BEYOND THE KNOCK-KNOCK DOOR

SCOTT MONK
In memory of Dad,
who always wanted to be a cowboy
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Thrashing the reins, the Red Samurai charged his warhorse higher into the forest, towards battle. Together they thundered up muddy slopes, galloped past waterfalls, leapt over the giant roots of kapok trees and raced beside rivers turning brown with snakes. The tropical downpour soaked their armour and numbed their flesh as they rode closer to danger. Haste was vital. The giant footprints they’d finally uncovered were washing away. Soon they’d lose all trace of the monster.

They reached the upper mountain range when the rainforest began to tremble. Feet scampered from behind ferns and a phantom leapt across the branches. Pulling up his warhorse, the Red Samurai slowed to a canter and moved his hand to the hilt of his longsword. He pressed on, ducking under vines, but fully alert of every animal, shadow and spying eye. All morning he’d expected an ambush and, quite frankly, he welcomed it. The only danger he’d faced since secretly arriving on this island was a bad case of saddle soreness.

Trudging through a patch of passionflowers, the mare’s ears pricked before she braced. Her sinews tightened; her nostrils flared; and those big, black eyes rolled. The samurai yanked the reins and heeled her belly. She heaved with hot, angry grunts as she staggered sidewards, throwing her neck and trying to lead him away. Her skittishness wasn’t lost on him. He cautiously dismounted and fully drew his blade.

She whinnied as the air shivered and leaves shook unnaturally around them. They each heard a low, distant inhale of breath coming from within the Weeping Mountains that turned into a rasp before quickly shifting into a high-pitched –

SHHHRRRIIIIEEEKKK!

The nightmarish scream ripped through their skulls. Shockwave after shockwave hit the Red Samurai, who tore off his antlered helmet and face mask to cover his ears with his hands. Unable to defend himself, he swayed off balance and dropped his sword as the splintering pain crumpled him to his knees. The rainforest became a swirl of green as his mind spun in scribbles of agony. Stags darted from the undergrowth and bats blackened the sky. When the last of these disappeared, so did the shrieking.

Appreciating for the first time the enemy he hunted, the samurai groggily
recovered his sword and reached for the saddlebags, only to find his warhorse gone. She’d bolted, taking his bow and arrows. With a grunt, he pulled on his antlered helmet again and re-tied his snarling face mask. It mirrored his feelings.

Undeterred, he pushed on and found a cave mouth running with icy water. It yawned slightly wider than his shoulders, measured as high as two men and smelt of bones. He slid his clan’s flag from the back of his red armour and planted its pole near the cave mouth, so if he failed to return, his kinsmen could avenge his death. Pulling a flask of oil from a pouch, he made a torch, lit it with flint, then entered the mountain. There was no hesitation. Nor doubt. He was the second most powerful hero in all the Seven Worlds of Wonder – renowned for his strength, courage and valour. He’d trapped the Nine Bandits of the Endless Desert, survived the Tomb of a Thousand Kings and single-handedly sunk an entire pirate fleet. Killing monsters was his favourite assignment.

He squeezed along the mountain shafts until he discovered a larger cavern, which coursed with a black river and dripped with stalactites ready to spear him dead. As he crept past the giant limestone columns and shawls, his spluttering torch cast shadows across the nooks and crannies that disturbingly looked like hundreds of melting faces.

Suddenly, he stopped and turned, feeling the moist, putrid air shift again before – SHHHRRRIIIEEEEKKKK! – another scream pierced his brain. He lurched side to side with vertigo before crashing to the ground. Desperately, he tried to escape the noise by crawling behind a rock. Another wail shook the cavern as he reached into his pouches for beeswax to plug his ears. The effect was immediate. He could still hear the monster’s call, but without the nausea.

The shrieks were growing louder. And closer. The monster was deliberately weakening him before it attacked. With a war cry, he brought the battle to it, charging forward and slashing his sword. But slowly, eyes wild, he lowered his blade as he faced nothing more than an empty cave.

Following the black river, he climbed a broad, slippery shaft and surfaced near the edge of an enormous pool. Beyond it loomed the impossible. So impossible in fact, that what he saw was long thought to be a fairytale.

‘King Amadeo’s Ghost!’

It wasn’t a ghost as such, but an enormous library. It towered five storeys high with stained-glass windows, green copper domes and statues of stallions pulling war chariots. Titanic iron doors stood broken and twisted, allowing rainwater to cascade down its broad front steps. Beyond them stretched a great marble hall, with red columns, black tiles and yellow balconies, archways and stairwells. It was one of ten such halls filled with reading rooms, scholarly busts and once-mighty tapestries. Centuries of neglect had stripped away the library’s
beauty, however. Cave-ins had punched holes in the ceiling and destroyed most of the plush furniture and artwork. Mould poisoned the air and rats paddled across the flooded floors.

The elders had told him stories about this place. Five hundred years ago, this world’s brash young King Amadeo had ordered his royal architects to build a library big enough to hold a copy of every book, volume or scroll ever written. He decreed that all merchant ships be boarded and searched for literature, and that every monk travel from village to village to confiscate any texts they found. The king hoped that by bringing together the entire world’s knowledge in one place, he’d become the wisest man alive. But his pride was undone by the native people who called these islands their home. He banned them from sharing that same knowledge, fearing that they might learn the arts of science, technology and war. Angered at the decision, the warring Thirteen Tribes formed their very first joint council and agreed to burn down the library. When they besieged the Weeping Mountains, though, to their shock they discovered that the monks had fled and the building itself had vanished. Not a single brick was to be found. A superstitious people, most of the tribes believed that the king’s pride had been its own curse – that if the knowledge couldn’t be shared, then no one could have it. Some even whispered that the ghost library still existed and that it materialised to a select few. But, if they read a book from its shelves, then they too would be cursed and never be seen again.

Fairytale or not, the Red Samurai waded into the ankle-deep muck and pushed back the darkness with his dim torchlight. He passed between a pair of staircases guarded by marble statues – one reading a scroll and the other chopped off at the knees – before uncovering the first real signs of the monster. Slung over fixed oil lamps were giant round jaw bones. Jagged with rows and rows of sharp, triangular teeth, they had once belonged to the fiercest of predators. He tightened the grip on his sword as he lifted up his torch. It seemed the monster that terrorised this world didn’t just catch fish for dinner – it hunted great white sharks.

Further along, there were more disturbing clues. A battle had been fought and lost by a native tribe at the top of the left staircase. Spears, netting and skeletons lay in a heap below stonework darkened with scorch marks, and chains dangled from several columns, where prey had been –

SHHHRRRIIIIEEEKKK!

The monster’s horrible cry echoed throughout the hall, but again the beeswax blocked any vertigo.

Ripples lapped the samurai’s ankles, and, turning, he saw a blur race along a far wall, chased by his light. He twirled his sword and checked each shadow,
every column. Flapping wings darted out of view among the many floors high above, and a rock tumbled into the muck behind him. He jabbed his torch into the dripping darkness and readied to pounce, not entertaining any thought of retreat. It was better to die a hero facing an enemy than return home a coward.

The air shifted again and he tensed, but the beeswax blocked him from hearing the clicking sound from above.

Long, sharp teeth dropped from the roof and – CHOMP!
Blackness swallowed his torch.
Monsters also existed on Earth.

Except these three had cold hearts, licorice-stained teeth and very fast bikes.

Sprinting into oncoming traffic, the Thornleigh sisters cut off a city bus, scraped a taxi, dislodged a car’s side-view mirror then jumped the footpath. They bowled over a postal courier, splashed an office lady with her own egg curry and scared a man and his wife. Worse, they refused to give way to a howling ambulance. They didn’t care. They were hunting. And today’s ‘rabbit’ was their favourite cry-baby: Michael Bowman.

_Run, rabbit._ Run.

He raced into another busy street on his rickety skateboard. Two police on horseback yelled at him to halt, but he zipped away, more afraid of the girls. He had long brown hair, a hooded windcheater, baggy pants and a backpack that bounced on his thin shoulders. He tried working up more speed but the street was flat. The faster he kicked, the harder they pedalled. He’d already shaken them once, weaving among the school’s hallways before escaping through the music room and into the afternoon rush.

The oldest sister, April, took the lead. She levelled with him and lunged. _Screeeeech!_ He cornered hard before launching into a fast food restaurant. ‘Hey! No skateboarding in here!’ the manager shouted. _Bump._ A man lost his hamburger and fries. ‘Stop!’

No way! Michael flipped up his board into his hand, scrambled over the counter and scattered coins and Cokes. Ice crunched beneath his feet as the manager tried to grab him. Too late. He barged into the alley and jumped on his ride again. From the crashing, smashing and bellowing, he knew the Thornleighs were right behind.

He scooted past graffiti, bins and wooden pallets. His foot kicked the ground and his skateboard whirled furiously. There was little chance for escape – the alley was long, cluttered and devoid of intersections. Nearby, an animal control inspector slammed a cage on a snarling dog then started up his truck.

Again, April reached Michael first. She was fuelled by anger and cruelty. As she raked at him, he desperately reached out and grabbed the rear of the truck. _Zoom!_ He was away!
‘Who’s a freak now?’ he shouted above the dozens of snapping mutts.

He stayed tight to his ride, zigzagging and performing ollies and kick-flips as they left the laneway. Eager to enjoy the sour look on the Thornleighs’ faces one more time, he grabbed the truck with both hands and swivelled to watch them disappear, only to turn pale. No! They were gaining speed! The inspector was pulling over to see what the dogs were fussing about.

The three sisters leant over their handlebars and swung side to side as they pumped the pedals. When the truck eased towards the corner, Michael let go. He fired across a busy four-way intersection as – ‘Watch out!’ – tyres screeched.

It was the diversion he needed. He homed in on a train station and checked his watch. Perfect timing. He flipped up his skateboard, leapt down the steps and rode through the turnstiles, punching his ticket in one smooth motion. He’d made it to the platform when a wreck of chains, rubber and metal crashed behind him. The Thornleighs threw aside their bikes and chased him on foot. He looked down the tunnel and heard the distant horn of the approaching 4.13. *Hurry up! Hurry up!*

‘Owwww!’ he screamed.

‘Try running now, freak!’ April said, yanking his long hair.

‘Let me go! Please! Stop!’

‘Grab his bag!’

Her two younger sisters, May and June, wrestled his backpack free as he begged for help. Most commuters stared in shock until a businessman tried separating them. ‘Call the guards!’ he ordered.

Finally torn away, April walked backwards along the platform, holding Michael’s homework in one hand and his skateboard in the other. ‘Let’s see you get an A-plus now, wimp.’

‘No!’

They emptied his homework in front of the train before April bashed his skateboard against a pylon. Chunks of plywood flew across the platform until the same businessman chased them away. Within moments, the transit guards pursued the sisters through the station and caught them at the doughnut stand. Michael knelt to pick up the pieces of his skateboard until another uniformed officer ordered him to his feet. Only the intervention of several witnesses stopped him being frogmarched outside as well. Abandoned and with the train rushing behind him, Michael stood on the platform as the loose pages of his assignment blew about his legs.

Breathing out a shaky sigh and threatening tears, he flopped down on a bench, ran his thumb along the splintered edge of his skateboard and twisted free the back truck that had been all but hammered off. The next train was due in
seven minutes – enough time to dry his face. He hated this city. He hated the Thornleighs. He hated school. And he hated being weak. He just wanted to go back to his dad’s blueberry farm and play with his two cattle dogs. Everyone was friendly there. Mrs Greenfield, the butcher, gave him free slices of pepperoni. Mr Kidwell allowed him to sit in his used cars for sale – even the twenty-thousand-dollar models. And Laura Tleige shared her chocolate muffins with him while sneaking glances between blushes in a way that only twelve-year-old girls could understand. Back home everything was calm, spirited and comfortable; not like here – cramped and noisy like an accordion.

Noisy? Then why was the station suddenly so quiet?

He rose in shock. At first glance, everything seemed normal. On his platform, old ladies hugged, a businessman brushed cinnamon sugar from his tie and high school students retreated into their deafening headphones. But as he moved among them he watched with bewilderment as the pair of old ladies waved farewell to each other then walked away, only to snap back for a quick embrace. Again, they waved, walked away then reversed for the same hug. When they did it for a third, fourth and then a fifth time, Michael was so frightened that he backed into a woman repeatedly slurping the same noodle into her mouth. They weren’t the only ones. A teenage boy dropped his ticket, only for it to fly back into his hands before it hit the ground. A lawyer swapped her dry-cleaning over and over between shoulders. And commuters shuffled forwards and backwards through the turnstiles. Everyone was trapped in a time stutter.

Except him.

‘Hello?’ he called out, afraid to touch them for fear of being trapped as well. ‘Can you hear me?’

A generator whined underground. It was a sad, dying sound like fading power. Soon, the entire station dimmed and the shadows thickened.

Cl-lick – Cl-lick – Cl-lick –

He jumped.

Cl-lick – Cl-lick – Cl-lick –

What was that?

Cl-lick – Cl-lick – Cl-lick –

Those slow, broken sounds?

He almost called out again but sensed danger. There was definitely another person down here with him, maybe a maintenance man coming to fix the generator.

Cl-lick – Cl-lick – Cl-lick –

No, that didn’t sound like an electrician. There was no torchbeam or rattle of
tools. Maybe it was best for him to leave. But the noise was approaching the turnstiles – his only way out!

_Cl-lick! Cl—_

The lights powered up suddenly and Michael barrelled into a group of teenagers. ‘Hey! Watch out, kid!’ they protested, drawing looks from the other commuters. They gathered their school gear about them and stared as if he was crazy. He looked round the platform, confused to see both old ladies finally walk away, the woman swallow her noodle and the boy pick up and pocket his ticket. People moved freely, as if no longer snared by time.

He stepped away. Maybe he was crazy.

_Cl-lick – Cl-lick –_

Wait. That noise.

He weaved through the commuters and spotted a homeless man wearing a chequered hat, an olive coat, several layers of ghastly shirts and a pair of green trousers tucked into football socks. His hair was orange, thinning and slicked back, and he limped with the support of a single aluminium crutch. At least that explained the clicking. Michael breathed, watching him beg for money. Maybe it was the man’s appearance or smell, but everyone he asked hurried through the turnstiles with their briefcases, children or parcels held tightly.

The 4.20 approached. Commuters folded their newspapers or collected their shopping bags as a blast of chilly, metallic air preceded the headlights of the train. The shrill of dozens of rolling wheels deafened the platform for a second, before giving way to a ruckus near the turnstiles.

‘Let go of me! That’s my train!’ the homeless man said, blocked by the transit staff from passing through.

‘No ticket – no train.’

‘I don’t need a ticket.’

‘And we don’t need you hanging around here.’

The guards tried herding him towards the stairs as commuters turned away, having seen it all before. A few snorted or laughed into their phones. ‘How disgusting,’ one girl sniffed.

‘You’re hurting me! Let go!’

‘Come on. Crutches or no crutches, you can still walk –’

‘I said I’ll find you an extra lousy dollar if you let me!’

The train came to a rest as a recorded voice listed off the designated stations. People inside and out crowded round the doors, waiting for them to open.

‘Mister,’ Michael said, urgently reaching forward. He stood on the other side of the turnstiles, holding out a dollar in change. ‘Here.’

‘Save your money, son,’ the first guard said. ‘He’ll only waste it on alcohol.’
But Michael offered it again.

The homeless man struggled free then leered down his veiny nose at the twelve-year-old boy and the coins. Without so much as a thank you, he swiped them and teetered off, watched by the guards, who shook their heads.

Michael just squeezed through the closing doors of the train.

Rain fell as he stared out at the grey city. Demolition crews, skyscrapers, peeling billboards and grim-faced police cordoning off a car accident slipped by before the scenery broke into hundreds of dark blotches and became one wet blur. With a sigh, he rested his head against the cold window and dreamt of green fields, tree houses and jumping with his brother and sister into rivers buzzing with dragonflies. Back at the farm, there were no snooty classmates or Thornleigh sisters who made him miserable. And today had been one of his better days.

A passenger prowling between carriages distracted him. He sat upright as, to his amazement, the orange-haired homeless man searched for a seat. But how? He himself had only barely jumped on board – and he already had a ticket. Soon, though, Michael wished he hadn’t. With great theatrics, the homeless man collapsed in the second row, facing the back. He coughed, wheezed, burped and picked his nose, making sure everyone caught the show. Two commuters moved to other seats, while a third clutched her bags, too scared to follow.

Michael’s cheeks burned. He felt the other passengers’ ire. But his mum had taught him to be kind to those less fortunate than himself. ‘Just because somebody’s got dirt on their face doesn’t mean you have to treat them like it,’ she’d always say. Also, deep down, he’d helped the beggar out of silly bravery. He wanted to prove to himself that the cl-lick cl-lick man was nothing more than a harmless fright.

As the beggar quieted to everyone’s relief, Michael cast one last uneasy glance towards him and stiffened. Discreetly this time, the man caught a cockroach crawling beside his seat and held it squirming by its antennae. Rather than squashing it underfoot, though, there was a strange shifting behind his coat buttons. A hairy, white claw shot out, snatched the bug then vanished!

Michael blinked. At first, the stranger ignored him. But then he turned with a cold, festering stare that forced Michael to look away.

Five stops later, he was still stunned as a rush of umbrellas, newspapers and sprinters dashed past him into waiting cars, leaving him soaked at the bottom of the station. He plodded upwards to street level when someone barged past and knocked his shoulder. ‘Hey!’ he protested, until he noticed it was the homeless man striding three steps at a time.

In his haste, the beggar dropped something small, brown and leather.
Reaching the top, Michael picked up the wallet. It contained cash. Lots of cash.
‘Wait! Mister!’
But the homeless man was gone. And he no longer used a walking crutch.
His sister was under attack. A young man thrust his bamboo sword at her stomach then her face. But Samantha Bowman knocked it aside and retaliated with her own weapon. She slashed, parried and yelled; overwhelming him with speed and precision. She blocked a swinging blow near her wrist, swept away his sword and flung him off balance. The threat of being beaten by a twelve-year-old girl rattled him. However, Samantha grew excited. She could win this fight. She could be the best. With a loud cry, she charged forward and chopped her sword at his skull. But rather than striking his helmet, it thwacked against the floor of the basketball court, allowing him to easily slice at her hip. It hammered her padded blue armour before their sensei ended the match.

Red-faced, Samantha tore off her own helmet and threw away her bamboo sword before marching barefoot towards the change rooms. The other kendo students sniggered until the sensei ordered silence and everyone to kneel. That included her. But she wasn’t going to meditate. She wasn’t going to follow orders. She wasn’t even going to practise stupid kendo anymore. She snatched her school bag and palmed open the exit when a younger sensei grabbed her sleeve and pulled her back.

‘You should have waited for him to attack you,’ he said. ‘You need to learn patience.’

‘I know! But patience doesn’t come quick enough!’

Tossing her armour and gloves into a bin, she slammed the outer door, which swung inwards again and almost hit Michael.

‘I suppose you saw?’ she said, striding into the rain.

‘Don’t give up,’ he said, hopping into his water-logged shoes. ‘You were starting to get good.’

‘Good at looking like a jerk!’

‘You’re not a jerk.’

‘Hello. Twenty people inside are laughing at me!’

He kept quiet and hurried beside her, barely keeping pace with her long legs. He wanted to talk about the homeless man’s wallet, but she was in a foul mood – one he’d grown accustomed to during the past six months.

Her temper worsened when a car sped through an amber light and splashed
them with a great wing of water. ‘Arghhh!’ she yelled. Double ‘Arghhh!’ when a pair of teenage boys laughed behind her. She grabbed Michael by the wrist and yanked him towards a cluster of high-rise apartments. He struggled free and rubbed away the pain. ‘Fine!’ she said. ‘Walk home by yourself! See if I care!’

His shoulders sank as she disappeared among the black umbrellas. Men and women in suits shunted him out of the way as they fought for taxis or knocked on bus doors. Standing under a thin awning, he added another reason why he hated this city: it was easy for a kid to be forgotten.

He moped in the streets a while longer. He didn’t feel like going home. He stared into the shop windows he passed: internet gamers blasted each other with little emotion; roast ducks hung by their long necks at a Chinese barbecue kitchen. His final stop was accidental. Following his feet, he passed a department store, only to be cornered by a spruiker dressed as a giant baby chicken.

‘Cheap! Cheap! Cheap!’ the baby chicken said into a scratchy microphone. ‘Twenty-five per cent off. That’s right. Twenty-five per cent off all children’s shoes, clothes, underwear and skateboards.’

Michael was hooked.

He drifted among the rows of sleek rides plastered with logos of skeletons, aliens, Tahitian surfers and roaring flames. They were the brands owned by cool kids at school. He tested one and imagined himself cruising along the streets, sliding down railings and hanging out with the popular boys. He’d be able to find a replacement for his second-hand termite biscuit now in pieces.

Turning over the price tag, he sighed. Even ‘Cheap! Cheap! Cheap!’ was too expensive. Unless –

He opened the homeless man’s wallet. Twenty, thirty, fifty, eighty, two hundred dollars! It contained a fortune! There was enough for a new board – plus shoes!

A light flickered above and a security guard frowned at him. Moving on, Michael closed the wallet. A new skateboard could wait. The money wasn’t his. He’d hand it into the police and give a description of the homeless man. Olive coat, chequered hat, one aluminium crutch –

That crutch. What kind of person faked an injury to sponge spare change from twelve-year-olds? And judging by the thickness of the wallet, he wasn’t the only sucker. Maybe he should buy the skateboard anyway. Yeah, teach the homeless man – if indeed he was homeless – about stealing.

Minutes later, he walked through the sliding doors with a skateboard – the remains of his old one. He couldn’t bring himself to buy a new ride. That would be stealing too. His termite biscuit was only good for firewood now, but he’d
earn the money picking blueberries at his dad’s farm.

Angling into the rain, he detoured east. Since moving to the city, his mum had drilled the location of all the city’s police stations into him, his sister and brother. ‘Just in case there’s trouble,’ she said, after asking them to recite the addresses for the fourth time. The closest was near a giant movie complex, flashing with the latest blockbusters. He slowed at the first smell of popcorn. All those films wanting to be seen! All that chocolate waiting to be eaten! Again, he felt the weight of the homeless man’s wallet. It would only be twenty bucks this time – small change compared to the price of a new skateboard. C’mon. Finders keepers, right?

No. He pushed back his wet fringe then walked down the final street.

Passing a TV store, he glanced into its docking bay when he saw, rummaging through flattened cardboard boxes, the homeless man.

‘Where’s your crutch?’ Michael asked, spitting out rain.

The homeless man grabbed the bin and hobbled round to face him. ‘Get away from me. They’re mine!’ He reached for his crutch leaning against the wall and jabbed it into his armpit.

‘Remembered to take it with you this time, eh?’

Ignoring him, the beggar collected three damp boxes then cl-licked, cl-licked, cl-licked into the street.

‘I should report you to the police. It’s not right to rip off people, y’know.’

‘Get lost, kid. I don’t talk to strangers.’ Then, with a change of mind, he turned on Michael and demanded, ‘Unless you know where I could find bigger boxes.’

Michael reeled at the smell. ‘Why would I?’

‘Then stop bothering me. I’ve got houses to build.’

