

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

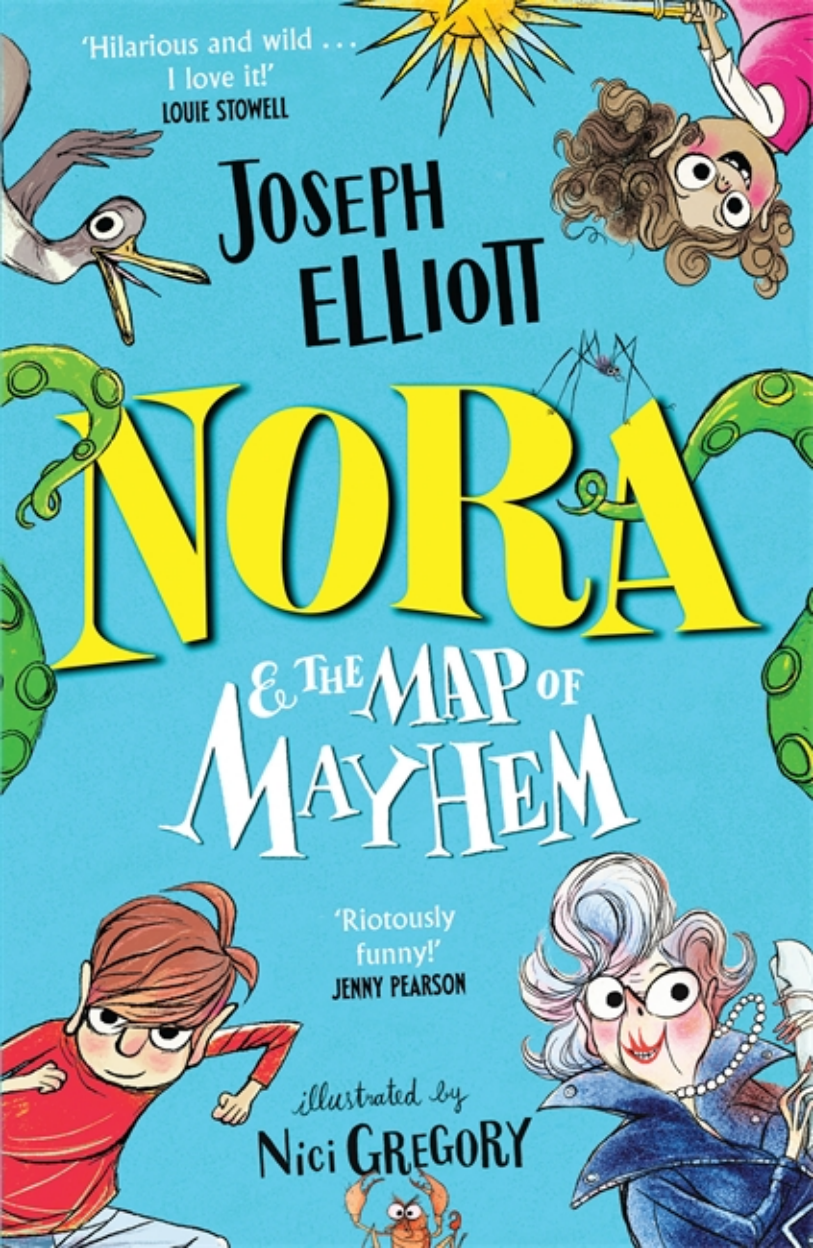
JOSEPH
ELLIOTT

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
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

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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, Daddiiiiiiiiieeeeeees!’ 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 prawny 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 Foofington? 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 lot 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 cardigan; 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.



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**.

