laughed, and I sat back in my chair, watching them all with a satisfied little smile on my face.

Not bad for an old bird, eh?

So that’s it. The end of the book. I can’t believe you stuck around for the whole thing.



Not that it wasn't **intensely exciting** and **very thrilling** (it was); I just thought my constant jibes might eventually have got rid of you. But here we are. The very last page. Finally I can stop talking to you and get on with my life. The first thing I'm going to do is eat about a dozen scones, and then I'm going to have a nice long nap. Telling stories is exhausting. (And so is eating a dozen scones.)

So goodbye, have a nice life and, if there was one thing I wanted you to take from this story, it would be . . . how incredibly amazing I am. Never forget that.

That's it. That's all the life lessons you're getting from me. You've taken up far too much of my time already.

So long, farewell (good riddance).

I can tell you now, there's absolutely nothing on the next page, so don't even bother looking.

You had to check, didn't you? I knew you would, which is why I drew a picture of you here:



If you're thinking that it doesn't look much like you, it's because you're inside the purlygoof. Where you belong.