Michael followed him. He wanted answers. But for a man on a crutch, the beggar sure moved fast. He hurried past the cinema, weaved through the crowd, stepped into peak-hour traffic and – ‘Watch out!’ – almost walked slap-bang into a cement mixer! It braked hard and – UUURRRRNNTTT! – missed him by an arm’s length.

‘Are you all right?’ Michael asked, letting go of the homeless man’s greasy jacket, feeling his own pulse race as if he’d just avoided being killed. Further down the wet street, truck tyres smoked as the driver struggled not to jackknife.

‘Of course I’m all right! That was until you yanked me back on the footpath! You’ve probably given me whiplash or a slipped disc. I need a lawyer! Somebody!’

‘But I just saved you. That truck was going to –’

‘They’re my boxes, okay. Find your own.’
Michael stared at him, speechless. The beggar did likewise, bugging out his eyes in disdain.

‘Hey! You!’ a man shouted. He was squat and bulldoggish: all chest and teeth. His cement mixer blocked two lanes of traffic behind him. ‘Pick my truck to walk in front of, hey?’

‘Are you shouting at me?’ the homeless man answered.

‘So you’re deaf and blind?’

‘Only when listening to rude little men like you.’

‘Why you!’ The crowd of onlookers restrained the driver before he swung a punch. ‘You were in the middle of my lane!’

‘And you are in my face!’ The homeless man jabbed his nose at the driver, whose face couldn’t get any redder, then slicked back his orange hair. With a huff, he switched his crutch to the other armpit, turned on his heels and cl-licked away. This infuriated the driver more, who kept yelling until his insults were washed away.

‘And why are you still following me?’ the homeless man asked as Michael pushed through the pedestrians.

‘I –’

‘Go on then. Take one. Take a box if you must.’

He handed over the flattened cardboard, only for a brown tail to pop from his sleeve. It whipped back inside his coat instantly. Michael gawped. There was that creature again. Was it a rat?

The homeless man snatched back his box. ‘Well? Oxygen’s everywhere, y’know. Find another corner to breathe.’

Remembering why he was even chasing this man, Michael strode after him and fished out his wallet. ‘I came to return this.’

Without even knowing what Michael held out, the homeless man suddenly paused, craned his neck then slowly turned round, ignoring his money to lock his gaze on the boy. For a long moment, all they shared was the rain. The homeless man’s right eye tightened with suspicion while his left curled with curiosity. Readjusting his aluminium crutch, he dropped the boxes against his legs, scanned the streets then snatched away the wallet with the same force he’d shown at the turnstiles. He flicked through the notes, counted them twice then secreted them among his several pockets.

Michael wanted to ask the beggar how he had so much money but was suddenly dismissed with a sniff. ‘Now if you don’t mind, I need to find a foreman to build my house, thank you very much.’

He hobbled into traffic once again, forcing cars to swerve or brake. Drenched, Michael watched him scare people out of his path until he vanished
among the crowd.
Wrapping a jacket around his pyjama top, Michael dashed across the roof of his apartment building as the high, wet winds frightened his long hair into ghastly shapes. He dropped a handful of turkey meat into a nest then returned to the doorway. The mother hawk shrieked and he half-smiled. This was his favourite hiding place in the city too. There were no Thornleigh sisters to dodge or school kids calling him a murderer after learning that ‘country boy’ once beheaded a chicken for a Christmas dinner. It also proved to be the perfect escape from his parents’ arguments, which were becoming more blistering on the phone closer to the divorce.

It was his square of freedom. Here, he could read books, sketch superheroes or launch toy paratroopers into the thermals blown upwards by the loud air vents. Sure, he heard the saxophonist in the next building honk like a walrus and Mr Duncan’s own tooting on the toilet below, but it beat being crushed among the faceless pedestrians far beneath him. Once he’d thought only rich people lived in high-rise apartments, but now he realised it was just one human box stacked on another, on another, on another –

Boxes. He never wanted to hear that word again.

‘Where are you, you creep!’ His sister’s screaming echoed up the stairwell from their apartment, which again was a war zone. ‘Luke! I’m talking to you!’

Michael entered without anyone noticing.

Samantha charged into the living room, where the third of the Bowman triplets sat wriggling on the threadbare carpet, avoiding missiles and cluster bombs. He was too busy blasting aliens to listen. Bad luck. She pulled the power cord from the game console.

‘Hey! I’m saving the universe here!’ Luke said.

‘What did I warn you about if I found you reading my diary again?’

‘Who says it was me? It could’ve been Mikey.’

‘There are biscuit crumbs all the way through it. And tomorrow’s entry says: “I’m an ugly, skinny freak who’s in love with Rajan Sudhakar!”’

‘You didn’t write that?’

‘Of course not!’

‘Sorry, I didn’t hear you. You were too busy screeching into my ear!’
‘Mum! Luke’s been reading my diary again!’
‘Then you should hide it in a better place,’ she answered, walking down the hallway and zipping up her paramedic’s jacket.
‘I want my own room!’
SLAM!
‘And stop banging that door.’
‘You tell her, Mum.’
‘As for you, Mister, stay out of her things.’
‘Me? I’m innocent.’
‘Like the boy who keeps ringing the elevator phone and telling people they’re overweight?’
‘Heart disease is a leading cause of death in this country.’
‘So are angry mothers who have smart-mouthed sons.’
Luke buttoned it, but with a wry smile. Rarely did he outfox her. Instead, he replugged the game console into the power socket.
‘I hope you’re not planning on sitting in front of the TV all day,’ she called from the kitchen.
‘There’s nothing else to do.’
‘You could clean up your bedroom for a start. Some of the fleas in there need dog collars of their own.’
He howled.
‘Now c’mom. Turn that off and get into the shower. I’m taking these controllers to work with me –’
‘Oh, Mum.’
‘– to make sure you and your brother don’t waste a perfectly good Saturday. You’ve got to find a costume for tonight’s party anyway.’
He dragged his feet along the hallway and thumped their bedroom door.
‘Giraffe!’
‘Dog breath!’ Samantha yelled back.
Their mother grabbed clothes off the sagging couch, threw them after him and buckled up her backpack.
‘Save a life, Mum,’ Michael said, hiding the phone behind him.
‘No one dies on my shift, kiddo,’ she answered with a kiss. ‘I’ll be home at six to take you to your party, okay? Here. Take this money. There should be enough to hire some costumes.’
‘Do I have to go? The party invitation only said Samantha –’
‘I rang Mrs Sudhakar. She said everyone in your class is invited, including you and Luke.’
‘But I don’t feel too well.’
‘Sorry, but you look fine.’
‘Then I don’t want to go. The other kids hate me.’
She checked her watch. Her partner would be waiting downstairs in the
ambulance. ‘Mikey, remember our talk?’
‘Yes.’
‘I know moving here has been tough on you – it’s been tough on all of us. But
this is our life now. That means making new friends, okay? This party will
be good for you.’
She hugged him then caught the door shutting on herself. ‘Love you. Oh,
and try to keep your brother and sister from killing each other. We can’t keep
putting aside two spare beds at the emergency ward.’
Ten minutes later, the hostilities resumed. Freshly washed, Luke again saved
the universe using the spare controller that he secretly kept stashed under his
trading cards, and Samantha returned to share her sulking. She deliberately stood
in front of the TV as she ate muesli mixed with yoghurt and bananas.
‘Get out of the way!’
Having trouble listening, Michael pressed the phone harder against his ear. ‘I
just want to go back to the farm. I hate living in this city.’
‘I know,’ his dad answered, his voice mixed with frustration and
helplessness. ‘But you’ve got to stay there for now. Your mother and I agreed it’s
best we keep you and your brother and sister together until the divorce is over.
That way you can look out for each other.’
Michael trembled.
‘Son, it’s going to be all right. I’ll drive down in a fortnight to see you. And I
want you back home for the holidays, okay?’
‘Okay.’
‘Love you.’
Michael hung up.
Samantha yelped when Luke pushed her out of the way but retaliated by
blocking his view of the TV again.
‘Michael, did Mum leave any money for the costumes?’ she asked.
‘I don’t think so,’ he answered.
‘Thanks!’ Luke said, throwing away the controller. ‘Are you happy now?
You made me crash into that starship.’
‘She couldn’t have forgotten,’ she added, searching the kitchen. ‘She knows
it’s a fancy dress party. We can’t go looking like this.’
‘Cover yourself with some dirt,’ Luke said. ‘Everyone knows you’re a
weed.’
A pillow biffed him in the face.
Luke got his revenge downstairs when they were dragged outside to search for a costume shop. Samantha was marching ahead under her own umbrella when he raced forward and stomped on a dropped carton of strawberry milk. The splash was as big as her scream. She chased him three blocks before nabbing him.

‘That’s it!’ she said, pinning him against the window of an Egyptian restaurant. ‘Push me one more time today – just once – and I’m going to tell the principal it was you who put jelly crystals in the teachers’ toilets.’

‘But that wasn’t me!’

‘She doesn’t know that, does she?’

Shrugging off his crazy sister, Luke snatched the other umbrella from Michael and barged ahead.

‘Pity we can’t divorce him, hey?’ she said.

For triplets, the Bowman children were remarkably different. Samantha was the first-born, by far the tallest and hence the natural leader. She had green eyes, long black hair, a silver hoop earring in each lobe and a ‘cute’ nose her grandpa was fond of ringing like a Christmas bell. She’d been practising kendo for two years after seeing a documentary on TV about world sports and previously discovering the hard way how uncoordinated she was at playing basketball. She loved music, burritos, roller-coasters, peppermint, watching football with her dad and dancing in the bedroom when no one was around. And despite what her brain-dead brother might say, she was under no circumstances in love with Rajan Sudhakar. Boys – vomit!

Blond-haired Luke disagreed, of course. His sister’s diary was full of hearts, smileys, lovey-dovey dreams and all that other mushy stuff that reminded him of soap operas. If that’s how girls lived, then it was yet another reason he was glad to be a boy. Born second, he wasn’t the oldest, the bossiest or the baby. However, what he lacked in attention, he made up for in noise. He was the class clown and terror of the teachers – the one most likely to be ordered to stand outside – and that was why he enjoyed school, even if he was bad at it. He loved TV comedies, science fiction movies, computer games, comic books and eating chocolate ice-cream for breakfast when everyone was still asleep. His only goal was to command an intergalactic battle cruiser. Oh, and to make his sister’s life miserable.

That left the youngest, Michael. Born on the day after his siblings, a few ticks past midnight, he wasn’t brave or strong like Samantha. He wasn’t even funny or popular like Luke. He couldn’t catch a football without it first hitting him in the face, and he couldn’t play a musical instrument without it sounding like a strangled duck. He was so plain he wondered why his parents hadn’t
named him Vanilla. He had stick-brown hair, blue eyes and several scars from skateboarding that should’ve made him look tough but only highlighted his clumsiness. His single goal in life was to leave this horrible city.

‘Why are we looking for a costume shop anyway?’ Michael asked. ‘Mum didn’t leave us any money.’

She pulled an envelope of cash from her jacket. ‘Nice try, Squirt. I found it hidden under the lounge.’

Despondent again, he was repeatedly told to catch up as they worked their way through a list of costume shops. However, each store presented the same problem: the outfits were too expensive.

‘Let’s go home,’ Luke said. ‘My feet hurt.’

‘Then walk on your hands,’ Samantha said. ‘This is the biggest party of the year and we’re all going – no arguments. If you don’t want to pick a costume – fine. We can always go to a baby store and buy you a couple of nappies.’

But even she felt exasperated when they found the last shop on their list. A CLOSED sign hung in the door.

‘Pull out the old bedspreads,’ Luke said. ‘We’re going as ghosts.’

‘I’m not wearing pink,’ Michael said.

‘Or Sam’s old horsey quilt!’

The boys neighed and laughed, while their sister soldiered through the rain, the umbrella dark over her eyes.

Michael perked up, knowing another ten minutes of pestering would wear her down. She’d snap and announce that she was going to the party – alone. But a sideways look down an alleyway turned disastrous. Under a sign engraved with looping lettering was a dull bay window with a sparse and miserable collection of costumes. The door said OPEN. He strolled by, hoping she wouldn’t notice.

‘Finally.’

She did.

‘Mr Deed’s Curious Curios,’ Luke read. ‘I’ve never seen this here before.’

‘I don’t think I’ve seen this alleyway before,’ Michael added.

The lane ended abruptly. Apart from the bay window, the only other notable feature was a cluster of black garbage bags that spread out like a fat man’s belly. It was strange that a shop would be in such a deserted spot.

Samantha entered first. From the outside, Mr Deed’s Curious Curios appeared no wider than a cereal box, but inside, it was enormous – eleven-storeys tall with circular walls and a domed roof. From its middle towered an enormous fig tree, trickling with a waterfall and sheltering a dozen exotic birds, including toucans, macaws, kingfishers, motmots and birds of paradise. Moss
dangled from its branches, and a marble staircase spiralled around its thick trunk. Intermittently, the steps levelled at ornately carved bridges, which led to the different floors that were racked, stacked and packed with thousands of costumes from all nations and timelines. Statues of Chinese terracotta warriors guarded each row. At the base of the fig tree were two arcing display cabinets. They showcased the normal array of face paint, beards and fake blood, but they also held other treasures. There was a petrified dog from Pompeii, painted Aboriginal emu eggs from Australia, napkins from the *Titanic*, Russian belly scratchers, a poster of the Fiji Mermaid, moon rocks and a pharaoh’s golden death mask. Above them dangled a canoe from Irian Jaya and a strange wooden flying machine straight out of a Leonardo da Vinci sketchbook.

‘What is this place?’ she asked.

‘It’s some sort of strange museum,’ Michael said.

He inspected a red wooden wagon topped by a glass tank. It was a vending machine similar to a claw crane, but decades older. Instead of plush toys, it contained hundreds of round plastic capsules, half-clear and half-orange. In the clear half was candy and in the bottom half a hidden gift. Scratched gold lettering trumpeted it as a Now-Or-Never Wagon.

‘Cool!’ Luke said, rushing upstairs after spotting a star ranger uniform. Its stiff, cracked, green leather jacket and pants came with frayed, yellow trimmings and badges; a jetpack fit across his shoulders; a crash helmet was too big for his head; and a laser blaster hung from a utility belt of pouches. ‘Zap! Zap! Zap!’

‘Where’s the owner then?’

‘Yes, where is he?’ a voice with a thick Belgian accent asked behind them.

A light globe popped and, doubly startled, the children jumped. In the doorway stood a gentleman who looked like he’d just stepped out of the 1920s. He had short brown hair, hazel eyes, round glasses and a handsome face. He wore a blue pinstripe suit with matching gloves and a derby hat, from which he flicked off – not rain – but sand? He sported a crisp white shirt, yellow tie and a pair of immaculately polished pointed black shoes. Strangely, he also carried a rosewood walking stick topped with a ram’s horn.

‘Oh, waitaminute. That owner would be me!’ the gentleman said, shaking hands as he swept past them. ‘Hello! Visitors! And visiting *me*. What a wonderful pleasure. I hope I haven’t caught you on your way out, because that would make you leavers and not visitors, am I right? Hmmm?’

Samantha and Michael raised their eyebrows at each other. ‘Er, hi,’ she said.

‘Manners. I’ve forgotten my manners. Oh, and yes, my name. Mr Deed – Mr Goode Deed – at your service, young sir and miss.’

He shook their hands with extra enthusiasm then half-bowed, fingers
clasped.

‘We’re here to hire some costumes,’ she added, her voice rising like a question.

‘Splendid!’ he said, throwing his derby hat on the tip of a Zulu spear.
‘You’ve come to the right shop. We’ve got smugglers, jugglers, mobsters, lobsters, Spartans, tartans, slaves, knaves, teachers, creatures, pigs, wigs, musketeers and buccaneers.’

‘We don’t –’

‘Nose bones, trombones, milk maids, mermaids, zoot suits, big brutes, holy knights and Batman’s tights. Ugly horsemen and headless horsemen? Why of course, man!’

‘We were after –’

‘Leprechauns, unicorns, Argonauts, astronauts, rappers, flappers, Wild West trappers, singers, bellringers and gunslingers. Step away from those trees and bumble bees, if you please.’

‘Look, can you just listen –’

‘Why we’ve even got a scary rhinoceros that snorts and a President’s smelly pair of boxer sh –’

‘Enough!’

The man jumped, his fingers jittery against his chest. ‘Sorry, young miss. I do get carried away sometimes, don’t I? Please accept Mr Goode Deed’s humblest of humblest apologies.’

He bowed again.

‘Is that your real name?’ Luke asked, circling down the fig tree with the star ranger costume.

‘Only when I’m good,’ he winked.

‘What’s that on your face?’ Michael asked.

The incredible pair of round spectacles resting on Mr Deed’s nose had a see-through clock ticking inside the glass.

‘Look! I can see the time all the time rather than watch a watch. Wonderful contraption, is it not? I think the King of Whatsanamia gave it to me. Or was it the Queen?’

‘I think we should leave,’ Michael said.

‘Agreed,’ she answered.

‘Please, don’t go. You’re the first customers I’ve had all day. The rain makes a dull companion – unless you’re a fish.’

‘Well, I’m taking this,’ Luke said, slinging the tatty uniform on the display cabinet. He’d found a battered red visor attached to an intercom earpiece and a wrist computer as well.
‘Splendid! A fine choice, young sir. A star for the stars.’
‘How come this place is so big on the inside but small on the outside?’

Michael asked.
‘It’s like eating dinner. When you’re full, you can always fit in dessert, yes?’
‘That doesn’t explain anything.’
‘It explains why you get indigestion.’

Michael screwed up his face, thoroughly confused.

‘Zap! Zap! Zap!’ Luke sang again, firing the toy laser. When he aimed it at his sister, the ram’s horn walking stick pushed his arm back down. ‘Hey!’

Mr Deed waggled a gloved finger. ‘Guns are not for playing with. They are dreadful things. I’ll just put this in a safe place, shall I? Not even for a rainy day, hey?’

‘But I’ll look like a wimp without them.’
‘My boy, heroes don’t need guns. They need courage, smarts and an occasional change of underpants.’

Luke stared at the man with a you’ve-gotta-be-kidding face. Grumbling, he retreated to a display of cowry shell masks from Zaire.

That sorted, Mr Deed turned to Samantha and asked, ‘How about you, miss? What would you like to be? A maiden in distress? Or a pretty princess?’

She glared at him. ‘Do I look like a princess?’
‘Why, yes!’
‘A princess?’
‘Young miss?’
‘Stop calling me that! I feel like I’m in a beauty pageant.’
‘I didn’t mean to offend. I just want to help.’
‘Then help my brothers. I’ll find my own costume, thank you very much.’
‘But I have this pretty royal gown from London Town that –’
‘I’m not a Barbie doll!’

She stomped upstairs around the fig tree.
‘Oh dear. I seem to have offended everyone, except myself of course. But give me a few minutes more and I won’t be speaking to me either.’

‘Sorry about my brother and sister,’ Michael said, hovering above a collection of Native American hand drums, mummified bats and an ancient Indian chess set with elephant playing pieces. ‘They take a long time to get used to.’

‘And how long would that be?’
‘After twelve years, I still don’t know.’

As Mr Deed found a ladder to fix the broken light globe, Michael walked among the costumes on the ground floor – most of which were mouldy or soiled.
Among them he found the same giant baby chicken outfit he’d seen outside that department store. It was still damp. And oddly, only a few coathangers away, was the uniform worn by that lurking security guard.

‘Have you found anything fitting yet, young sir? A sheriff perhaps? A hat that claps?’

Michael moved along with growing uneasiness. ‘Me? Nothing. I’m – I’m just looking.’

‘Nonsense. Come.’ Mr Deed stepped down from the ladder and called out,
‘Ring-a-ting-ting! Mrs Hoyos! Customer!’

Something small and furry scurried down the branches of the fig tree, flusterling the tropical birds. Brown, grey, sporting a long tail and a crest of white hair, it was a strange creature – possibly a monkey? Running on all fours, it jumped and easily landed on Mr Deed’s right shoulder. The gremlin face reflected Michael’s own curiosity before biting down on a red berry with its needle teeth.

‘That’s a tamarin! A cottontop. But I thought they only lived in Colombia.’

‘Except this one,’ Mr Deed said, readjusting his glasses. ‘She stowed away in my travelling bag during a trip to Magdalena River and offered to work for me.’

‘Work for you?’

‘Why, yes. She takes care of my curious curios when I’m away on my adventures. Watch.’ Mr Deed walked over to the main counter and pulled out a plastic tag numbered 0001. He showed it to her. ‘Mrs Hoyos, we need a costume for this fine young gentleman.’

She leapt from his shoulder and climbed to the top of the fig tree. Luke, who had been harassing Samantha with a pair of wolfman’s claws, suddenly shouted, ‘Monkey!’

He raced upstairs and found Mrs Hoyos jumping along the coathangers. When he tried grabbing her, that same ram’s horn walking stick rapped his knuckles. ‘Ow!’

Luke appealed to his brother to do something, but Michael stood transfixed beside a broom closet, which stood ajar and revealed a secret. Stashed inside was a damp olive coat, chequered hat, a balding orange wig, false nose and, significantly, an aluminium crutch.

The walking stick slowly pulled the door shut. ‘Curiosity, the cat and all that,’ Mr Deed said in a measured tone. ‘Now, my boy, what do you think of this costume? Worthy of a gentleman, yes?’

He presented him with a battered plastic suit of gold armour, a faded red hooded cloak, a chipped helmet and a wobbly sword. But Michael failed to see
them. He stared at the well-dressed man in front of him then the tamarin,
remembering yesterday’s train ride. Her tail almost looked like a rat’s, and she
could fit in the sleeve of the olive coat. Those white claws – they could easily
snatch a cockroach.

Samantha paid for their costumes at the front counter. Mr Deed rang up the
bill, one eye on the cash register and one spying Michael hovering behind her.
‘And I’ll take that bandana, the stick-on cobra tattoo and the black cosmetic
pencil, thanks,’ she said, placing a frayed pirate outfit next to that of the star
ranger and gold knight.

‘How come they get swords and I don’t?’ Luke protested.
‘Because remember what happened at our farewell party?’ she said.
‘Yes.’
‘I’ve never seen so many police cars in my life.’

He lumbered away and pointed to the red wagon. ‘What’s that supposed to
be?’

Mr Deed perked up and joined Luke beside it. ‘Don’t you know what a
Now-Or-Never Wagon is?’

‘No.’

‘Well, good, because I’m uncertain myself. An old friend who worked for a
travelling carnival was all too happy to give it to me. He said most times it
helped you, but sometimes it was a curse.’

‘A curse?’

‘It offers strange gifts that you might desperately need when you’re in
trouble – now, later or never – hence its name.’

‘Then why isn’t it called a Now-Later-Or-Never Wagon?’

Mr Deed paused then smiled politely. ‘Yes …’

‘So why’s it cursed?’ Michael asked.

‘Because the last time my friend used it, his gift was pop-up flowers.’

‘Flowers?’

‘Yes. You see, two minutes later, he was hit by a motorbike and rushed to
hospital, where, beside him was a vase –’

‘For his flowers,’ Samantha said. ‘Yeah, yeah. We get it.’

‘Try your luck,’ Mr Deed said. ‘Ten cents a turn.’

‘Give me some money, Sam,’ Luke begged.

‘What for?’ she said. ‘Everyone knows those machines are dodgy.’