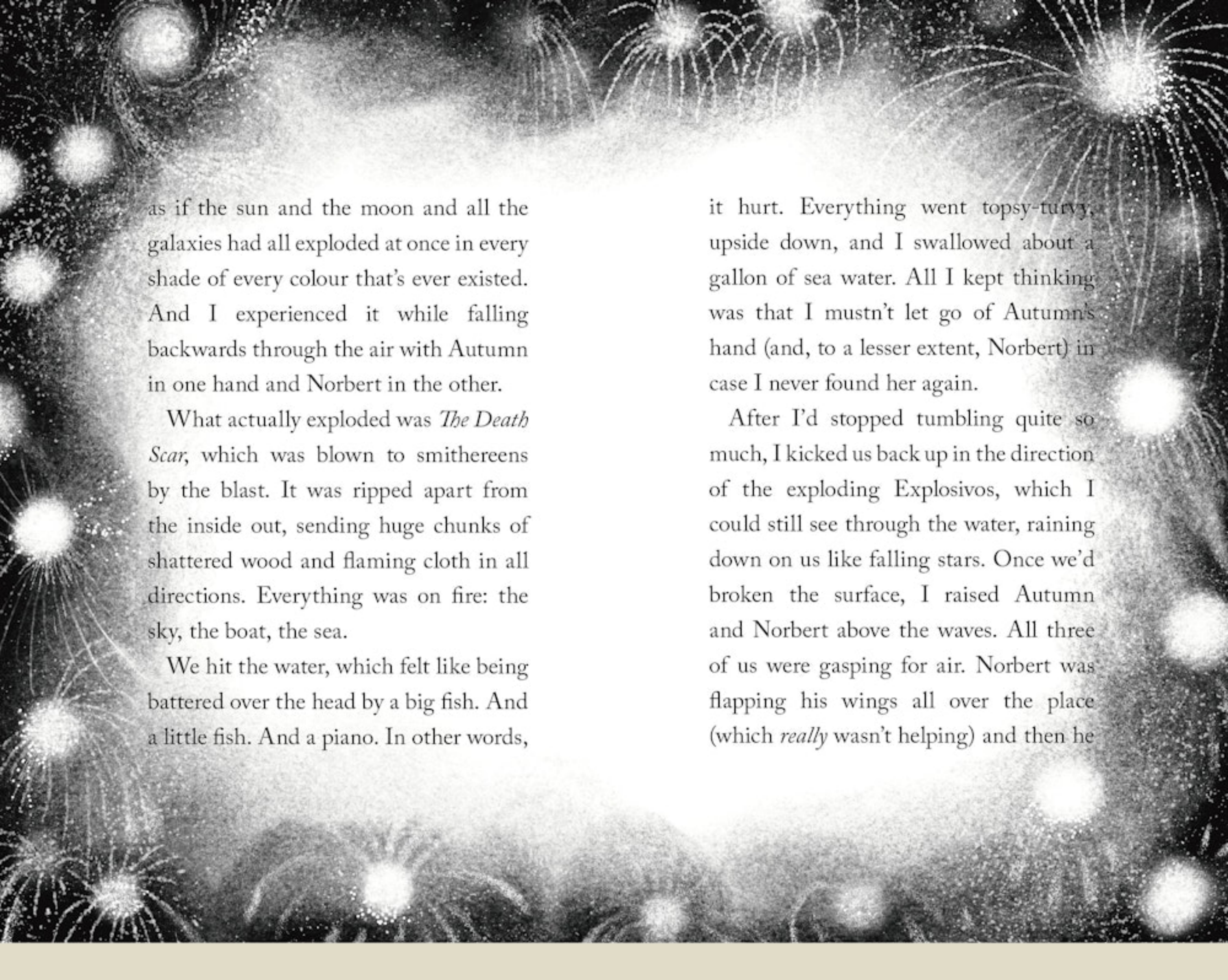


Chapter The One Before The Last One

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.'

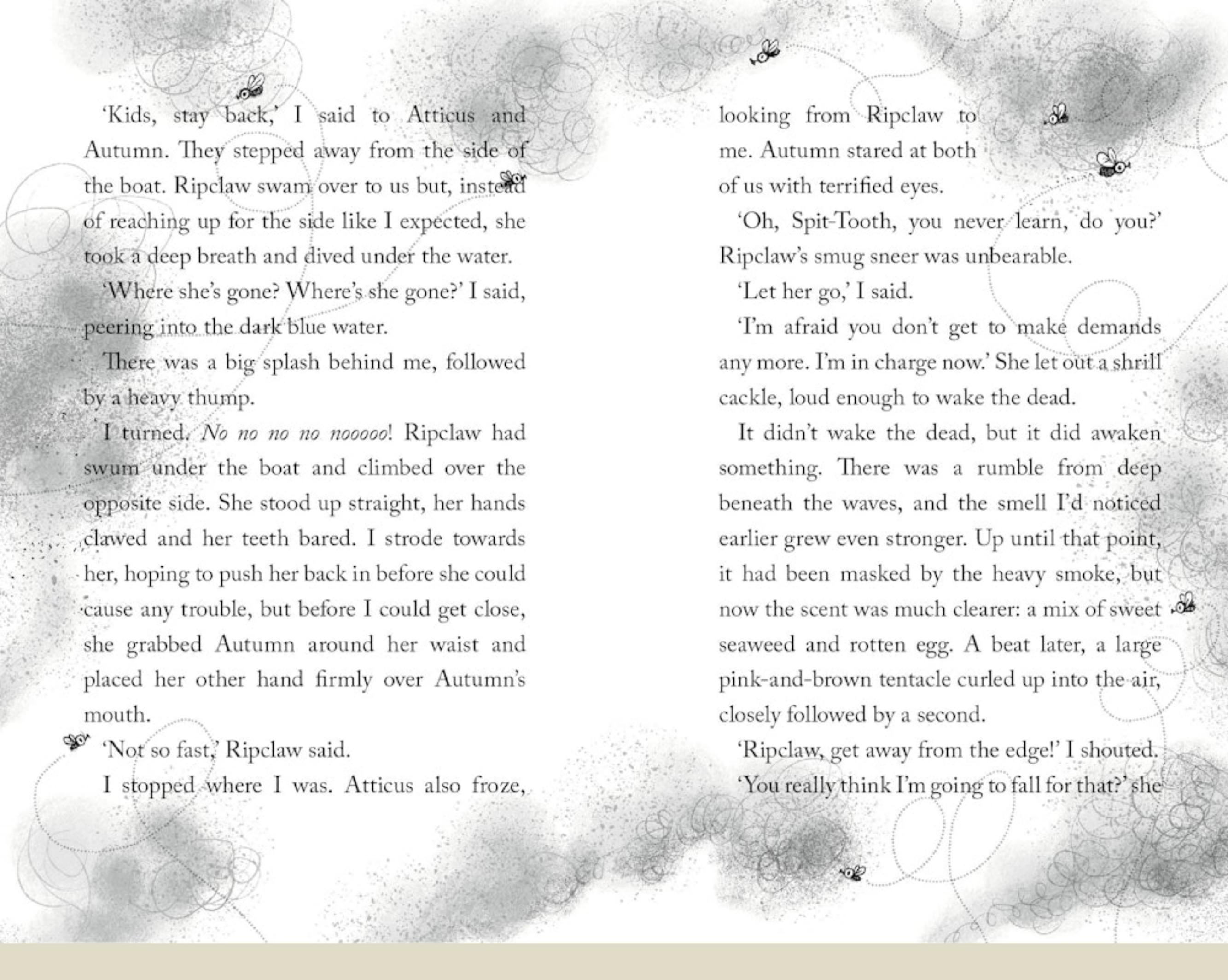
'I don't have any,' she replied.

'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 welks. 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.