He nagged until she relented, and he fed the slot with ten cent coins. He
toggled the joysticks, snatched a capsule with the claw and then caught it rolling
down a chute. Twisting open the orange half, he blinked. ‘Huh?’ It contained a
rusty key.
‘I told you it was a waste of money,’ she said, collecting their costumes. He had another go. The result was worse. Even before he clawed hold of a capsule, the wagon dropped into the chute a tin of sardines.

‘O-kay,’ Luke said. Not even getting socks for Christmas was that boring. His puzzlement was only superseded by Mr Deed’s. The Belgian crouched to inspect the Now-Or-Never Wagon.

Luke didn’t care. He threw both items inside the star ranger’s utility pouches then opened the top half of the capsule. At least it contained candy. ‘Thank you,’ he burped into his sister’s ear.

‘You really are disgusting, you know that?’ she said, pushing him away.

‘Beware,’ Mr Deed warned, taking the remaining candy and dropping it into Luke’s top pocket. ‘Only in moderation or terrible things will happen.’

‘What terrible things?’ he asked, excitedly.

Mr Deed leant forward. ‘You’ll get cavities.’

Luke groaned. **How lame was that?**

His sister didn’t want to hear any of it. ‘C’mon. We’re going home.’

‘Oh, yes! Look at the time, or let the time look at me.’

Mr Deed pushed them out of the store, then flipped his OPEN sign to CLOSED. ‘And just remember what my mother said before she had my brother: “one good Deed deserves another”.’

Samantha and Luke shook their heads and raised their umbrellas. Michael lingered, though, watching Mr Deed in the bay window dust a Little Red Riding Hood costume. He wanted an explanation about that broom closet.

‘Patience, young master,’ Mr Deed answered without prompting. ‘A mystery is a dull question if there’s not plenty of confusion first.’
'Star Ranger Seven to Earth Control. Star Ranger Seven to Earth Control. Sensors are picking up unintelligent life form in bathroom. How should I proceed? Over.'
‘Get lost!’
‘Mutant is hostile. I repeat. Mutant is hostile and spraying toxic goo on her hair.’
‘I said get lost!’
Samantha threw the empty aerosol can at Luke before turning to draw a beard on her chin with Mr Goode Deed’s cosmetic pencil.
‘Won’t that stain?’ her brother asked, filling the doorway again.
‘No,’ she said, rolling her eyes while looking in the mirror. ‘It washes off. Now get out. Don’t you have a stupid game to play or something?’
‘Samantha!’ Michael yelled from the living room. ‘Mum’s on the phone!’
‘Tell her I’m busy!’
‘She said it’s urgent.’
Huffing, she stormed down the hallway to grab the handpiece. However, still lurking in the bathroom, Luke grinned. He checked no one was watching then swapped the cosmetic pencil with an almost identical one he’d bought from a convenience store. The fine print clearly warned – Handle carefully: Permanent marker.
A few ‘Yes Mums’ later, Samantha returned to the bathroom and resumed drawing on her face, unaware of her brother’s prank. ‘Get dressed, would you,’ she snapped at Michael, who lingered nearby.
‘Do I have to?’
‘Yes! Now! Mum’s working a double-shift. She can’t give us a ride. We have to catch the bus instead.’
‘In our costumes?’ Luke asked.
Across town, the birthday boy, Rajan Sudhakar, lived in a well-heeled suburb straight out of a glossy home-and-garden magazine. Every double-storey house had clipped lawns, pruned rose bushes, square hedges, porches trimmed with ivy and pebbled driveways. As the Bowman triplets approached, still smarting from all the sniggering on the bus, they heard the slamming of car
doors as their classmates dashed into the rain wearing new and much cooler costumes, and carrying much bigger presents.

‘How do I look?’ Samantha asked, adjusting the feathered pirate hat over her knotted bandana. She wore a purple vest and coat with silver trimmings, black pants, a white shirt, boots folded at the knees, hoop earrings, a red sash round her waist and a short, curved plastic cutlass. A thick goatee beard scribbled down her chin and a fake cobra tattoo menaced her neck. She looked mean. Michael, on the other hand, felt like a turtle. His gold chestplate, leggings, sword, open helmet, shoulder guards and red cloak were way too big.


‘Don’t listen to him,’ Samantha said, pulling Michael’s long shaggy hair into a ponytail and plaisting two braids above each ear. ‘There. Now you look like a prince.’

Unconvinced, he tucked his helmet under his arm and said, ‘You go on. I’ll catch the bus home. Mum won’t have to know.’

‘What is it with you and this party?’ she asked.

‘The Thornleigh sisters,’ Luke answered. ‘He’s worried they’ll show up.’

‘They won’t,’ she said. ‘Rajan’s not that stupid.’

Unfortunately, he was.

A green van arrived and delivered the three bullies and their bicycles. They too sported costumes. April Thornleigh – scowling as usual – had come as a spideress. She wore a swirling black-and-yellow cloak, heavy make-up, gold web earrings and a crawling nest of plastic tarantulas in her puffy blonde hair. The middle sister, May, was a mean cyborg, complete with robotic arms and legs, steel jaw and telescopic eye. And finally, the youngest sister, June, was Red Riding Hood. Her outfit must have been stolen. It was the same one the triplets had seen in Mr Goode Deed’s shopfront before he’d closed for the day.

‘Don’t worry,’ Samantha said, as both sets of siblings sized up each other. ‘I’ll deal with them. Just stay out of trouble.’

Michael hurried after her, convinced she was joking. Weren’t they the same triplets who had once freed all the animals from a pet store, caused their old school bus to crash into a dam, and been banned from a chain of supermarkets for playing football in the aisles with rockmelons? As the old saying went: trouble always comes in threes.

The party was held under a marquee in the back garden, where the guests were dressed as centurions, androids, Spidermen, ducks, ladybirds, vampires and movie stars. They ate, drank and listened to music as the birthday boy himself, Rajan, strutted around in a 1920s gangster outfit, speaking with a Chicago accent and calling all the girls ‘Toots’. A lot of the parents found this amusing – not
because of the bad imitation, but at the irony that his father managed a bank that nowadays ‘robbed’ people instead.

‘Runs in the family,’ one mother said, scooping up bean salad.

As Samantha and another classmate, Carrie-Anne Duncan, followed Rajan around the rain-speckled pool, Michael shivered alone by the food table, picking at sausage rolls, hotdogs, corn chips, salsa, garlic bread and mini-pizzas. He couldn’t help but overhear a group of pretty girls nearby gossiping about who was the cutest boy in their school. ‘Not the hillbilly chicken murderer,’ one said. ‘He’s only invited tonight because his mum asked.’ Their heads poked up together and he shrank away.

He’d just watched his brother win a toy robot in a game of charades when six hands grabbed him from behind and shoved him against the far side of the house.

‘What present did you bring us, loser?’ Chewing licorice, April Thornleigh bared her black teeth. Around her boots lay a dozen torn-open presents. ‘Let me guess. It’ll be something cheap.’

‘No, don’t!’

She shredded the present’s wrapping, laughed with disgust then stomped it underfoot. ‘A board game? How lame is that? Is your old lady too poor to afford anything good, Lowman?’

‘That would explain the costume,’ said her sister, May.

‘Would you like a cookie?’ asked June, the youngest, squashing it into his mouth. The basket of sweets was part of her Little Red Riding Hood costume.

‘What are we going to do with this cry-baby now?’ May asked.

‘Punish him for yesterday,’ April said.

Ten minutes later, Luke barely heard the calls for help above the music and the rain. He found Michael in the compost bin – gagged, tied and his helmet dripping with hot mustard.

‘They did this, didn’t they?’ Luke demanded, freeing him. He threw away the ropes and balled his fists. ‘This has got to stop … tonight.’

‘No! Don’t! You’ll only make it worse.’

‘Worse than what? This? You’ve got to stand up to them, Mikey.’

‘But it only makes them angrier.’

‘Then we need the one person they’re afraid of.’

But that one person was busy.

‘What?’ Samantha snapped. ‘Can’t you see I’m talking here?’

Rajan slid from the kitchen bench and circled Michael, chuckling. ‘What happened to you, Bowman? Fall under a lawnmower?’

‘No, he didn’t,’ Luke said as their classmates laughed. ‘Why are the
Thornleighs here?’
‘It’s my party. The more guests that show up, the more popular I am.’
Luke almost puked. ‘Well? Are you going to kick them out?’
‘Me? Why would I –’
‘Not you – her,’ he said, pointing to his sister.
‘Can’t this wait?’ she said.
‘You promised to protect him.’
‘And I’ll deal with it later. Rajan’s in the middle of telling me about his time on TV.’
‘I was children’s game show champion eight weeks in row,’ Rajan said.
‘As if you haven’t told us a million times already,’ Luke groaned.
‘It would have been a record nine if they’d asked me an easy question like that other girl.’
‘Really? Okay, champ, what type of animals have feathers, lay eggs and cluck?’
‘Urnnt!’ Rajan honked like a game show buzzer. ‘Chickens!’
‘Yeah, and the room’s full of them.’
With that, Luke pushed Michael outside, leaving Samantha fuming. He’d sort this out himself.

★

Stepping from the kitchen with a pair of drinks, Samantha wondered where all the guests had vanished. One minute everyone was dancing. The next, she’d heard a whistle and the rush of feet. The mystery could wait, though. Rajan liked his Coke icy cold. She’d seen him creep towards the family powerboat docked on a trailer at the far end of the garden. Finally, it was their chance to be alone – away from all those silly girls who fluttered round him. Moths like Carrie-Anne Duncan, who laughed at everything he said, even normal things like, ‘Can someone get me a drink?’
Samantha feared he’d vanished too until she heard a bump from the boat’s cabin. Freeing her hair from the bandana, she realised a fake beard may not be the most attractive look to win over a boy, but he’d told her twice that she had the second best costume at the party – behind his, of course.
She climbed on deck and instantly froze. Rajan was sitting inside his parents’ boat all right. Sitting next to that moth, Carrie-Anne Duncan! And worse – kissing her!
She splashed them with the Cokes.
‘What’s going on in here?’
The lovebirds split, spluttering and wiping themselves dry. But upon
discovering it was plain old Samantha Bowman and not their parents, Carrie-Anne curled next to Rajan again and said in a sing-song voice, ‘What does it look like?’

‘But you said – outside – by the steps –’ Samantha turned to leave.
‘Toots, wait!’
‘Rajan!’ Carrie-Anne shouted.

Samantha charged past the pool, under the marquee and up the driveway, Rajan chasing her and Carrie-Anne chasing him. She reached the front lawn, where a wall of guests blocked her escape. If it wasn’t humiliating enough to find the boy she liked making out with the prettiest girl in school, everyone was now laughing at her. Or so she thought.

It took a moment to see what was so funny. From a large tree flashing with fairy lights hung three sets of bikes – or what remained of them. The wheels, seats, handlebars, chains, pedals and inner tubes had all been dismantled and thrown into the branches. Across the road, one of the frames poked from a drain, another was strung up a flagpole and the third was guarded by a particularly insane Doberman. Her classmates moaned when a parent clapped his hands and herded them towards the back garden again, announcing, ‘Show’s over’. As another father fetched a ladder, the real entertainment finally arrived. The Thornleigh girls returned from a corner store with stolen shaving cream, party balloons and laxatives for some mischief, only to stand agog when they spotted what remained of their rides.

‘Bowman!’ April screamed.
‘Bowman!’ May yelled.
‘Bowman!’ June fumed.

Their angry voices pierced the quiet suburb and set off car alarms.

Spotting Luke doubled-up laughing, the sisters ran towards the Sudhakar’s front porch. They bulldozed through kids and parents, still yelling his name before he bolted inside. Up the steps and into the lounge room they thundered, muddy classmates roaring after them. Mrs Sudhakar screamed as they ran along the hallway of antiques and rattling collectibles, and into the tiled kitchen. As the back door banged shut, April flung it open and –
‘Now, Mikey! Now!’

The marquee collapsed, snaring all three sisters. Luke and Michael high-fived as the bullies flopped and stumbled under the wet canvas, knocking each other over as they tried to stand.

‘What have you done?’ Rajan shouted at them from the kitchen steps.
‘You’ve ruined my party!’

The brothers reversed towards the pool as classmates and parents filled the
backyard, also demanding answers. Only one person seemed to be enjoying herself.

‘And why are you laughing?’ Rajan yelled at Samantha, who’d rushed back down the driveway. ‘They’re your brothers. Take them back to your pigsty or wherever you come from!’

Shove! Straight into the pool he went.

‘I told you I never liked him,’ she said, grabbing her brothers. ‘Now run!’

They jumped over the back fence, slammed open a neighbour’s gate then hurtled down the street into the rain with the entire party screaming after them. They toppled a motorbike, smashed a pot, triggered a sprinkling system and woke a pair of dogs. If an angry mob of sugar-crazed classmates wasn’t bad enough, then two German shepherds snapping after them certainly was.

‘They’ve got sharp teeth, Sam!’

‘I know! I know!’

The dogs tore at their feet as they climbed over another fence. Safely on the other side, they rushed around a swing set and returned to the streets. Unfortunately, the mob found them.

The triplets hesitated at a T-junction. They turned right but a workman blocked them, saying, ‘Sorry, kids. The powerlines are down. You can’t go that way.’ They chose left instead.

Splashing through an alleyway, Michael looked over his shoulder. He noticed all the lights were on.

‘Who cares? Run!’

The alleyway ended abruptly and dipped into a giant unlit park. Black, mournful winter trees clung to its slopes, and a stormwater drain sloshed and groaned in its middle. With the mob closing on them, they had no choice. They ran down the rain-slicked grass and along a darkened path to a concrete bunker buried in the hillside.

‘It’s locked!’ Michael said, shaking the metal door, which warned KEEP OUT. Above, the mob spotted them and howled.

Luke reached into the pouches of his star ranger belt. He rolled the key from the Now-Or-Never Wagon between his fingers before pushing his siblings aside and inserting it into the lock. It opened!

When the mob arrived, April stopped outside the metal door. She twisted the handle unsuccessfully then shoulder-charge it with the help of a couple of kids. Thud. Thud. Thud. It held fast.

‘I know you’re in there, Lowmen! Get out here now or you’ll suffer at school on Monday.’

‘And apologise for ruining my party!’
‘Rajan Sudhakar!’ a man shouted from the top of the hill. ‘Get up here this instant! Your party’s over. You and your friends are all going home.’

‘But Dad –’

‘Now!’

After one more thud, the footsteps shuffled away, while inside the door – cramped amid the cold and mildew – the triplets’ sighs were lost among the groaning pipes and rushing water. They kept silent until they were doubly sure everyone had left.

‘If they didn’t hate us before, they sure do now,’ Samantha said in the darkness.

‘I’m never going back to that school,’ Michael said. ‘I don’t care what Mum says.’

‘Well, you might get your wish,’ Luke said with a nervous laugh.

‘Why?’

Attached to the shoulder of his star ranger costume was a small flashlight. He shone it at the lock, in which the bottom half of the rusty key was stuck. In his haste to barricade them inside, the top half had broken off. There was no way they could now unlock the door.

‘We’re trapped?’

‘It was the only way to keep April from getting in –’

‘And us getting out!’

Samantha shook the handle before Luke took a turn. They tried screaming for help but the mob had left.

‘You’ve really messed up this time!’

‘Me?’ Luke said. ‘You told us to run this way!’

‘Well, who destroyed Rajan’s party?’

‘Whose fault is it that we went to such a dumb party in the first place? I hope he was a good kisser!’

‘You annoying little –’

Brother and sister grabbed each other and wrestled in the darkness. The flashlight shone around the small entry room like a berserk strobe until Michael threw down his helmet and screamed, ‘STOP IT!’

Stunned, Luke and Samantha blinked at him. His face was red and his neck cords stretched.

‘Enough!’ he finished. ‘We’re worse than the Thornleighs! At least they like each other. All we seem to do is fight. We can’t even get through a party without an argument. And I’m sick of it. Do you hear me? Sick of it! Yes, I know we’re trapped, and, yes, I know no one’s around to help us, but let’s figure a way out of here – together – okay?’
Snatching back his helmet, he tugged it on his head and waited for his siblings to move, until, annoyed, he ordered Luke, ‘Point your flashlight there. Show us what’s making all this noise.’

Obediently, Luke did so, but with a glance to his sister, who matched his bewilderment. Neither could remember the last time Michael had raised his voice.

‘It’s an old pumphouse,’ Luke said, as they followed the beam over the pipes, gauges and flow meters. That explained the steady throbbing like a washing machine. Millions of litres of deluge churned below them. ‘Over here,’ he added a few minutes later, lifting up a rotting mat. ‘A trapdoor.’

A rung ladder descended underground. ‘I’m not going down there,’ she said. ‘Suit yourself,’ he shrugged as Michael followed him into the darkness.

She watched as their only source of light disappeared, then waited. A minute turned into two, and two into three before she called out, ‘Michael? Luke?’

The only reply was her echo.

‘Speak to me!’

More angry than frightened, she moved the cutlass to the back of her sash then groped for the top rung of the ladder. She climbed down thirty metres into the darkness before bumping into a cold, concrete floor. Pipes throbbed, the roof dripped and the stormwater raged louder. There was no sign of her brothers.

‘You better not be trying to scare me, or I’ll cut out the heads from your comic books again!’

‘Awww,’ Luke whined, turning on his flashlight. ‘You’re no fun.’

‘Scared her though,’ Michael said beside him.

‘Did not,’ she said. ‘Now stop mucking around. Find us a way out of here. I’m tired of standing around in these wet clothes.’

Swinging the flashlight side to side, they discovered a maze of control rooms, maintenance areas, workshops, tunnels and even a nook with hammocks. Forgotten instructions were written in chalk next to metal turn wheels, and razor-sharp flakes of rust threatened to slice their skin. The pumphouse must have been the central station for the area before being abandoned. Plenty of clues hinted that it hadn’t been operational for decades. A stained calendar opened at February 1939 hung from a nail; a newspaper inked with mould reported a story about somebody called King George VI; and no pump gauge was computerised.

When Michael found an old soda pop bottle half-filled with sticky cola on a card table, everything started to get really weird.

‘Why are the pumps running?’ Luke asked.

‘Hello? It’s a pumphouse,’ she said, rubbing her hands together to keep warm.
‘How, when no one’s been down here since World War II.’
His observation lingered like a ghost. It didn’t help that the dripping water
echoing along the tunnels sounded like people talking.
‘Let’s keep moving,’ she said. ‘This place creeps me out.’
Last to leave, Michael forgot about the plastic sword on his hip and twisted
too close to the card table. The bottle fell to the ground and shattered.
‘Careful!’
‘Wait! Check it out.’
Instead of little puddles on the flat concrete floor, the cola droplets
regathered then leapt into the air and turned the corner as a single stream – as if
being pulled by a greater force. The triplets followed it further along the tunnel
to a large cavity. Decades before, it had been plugged with plaster but erosion
had since eaten away its base. They stared in amazement as more jets of
rainwater zipped about them and hurtled through the hole.
‘It’s got to be a trick,’ she said, catching a stream in her hand. It drilled into
her palm then reformed around her fingers as smaller rivulets that shot into the
cavity.
‘I think I can see steps,’ Luke said, stooping on hands and knees for a closer
look. ‘Going down into some sort of cave.’
‘A cave?’ Michael repeated. ‘Under the city?’
When Luke stood again, his flashlight spelt out the warning painted next to
the plaster: *Authorised access only. Trespassers face imprisonment.*
‘Stop playing around,’ she said. ‘Keep the light steady.’
‘I’m not playing. The battery’s dying.’
She grabbed his flashlight, watched the bulb dim and shook it. It powered up
again but weakly. ‘We better get back upstairs. I don’t want to be trapped down
here in the dark.’
The moment she said that, the battery died. The tunnels collapsed into
darkness, cutting off their last chance of retreat. ‘Great. Just great.’
Fear lurked until a flash forced them to cover their eyes and step backwards.
Brightness shone through the hole in the plaster.
‘What’s causing it?’ Michael asked.
‘Who cares,’ she said, kicking the plaster. ‘It’s our way out of here.’
Her brothers helped break away the plaster until they created a crawlspace to
squeeze through on their bellies. Soaked, they stretched to their full height on the
other side and stood at the top of the stone steps, which curved into a chilly cave
that clearly wasn’t natural. It had a wide chequerboard floor crafted from marble
tiles, and a ring of round glass globes hanging from the ceiling glowed with an
unknown energy source. Water seeped from the roof but didn’t collect in a pool.
Instead, just like the sewers, it defied gravity, flew through the air and wormed around the edges of the most overpowering presence in the room – a gigantic double door.
Doors this size just didn’t exist. Larger than even those belonging to the most majestic of cathedrals, it was red, wrought from steel and impenetrable. Gold-painted ironwork spread across its surface like ivy and featured an array of cogs, pistons, bells, chains, whistles and cuckoo birds. Near the bottom, a pair of eagles clenched large round knockers. And barring its middle was an enormous metal beam, presumably to lock people out – or to keep something in.

‘What is this place?’ Luke asked, pausing next to the door to watch the water being sucked into its jamb. ‘And who would build a door this big?’

‘Or build one under a sewer?’ Michael said, running his hand over the gold ironwork until he noticed a section where the cobwebs had been cleaned away.

‘It’s just a door,’ Samantha said. ‘And like all doors, they open.’ She lifted a round knocker and pulled with all her strength. ‘It won’t budge.’

Luke snorted. ‘Maybe because there’s that giant beam across its middle.’

‘Okay, Smarty Pants, then how do we get up there to remove it?’

She dropped the knocker, which boomed twice.

The echo thundered long and deep. Dust fell from the cave roof and the flow of the gravity-defying water sped up. Even the strange lights seemed to glow brighter. They each stepped away from the door when, without warning, the gold ironwork started to tick-tick-tick and ding-ding-ding.

Little bells chimed by the dozen and dormant cogs slowly rolled on their teeth as chains stretched taunt. From the middle of the ironworks, a cuckoo bird sprang forward and flapped its wings.

‘Look!’ Michael said. ‘Paper’s printing from its beak.’

Being the tallest, Samantha snatched the long, thin stream of tickertape.

‘“Who’s there?”’ she read, slightly baffled. ‘Hello? Is anyone inside?’

The ironwork tick-tick-ticked and ding-ding-dinged.

Hello is anyone inside who? the cuckoo bird asked with a new message.

‘Hey! Open up! We’re trapped down here.’

Stillness settled over the ironwork again, as if it hadn’t moved at all. After a few impatient moments, she grabbed and rattled it. ‘We’re only kids, you know. We’ll die down here if you don’t let us out!’

Again, no cogs turned, no bells rang. The ironwork refused to budge.
‘Why isn’t it responding?’ she demanded, after another shake.
‘What did you do last time to make it work?’ Michael asked.
‘I pulled on this round handle thingy until Smarty Pants here told me I was doing it wrong,’ she said, showing them. When still nothing happened, they all pulled against the door until their arms and necks hurt, forcing them to let go. The knocker again bounced twice with a resounding boom.

Tick-tick-tick. Ding-ding-ding.
Who’s there? the cuckoo bird repeated, springing forth.
‘Us!’
Us who?
‘Samantha, Michael and Luke, that’s who, you idiot! Now let us out of here or we’ll bring back the cops and tell them you kidnapped us!’

The ironwork shut down. The bells stopped ringing and the cogs froze. The cuckoo bird flapped back into its nest of twisted metal. It proved too much for Samantha. She kicked and thumped the ironwork before shouting, ‘Stop playing games! Let us out!’

Amid her screaming, Michael stepped forward, heaved up the round knocker and dropped it against the door, triggering the ironwork into action.

Knock. Knock. 
Who’s there?
‘Sadie,’ he answered.

Sadie who?
‘Sadie magic word and I’ll tell you who.’
For a moment – no response. Then the cuckoo flapped its wings and chirped before whipping backwards. Samantha threw her arms up in dismay until a shudder silenced her. Deep within the red double door, the sound of even bigger cogs clicked and ticked, followed by an enormous rush of water. Suddenly, before their eyes, all the steam whistles blew and the metal beam barring their exit jolted sideways.

‘How’d you know to do that?’ Luke asked.
Michael shrugged. ‘It kept asking questions like knock-knock jokes.’
‘Well, the joke’s on us,’ she said, pushing against the ironwork. ‘These doors still won’t budge – they’re too heavy.’

Just as her brothers added their strength, another cuckoo bird sprang out.

Do you like riddles? it asked with more tickertape.
‘No, I don’t!’ she said. ‘I like being outside!’
‘Shhh,’ Luke said.

Do you like riddles? a third bird asked, popping out next to the second.
‘Yes,’ Michael answered. ‘Yes, I do.’
A fourth scissored forward. Unlock the answer and I’ll open for you.
More cogs tick-tick-ticked until a series of cuckoo birds printed a riddle, line by line.

Come out, it’s time to find me:
I’m one of five orphans
That you cannot find in summer,
Winter, autumn or spring.
Yet if you look hard enough,
You’ll see me close to the start of every morning
And near the end of every afternoon
What am I?

‘A door, stupid.’
‘Samantha – shut up,’ Michael hissed.
‘Well, it is.’
‘I don’t get it,’ Luke said, squatting and arranging the tickertape across the chequerboard tiles. ‘Five orphans? Is it a kid’s name?’
Michael pointed at the key words. ‘No, it’s not a person. Look, here. It’s a clue. It’s asking “what am I”, not “who am I”.’
‘Like I said: a door!’ she huffed.
‘You’re not helping,’ Luke said.
‘And you are?’
Michael ignored them both. ‘Most riddles are about common stuff we can see or eat or use. They’re so anybody from any country can solve them.’
‘How do you know that?’ she scoffed.
‘Dad taught me. When we’re out on the tractor, he passes time by telling jokes and asking puzzles.’
Her tone changed. ‘He never does that with me.’
Luke pressed on. ‘Okay, so five is another clue, right? How about fingers?’
Michael shrugged. ‘Ask it.’
‘Door, is the answer “fingers”?’
It remained steadfast.
‘A hand?’
Again, no answer.
‘Weekdays? Minutes? Dollars?’
‘Oh, please,’ she said. ‘How about your IQ?’
‘I don’t hear you doing any better.’
‘Why are we standing here talking to this dopey door anyway? Let’s turn round, go upstairs and find a wrench to bash open the door that doesn’t speak.’
‘And what are you going to use for light? Your radiant personality?’
Scowling, she marched towards the eerie glass globes, only to foolishly realise that she’d need a fire truck’s ladder to reach them. Annoyed even more, she snapped her pirate coat around herself and sat on the steps to fume.

The boys stayed put. Their guesses grew more desperate until boredom set in. Luke searched the cavern for more clues while his sister nagged him about why he didn’t bring a spare battery for his shoulder flashlight. Half an hour later, a bang echoed from the sewers above. Their excitement faded when no one answered their calls for help.

‘Give up, Squirt,’ she said, ‘or we’re going to freeze down here.’

But Michael refused to walk away. He knew he was close. Like all riddles, the answer was simple. It was just a matter of deduction. Five orphans. Not found in summer, winter, autumn or spring. Near the start of every morning. Near the end of every afternoon.

What was missing from summer, winter, autumn or spring?
What was near the start of morning?
What was near the end of afternoon?
Mo –
Afterno –
And then he saw them. The five orphans: a, e, i, o and u. Vowels. Of course! Quick, which one was missing from summer, winter, autumn and spring?
‘Door, it’s the letter “o”!’ Michael jumped up and rejoiced as the whistles shrilled, more cogs rolled and the double door shuddered open. One last cuckoo bird printed a final message: See you on the other side.

Just as he finished reading it, the metallic cuckoo bird launched into the air and flew out through the plaster crawlspace. They didn’t see it again.

‘Other side of what?’ he whispered to himself.

Luke stood next to him, staring silently at the now open door. Beyond it, and, unlike anything they’d ever seen, a long tunnel formed from spinning stormwater. ‘Wait!’ Samantha yelled as they walked inside.

Michael combed his fingers along the spinning tunnel’s wall, letting its icy sharpness drag his arm upwards. He plunged his whole fist in but quickly withdrew it when he was almost pulled off his feet. Luke also touched it. He skidded his palm on its coarse wetness and sprayed the water everywhere. But rather than being hit in the face, the beads hovered and merged into a giant glob. Finally, when it grew large enough, the wall slurped it back in, and the brothers
glanced at each other. They kept to the middle of the tunnel, sensing something way too powerful to be built by human engineers.

At the far end was a huge black sphere. It measured one hundred metres across and was engulfed within more churning stormwater, like a bubble. They didn’t need any more proof it wasn’t of this world. Bigger droplets suspended in midair formed an enormous star map of planets, suns, moons, asteroid belts and dust clouds, which drifted past their faces. They recognised Mercury, Venus, Earth, Mars and the rest of the solar system. But as for the thousands of other worlds, everything was alien. Michael followed two comets spiralling around each other, while Luke watched a supernova. Wow! Were these actually real?

Michael reached out to touch an ice planet when he lost balance and tumbled into the mini-universe. Rather than fall, he floated. He was flying! He was actually flying!

‘No way!’ Luke shouted. He took a running start and launched into the star map, spraying planets and suns everywhere. The droplets returned to the walls, while new ones leaked from the roof and reformed into galaxies. ‘Incredible!’ he laughed as they swam through the air.

‘Get back here now!’ Samantha ordered, standing on the lip of the tunnel. She was wobbly on her feet, frightened she’d be swallowed by the swirling stormwater.

‘Make us!’

She poked her foot into the bubble, only to grab hold of the edge in fright. However, there was nothing to cling to and she slipped, falling into the star map. ‘It’s not funny!’ she harrumphed, floating past them in zero gravity.

‘Hey, what’s that?’ Michael asked, noticing an electronic red ring encircling a blue planet sprinkled with thousands of islands. He gently touched it with his index finger and information scrolled beside it, responding to his request. As they studied it, he inquisitively reached out his whole palm. The droplets of the star map flew from all sides of the room and converged at a single point, reshaping into a giant model of the same island planet and its three moons. ‘I want to go there,’ he said.

Suddenly, trouble. The sphere blinked from black star map to white stormwater then to black again. It grew more urgent until – boom! – the Knock-Knock Door swung shut.

They desperately swam towards the tunnel but it collapsed. They tried digging through the bubble but its torrent was too solid. Around them, the room pressurised with a long, horrible hiss, and Michael shouted, ‘Sam! What’s going on?’

‘I don’t know!’
Without warning, the giant model planet imploded, swallowed by a vortex. The hole grew and grew, devouring the star map and pulling in the triplets. They screamed as every part of their bodies ripped apart and dissolved into trillions of atoms, corkscrewing into the vortex. The bubble burst – and *zip*. They rocketed into the stars.
Hurtling as comets of energy, the triplets pinballed across the universe. One moment, they flashed past Jupiter – the next, who knows! They streaked past planets, red giants and multicoloured nebulas, feeling no pain but an overwhelming sense of being stretched. They skimmed the triple rings of a large moon, spiralled into a wormhole, whistled among sky castles and then flashed through a raging starship battle. Lasers from a thousand gunports blazed between armadas before a villainous cruiser detonated and threw them into a distant galaxy. Most of the time they were blurs, travelling faster than the speed of light, then suddenly, without warning, they’d slow above a civilised world. Just as they spotted an amazing canyon city or a swamp tribe, they’d be yanked through space again.

Within minutes, their course straightened. The blue-green island planet loomed before them, growing larger and larger until they burst through its atmosphere and sped towards a rainforest. They collided with a mountain range and darted through the rock like ghosts. Everything turned black before their atoms reformed again. A deluge of stormwater knocked them off their feet, sweeping them along a dark shaft. They rode on their backsides towards an archway of dull sunlight curtained by cascading water, until they shot through it and –

‘AAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!’
– fell from the sky!

Splash!
‘AAAARRRRGGGGHHHH!’

Splash!
‘YAAAAHHHHHOOOO!’

Splash!

Luke plunged into the rock pool last, kicking free from the bottom and breeching. He shook water from his head like a dog then shouted, ‘What a ride!’

Coughing, Michael flailed about until Samantha pulled him on land. ‘Do you always have to be such a boy?’ she asked Luke.

He barely heard her, however. Above them, a waterfall thundered over a cliff and battered the rock pool. Its stream flowed east through a rainforest thick
with ferns, orchids, vines and gigantic trees. The canopy blocked the morning sunlight, and mountain peaks sliced open the clouds. Where were they?


‘Cities don’t have rainforests,’ Michael said.

He retrieved his knight’s helmet, while Luke poured out his jetpack.

Samantha, yearning for her soft bed back home, collapsed face-down on a boulder to dry. They jumped when Luke suddenly panicked. He slapped his pockets until, with a relieved sigh, he held up the toy robot warrior he’d won at Rajan’s birthday party. ‘I thought I’d lost it,’ he said, only to be answered by his siblings’ groans.

When his strength returned, Michael circled the rock pool and pointed to the top of the waterfall. ‘I think we travelled through it – not over it,’ he told his brother. ‘There must be a tunnel hidden inside that cliff.’

‘Then how are we going to get back up there? It’s at least thirty metres high.’

‘We don’t,’ she said, switching from her right cheek to her left to face them. ‘There’s bound to be a road around here somewhere. We’ll flag down a ranger or driver to help us.’

The boys looked at her then each other. ‘Er, I don’t think we’re even on Earth,’ Michael said.

‘Don’t be stupid. Where else would we be?’

He blinked. ‘Somewhere past Jupiter?’

She rolled over, her whole body hurting, not to mention her head. ‘Dream on. We simply fell into the stormwater drain and this is where it spat us out. End of story.’

‘Are you awake?’ Luke said. ‘We just saw spaceships, planets, flying castles –’

‘C’mon. It’s a dumb movie to frighten kids like us from poking around in that pumphouse.’

‘Then forget about going to the cinema again. That’s the best movie I’ll ever see.’

‘We definitely travelled through something weird,’ Michael said. ‘Look at the sky. It’s morning. When we left the party, it was dark.’

She slid off the boulder and removed her pirate hat and bandana to wring her long, black hair. ‘That doesn’t mean anything. We could’ve been down in those tunnels for hours and not known it. Or we could have been knocked on the head.’

‘Now who sounds stupid?’ Luke said.

‘It makes a whole lot more sense than us travelling through space.’

‘But my head doesn’t hurt.’
‘Really?’ She clipped him on the back of the skull.
‘Ow! What did you do that for?’
‘For getting us into this mess.’

Nursing the sore spot, Luke grabbed his jetpack, stormed to the other side of the rock pool then shouted, ‘You’re the worst sister in the world, you know that? Who needs April Thornleigh to bully us when we’ve got you!’

He marched away but Samantha made sure she got the last word in. ‘That’ll be nothing compared to the smack Mum’ll give you when we get home!’ she yelled. She shifted the cutlass on her sash, then added, ‘Good riddance, huh?’ But Michael pulled on his helmet without acknowledging her and followed his brother. ‘What? He had it coming. Where do you think you’re going? Michael! Get back here. I’m not kidding! Michael!’

He easily tracked his brother through the mulch and down a slope towards the stream. The air was crisp and tinged with nectar and decay. Three small, red explosions burst among the canopy and led him to an enormous kapok tree. Luke stood among its roots with a twig in hand. ‘Watch this,’ he said.

He tapped a plump yellow toadstool and counted to five before – ZING! – its cap whizzed upwards like a spinning top. Pop! Pop! Pop! Bright spore trails fell back down and sprinkled the undergrowth.

Michael prodded one that bloomed with a blue bang.
‘Or how’s this for weird?’

Luke annoyed one of the many flat orange fungi spiralling up the tree like a staircase. Within moments, stumpy little legs spread from its base before all the fungi suddenly started crawling up the trunk.
‘What are they?’ Michael asked, stooping closer.
‘Caterpillars with giant orange sails on their backs?’

Several ferns swayed and snapped at the top of the slope, catching them by surprise. Rather than discovering a new, exotic animal, they heard grumbling as Samantha crashed forward. ‘You’re going the wrong direction,’ she said. ‘The road will be up here, not down there.’

‘We’re following the stream,’ Michael announced over his shoulder as they kept moving. ‘It’s smarter to stick by fresh water.’

‘“It’s smarter to stick by fresh water”,’ Samantha mocked in a smarty-pants voice, standing her ground while watching them leave. Well, go on. Get lost. See if she cared. She was going to hike upwards and flag down a driver to take her home. She’d be snugly in her slippers and drinking hot chocolate in front of the TV, while these dummies would still be lost out here, waiting to be rescued by park rangers. Who would be the favourite child then?

She climbed a dozen metres before glancing up the steep mountainside,
which appeared impenetrable. She blew back her hair and moaned. Knowing those two, they *would* end up lost, falling down a giant hole or getting themselves killed. And who would Mum and Dad blame? Her. That’s right! Samantha Elizabeth Bowman. Oldest child and first to be yelled at every time.

She charged after them and – typical! – was immediately given the silent treatment. Fine. They’d better be grateful later that she’d saved them from certain death.

An hour passed and they still hadn’t sighted the city. No trail signs, no fences, no paths, no stormwater pipes – not even a tossed-away drink bottle littered their way. Everything was pristine. While this unnerved the boys, it perked up Samantha. She reminded them several times that her plan was far superior until they shouted at her to shut up.

Deep in the rainforest, they unearthed their first real discovery. Michael walked across a fallen trunk bridging the stream-turned-river and, from a snag, he freed a crushed red war helmet. ‘It must be six hundred years old,’ he said, cleaning muck from its broken antlers.

‘Don’t be stupid,’ Samantha said, joining him. ‘It’s just another costume piece. Somebody from the party dropped it in the stormwater.’

‘It’s too heavy to be a fake. See. It’s metal. And there’s no tag inside,’

‘Well, it can’t be real. I don’t think too many Vikings lived in parks.’

‘Rainforests,’ he corrected her. ‘And it’s a samurai helmet. You can tell by –’

‘It’s junk. Throw it away.’

It was their only discovery for some while. They followed the widening river further, hopscotching leaf-cutter ants and tarantulas. Privately, they each feared they were getting more and more lost but kept moving, convinced help was just around the next bend. Under such a thick canopy, even the sun seemed distant.

‘Are you sure you don’t have something to eat?’ Luke asked.

‘Just like last time – no, I don’t,’ she answered.

‘Not even chewing gum?’

‘Waitaminute. Yes – Yes, I do. My coat is filled with gum. And chocolate. And sandwiches. And a map to get us out of here.’

‘Okay, okay. You don’t have to get nasty.’

Squatting, Michael washed the tiredness from his face as the others rested against tree trunks and massaged their feet. They hadn’t slept in ages. Drinking from a cupped hand, he listened to the river and the nervousness of frogs until water drained through his fingers. He stood, realising the branches were silent.

‘Enough!’ she announced, sliding out her plastic sword. ‘This is ridiculous. We’re camping in there until a search party finds us. No arguments.’

‘About time,’ Luke said. He slipped off his jetpack and helped her hack
through a snake nest of vines into a small, dry clearing.

Michael hesitated. ‘I think we should keep moving. Something’s wrong. Rainforests aren’t supposed to be this quiet.’ He examined the trees for any flash of colour or warble. Since splashdown, he hadn’t heard a single bird.

Unconvinced, his siblings used their costumes as makeshift pillows and promptly fell asleep. The morning drifted past like the lazy river next to them. Soon, Michael’s eyelids also grew heavy and he caught himself nodding off. Sleep came easy.

He jolted awake when he heard a distant screech.
‘There it is again,’ Samantha said, crouching. ‘Coming from the mountains.’
‘And getting closer,’ Luke said, strapping on his jetpack. The air had warmed. Judging from the height of the sun, they’d slept through midday.
‘Do you think it’s help?’

SHHHRRRIIIEEEEKKKK!

Michael clawed the soil, suddenly light-headed. What was that noise?
‘Is – Is it a bat?’ she asked, wincing.
‘A big scary one,’ Luke said. ‘And it’s looking for us!’
The trees started to sway. Leaf litter scattered in stinking breaths. Whatever was approaching, it was huge!

SHHHRRRIIIEEEEKKKK!

Pain arced between their ears and they crumpled to their knees. Their minds spun as they lost all sense of balance. Samantha managed to haul her brothers to their feet as an invisible presence smashed through the trees, hungering for them.

‘Move!’

They fled, barrelling through branches, ferns and enormous spider webs as the menace gave chase. They jumped logs and ducked under vines, hoping to shake off the invisible terror, but it freely wove among the trees. Nothing could move that fast. Nothing they’d ever seen.

SHHHRRRIIIEEEEKKKK!

Their minds turned inside out again and knocked them off their feet. They crashed into the undergrowth, which wheeled as a giant blur. They wanted to be sick, but they also wanted to live. Desperately, they lurched to the right and chased the now roaring river.

Disaster. Samantha grabbed her brothers before they shot past her and fell to their deaths. Smack in front of them plunged a forty-metre waterfall.

‘Where to now?’ Luke asked above the roar. Gigantic trees towered in front of them. A cliff face flanked them. And that horrible noise drew closer.

‘We have to turn back,’ Michael said.
‘Are you kidding? Towards that thing?’
‘Maybe it’s just a wild pig.’  

**SHHHRRRIIIIEEEEKKK!**  

They blocked their ears. ‘Yeah, the size of a truck!’

Samantha took charge. She snatched a vine as thick as a man’s arm and tugged. It held as good as any rope. She readied to swing off the cliff when Michael stopped her. He pulled on it again, only to watch it break free from the canopy and plummet below. ‘They grow up – not down.’

‘What are we going to do?’

**SHHHRRRIIIIEEEEKKK!**  

Their skulls rippled with pain, and, frantically, Michael looked along the cliff face, spotting the veiny, collapsed tree trunk of a giant strangler fig. Excitedly, he rushed towards it, shouting at his brother and sister to catch up.

‘You can’t be serious! We’re not climbing down that. We’ll fall off!’

‘Who said anything about climbing down the outside? It’s a strangler fig. They’re hollow.’

**SHHHRRRIIIIEEEEKKK!**  

With no time to argue, Michael clambered down its middle. Wide as four men, it was a giant tube of roots. Samantha and Luke watched him descend into the darkness filled with bugs and creepy-crawlies before hearing another horrible shrill.

‘Move!’ she yelled. She scrambled into the strangler fig last, clawing at roots and searching for footholds. One miss and they’d all tumble to their deaths. Another giant scream blasted from the cliff face and rained dirt on them. ‘Hurry up!’

Down, down, down, they climbed.
'Did anyone see what kind of monster it was?' Luke panted far below at the base of the mountains. They’d put plenty of distance between themselves and that waterfall.

‘Monster?’ Samantha said dryly. ‘*Please*. There’s no such thing.’

‘Then what did we just run from?’

‘A machine. A bulldozer maybe.’

‘Bulldozers don’t sound like that.’

‘This one does.’

‘Then you look pretty scared for someone running from a *bulldozer*.’

She staggered to her feet, winced at the stitch in her side then continued into the thinning undergrowth. ‘Do not.’

He followed after her. ‘When are you going to admit we’re on a whole different planet? Probably in a whole different galaxy?’

‘You might be on a different planet, but *I’m* not.’

‘Then how do you explain this rainforest? Some granny’s overgrown garden?’

‘Okay, so we’re not in the city. The stormwater just – I don’t know – swept us further out than we think.’

‘To where? *The Amazon*? One little pipe and – *bang!* – watch out for piranhas? Are you insane?’

She turned on him. ‘Look! I know as much as you, all right? But before we start believing in monsters and different planets, let’s find help, okay?’

Tired of the bickering, Michael drifted away. He watched an owl butterfly warm its wings then spotted a hairy tarsier with big, blinking red eyes. He tossed stones at giant seed pods hanging from the canopy and bolted when they exploded like jumping jacks. He ran his hand over the roots of another strangler fig that twisted and thickened around the trunk of a big-leaf mahogany tree. Soon, those same roots would fully cover and choke it to death. Only the strangler fig would remain.

Nearby rustling scared him. A creature was wriggling through the leaves. Hesitantly, he stepped forward. When he got close enough, he pulled apart the branches and expected to see a young bird but leapt back in fright. A seahorse –
a flying seahorse! – zipped inches in front of his face, beating its little fins like wings. It curved to the right, spooked by the approach of Luke and Samantha, and fluttered upwards into the canopy. ‘Wow!’


‘Hey, do you smell that?’ Samantha interrupted, catching the hint of a fresh breeze. Toadstools whirled and popped as they ran among the thinning trees and caught glimpses of a green meadow pimpled with stumps and wrinkled with hills. Beyond it, on the horizon, blazed a blue ocean.

‘I don’t see any houses or roads,’ she said, sticking to the shadows of the rainforest. ‘But look there,’ she pointed. Along its edge, red rags fluttered from two hundred trees. Leading up to them, parts of the meadow had been flattened by boots. ‘So much for your aliens.’

Michael smiled and looked to the canopy. For now, he didn’t have the heart to tell them about the seahorse. They’d call him mad.

Luke searched the ocean for ships. ‘There might be houses by the beach,’ he suggested.

Michael led the way, pushing into the meadow. He halted immediately. Something was wrong. Dreadfully wrong.

His arms and legs were suddenly heavy. He felt too sluggish to move. Glancing down, his breath hitched with alarm. Wherever the sun struck his costume, the gold plastic was hardening into steel!

His plates of armour glistened. His gauntlets stiffened. The nicks and scratches sealed together. The fake leather straps mended and tightened. His sword weighed down in its scabbard. His tattered red cloak restitched itself into fine cloth with curling gold embroidery. And his chain mail clinked as each row of rings turned solid. Speechless, he flexed his fingers inside his new gauntlets, only to pause when he discovered each shoulder guard transforming into the enormous head of a roaring bear. The insignia of a third – fighting and clawing on hindlegs – grew large on his chestplate. And finally, the face of a fourth – with snarling teeth and angry eyes – became his helmet.

The shock overwhelmed him – not to mention the extra kilograms. ‘Whoa!’ He crashed backwards on the grass.

As his siblings rushed into the sunlight to help him, they too froze.

Luke’s star ranger uniform aged in reverse. His green and yellow leather jacket and pants turned soft and supple. His utility belt drooped with new pouches. The hi-tech gadgets and computers on his wrists and belt blinked and beeped to life. His crash helmet fit his head. The red plastic visor attached to his earpiece fizzled into an electronic display – diagrams and data scrolled in front of his eyes. Solar panels charged his jetpack. ‘How cool is this!’ he laughed,
pressing a button.

*BOOOOOOM!*  
‘WAAAHHHHOOOOOOO!’

The jetpack rocketed him into the clouds.  
At first, Samantha’s changes were cosmetic. Her pirate hat puffed out with real ostrich feathers; a steel cutlass curved from her hip; her white shirt and red sash changed to silk; and the ratty patterns on her purple vest and coat rewove themselves into silver thorns and roses. Even her buttons turned into pieces of eight. She looked quite dashing. But then her chin and lips itched. She scratched them with increasing fury until she felt needles of thick, spiky hair growing where she’d drawn her goatee.

‘AAARRRGGGHHH!’

She ripped the black tuffs from her face and threw them to the ground. But just as she cleared one patch, another sprouted in its place. ‘Get it off me! Get it off!’

Wondering what was wrong, Michael struggled to sit up. When he saw her face, he baulked. When he saw her neck, he turned white.

‘What?’ she demanded tearfully. ‘Tell me!’

‘Your tattoo. It’s – It’s hissing!’

‘AAARRRGGGHHH!’

She wrestled out of her coat and found the cobra slithering across the surface of her skin. It writhed round her arms, shoulders, legs and belly, as she hopped on the spot, trying to shake it loose. Screaming, she bolted back into the rainforest, looking for a river to scrub the ink off.

At the same time, Luke roared past, losing altitude as an alarm squawked: ‘WARNING! WARNING!’ He crashed into the meadow, a cartwheel of arms and legs.

‘Cool,’ he repeated, before collapsing.

* 

They camped under a young tree that evening, still a few hours walk from the ocean. During the afternoon, they’d discovered more signs of civilisation. The ruins of a stone farmhouse sheltered them from the wind and kept their fire bright. A collapsed monastery ghosted the hill opposite them, next to a cemetery, which they’d wait until morning to explore.

‘What is that?’ Michael asked, hearing running hooves.

Luke scanned the darkness with his visor, picking up a pair of heat signatures. ‘Deer,’ he said. ‘There’s a herd on the slopes.’

‘Do you see –?’
‘No. I’ve zoomed all round us and we’re safe.’
The triplets peered beyond the ruins. Their instincts told them otherwise.
Luke keyed his wristpad and the visor fizzled, turning the landscape black again. Two white half-moons and a third purple giant hung in the sky.
‘What else does that do?’ Samantha asked, pointing to his earpiece.
‘What doesn’t it do might be a better question. It’s got everything – infra-red, night vision, encyclopedias, video playback, telezooms, temperature readings, a compass, microphone – there’s even this light flashing with the word RADAR. Maybe if I press this button –’

PPPFFFSSSHHH!
They jumped as a small satellite fired from the top of his jetpack. It trailed into the sky before disappearing. Within moments, his visor switched to green. It displayed an aerial layout of the surrounding terrain and their exact location. To their right, twenty small dots ran away – the deer, he realised. To their left –
That was strange. A warning signal beeped again before the screen faded.
Oh, man. Another power failure. The solar cells needed recharging.
‘Don’t push any more buttons,’ she said. ‘You could end up on one of those three moons.’
‘Three moons, eh? So you finally admit that we’re no longer on Earth?’
She pulled back her silk sleeve. Frightened by the fire, the cobra slipped up her arm. ‘How many bikers do you see tattooed with one of these?’
‘Does it hurt?’ Michael asked.
‘No. Just itches – like touching a caterpillar. Scratching only makes it move, see?’
‘At least it’s not poisonous.’
‘Great.’
She clawed at her goatee then threw another branch on the fire. Luke reached into the pouches on his utility belt and pulled out the toy robot he’d won at Rajan’s party, followed by a silver survival blanket, first-aid kit, screwdriver, rope, lighter and parcel containing an inflatable six-man raft. As he’d discovered, the pouches were seemingly bottomless. They stored as many items as placed in them and slowly restocked anything he removed.
‘Hey, a gold coin,’ he said, thumbing it towards Samantha. One side showed a seahorse, and on the other, the profile of a young queen.
‘Any more food in there?’ she asked.
‘Just more of those awful lemony rations.’
They split up the energy bars, silencing their stomachs for a few more hours.
‘How about you, Mikey? What special powers does your armour have?’
He half-smiled. ‘It tires me out.’ Then, pulling off his gold gauntlet, he
handed it to his brother. ‘Throw it as far away as you can.’

Luke stood and tossed it twenty metres. Within seconds, the gauntlet boomeranged back and snapped on Michael’s wrist.

‘Now that is weird. Try your hat, Sis.’

She tossed it away and, it too, returned.

‘We can take off the costumes but not be separated from them,’ Michael explained. He removed his gauntlet again and placed it in front of them. He made a fist, which the metal fingers mimicked. ‘I think we’re the only ones allowed to wear them.’

‘But that would mean –’

He nodded. ‘Mr Goode Deed’s behind all this.’

“That nutcase?” she said.

‘Think about it. Back home – his shop in the strange alleyway that suddenly appeared, the Now-Or-Never Wagon, the key to the pumphouse –’

‘It was just a key to the pumphouse.’

‘No, there’s more – something I haven’t told you. When I caught the train two days ago, I helped a homeless man buy a ticket. When we got off at the station, he dropped his wallet with two hundred bucks inside –’


‘Exactly. And later, I saved him from being hit by a cement mixer.’

‘Since when did you join the Scouts?’ she snorted.

‘Listen. He also dressed up as a baby chicken and a security guard. I saw the costumes in his shop. He might’ve even been that guy who told us the powerlines were down, steering us towards the park. He’s been behind this from the start.’

‘You sure he wasn’t wearing a cereal box?’ Luke asked. ‘He’s definitely the king of fruit loops.’

‘Why would anyone want to dress up as a homeless man?’ she said.

‘It was a test,’ Michael answered. ‘To see who would help him. To see who was honest enough.’

‘And out of the millions of people in our city, he picked you, right?’

‘No, the opposite. I picked myself. He was waiting for the right person to come along.’

‘It’s bad enough your brother thinks he’s superhuman, Mikey, but coming from you, it’s a little sad.’

‘How do you know all this?’ Luke asked.

‘I don’t. I’m guessing. But when we left his shop, he said something weird: “One good deed deserves another”.’

‘That’s ludicrous,’ she said.
‘So’s you turning into Captain Blackbeard,’ Luke replied.
Not believing a single word, she drew her cutlass and left for the bushes. ‘If any of this is remotely true, then Mr Goode Deed better know Mrs Ima Lawyer because we’re going to sue for millions.’
Her brothers stayed by the fire, pulling apart the theory.
‘To go through that Knock-Knock Door. To come here.’
‘Yeah, but why?’
He pondered it a while then echoed the last words spoken by the Belgian in the blue suit: ‘A mystery is a dull question if there’s not plenty of confusion first.’
'I can’t walk into a town looking like this! You might think it’s funny that I’m the Incredible Bearded Lady, but I don’t!’

‘Lucky you didn’t draw any curls on your chest, eh?’

Samantha filled Luke’s face with hers. ‘You listen to me, Luke Francis Bowman. I’d keep that wind tunnel you call a mouth closed from now on. DO YOU UNDERSTAND?’ He gulped. ‘Good! Now stay that way and we might actually like each other for the first time in our lives!’

Her leather boots squeaked across the clean, white sand as she marched from the beach to the shade of a long, rolling cliff face. She passed Michael, who stood dumbstruck, gaping at the impossible. Before him, as if magnetically repelled from the planet itself, hundreds of limestone islands sailed above the ocean and rode through the sky. Some were small and fast; others gigantic and sluggish. Tropical gardens thrived on their topsides and waterfalls sprayed over their edges. Occasionally, an avalanche of boulders tumbled down and pounded the sea like cannonballs. Others crunched into the graveyard of shipwrecks, splintering masts and smashing wooden carcasses, which groaned with each surge of the waves.

They weren’t the only marvels. Amazingly, there were the fish – great schools flying among the floating isles. They shimmered, twisted and looped in perfect unison, curving dangerously close to the crags before sprinting away across the coral cays. No wonder the triplets hadn’t seen any birds in the rainforest. They didn’t seem to exist. Further along, Luke spotted an enormous, orange and very dead stone crab. It was the size of a double garage. He walked inside and looked at the carapace, which had been crushed open and the flesh eaten.

Michael’s armour warmed in the mid-morning sun, and the wind tugged his cloak as he sat and watched the islands meander. A sense of peace overcame him as he wriggled his toes under the hot sand. Embarrassingly, this was his first visit to a beach. He’d seen them on television but had never tasted a salt breeze or heard the foamy fizz of real waves. His dad was a life-long farmer and hated leaving the land. He preferred rivers, hills, kingfishers and dust on his dogs to caravans, seagulls, rubbish bins and slowly crackling skin. ‘Too many tourists,’
he’d always say.

‘Where is everybody?’ Samantha demanded, scouting for a boat, footprints in the sand or even a washed-up shopping bag. ‘The monster can’t have eaten them all.’

Then, barely above the wind, they heard music. They stopped and turned towards the furthest cliff top. ‘Is that a flute?’ Luke asked.

‘Who’s playing it?’

‘Scanning …’

His visor zeroed in on a thin teenager sitting cross-legged on a high, rocky arch and playing a pipe made of coral. He was fifteen – possibly sixteen – and human. He had loose blue hair, a sharp face, tanned skin, boyish stubble and sky-coloured eyes. Two sapphires were set into each cheekbone, and a set of gold chains looped from his left ear – probably to disguise that nasty burn scar along his neck. His old-fashioned clothes resembled those of a swashbuckler or even a musketeer. A white lace collar flowered over a sleeveless green doublet, which was trimmed and buttoned with gold. Red stripes ran along the arms of his white shirt, and his red puffy pants were tucked into brown boots folded at the top.

Michael pulled on his own boots and metal leggings, and dragged Luke away, whose visor not only recorded the piper’s song but listed each note as well. The limestone arch was unreachable directly from the shore.

‘You go talk to him,’ she whispered. ‘I can’t do it looking like this.’

‘Pretend you’re a boy,’ Luke said. ‘No one will know.’

‘I’ll know!’

‘Then stay here. Mikey and I aren’t afraid, are we?’

They retreated back up the cliff then approached the piper from behind. Startled by the clink of armour, the teenage boy dropped his coral instrument and stretched out his left palm. A sword hidden in the scrub flew into his hand. In a flash, its tip poked Michael’s throat.

Samantha screamed for Luke to act as she ran along the cliff and drew her cutlass. Both were too slow. The teenager was ready to disarm Michael until he noticed the golden armour and its four bears. Immediately, he stabbed his swashbuckler’s sword into the ground and knelt in submission.

The triplets blinked in disbelief.

Head down, the teenager apologised frantically – or that’s what they thought he was saying. He spoke a language none had heard before.

‘Do you speak English?’ Michael asked, rubbing his throat. ‘En-glish?’

The teenager paused, shook his head then continued gibbering. He saw the cobra hissing on Samantha’s neck and averted his gaze.

‘He sounds Spanish,’ Luke said.
‘I thought it was Italian,’ Michael answered.
‘I don’t care if it’s two dogs barking,’ she said. ‘He just tried to kill you!’
‘We scared him, that’s all. He was defending himself.’
‘Who can blame him?’ Luke said. ‘What with the monster and all. Did you see how that sword flew through the air? It just jumped into his hand!’

She lowered her own cutlass and walked round the piper, checking if he had any more weapons. The teenager slyly pretended to scratch his shoulder, only to flip over a patch of striped red cloth to hide the emblem of a bounding white rabbit.

‘So are they your real clothes? Or did Mr Goode Deed send you to this place too?’

‘Sam,’ Michael said.
‘Or,’ she raised her sword again, ‘maybe you’re one-and-the-same, wearing another disguise.’

‘Sam!’

The breakthrough in communication came when the piper respectfully offered them each a pendant. It was a simple piece of jewellery – a spotted slipper snail shell dangling from a twisted leather cord. A gentle rattle revealed something small inside. Watching him tie one around his neck, the triplets warily followed his lead then instantly heard his voice translated into English.

‘— understand each other. I hope I haven’t offended you or your companions with my sword arm, my liege. My life is yours if I have done so.’

The piper knelt again but Michael lifted him to his feet. The strange boy kept his eyes lowered with respect, although they repeatedly wandered to the cobra tattoo.

‘Er, I’m Michael. This is Luke and Samant —’

‘Ahem,’ she coughed.

‘Sorry, Sam. She’s —’

‘Ahem.’

‘He’s also travelling with us.’

Luke leant forward and grinned. ‘Don’t worry about him. He’s always moody because’ – an elbow sharply jabbed into his ribs – ‘his voice hasn’t broken yet.’

‘No, but I know a few bones that will be,’ she growled.

‘What’s your name?’ Michael asked.

‘Aurelio, my liege.’

‘And you’re a musician, Aurelio?’

‘Yes, my liege, but mostly a humble guide for lost travellers.’

‘Why do you keep calling him that?’ Luke asked. ‘Y’know, “my liege”.’
‘Why, because he is the Gold Knight – the bravest warrior in all the Seven Worlds of Wonder. He single-handedly froze the Giant of the Lost Lake, rescued the children of the Wolflands, caught the Knave of Knaves and ended the Thousand Year War with a poem. No man matches his valour and strength – not even the mighty Red Samurai. He is our most loved champion from the Hall of Heroes.’

‘The Hall of what?’

‘Hall of Heroes – the home of all the best warriors. That is where you’ve journeyed from today, is it not, my liege?’

‘No. We’re –’

Whiskers scratched his helmet. ‘Play along with it,’ his sister breathed.

‘We’re, er – how can I put it –’

‘– on our way home,’ she finished for him. ‘But we first need to find the nearest city … to do hero stuff.’

‘That would be Pacifico, sir. The great eastern capital of peacemakers.’

‘And …’

Aurelio blinked.

She sighed. ‘You told us you’re a guide for lost travellers. Go on then. Take us there.’

‘Yes, sir. It would be,’ he glanced at the cobra yet again, ‘an honour.’

He grabbed his coral pipe and scabbard, and walked to the tip of the limestone arch, where he played a low, soft song.

Samantha rolled her eyes. They needed help, not music. ‘Hey, pied piper –’

Michael grabbed her arm and pulled her aside. ‘Stop it.’

‘Stop what?’

‘Bullying him.’

‘Am not. I’m just cutting out being polite.’

‘You don’t have to scare him, okay?’

‘Who are you now? Dad?’

His jaw tightened. ‘Listen, if we’re going to get back home, we need friends. You scaring people away isn’t helping.’

She bowed and dipped her hat. ‘Yes, my liege.’

Luke’s radar beeped. A pair of green signals appeared on his visor. ‘Wow!’

Two flying creatures the size of a bus soared along the cliffs until they levelled with the archway. ‘Stand back,’ Aurelio said, resuming his piping. They looked like whales but with cream bellies, dark grey backs, dozens of spots and stripes in a chequerboard pattern, and most noticeably – shark fins!

‘Sharks?’ she shouted, seeing bite marks chewed into their sides.

‘Whale sharks,’ Michael corrected, removing a gauntlet to gingerly pat the
closest one. Its skin was rubbery but dry. ‘Don’t worry. They don’t eat people.’
‘In our world maybe.’
‘In our world they don’t fly,’ Luke said.
‘You’re safe, my friends,’ Aurelio assured them, pulling his blue hair into a ponytail. ‘This is Ningaloo, and that old man there is Exmouth. They’ll take us to Pacífico.’
‘I’m not getting on one of those!’ Samantha said, her cobra’s hood flaring.
‘Why not?’ Luke asked, also patting a whale shark. They weren’t scary at all.
‘Do you see any seats or saddles?’
‘No need to fear,’ Aurelio said, mounting Exmouth in front of the first dorsal fin. ‘No one’s ever fallen off. If you hold their sides like this and don’t panic, they’ll take care of you.’
‘I’m not risking my life on a fish! Hey! What do you think you’re doing? Get back over here.’
‘Stop being a cry-baby and get on,’ Luke said. ‘See. Mikey’s not scared.’
She seized Michael’s hand before he joined Luke on Ningaloo. ‘Don’t you dare. We’re all staying put.’
‘And do what? Wait to be attacked again by whatever’s in those mountains?’
The mention of the monster silenced them. Even Aurelio cast worried looks.
‘Why can’t he just fly us back up to that waterfall?’
‘Begging your pardon, sir, but few fish dare fly over the Broken Isles because of those Weeping Mountains.’
‘The Broken Isles?’ Michael asked, as Samantha let go of his hand. ‘That’s the name of this place?’
‘Yes, my liege. Named after the floating islands that fill the skies. They crush any ship that dares –’
‘Yeah, yeah, yeah,’ she said. ‘Save it for the travel brochures. If this is the only way out of here, then help me on this fish taxi.’
‘Taxi, sir?’
‘A whale shark with wheels,’ she answered, saddling the rubbery skin.
‘How do they know where to go?’ Luke asked.
Aurelio pointed to ten striped fish wriggling against the whale sharks’ bellies. ‘Pilot fish,’ he said.
He blew a high-pitched note and suddenly they all lurched from the archway. The triplets grabbed hold of their mounts as they rose higher from the cliff and left the beach far below. Luke jokingly asked when the flight attendants would be serving hot meals, while Samantha squeezed her eyes shut. Michael had a weird sensation of being tugged by the shoulders towards the floating islands.
Then toot! They stopped. Hovering, they felt the breeze against their faces as Aurelio fingered new notes. Then, without warning, they hurtled hearts and guts straight towards the water!

‘AAARRRGGGHHH!’

The whale sharks skimmed the waves before splitting – Exmouth soaring skywards while Ningaloo curved low and wide. They soared past the floating islands, which were coated with Viking shields, cogs, weapons and engine parts. There were even three skeletons pinned by their prison shackles. Faster and faster the whale sharks roller-coasted on the trade winds, the pilot fish setting the pace. Escaping the islands, Ningaloo broke through the clouds and rejoined Exmouth, Aurelio and Samantha, who looked like she needed a sick bag. Quick.

Still trying to swallow his stomach, Michael yelled, ‘WAHOO!’ as they charged east above coral cays, sandbars and shipwrecks. They passed schools of flying barracuda, sweetlips, blue tangs, pink jellyfish floating like balloons, porpoises, flapping turtles and humpbacks, and crossed over a giant, sucking whirlpool. Soon, the brothers’ fears eased, and they relaxed in their seats to enjoy every magnificent sight.

‘How’d you make your sword fly back there?’ Luke shouted three times before Aurelio heard.

The piper revealed a metal broach strapped to his palm. Veins of red light glowed as one of Luke’s bottomless pouches flipped open and a knife and fork leapt across to the teenager’s hand. ‘It’s the strongest magnetic ore in the universe, friend. It can attract or repel all types of metal. It has several names, but here we call it “widow rock” because it has killed many a good sailor.’

‘By something so small?’

Aurelio shook his head. ‘This is but a pebble. Most of it is found behind us in those floating islands. That’s why we always keep a safe distance.’

Michael looked puzzled, as Samantha’s hat flew off.

‘With respect, my liege, not even you are strong enough to fight off five thousand tonnes of rock.’

Aurelio nodded at the gold armour and Michael gulped. He pictured himself being pulled off the back of the whale shark and slamming into a magnetic island, stuck forever, just like those skeletons.

Suddenly, his guts dipped. And again. Oh no. Ningaloo was losing altitude. Worse, they were falling!

Aurelio piped a frantic song but the whale shark didn’t respond. The boys clawed her sides as she speared towards a cloud below them that was dark and sinister. It wasn’t heavy with rain but –

‘Duck!’
– a swirling cyclone of sardines!

Thousands of the tiny fish flashed about them as Ningaloo opened her gigantic mouth to feed. Their dry, rough skins slapped against the brothers’ faces as they tried to hold on. Exmouth came to their rescue, though. He charged through the middle of the sardines and scattered them like an explosion. Finally, satisfied with their fill, the two whale sharks curved upwards, while, underneath his feet, Michael swore he felt fish bouncing inside Ningaloo’s belly.

‘Land ho!’

Gradually, a spot on the horizon peaked into the imposing shape of an extinct volcano. A large freshwater lake filled its crater, and lush green trees bubbled down its slopes. In its shadow was a harbour of ninety islands scattered like a broken plate. Unlike those they’d just fled, these islands were locked in the ground and home to four million people.

The whale sharks started their descent, swinging over buoys and trawler boats spilling with large hauls of prawns. Soon, an enormous stone titan loomed in front of the triplets – one of thirty statues circling the islands. Each depicted a famous king or queen kneeling in the sea, measuring as high as any skyscraper and holding aloft thick metal chains in raised fists. They must be watchtowers, Michael reasoned, noticing as groups of soldiers stationed on their crowns pointed and stared through spyglasses.

Individual islands took shape, and the triplets got their first real view of the thriving merchant city. It reminded Michael of Venice. Four-storey terraces dripped with hanging gardens and blazed orange in the sun. Spiked cathedrals were squeezed next to universities, dance halls, galleries and markets. Plazas fluttered with blue and gold pennants, while gondolas ferried passengers along the many intersecting canals. Decorated with scallop-shaped tiles, the architecture was beautiful, grandiose and old-worldly. But the more they looked, the more they spotted the new and wondrous. Clomping horses pulled tasselled carriages made from giant sea snail shells. Children skimmed through the cobbled streets on hover skates. Bubble submarines sank to explore hidden treasures. Acrobats performed in public squares on tall jets of water. Amphitheatres hosted sculptors who could manipulate sand like an orchestra conductor. Divers surfaced beside a floating barge and signalled a crane operator to winch a massive harpooned crab to the surface. And from the biggest island’s marina, a sleek cruiser left port – not by powering across the waves but by rising above them. Trailed by bright blue engine fire, it bellowed a final farewell before blasting across the skyline of spires, domes and terracotta roofs.

It was to this capital island that Aurelio steered. He played his pipe and the pilot fish pitched them towards a central plaza marked with a large clock tower.
‘Welcome to Pacifico – home to a noble class of artists, poets, storytellers, musicians, dancers, actors, philosophers and travellers. Shall we meet some new friends?’

Answering his pipe, the whale sharks dashed into the widest canal. They soared past terraces, jugglers, restaurants and fish; swept under footbridges and whipped past flags. On a whim, they arced to ring a church bell, which, for a moment, even left Samantha laughing.

‘My liege, it seems we’ve attracted a crowd.’

In the shadow of the whale sharks, people pointed. They were human, Michael realised. Or close to it.

‘Hold on.’

They circled the clock tower one last time before descending into the plaza. Children, too, rushed from the archways in their hordes. Not that it was easy to tell them apart. Amazingly, most citizens of Pacifico were in their teens.

Like Aurelio, they were handsome with fine, slightly pointed faces, flawless skin, headbands, ear chains and gems set into their cheeks. Their long, braided hair ranged from black to blue to lilac, with a few redheads. No greys stood out – or indeed, elderly people at all. Their tailored clothes were similar to those worn in Europe centuries ago. Adolescent boys wore bright velvet suits, waistcoats, black shoes, gloves, hats and breeches adorned with sequins despite the spring heat. Girls paraded in neck ruffs, sleeves and long satin gowns drawn tightly at the waist with a corset and widened at the bottom with a cone-shaped hoop skirt. Showing too much skin was frowned upon, it seemed. However, again, the sea influenced their look. Conches and other shells replaced hats, and some of the fabrics drew inspiration from marine animals. One girl’s sandy-yellow and brown dress swirled with blue rings like a blue-ringged octopus, while a boy paraded in the orange and white bands of an ornate butterfly fish.

Exmouth landed first. Still playing his pipe, Aurelio remained mounted, while Samantha slid off. She was just as ungracious in debarking as boarding and grumbled about the ride. Straightening her purple coat and cutlass, her hat flew back on her head before she turned round. The moment the crowd saw her, it gasped. ‘What?’ she snapped, covering her goatee. ‘What?’

‘Pirates! Run!’

People fled across the plaza, tripping over chairs, tables and children. Windows slammed shut and doors rattled. Where thousands of citizens and tourists had stood moments ago, only the flagpoles rang in the breeze.

‘Just like school, eh?’ Luke shouted down at her.

She snarled until silenced by marching steel. From the far corners of the plaza, two dozen teenage boys trooped in unison, armed with long sharp pikes.
They wore chestplates with coral patterns, striped blue and yellow jackets, matching puffy pants, white collar ruffs and strange curving helmets. Their uniforms matched those worn by the soldiers on the watchtowers.

‘Halt, pirate! Throw down your arms!’ their captain shouted. He had a blunt nose, heavy brow, cropped blue hair streaked with lilac, eight turquoise cheek gems and four military ranks sewn on each sleeve of his jacket.

‘Says who?’ she laughed, amused how young they were. And those pants – definitely uncool.

‘Captain Cavalli of the Royal Marines! Now surrender your sword or your life is spent!’

A pinwheel of sharp points stretched under her chin. They pressed against her neck until her cutlass clanged on the flagstones.

Several marines broke away to arrest Aurelio as Ningaloo glided into the plaza. The brothers had no choice but to face capture as well. The soldiers readied to arrest them when the captain saw Michael’s armour adorned with the four bears.

‘The Gold Knight!’

He pounded a fist to his chest and dropped to one knee. This triggered a domino effect. The other marines lowered their pikes, bowed and repeated his name.

‘Forgive us, my liege,’ the captain said. ‘We did not know it was you.’

Removing his helmet, Michael looked from the teenage marines to the few brave Pacificans creeping from the shadows.

One moment the Royal Marines were trying to arrest the triplets, the next, saving them from being crushed to death. Together they pushed through the crowd, which, in its enthusiasm, had again mobbed the plaza, waving and cheering, ‘My liege! My liege!’

‘What news from the Hall of Heroes?’
‘But he’s so young …’
‘Are you here to kill the monster?’

The arrival of a real-life hero had overshadowed the threat of a pirate invasion.

‘Do you think this will go to his head?’ Luke asked.
‘If we don’t lose ours first!’ Samantha shouted.

The marines cleared the way past teahouses, fountains, jewellers, fashion boutiques and games of hover bowls until they reached a wide bridge. The triplets gasped. On the far side was a magnificent royal palace. Domes and spires with shell-like designs pointed heavenward; stained-glass windows glinted yellow, red and blue; statues of seahorses stood on their curled tails; ancient champions fought on carvings and mosaics; and a massive stone staircase climbed to a sunlit colonnade jostling with robed onlookers.

Captain Cavalli raised his hand, and, simultaneously, his young soldiers stopped and pounded their pikes on the flagstones. Following a second command, they split and took up posts along the bridge as the captain led the triplets forward.

Halfway to the palace, two shadows passed over them. Aurelio waved as he, Exmouth and Ningaloo returned to the western skies. ‘Farewell, my friends,’ he called out. ‘Find me again if you ever need a guide.’ They returned the wave then climbed the massive stone staircase.

Reaching the top, they almost toppled over in exhaustion. But there was no time to catch their breath. Politicians, courtiers and nobles swarmed around them, eager to shake hands and ask questions.

Short, sharp claps soon brought everyone back under control.

‘Countrymen, return to your duties,’ a portly man said, tunnelling through the crowd and throwing a robe around his chunky shoulders. ‘This is not the
civilised way to greet such distinguished guests. There will be plenty of opportunities to meet our heroes later. Now, please. Everyone!’

The crowd dispersed, albeit not too far away. Finally alone, the man struggled to kneel before pecking Michael’s gauntlet. Samantha and Luke burst out laughing.

‘Welcome to Pacifico, my liege. Prime Minister Pasquale at your service. What an absolute honour it is to finally meet the Gold Knight himself. I’ve been hoping for this day for many a year. And if I may be so bold, it is also a privilege to welcome not one, but three, champions from the Hall of Heroes.’

‘Er, thanks,’ Michael answered. ‘I think.’

Wearing an odd-shaped orange cap that curled at the back, Prime Minister Pasquale differed from the other Pacificans. He was in his early-fifties and fat. Short red hair was greying above his ear chains, and he stood with an arched spine to balance the extra weight. He had a jovial face, fading blue eyes, big lips, thick brows, a prominent nose, twin moles on his forehead and four rubies set in each cheek. A double chin sagged around the collar of his white woollen robe, which was worn over another orange velvet one. Gold bells the size of lemons jingled down his middle, and jewelled rings choked each thick finger.

‘I’m Michael,’ he answered, helping the Prime Minister to his feet. Wearing his armour in this sun was bad enough, but he hated to think how hot it was under all those regal clothes. ‘This is Samant –’

‘Sam,’ she corrected.

‘And I’m Luke. You’ve heard of me too, right? The famous star ranger?’

The Prime Minister’s gaze lingered on the cobra twisting about their sister’s neck before he turned to Luke and smiled. ‘Sorry, good sir, but no. News from the Great Hall is less frequent to our parts. In fact, we haven’t heard from it for many a season. No need to worry, though. Your ilk must be busy travelling the Seven Worlds and restoring peace, am I correct?’

‘Um, yeah, I guess so,’ Luke shrugged, looking at his siblings for help.

‘Come. You must be exhausted. Let us enjoy some refreshments while your rooms are being prepared.’

He led the way.

Samantha pulled Michael aside before they reached the entrance.

‘Remember what I said: my name is Sam. Pretend we’re friends from this Hall place and get us home, okay?’

‘Okay, I’ve got it.’

Two brown-skinned servants bowed then pushed open enormous double doors carved with shells, dolphins and seahorses. Stepping inside, the triplets discovered an enormous palace furnished with marble and gold. It was spread
across five floors with high ceilings and private balconies all overlooking the ninety islands. Libraries, throne rooms, map rooms, music halls, galleries, parliament chambers and kitchens formed the central hub, while guests’ quarters and powder rooms filled the upper levels. Pasquale gave them a tour of the armoury, ballroom, magnetic gymnasium, private chapel and an underground royal crypt before crossing an inner courtyard bursting with fountains and flowers. Polished busts of poets and philosophers filled every corner and hallway. Statues waited by doors. Chandeliers hung with diamonds. And chefs, maids and footmen paused from their duties and lowered their eyes, while more teenage politicians hurried down elaborate gold staircases to greet them with star-struck smiles.

Michael’s footsteps chink chink chinked as he walked around the Great Council Room, its four walls and arcing roof encompassed by one continuous painting. In an Eden-like landscape, saints and angels cared for children, while above, the Hand of God created the universe. Wolves ate alongside lambs; baskets overflowed with apples; and soldiers beat swords into ploughshares. The colours also drew him closer – they literally glowed. He touched the masterpiece, only to have his fingers pass straight through the canvas!

‘Go on,’ Pasquale said from the doorway. ‘Don’t be frightened.’

Apprehensively, Michael reached forward and stepped inside the painting. It was a giant hologram! He stepped among the beehives, touched an angel’s wings and looked into a pitcher of pouring milk. Everything was three-dimensional.

‘This is so incredible,’ he said. ‘It’s so life-like. Who owns all this?’

‘Why, Sir Michael, do you not know?’

He gave a blank look.

Pasquale frowned with confusion. ‘Why, Queen Oriana herself – monarch of Pacifico.’

‘Oh, yes, Queen Ori – Oriana. It’s just we’ve, er –’

‘– travelled to a lot of worlds recently,’ Samantha finished. ‘We forget what planet we’re on most of the time.’

‘I understand completely. Being a Prime Minister is the same. Everyone expects you to remember their names, when you have difficulty remembering your own.’

He laughed to himself until interrupted by an elderly brown-skinned footman, also wearing a white wig, royal-blue and gold coat, matching breeches and a lacy neck scarf. He handed the Prime Minister a rolled-up parchment sealed with purple wax. ‘Ah. Her Majesty sends her apologies for not greeting you in person. The signing of a new treaty with the Merchant Guild has taken her away on state business. But she has invited you to a feast tonight in your
honour, if that so pleases you.’
    Michael looked at his siblings. ‘Er, we –’
    ‘Feast?’ Luke jumped in. ‘You bet it pleases us!’
Michael woke to the smell of warm blueberry pie. For a moment, he thought he was snuggled deep in his old bed back on the farm. His dad would be in the kitchen, sitting on a stool, solving crosswords and swatting Luke every time he got too close to the oven. Samantha would be tearing across the fields on her trail bike, ignoring his mum, who’d be on the back steps yelling at her to come inside. Birds would be flittering on the feeder next to his windowsill. And their two cattle dogs would be chasing after a rabbit they’d spooked into the hills. In a blink, his hopes disappeared. Two white half-moons and the purple giant rose above the skyline of Pacifico, reminding him how far he was from home.

He sat up in a king-sized bed in a king-sized room, which Prime Minister Pasquale had personally reassured him was his alone. It was furnished with silk sheets, soft pillows, chandeliers, ornate mirrors, water jugs, lounges and a large gold writing desk. Never in his life had he slept in a place so serene. Church bells rang as he padded through his balcony’s billowing curtains into the cool twilight. Across the harbour, wealthy tourists streamed towards their waiting passenger liners, while the merchants blasted away in rickety shuttles. A gondolier secured his boat to a striped mooring pole and nodded to a tavern keeper who was struggling for customers as rows of street lamps powered up.

Suddenly, right in front of Michael, five large creatures soared past. They had wings and whip tails. He jumped back, startled at their closeness, until he recognised their shapes flying across the terracotta rooftops. Stingrays. Beautiful stingrays. Indeed, this was a world of wonder.

Running himself a bath, he unbuttoned his top only to realise what he was wearing – silk pyjamas. During his nap, his armour had remained by his bedside and not jumped back on his skin. Thank goodness. Trudging around in all that heavy metal drained him. Being free of it was literally a weight off his shoulders.

He washed and changed into his freshly laundered clothes before someone banged on his door. He moved to answer it, when, piece by piece, his gold leggings, gauntlets, chain mail and other bits of armour, flew across the room and latched onto him. As his red cloak fluttered down his back, he sighed. Oh, man. Doomed to be a giant can of peaches again.

Samantha barged in, dragging Luke by the ear.
‘Ow! Ow! Ow! Stop it!’
‘No! First tell him what you did, you little creep.’
‘Help me, Mikey. She’s gone crazy.’
‘Crazy? Crazy! That’s not even close to how I feel right now. Crazy is you swapping my washable cosmetic pencil for a permanent marker. Crazy is letting me draw this beard on my face without warning me, knowing I’d have to wear it to school on Monday. Crazy is arriving on a planet where everything fake suddenly turns real. Oh yes, those things are crazy. But not me. I’m downright psychotic!’
She frightened Luke into a chair then slammed the bathroom door behind her.
‘No luck with the barber?’ Michael whispered to him.
‘No.’ Luke grinned. ‘He shaved off her beard, but it grew back! Every single whisker! Now he wants to know her secret so he can turn it into a cream for bald tourists!’
She upended a dozen drawers before finding a pair of scissors. ‘I can still hear you!’
‘Maybe this Queen Oriana can help,’ Michael offered.
She barged back into the room. ‘You’re not listening. This beard is permanent. Perm-a-nent. It’s never coming off!’
‘Never speak to me again!’
She banged the bathroom door shut a second time and continued snipping between screams.
The brothers shared a quiet laugh until they were interrupted by another knock. ‘Come in.’
A tattooed footman hobbled in carrying a leather-bound journal. ‘My liege,’ he said, eyes lowered. Like most of the city’s servants, he too was brown-skinned. He had straight black hair streaked with grey, a broken nose and a stocky build suited to outdoor work rather than shuffling through palace hallways. Whorls and waves were inked down the right side of his face, and he had no cheek jewels; both details setting his people apart from the Pacificans.
‘My liege,’ he repeated in a surly voice, offering the journal a second time.
Michael stopped staring at the tattoos and took it. The man limped outside.
‘Creepy, huh?’ Luke said. ‘They’re called the Scorned. Most Pacificans stay away from them. They think they’re parasites.’
‘So why do they work in the palace?’
Luke shrugged. ‘Someone’s got to.’ Then, looking at the journal, he asked, ‘What’s that for?’
‘To keep a diary. We need to write down names, take notes, draw maps – y’know, remember stuff.’

Luke pretended to doze off, complete with a snore. ‘Sounds like school.’

‘Then why do you keep reading mine?’ Samantha snapped, sitting on the bed with her beard intact.

However, the journal caught his interest again when Michael wrote his first few lines. ‘Hey, how’d you do that?’

Michael had written, *Day Two: We have arrived in a harbour city called Pacifico that has to be the most beatifull place we’ve ever seen.*

Before their eyes, his messy handwriting wriggled and twisted until it neatened into perfect penmanship. Also, the mistake *beatifull* corrected itself to *beautiful*.


Michael sketched a lousy stick figure of the tattooed footman. Within seconds it transformed into a life-like portrait. ‘Now that is cool.’

A third knock sounded. It was the surly footman with the lame leg again. Michael shut the journal.

‘Begging your pardon, sirs. Your presence is required in the state room. Dinner will be served in twenty minutes.’

Single file, he led them along a gold corridor echoing with chatter and violins. He opened a double door, bowed, then presented them to a roomful of five hundred young lords and ladies dressed in their finest suits, robes and gowns. ‘Bravo!’ they shouted. ‘Bravo!’

‘Nobles of Pacifico,’ Prime Minister Pasquale said, quelling the applause, ‘let me introduce to the Ninety Islands three of the most honoured guests, not only among the Seven Worlds of Wonder, but the entire universe. As you well know, this is Sir Michael the Gold Knight, champion of the Hall of Heroes.’

‘Bravo! Bravo!’

‘Accompanying him is his friend, field agent Luke of the Star Ranger Corp.’

‘Bravo! Bravo!’

‘And behind them is – ahem – Captain Sam of the Black Cobra, er, Seafarers.’

An angry din rose at once. Young women flipped open their fans and the boys talked among themselves. Samantha’s face reddened and she sang into Michael’s ear, ‘This isn’t working. They know that I’m a girl.’

‘They know you’re a pirate,’ he answered.

‘Lords! Ladies!’ Pasquale said. ‘Please, your concerns are well-intended, but the Gold Knight has personally assured me that we have nothing to fear. His companion has turned his back on his inglorious days of piracy and is as much a
law-abiding citizen as you or I. Well, maybe you,’ he corrected himself, drawing
laughter. ‘Isn’t that right, Sir Michael?’

The whole room fell silent, as he swallowed his answer. ‘Yes.’

Again, the nobles broke into applause. ‘Bravo! Bravo!’

Pasquale looked at the triplets with relief.

Violins struck up and servants fluttered among the nobles, offering tall
drinks from silver platters. Pasquale encouraged the ‘heroes’ to mingle.
Immediately, Michael was circled by smiling young ladies, who curtsied in their
hoop skirts and tried to catch the light on their cheek gems.

‘Oh, please,’ Samantha groaned.

All three were crowded in by plenty of questions too:

‘How does one join the Hall of Heroes?’

‘Have you a wife, Sir Michael?’

‘Are the stories about the She-Bear true?’

‘What do you think of Garibaldi’s third concerto?’

‘Did you know that I’ve written three epic poems about you?’

Samantha attracted her own attention.

‘You poor man. You must have had a troubled childhood. What disaster led
you to a life of piracy?’

‘Brothers,’ she answered, pushing through the guests for some air.

After entertaining yet another cluster of nobles, Michael found the
pleasantries anything but pleasant. All the questions were about the Gold
Knight’s adventures, which he knew nothing about. Each time he made up a
story he cringed, fearing a more knowledgeable noble would catch him out. But
the longer he spoke, the more he learnt about his namesake from the Pacificans
themselves.

A nervous lord with lilac hair, round spectacles, six opal cheek gems and a
droopy eyebrow approached Michael when four trumpets sounded at the bottom
of a wide, curving staircase. His moment to speak privately was lost as the most
important dignitary had arrived.

‘Her Majesty, Queen Oriana!’ Pasquale proclaimed.

Respectful silence hushed the state room as everyone knelt and watched her
descend. Michael understood why. Expecting someone much taller and older, he
was stunned to see a girl his age. She was beautiful – possibly the most attractive
girl he’d ever seen. Fair-skinned and slim, she had lavender eyes, matching
braided hair and a thin crown crafted with five strings of pearls. Two strings
draped behind her ear chains, two in front and one traced her small, round nose.
Gold leaves threaded a coral-white gown backed with a large scallop neckpiece
and armlets twisted around her sleeves. Her pointed shoes shimmered in the light
of the chandeliers as she took one poised step at a time.

The lords and ladies rose again then parted as she made a calm, straight line for Michael. He counted five small amethysts dotting each cheek as she halted and raised her left hand. Overawed, he was lost in the smell of her lavender perfume until Luke nudged him in the ribs. He blushed, remembered what he’d seen on the news once, and bowed, kissing her rings. ‘Your Majesty.’

Luke followed his brother’s lead before the Queen fronted their sister. Immediately, Samantha’s intentions were clear: there was no way she was going to pucker up. However, Luke pushed on her shoulders and coaxed her to bend down. She pecked the jewelled hand but made sure her pirate beard prickled plenty of royal skin.

‘Greetings,’ Queen Oriana said in a light, respectful tone. ‘Thank you, our three champions, for journeying across many galaxies to our beloved city. On behalf of my people, Pacifico welcomes you with its greatest and most endearing friendship. For indeed, the mighty peacemaker himself, the Gold Knight, deeply honours us by being counted among our number tonight.’

‘Thank you, Your Majesty,’ he said, turning red again.

‘Please, my palace is your palace. My table is your table. Come and enjoy a feast befitting such treasured guests.’

A string quartet struck up another tune as the royal court was seated. The Queen sat at the head of the main table in a gold, high-backed chair; Michael joined the Prime Minister at the opposite end; while Samantha and Luke took the middle. Nobles crowded beside them and at the adjacent tables.

The excited conversations continued until scores of tattooed servants emerged from the kitchen holding steaming silver platters. The triplets, especially Luke, shuffled in their seats with great expectation, desperate for something tastier than lemony rations. With a flourish, the white-gloved servants waited for a bell to ring, then lifted the domed lids. Everyone ahhhed through hungry smiles.

Dinner was an array of seafood. But it wasn’t a normal set menu, featuring baked fish served with salad or vegetables. It was an overindulgent smorgasbord. In addition to platters of lobsters, oysters and crabs prepared in a dozen exotic ways, there were whole octopuses served on beds of caviar; prawns so fresh that they crawled from their bowls; and circles of trout, salmon and blue fin tuna stacked in colourful layers. Servants placed breadsticks and condiments on the table, before filling glasses with a red drink that squirmed with baby eels.

The triplets sat stunned as those around them happily hammered or cracked open crustaceans and picked out the meat. Having ever only eaten small river fish they’d caught themselves, they swapped confused glances. Where did they
‘Eat up, my boy,’ Prime Minister Pasquale said to Michael, between slurping down his first plate of oysters. ‘No one leaves this room unless they’ve tried one of everything. Queen’s orders.’

He gulped, a little squeamish. ‘Do you ever eat steak?’
Pasquale almost choked. ‘Do we eat what?’ he boomed.
Michael shrank. ‘Do you ever eat steak?’
‘Steak? As from a grass-eater? My liege! Begging your pardon, but here in Pacifico we aren’t savages.’

The nobles laughed cordially then returned to their food. Shamefaced, Michael looked to his brother and sister, who shrugged and picked up platters. Curious as to its taste, Luke chose a lobster, while Samantha liked a little heat and went for chilli squid. Michael forked deep-fried whitebait onto his plate, before Pasquale tisk-tisked then added trevally, paella and a whole snapper. ‘We don’t want you to starve.’

As the gathering relaxed and belts were loosened, so were tongues. Talk and laughter overwhelmed the violins as young nobles downed their forkfuls and gossiped about fashion, travel and their favourite actors.

‘Tell us, friend, how is your new play faring?’ one lord asked another. ‘Have you penned the opening scene yet?’
‘Alas, no. Great theatre takes years to craft.’
‘But only a few minutes to petition Her Majesty for another fat purse of gold!’ a third joked, sending his friends into riotous laughter.

Further along the table, the conversations were just as well-spoken and strangely adult.

‘Your skin is quite fair and smooth, sir,’ one young noblewoman said, seated across from Samantha. The lady snapped shut her clam-shell mascara kit and smiled. ‘I thought it would be more tanned after a life at sea.’

‘And more toned,’ another added, who herself looked no older than twenty. She had red hair twisted at the back into curls, gold ear chains and six opal cheek gems. ‘You must be like the swashbucklers who fill our taverns and only take orders from their friends – to buy the next round of drinks!’

‘Lady Isabelle, you are bold,’ a third laughed, covering her mouth with a gloved hand.

At the end of the table, a tap on the shoulder from behind saved Michael from answering a question about his favourite battle. ‘My liege,’ said the nervous lord with the droopy eyebrow and spectacles. ‘I-I’m so glad you came. You finally got my letter, I see. We have much to discuss. Can you spare a moment of your time?’
‘Nobleman Guido, can’t this wait?’ the Prime Minister said, shifting round in his seat. ‘Our friend here has barely begun eating, and you wish to talk to him? Come now. Let him fill his belly before you fill his ears.’

The young man paled as he looked to Michael for support. Realising it was poor timing, he bowed then retreated to sit beside the red-headed Lady Isabelle and her friends.

When the noble was out of earshot, Pasquale whispered to Michael, ‘Apologies, my liege. I would have kept away our lord there if I’d seen him earlier. Nobleman Guido is a fine son of Pacifico, but he does have a love for strange stories that can tire even the most patient of men.’

Unlike his brother, Luke revelled in their newfound fame. ‘And so this alien jumps out and I shoot it dead. Zap! Then another. Zap! Then another. Zap! Zap! Suddenly, they’re overrunning the whole fort and my men are fighting for their lives. They give me cover fire as I run towards our jeep, which I then use to squish more of the nasties to reach our spaceship.’

‘And this is how you came to the attention of the Hall of Heroes?’ smirked Captain Cavalli of the Royal Marines, reclining in his chair. His helmet and armour had been swapped for a short, sandy jacket emblazoned with a pair of gold sea shells, and a ceremonial sword chained to his belt.


‘Until Mum turned off the game console,’ Samantha muttered under her breath.

‘A toast!’ a nobleman said, raising his glass. ‘Only the bravest are chosen by the Hall!’

‘Brave indeed to come to Pacifico with a pirate,’ the captain added.

The guests shortled – except Samantha, who slapped down her cutlery. ‘And I thought the only snake here tonight was the one on my neck.’

Silence spread around the room. Some nobles reeled in shock; others sensed a battle of wits.

Captain Cavalli smiled and raised his glass. ‘A cold remark, sir. Dare I say as cold as the flagstones of my dungeon.’

She flushed as more guests laughed. She gripped the handle of her sword until a single voice brought the room under control.

‘Captain – enough.’

Queen Oriana dabbed the corner of her mouth then gently folded her silk napkin before speaking again. ‘Pacifico is a harbour of peace. All people of good grace shall be shown respect – especially those invited to my table.’

Captain Cavalli half-stood and bowed. ‘My apologies, Your Majesty. And to you, Captain Sam. I beg forgiveness for my loose tongue. I was merely sporting
for quips.’

He sat down again but Samantha fumed.

Queen Oriana nodded then addressed Samantha herself. ‘Excuse our curiosity, sir, but – how shall we say it? – you are an oddity in this court. It surprises us greatly to find a pirate – indeed a Black Cobra pirate no less – travelling in the esteemed company of the Gold Knight himself.’

‘Y’know,’ she began, using the shoulders of the lord and lady beside her to push up from her seat. ‘I got sick of plundering the other six Worlds of Wonder, so I told my liege there: “Let’s head over to good old Pacifico and stay a month or two. The noblemen stink a bit and the women are catty, but at least they’re rich. Let’s rob a few.”’

She walked behind the other guests and squeezed the cheeks of a lady with too many necklaces, leaving them gasping.

‘Sam!’ Luke barked, while Michael hung his head.

Queen Oriana remained calm, though, and waited for the murmurs to fade. Then, with dignity, she clapped her hands and said with a nod, ‘Good show, sir. Your humour, whilst dry, is much appreciated. Your goal is complete, for you have merrily plundered my table tonight.’

Laughter rolled throughout the state room and broke the tension. Hot-faced, Samantha felt foolish but unsure why.

‘What she means is –’

‘No offence taken, Sir Michael,’ Queen Oriana said. ‘The ways of your companions are not necessarily the ways of this court. We understand that for civilisation to continue, not everyone has to be civilised.’

‘Thank you, Your Majesty.’ He breathed deeply as they exchanged smiles. For someone their age, she sounded so wise, so grown-up.

Feeling full, Michael was astonished when the servants returned to the state room in teams of twenty, shouldering enormous platters. He paled when Pasquale leant sideways and said enthusiastically, ‘Ah, the main course.’ The bell rang again and the lids were removed to reveal five-metre long black marlins, each weighing close to seven hundred kilograms. The closest one’s dead eyes stared at him over its sword-like bill, and he feared he’d be forced to eat it. But that was just the beginning. Around them were placed more dishes, which, when uncovered, turned the triplets grey. Pickled, salted or grilled were some of the nastiest and vilest nightmares ever cooked. There were helpings of fangtooth; obese dragonfish; slimy, pink, gelatinous blindfish; humpback blackdevils; elongated large-tooth conger eels with needle jaws; megamouth sharks with bloated cheeks; common redmouth whalefish that resembled cows’ hearts; and eastern frogfish with big lips and beards – as well as more ‘normal’ pufferfish,
sea urchins and sea cucumbers. All three Bowman children felt their guts churn when Pasquale selected a fathead. Like its name, it looked like a bald, waxy face with beady black eyes and a bulbous nose. When he readied to carve it open, Michael excused himself and rushed down to the gardens for air, where he hid until Luke fetched him, assuring him the tables had been cleared.

Dessert was more to the triplets’ liking. Luke scooped chocolate torte onto his plate; Samantha chose peppermint gelati; while Michael added colour to his complexion with a warm slice of blueberry pie. Other guests joked they couldn’t eat anything more but still gobbled through two plates’ worth.

‘Forgive us for prying again, Sir Michael,’ Queen Oriana continued, ‘but what business brings you and your companions to our world?’

He shifted in his chair. He knew this question was coming. ‘We’re trying to find our way home. We opened a door to your world that maybe we shouldn’t have.’

‘A door?’

‘Y’know, the one in the mountains guarded by the monster,’ Luke said. ‘The carnivorous monster that shrieks.’

‘Monster?’ the guests repeated. Prime Minister Pasquale snorted out his coffee; the servants paused from their duties; and the spectacle-wearing nobleman named Guido looked at Michael, confused.

‘You’ve seen the monster and lived?’ a lord pushed.

‘Seen it? It nearly killed us!’

Again, the room whirled with chatter.

‘Preposterous!’ Captain Cavalli laughed. ‘I’ve sailed the Western Seas twice and never encountered this monster. It’s just make-believe.’

‘Some fairy story – if the fairy happens to be twenty metres tall!’

‘It’s twenty metres tall?’ a young lady asked, horrified.

‘We don’t know that,’ Michael said. ‘We never saw it but—’

‘It’s invisible?’ another lord called out.

‘If we cannot see it, how can we fight it?’ a third implored.

Fear spread among the tables until the Queen stood to talk over the noise.

‘Nobles! Nobles! Please, a word. There is no need for panic. If this news is indeed true, then Captain Cavalli and his marines will investigate it in due course. While I do not question the Gold Knight’s word, we must have first-hand proof before descending into chaos. Our city is well protected, as you well know. The whirlpool to the west stops any creature taking to the seas, and all shipping to the Broken Isles is forbidden until our fishing fleet’s safety can be guaranteed.’

She indicated for the string quartet to strike up a song when, inexplicably,
the electric lights flickered. The room blinked into darkness and a platter crashed to the ground.

‘Your Majesty!’ Captain Cavalli shouted.
Thunder cracked inside the darkened state room as lightning silhouetted a tall, strangely dressed man. He wore a black three-cornered hat trimmed with gold, black pants, well-heeled boots, leather gloves, a white shirt with excessively lacy cuffs, a golden vest, and a black and red cloak clasped with a pin in the shape of a puffed-up rooster. His most distinguishing feature, though, was his mask: vivid blue eyes commanded respect above a perfectly cast nose, boyish cheeks and a permanently pursed mouth. It too was gold.

Striding towards the guests, he stepped fluidly on a chair then the tabletop, knocking over silverware and crystal glasses as he made his way to its middle. He paused and banged his ebony walking cane three times.

KRA-KOOM!

Thunder boomed. Lightning flashed. Then he was gone. In his place hunched another man, this one wearing a beaked mask and a coat of coloured feathers.

Michael stood, ready to flee, when the strangest thing happened – the nobles applauded. Prime Minister Pasquale gently pulled him back into his seat and saw Queen Oriana wave Captain Cavalli into doing the same. ‘Enjoy the show, my boy,’ Pasquale whispered.

‘Wark! Wark! Wark!’ the Vulture said, as he flapped his colourful feathered arms under a moving spotlight. ‘Your Majesty, lords and ladies, nobles of the Ninety Islands and honoured guests, welcome to the entertainment part of the evening. For those who shamefully have not seen us perform around the city, we are the universally loved Harlequins – a troupe of actors, musicians, circus performers and –’

‘Fools!’ Pasquale shouted.

‘Ah, it takes one to know one, Prime Minister.’

The guests laughed, including Pasquale himself.

The Vulture backflipped to the adjacent table and scattered more dessert bowls and glasses. ‘At the Queen’s request, we are here tonight to perform any story of your choosing – whether it be about star-crossed lovers, a war between kings, or an ugly duckling that turns into … well, somebody’s ugly dinner. So what shall it be, my young lords and ladies?’
‘Star-crossed lovers!’ a girl shouted from the other side of the hall.
‘No, the war between kings!’ a boy said.
‘How about the fable of the frog and the wolf,’ a third added.

Supporters for all three stories raised their voices, hoping to win over the others. Queen Oriana settled the argument, though. She said, ‘Considering the presence of our most-honoured guests this evening, I think it’s appropriate we hear the story of the Gold Knight himself.’

‘Bravo!’ Pasquale said, before the nobles applauded as well.

‘A fine choice indeed, Your Majesty,’ the Vulture said, bowing. ‘Then let’s not waste any more time. Citizens of Pacifico, let me introduce the Gold Knight!’

Michael felt his heart leap as the spotlight raced from the Vulture across the room towards him. Now they wanted him to act as well! But instead, all eyes fell on a barefoot boy lurching through the doorway wearing short pants and carting water buckets across his shoulders. A dirt-stained mask covered his face. Two older harlequins followed him, dressed just as haggardly, coughing into their hands.

‘Once upon a time,’ the Vulture began, ‘there lived a poacher’s son, who, like his parents, only owned the dirt on his feet. One winter, just as the first snow covered the lands, his parents fell ill and were left bedridden.’

The two older harlequins dropped to the floor.

‘Unable to find work at the mill, or even the piggery, the boy feared his family would starve to death if he couldn’t find food. So he grabbed his bow and headed to the Duke’s woods where his father had expressly forbidden him to tread, despite poaching from there many a time himself.

‘The boy was a keen shot and caught two snow hares, which he strung by the feet to carry home. He’d reached the top of a hill when, only a few metres away, a pair of big, black eyes stared at him. It was the mighty She-Bear!’

‘Rooaaarrr!’ A female harlequin sporting a bear mask and brown fur coat clawed the edges of the hall, hugging nobles and drawing laughter.

‘The boy froze. He wanted to aim his bow like a mighty warrior, but he couldn’t move. He’d lost his nerve at the sight of her. However, as he waited for death, the shadows of the afternoon grew longer. No powerful jaws snapped his bony body in half. No terrible claws knifed his belly.

‘Slowly, as he opened one eye then the other, he saw the snarling She-Bear still hunched among the trees, staring at him. He didn’t understand why until he saw blood on the snow. Her leg – it was caught in a trap.’

The female harlequin fell to the ground and pulled a flowing red scarf from her ankle.
‘The boy realised this was his chance to kill her. The meat would feed his family for a week, and her beautiful coat would fetch a heavy bag of gold. With a steady hand, he nocked an arrow and aimed. At the last moment, though, he felt something small bump against his legs. To his astonishment, he looked down and saw three bear cubs.’

A trio of harlequins appeared and circled the actor in short pants.

‘Now this young boy was born with what all children have – a big heart. He lowered his bow upon learning that the She-Bear was a mother. Against his better judgement, he realised he had to free her. He laid his weapons on the ground and approached. She grew in size as he got near. The hairs on her neck bristled and all her muscles rippled as she prepared to pounce. Just as the boy reached for the trapper’s snare, she lashed out! Claws and teeth grabbed for his neck! Fortunately, he had big feet and tripped backwards in fright. He ran away and hid at the bottom of that very same hill.

‘Twilight soon arrived and he realised he must return home before dark, so he fetched his bow and arrows, while keeping a safe distance from the She-Bear, who lay helpless and slowly bleeding to death. Before he left, however, he heard the cubs moaning with hunger. If they didn’t eat that evening, they too would slowly die. Again, overwhelmed by pity, he felt he needed to help. He pulled a small knife from his belt, cut up a snow hare and threw the meat among them. He then left for his village, doubting they’d survive on their own.’

A male harlequin in a sun mask swapped sides with a female moon-face.

‘Now, just as children have big hearts, they have equal amounts of curiosity, which leads them into trouble more times than not. Rather than stay far away from the Duke’s woods, the boy returned the next day to learn the She-Bear’s fate. He was surprised to find her alive – still weak but undiscovered by the Duke’s trapper. The cubs ran out to greet him again only to be brought back by another of her roars. A little braver that morning, the boy hunted deeper in the woods and dragged back the carcass of a young boar he’d slain. He cut up its meat and threw it to the four of them, while leaving with another pair of hares on his back.

‘He visited them on the third day as well. This time he brought with him berries and a healing salve, which he’d begged from the monastery. When he found the She-Bear, though, her breathing was shallow and her eyes were fading. She had lost a lot of blood and a heavy snow was settling in. He had to free her if she was going to live another night.

‘Drawing on more courage than a skinny boy can possibly possess, he approached her again. The nearer he got, the deeper her growling became. Just as he reached for her leg, she lunged! She knocked him off his feet and stood
ready to kill him.

‘Smelling her horrible breath, he knew he was doomed. But he was saved by the three bear cubs, who rushed from the trees to lick his face. The boy laughed at the silliness of it, and this seemed to lighten their mother’s mood. She realised he meant no harm and collapsed next to him, dying.

‘He knelt down beside her and inspected her leg. The wound was deep. The trap had sunk to the bone and almost bled her dry. Having hand-raised many pet animals himself and lost plenty to wolves, he knew he could save her, but it was unlikely. He prised its metal jaws apart with all his strength until –

‘Roooaarr!’

‘– the She-Bear was free!’

The young actor in short pants stitched up the wound and applied the healing salve, before helping the bear harlequin to stand on all fours. Finally, when she did, the cubs jumped and cartwheeled.

‘She was saved! But there would be no friendship between them. Bears were created to be fierce, and fierce they shall always be. The She-Bear left with her cubs for the northlands, warning the boy to stay away with one last roar.’

The spotlight faded. ‘Now, this story would have been lost among the snowdrift if not for two more sets of eyes. The trapper and his daughter had heard the She-Bear’s wounded howls and ridden through the woods to kill the mighty creature. To their surprise, they found the boy mending her injured leg and playing with her cubs. “What courage is this?” they asked. “Why does she not strike him down?” They remained hidden until both boy and bears had parted company, then rushed back to the castle to tell the Duke.’

The spotlight focussed on the fireplace, where two actors spoke to the black harlequin. They re-enacted the She-Bear story in triple-speed, drawing more laughter.

‘The Duke was furious. Just as he did not want bears in his woods, he did not want poachers. He ordered the sheriff to arrest the boy and his family, and bring them before him for trial.

‘Fearing for their lives, the boy’s parents begged the Duke for mercy – if not for themselves, then for their son. But the Duke would not listen. He ordered them to be thrown in prison and set a date for their execution. The trapper’s daughter tried intervening, saying she had never seen such bravery, even among the Duke’s own men. He said the law was the law, and that if the poacher’s family did not understand it then they would understand the executioner’s axe. But the daughter persisted, having been a friend of the Duke’s since childhood. Her pleading softened his heart, and eventually he offered a pardon on one condition: if the poacher’s son could control bears then he had to show proof
within a month from his jail cell. If not, then he and his family would lose their heads.

The sun and moon harlequins locked arms and danced in a circle.

‘A month later, as forewarned, the Duke passed through the village where the poacher’s family was imprisoned. He found them shivering in their cell, as dirty and poor as the last time he’d seen them. “Fetch the executioner!” he told the sheriff. “This young thief cannot tame the fiercest of animals, just as I cannot tame thunder.” But as he turned outside, the Duke was forced to swallow his words. There, in front of him on the jail’s steps, was the most astonishing sight.

‘The sheriff couldn’t explain it. Nor the executioner. He even called for the friar, who also confessed ignorance. So the Duke immediately released the poacher’s family and granted them a pardon upon swearing an oath that none would steal from another man’s land again.

‘But your lordship,” the poacher’s wife asked, “why have you given back our freedom this day?”

‘The Duke led them to the front steps then said, “Just as this boy of yours has shown mercy, so mercy has been shown to him in kind.”’

The harlequins froze as the spotlight switched to the Vulture. ‘Now I know what you’re thinking: what did the Duke find on the front steps of his jail? Well, after years of searching and many a worn sole, I finally found the faintest clue in the smallest village on the outskirts of the furthest lands on the most distant of worlds. The good folk there pointed me to a crooked road that passed the local piggery, each saying the same thing: “Come back in winter, mister, if you dare. Stop outside the old poacher’s hut, and at his front door you’ll find your answer.”

‘And so I did that very next winter. Amid the thick, white snow, I fought my way to the old poacher’s hut, afraid I’d freeze to death before I called upon his hospitality. Incredibly, as I closed the gate, I saw the exact sight that had changed the Duke’s cruel heart: a freshly-killed snow hare and a young boar – both showing the teeth marks of – what else? – but an enormous She-Bear.’

The spotlight faded and the Vulture bowed. The room languished in silence until, as one, the audience rose and cheered, ‘Bravo! Bravo!’

★

Horse-drawn carriages clomped over the royal bridge an hour later, disappearing into a chill fog. Wrapped in their cloaks, the last of the nobles shook hands with the triplets and bid farewell.

‘Sir Michael, you truly have a good heart.’

‘Did you ever cross paths with that She-Bear again?’
‘Exceptional performance, was it not? I thought for a moment the young actor was really you.’

The triplets thanked each of the lords and ladies before Captain Cavalli called for his marines to escort the stragglers home.

‘Sir Michael, please, may I impose upon you now?’ a nobleman pressed, cornering him. ‘I must urgently speak with you. I have news.’

Before he could answer, the young lord with the droopy eye and spectacles steered him to the side of the bridge. It was the same fellow whom Prime Minister Pasquale had earlier brushed aside.

‘Excuse my rudeness but this is a matter of haste,’ Nobleman Guido said.

‘Are you certain, my liege, that you encountered a monster in the rainforest?’

‘Well, it was something huge –’

‘And it attacked you?’

‘Sure but –’

The young man grabbed Michael again and herded him further along the bridge. ‘This is unexpected news. All that I’ve learnt – the disappearance of your companion, the Red Samurai, it –’

‘Nobleman Guido,’ Prime Minister Pasquale said in a loud voice, causing the older boy to jump. ‘Come, leave our liege alone. He’s had a long journey, and if his tongue is anything like my belly, he needs his rest.’ Before Guido protested, the Prime Minister waved forward two marines. ‘Gentlemen, show this fine lord here home. No doubt his sister, Lady Isabelle, is waiting for his return.’

The marines saluted then ushered Nobleman Guido into a sea snail carriage. He opened a small window, and, before the driver slapped the reins, he handed Michael a silver signet ring. ‘Alms for the poor, my liege. Use it to help the lost.’

Blank-faced, Michael struggled for words as he examined the expensive jewellery inset with an engraved ruby.

‘What a fine citizen,’ Pasquale said as the carriage rode away. ‘Eccentric, but a good son of Pacifico nonetheless.’ He staggered back to the palace, leaning on Michael for support. ‘Now, my boy, let’s discuss more important things – like what we are going to have for lunch tomorrow.’
Angelfish swirled and pecked around Michael’s feet as he threw stale cake crumbs onto the flagstones of the promenade. He watched as the sunrise prowled across the ocean and slipped by the royal titans, transforming the city from a misty grey to a fiery gold. A deep foghorn scattered the shimmering school of fish as a cruise liner passed directly overhead, buffeting him with its enormous hover engines and sprinkling him with cosmic dust. It splashed down in the harbour and carved its way to the marina, heralded by dozens of ringing buoys.

Allowing his siblings to sleep in, he started his day by exploring the extraordinary. It didn’t take long for him to be recognised, or more accurately his alter ego, the Gold Knight. After separating himself from several fawning tourists, he disguised himself with his red cloak then walked along the marina, marvelling at the intergalactic ships. Next, he and other sightseers stepped inside a bubble submarine, laughed as seawater flooded above its glass hull then gawped as it purred through gigantic forests of coral. Radiating a thousand bright colours, they stretched for hundreds of kilometres. Squat brain coral grew among wavy sea anemones. Willowy pink ones fired playful tiger prawns from their tube-like branches. Greens prickled with thorns when a lobster crept too close. And big kettle drum reds fizzed like they were boiling.

A school of squid shot above the glass hull to everyone’s enjoyment until the captain lurched the submarine hard to starboard and sheltered it within a ribcage of thick coral. To the left, an enormous crab loomed with its snapping claws. Any fears were quickly eased – professional crab hunters snorkelled past with nets and harpoons.

The tour’s centrepiece was the underwater opera house. Curved like sails and featuring great glass windows, the ocean bathed the structure in the brightest of blues. They watched from outside as a diva rehearsed in front of five hundred empty seats before the tour returned to the surface.

Next stop was a sports arena. Inside a small rectangular stadium built over water, two teams played a game that could only be described as a cross between a giant crossword puzzle and football. Players ran across a limited number of magnetically floating tiles to catch and kick a ball into their opponents’ goal. However, the tiles continually moved and left gaps. Half the teams ended up
falling into the water, much to the delight of the fans.

Last stop was the commercial hub. Here, all manner of shops flourished. A master glassblower puffed out a collection of candlesticks. A tour company advertised camping trips inside a sunken city. Treasure hunters displayed their latest finds of pottery and coins. A jeweller laughed with young Pacificans who considered new cheek gems, while a goldsmith’s front window sparkled with necklaces and rings. Michael entered the heart of the buzz – a large, shaded central market. It was an emporium of flowers, spices, silk and exotic pets. But rather than set up traditional stalls along the canal, most merchants sold their goods from gondolas.

A trio of teenage girls giggled as Michael passed by. He faltered, fearing he’d been spotted, only to realise they were swanning around their prettiest friend, who had tried on a lime-green gown. Mischievously, she flirted with an unsuspecting boy until he plucked up enough courage to stroll across and comment on how great she looked. With a little too much familiarity, he placed an arm around her waist when – snap! He literally froze to the spot. He stayed that way for another five minutes, long after the girls paid for the dress and left, still laughing.

‘Is he okay?’ Michael asked the seamstress.
‘Only if he keeps his grubby hands off our pretty maidens.’

Further along, a ruffled young lady walked across a footbridge, holding several strings of pearls leashed to an equal number of flying seahorses. They floated up and down on their little wings, sniffing lamp posts for scents, until being gently tugged away.

‘I don’t know about you, friend, but where I come from pets walk on the ground.’

Michael faced a middle-aged man who sported a peppered goatee and a bright orange sari. He was completely bald except for a long, plaited topknot that fell between his shoulders. From his nose up, his face was painted red. From the nose down, a bright yellow. Like most of the merchants, he spoke with a rough accent vastly different from the Pacificans.

‘You’re not from Pacifico either?’ Michael asked.

The merchant shooed away a blue groper fish sniffing his baskets of light and dark sugars. ‘An old buzzard like me? No, I would have been shipped to a nursing moon years ago. Look around you. All us merchants are off-worlders. Same as you tourists, we fly in at dawn and fly out at dusk.’

The sugar merchant squinted at Michael’s hooded face then stepped back, aghast. ‘The Gold Knight! My liege, I’m – I’m sorry. I didn’t know it was you. If you’d shown yourself, I would have –’
He started to kneel but Michael grabbed his elbow. ‘Please, don’t. No offence taken. I just want to explore the city without attracting a crowd.’

Nodding, the merchant hurriedly steered him out of earshot towards a mooring pole. ‘So the rumours are true! The Hall of Heroes is opening its doors again! This is fantastic news. Let me tell you, parts of this galaxy have gone a little crazy since you left. There’ve been strange things happening around the Dead Planets that –’

A customer interrupted the merchant, who excused himself to sell her a sack of raw sugar. Michael had moved to the next gondola when the merchant shepherded him back. ‘Apologies, friend. Where was I?’

Michael pulled his hood closer as a couple of bottled water merchants pushed past. ‘You were telling me about being an off-worler.’

He scratched his goatee. ‘Well, as you know, Pacifico is a collection of ninety islands. Problem is, over the centuries, the city has grown too big. There’s no more spare land to build on. So the government has passed a law that says if you’re not born here, you can’t be a citizen. It’s afraid of further overcrowding. Can’t blame it, though. There’s no crime, no wars, no instability and – twelve silver crowns, thank you – no shortage of customers. Where else would you want to live?’

A skinny, brown boy with a shaved head and tattooed legs slunk across an arching footbridge, spyng the baskets of fruit.

‘Although,’ the sugar merchant added, ‘there’s always the Scorned. Gotta keep your eye on them types. Their fingers are as fast as their feet.’

A large shadow crossed overhead, and Michael followed an odd-shaped spaceship with six glass cargo holds that glistened in the sunlight.

‘Something else you haven’t seen before, eh?’ the merchant said. ‘Can’t imagine the Hall of Heroes ever needing a water tanker. Is the Hall in the middle of a lake of diamonds like all the stories say?’

‘I can’t really –’

‘That’s okay. I understand. It’s a secret and all that. Don’t know why a water tanker would be visiting a place like this, though. You’d think on a water planet they’d have plenty of the stuff.’ He stepped into his gondola and restacked a handful of sugarcane stalks. ‘Then again, I’ve heard rumours that the freshwater lake on top of the volcano has gone salty. The government is rushing in new supplies from the ice worlds every couple of days until they can build desalination plants.’

The tanker disappeared below the rooftops, prompting Michael to ask, ‘If this city is so old, why are there spaceships?’

‘My liege, with respect, even you haven’t been away that long,’ he said,
before stopping himself. For the first time, he took note of Michael’s age then, with a muddled look, continued. ‘Er, faster-than-light travel only became a commercial reality thirty years ago. It caused all sorts of headaches. Explorers and mining companies trespassed on planets that still ran on steam or coal power, like this one, and changed their whole history. No longer did these worlds want to slowly develop their own technology – they wanted the same advancements as other planets. The Universal Council had to step in and fix the mess. Most worlds are still in transition. The older civilisations are showing the younger ones like Pacifico how to advance their technology – for a hefty price, of course. Some governments are more stubborn than others, though. They want to protect their culture and laws. They have asked to be quarantined from the rest of the universe, until they are ready for First Contact.’
‘And the Seven Worlds of Wonder?’
‘Seven planets so unique that you’ve got to see them to believe them. That’s if you can. One or two are strictly off-limits.’
He sold three more sacks of fine white sugar to a pastry chef for a handful of coins. ‘They can’t stay that way forever, though. Progress is progress. Money is opportunity.’
Watching the man count his morning’s takings, Michael asked him, ‘When you sell sugar, do customers ever trade you something other than money?’
‘Plenty of times. Once, a man even offered me a jar of leeches. I said, no thank you. I’m already being drained dry by all these taxes!’ When the merchant realised only he was laughing, he cleared his throat and noted with interest, ‘Why, my liege? Do you have something worth trading?’
‘I’m not sure. Can you tell me what’s so special about this ring?’
He handed over the silver signet ring with the engraved ruby that Nobleman Guido had donated. The merchant’s eyes widened before he almost threw it back.
‘Get rid of it! Toss it into the whirlpool! Whatever you do, don’t keep it. It’s a dead man’s ring!’
‘A what?’
‘A cursed copper. A golden ghost. A nooseman’s supper. It’s called many things on many worlds, but the story’s always the same: whoever finds one, normally ends up dead.’
‘Dead?’
‘Pushed out airlocks, drowned at sea … Walk into any tavern and you’ll hear the tales. These things are passed among the scum of the universe. They can hide secret messages or be made into booby traps. Rarely do they pop up in the purses of commoners, though. I nearly lost my life once when this bounty hunter traded
me the wrong piece of jewellery. I spent two days tracking down a customer across five planets to get it back for him. Get rid of it, I say.’

‘But how can you tell?’

‘The ruby’s a fake but someone has gone to great lengths to engrave a seahorse’s head on it. And this number 6-8-2235 etched under it, see? That’s not a date or year I’m familiar with.’

‘Then what do these words on the outside mean? I can’t read –’

The sugar merchant caught sight of a flash in the crowd and suddenly stiffened. ‘I can’t help you, my liege. Please, I have customers.’

Examining the dead man’s ring closer, Michael sat in the shadow of a music conservatorium, which seemed to be devoid of students, tutors or even an orchestra. He read the inscription around the silver band: *Omnes aequo animo parent ubi digni imperant*. What did that mean? Unafraid of any jinx, he pocketed the ring and weighed the merchant’s warning. If the scum of the universe did swap these pieces of jewellery, then of course some would meet horrible fates. Such was the risk of dealing with traitors and criminals.

As lunchtime approached, the crowds grew. Tourists kept the cafes busy, while gondoliers delivering parcels via pulley systems to customers high above struggled with the logjam of traffic on the canals. Michael opened his journal and sketched all that he saw: the puppeteer and his funny marionettes, florists selling floating rock gardens, a mailbox with a stony face and legs that pulled free of its wall to deliver letters, even the long-legged black harlequin himself.

The tall actor was swarmed by excited children, who pestered him to perform a trick. Silently, he removed his three-cornered hat, proved it was empty then waved it above their heads. He tapped it four times with his walking stick and – hey, presto! – bonbons rained from its middle. The children ran back through a school of bumphead parrotfish to their parents, laughing.

Michael was all smiles, too, as he squeezed down an alleyway, rounded a wellhead then excused himself past a large Scorned woman going door-to-door collecting laundry. He found two more Scorned scraping barnacles and starfish from walls, before being cut off by a posse of old swashbucklers. They disembarked from a gondola at the Sandcastle Tavern and glanced at him with suspicion as the bouncers searched them for weapons. Two moray eels with chained collars whipped from crevices flanking the doorway and snapped at him.

‘Did you see that boy on the whale shark?’ one swashbuckler asked. ‘Whose guild is he with?’

‘Not ours, that’s for sure,’ a second answered. ‘We don’t accept spies and pied pipers.’

Michael hurried past the off-worlders, troubled at what he’d overheard. It
was clear they were talking about Aurelio – a spy? He didn’t believe it. However, admittedly, he was unsettled that they’d found the piper on the Broken Isles playing his flute while a dangerous monster roamed.

On the other side of the capital, he was watching handymen unfurl a large banner numbered ‘300’ down an art gallery’s wall when he heard a woman’s scream in the distance. He hurried after a group of marines towards the waterfront where the wealthiest families lived and stopped outside a four-storey mansion. A red-headed lady threw a volley of pots, pans and vases at the soldiers, then retreated in tears. ‘This is your fault!’ she cried. ‘Why weren’t you protecting him? He’s probably dead!’

‘Move!’ Captain Cavalli said, bulldozing through the people. ‘Whose house is this?’

When no one presented themselves, a Scorned maid shuffled forward, eyes down. ‘Lady Isabelle and Lord Guido’s, captain,’ she answered, as more utensils bounced and clanged.

‘What is the manner of this disturbance?’

‘It’s the master of the house, Lord Guido, sir. He’s missing.’

‘Missing?’

‘We welcomed him home from Her Majesty’s banquet last night, but he failed to rise this morning. When we checked on him this hour, his bedding – have mercy – was torn apart as if by some wild animal!’

The maid and captain watched as the marines again stormed the mansion.

‘Get out of my house!’ Lady Isabelle shouted, shoving them backwards.

‘You’re too late. My brother’s gone! The monster’s taken him!’
Marines snapped to attention as Queen Oriana hurried along the uppermost colonnades of the palace, trailed by politicians. Captain Cavalli called for his sergeant and disappeared down a flight of steps. Doors burst open and shut as young messengers rushed into the city, carrying sealed parchments.

Standing in the inner courtyard among fountains, statues and tropical blossoms, the triplets watched with a mix of helplessness and frustration as the pandemonium raged around them. They heard snatches of conversation but nothing complete. A pair of footmen claimed that claw marks had been found inside Nobleman Guido’s bedroom. Others told of hearing a giant winged creature on their roofs at night. A huddle of cooks was convinced a young girl had also been kidnapped from the waterfront.

‘Apologies for the delay,’ Prime Minister Pasquale said, palming wisps of sweaty hair behind his ears. His white woollen robe hung askew across his shoulders, and his shoes didn’t match. ‘Sit. Sit. Lunch is due to be served.’

He flopped heavily into his chair, groaned as he held his spinning head, then peered up through bloodshot eyes. It seemed the Prime Minister hadn’t gone straight to bed last night. ‘What, my liege?’

‘Haven’t you heard?’ Michael said, still standing. ‘The monster – it’s here in the city.’

‘Oh, not you too. Come now. Please. Sit. Unless the monster’s invited itself to lunch, I can’t see why we should starve.’

The triplets frowned before taking their places at the table. Immediately, servants set jugs of iced tea, and orange and mango juice in front of them.

‘But the monster –’ Luke said.

‘Tut, tut, my boy. There shall be no more talk of such nonsense. Captain Cavalli briefed me on my way here and told me the threat is a hoax.’

‘Then why is everyone panicking?’ Samantha asked.

Pasquale greedily drank the iced tea. ‘Pacifico might be a city of art, but it is also a city of gossip. Even here, falsehoods are common sport. Nobles and travellers have been inundating the palace for the past hour, asking if this preposterous monster story is true. They even woke me up – before lunch! – the cheeky scoundrels.’
‘But Lady Isabelle –’
‘– has caused enough grief for one morning. Let’s not talk about this further. Not on an empty stomach anyway.’
Several footmen, including the lame servant normally assigned to Michael’s room, brought lunch to the table. With a hum, the Prime Minister lifted the lid off the nearest platter and breathed in the steam. ‘Mmm, pancakes! My favourite.’
And he wasn’t wrong. There were stacks and stacks of them: buttermilk pancakes, chocolate pancakes, straw berry pancakes, blueberry pancakes, black forest pancakes, cinnamon-apple pancakes, peanut butter pancakes, coconut pancakes, brandied apricot pancakes, banana upside-down pancakes and pancakes soaked in lemon syrup. They all smelt delicious. In a flurry of forks, Pasquale, Michael and Luke loaded their plates, while Samantha wanted to know if there was a healthier option.
‘Do you have something other than pancakes?’ she asked the lame footman.
He nodded and answered in a tetchy voice, ‘We have flapjacks, sir.’
‘No, that’s just another type of pancake.’
‘We have pikelets –’
‘So’s that.’
‘Crepes –’
‘Ditto.’
The man cleared his throat. ‘Well, sir, I guess there’s always a blintz.’
‘What’s that?’
‘A sugary batter fried thinly in a pan covered –’
‘Another pancake, right?’
The servant blinked. ‘Why, yes, very wise of you, sir.’
The cobra’s hood puffed out as she gripped the tablecloth. ‘I want some fruit. Do you have that?’
The footman looked at the older servants, but they were smart enough to ease out of the courtyard. ‘The chef cooks a ricotta crepe topped with slices of orange that –’
Everyone jumped as she slammed her fist on the table then leant towards the footman’s face. ‘So bring me the orange and leave behind the crepes. If you or the chef have a problem with that, I’ll go into that kitchen and show you both how to slice it, got it?’ She slapped her cutlass on the table.
The footman’s eyes narrowed.
Pasquale wasn’t as patient. ‘You heard our guest. Do as he says!’
Scowling, the tattooed footman bowed and hobbled towards the kitchen.
‘Ungrateful – the whole lot of them!’ the Prime Minister sniffed. ‘They come
to our city poor and wretched, and out of kindness we give them shelter. And how do they repay us? With insolence! They should be thankful that we’re such a forgiving nation. Over the centuries their people have waged many a war on this fine city and killed plenty of our gallant young men. It’s only since we drove them back to their homeland once and for all that we’ve been able to usher in this new age of peace. You’d think they’d be better mannered when we have offered them so much hospitality.’

Luke wiped away caramel-walnut sauce dribbling down his chin. ‘Why are the Scorned so old, but you Pacificans so young?’ he asked.

‘Except yours truly,’ Pasquale said proudly.

‘Except for you.’

‘Why the same question has been on my mind about you three. I always imagined heroes from the Hall would be – dare I say it? – as old as they are wise.’

‘We, er –’

‘– age slower,’ Michael said.

‘Because we eat fruit,’ Samantha snapped.

‘And here I thought only Pacificans had discovered the fountain of youth. Well done, my friends. Well done.’

‘Have you?’ Michael asked. ‘I mean, is there really a fountain of youth?’

Pasquale reached for the maple syrup and flooded his second plate of pancakes. ‘To a degree, my boy,’ he winked. ‘The volcanic minerals in our water system – how shall I put it? – keep time at bay. They slow the ageing process and give us a youthful appearance.’

‘But not you?’

‘These wrinkles are the burden of office, I’m afraid. Leaders from other worlds prefer dealing with someone who looks a little older and a little wiser. It doesn’t stop them from asking me to bring a couple of elixirs of our mineral water for themselves and their wives, though.’

‘Then why are the Scorned older than everyone else?’ Luke pushed.

‘Because the mineral water is found only in Pacifico. They’re outsiders – islanders from the Thirteen Tribes who share our planet.’

‘But I heard there’s a ban on foreigners living here,’ Michael said.

‘Well, we’ve … er, recently suffered a shortage of labour. We need strong men to build our homes and women to clean them.’

Samantha bristled before Michael kicked her in the shins. Pasquale missed it, however, and waved over another footman. ‘Fetch some fans, would you? It’s an oven out here.’

‘No wonder,’ Michael said. ‘You’re wearing all those robes. Everyone here
must be sweating in those heavy clothes – especially the ladies in their gowns.’

‘You wouldn’t catch me wearing one of those awful corsets,’ Samantha said.

Luke smirked. ‘If you were a girl.’

She shut up, realising her mistake. At the same moment, her lunch arrived – three oranges sliced open. ‘Thanks,’ she said to the footman, who answered with a none-too-impressed, ‘At your service.’

‘Why do you wear jewels in your cheeks?’ Michael asked.

‘Ah, vanity mostly,’ Pasquale said. ‘And courting if you’re young. But it’s also a status of nobility and family. The more jewels, the more respect you’re granted. I have four on each cheek as you can see, and Queen Oriana has five. Only royalty is granted such a privilege.’

A messenger handed him a parchment.

‘Good news,’ he said. ‘Speaking of Her Majesty, she will make an announcement shortly.’

‘Maybe they’ve caught the monster,’ Luke said.

‘I doubt that very much.’

‘You don’t believe it exists, do you?’

Pasquale laughed. ‘My boy, I’ve travelled to most of the Seven Worlds of Wonder and seen many an exotic creature. Nothing much surprises me anymore. But I’m quite certain no monster lurks in Pacifico – except maybe on the tongues of those who have drunk too much wine.’

‘Then what attacked us on the Broken Isles?’

‘Oh, come now. Surely the Hall of Heroes has real problems to deal with, rather than chasing myths and legends.’

‘But Nobleman Guido is missing,’ Michael said. ‘You should be organising a search party for him.’

‘Friends, I respect your concerns, but we cannot turn over a whole city for one noble. Plus, how can we hunt something that no one has seen, except yourselves – and even you can’t describe it. If such a creature does exist, you will have to spearhead its capture. Our young marines aren’t prepared for such a task. They’re peacekeepers – not soldiers. And only a small command at that.’

‘What?’ they all said at once.

‘If they’re not soldiers, then why do they carry pikes and swords?’ Luke asked.

‘Or patrol those giant statues of kings and queens?’ Samantha added.

‘Mr Pirate!’ Pasquale answered, waving his cutlery in astonishment. ‘I thought you of all people would have figured that out by now.’

‘What?’ she said.

He chomped theatrically with his yellowing teeth.
She recoiled, convinced he was mad.

‘Sharks! The skies are full of them! White pointers. Hammerheads. Tigers. I dare not imagine what scandal would befall us if one of our guests was eaten because we didn’t have guards posted on our titans.’

‘You’re telling me _sharks_ fly here as well?’

‘Oh yes. Thousands of them. Especially now, during the warmer months.’

The triplets searched the skies, drawing a chuckle from the Prime Minister. They were interrupted by Luke’s glowing red visor curving across his eyes of its own accord.

‘What’s wrong?’ Michael asked.

A few taps on the wristpad revealed the problem. ‘There’s a light flashing _EMERGENCY TRANSMISSION._’

More red light beamed from the earpiece, but this time straight on the table.

Before them, a hologram of Queen Oriana sat on her royal throne.

‘Oh, how cute,’ Samantha said. ‘Just like a little Barbie doll.’

Michael kicked her shins again.

‘Shhh!’ Luke said.

‘– for this interruption, but I wish to address an issue that is long overdue,’ Queen Oriana began. ‘Unfortunately, some untruths are circulating about a wild animal, which reportedly lives in the Western Seas. Let me make my position clear: myself, my government and my Royal Marines aren’t privy to its existence, despite several exhaustive searches of the region. We will continue these investigations, but in the meantime we must not let fear overshadow common sense.

‘This morning, we had an unfortunate circumstance where one citizen believed a member of her family had been taken by this animal. Captain Cavalli of the Royal Marines has since assured me this is not the case. The missing brother left Pacifico on urgent business last night with the Jewellers’ Guild. He did not have time to inform anyone of his sudden departure, hence the confusion. He has since forwarded a message to his sister, explaining his haste.

‘So, my friends, be calm and clear-headed at all times. If you are worried about a loved one, then approach the Royal Marines first, so as not to create undue panic. Yours in peace, Queen Oriana.’

The hologram relooped to the beginning. ‘Apologies fellow citizens and guests of Pacifico for this interruption, but I wish to address –’

‘See,’ Pasquale said, munching on another pancake. ‘All fares well. Nobleman Guido is safe and well. Pacifico still rules the seas.’

*
Far beneath the city in a dungeon few citizens knew about and none had ever escaped, two shadows listened to Pasquale’s bold statement via a microphone hidden in the courtyard’s gardens.

‘Well done,’ the shorter shadow said, switching off an earpiece. ‘The Earth children are not only fooling themselves, but the city as well. As planned, their doom will inspire many to take up weapons.’

‘What of these swashbucklers who’ve arrived?’ the leader asked, coldly. ‘Mere swords-for-hire looking for one last adventure on the Broken Isles – and the one last reward that comes with it.’

The leader pondered this then twisted a hook on the dungeon’s wall to reveal a secret door. It opened into a tunnel. ‘We can use them to our advantage,’ he said, before stepping through.

‘And the monster? Shall it return tonight?’

‘Yes. The nobles are nervous, despite the Queen’s assurances. If Guido can be taken from his bed, then the others can expect plenty of restless nights.’
‘Hurry or they’ll catch us!’

The blips on Luke’s radar multiplied as the triplets fled along the streets, ducking under sunfish and zigzagging through outdoor cafes. They rushed across a footbridge, only to retreat when more people spotted them from the other side. Tourists shouted their names, and within seconds everyone swarmed. Trapped, they backed into an art studio then bolted out the rear door. They hurtled down a narrow alley filled with dripping washing and children kicking a football.

‘When will they leave us alone?’ Michael shouted.
‘Us?’ Samantha said. ‘They’re your fans – not ours.’

The crowd chased them past water acrobats, round a university and through a royal botanical garden. Most people fell away, but the holograph-hunters were relentless.

‘Hey, what are you doing?’
‘Let them follow us now.’

Luke fired his jetpack but Michael’s gold armour weighed too much. An urgent adjustment on his wristpad and – BOOM! – they blasted into the air. Thrill gripped them both in one giant rush as they rocketed out of reach, flying over terracotta roofs and church spires. Luke’s shoulders quickly began to ache with the strain and he felt his brother slipping. He powered towards a neighbouring island’s distinctive belltower and perched him there. It was round, ten storeys high, and every arched window featured the statue of a famous artist, musician or playwright. Michael kept watch as he waited for Luke to return with Samantha.

Pulling off his helmet, he scrubbed his sweaty hair free of its ponytail then leant against the statue of a lute player to marvel at the huge water tanker moored nearby. Pumps drained each of its six strange glass hulls, replenishing underground wells. Further along on a junk barge, a gang of Scorned children picked through a pyramid of discarded gowns, shoes, mattresses, toys, handcrafted furniture, holographic broadcasters and rotten food before a marine chased them into the alleyways.

‘Remind me never to be famous,’ Samantha said, stomping down the tower’s
spiralling steps.

‘Beard rash?’

‘Cute considering the only irritating thing here is you.’
‘Hardy har-har. Remind me to drop you next time.’

They found Michael talking to himself, recounting the conversations at lunch. From behind him, a light sea breeze eased the sharpness of spring.

‘I know that look,’ she said, also removing her feathered hat. ‘Let me guess. You think Pasquale is hiding something.’

‘How’d you know?’

‘Hello? He is a politician.’ She drank from the canteen Luke handed her then added, ‘Remember back at our old school when the gardener found a snake and the teachers kept telling us there was nothing to worry about? But we all knew something was wrong because a lot of people were running around? Well, a lot of people at the palace looked fairly frantic over a monster that’s not supposed to exist.’

‘The Guido story is a lie. He didn’t suddenly leave in the middle of the night. No ship is allowed to travel to or from Pacifico between dusk and dawn.’

‘And don’t forget Guido’s bedroom was torn apart.’

‘Then why is Prime Minister Pasquale lying?’ Luke asked.

‘Is he?’ Samantha countered. ‘Or is it Captain Cavalli? Funny how at dinner last night he said the monster was just a story, even though we were nearly its lunch.’

‘Why keep it a secret?’

‘To keep the city from panicking?’ Michael offered.

‘Maybe it’s a cover-up,’ she said. ‘If people are going missing, Cavalli would be the first one blamed for poor security.’

This last suggestion killed the conversation. Unnerved, Michael stood and spied outside. He was surprised to see the lame palace footman, not dressed in his wig and royal-blue coat, but in beggar’s rags. He met with a worker unloading a cargo ship, checked no one was watching then received a sack of goods. Without any more fuss, he hobbled back into the streets, glancing over his shoulder.

‘Is that the same cranky footman outside your room?’ Luke asked beside him. ‘The pancake guy?’

Michael nodded.

‘Should we fly down there and stop him?’ Luke asked.

‘Not yet. Let’s just keep an eye on him. We’ve already got one mystery to solve.’
‘What mystery?’ Samantha asked, slightly annoyed.

‘Nobleman Guido’s disappearance. I should have listened to him. He kept pestering me at the banquet, but I ignored him. He seemed surprised that we’d found the monster. He also mentioned the disappearance of someone called the Red Samurai. Does your electronic library have anything on him?’

‘I’ll check,’ Luke said.

A hologram burst from his earpiece, showing a warrior with a fold-up fan and a slashing sword.

‘Red Samurai,’ an electronic voice said in a professorial tone. ‘Humanoid. Male. Deputy Leader of the legendary Hall of Heroes. One of the few active members of the Universal Security Force, which has been in decline for the past decade –’

It listed his childhood, home planet and famous battles before Luke switched it off. ‘Don’t you think it’s a little weird that we found a samurai helmet in that rainforest?’

‘Yeah, it even looked like it had been in battle,’ Michael said.

‘So the monster took Nobleman Guido and this Red Samurai?’

‘And who knows how many more.’

‘So what are we going to do?’

‘Keep an eye on Captain Cavalli, Pasquale and’ – Michael looked outside again – ‘anyone else acting suspiciously. Maybe talk to Lady Isabelle and find out what she knows. Once we put the clues together, we can catch it.’

‘What?’ Samantha almost yelled. ‘Now you want to catch this monster?’

‘Think about it, Sam. It all makes sense now. Why else would Mr Goode Deed pick us to come here? He knew Pacifico was in trouble and needed someone to help. He gave us these costumes because people would respect the Gold Knight.’

‘Are you nuts? This monster is eating people – and you think we’re here to kill it? How? Keep running from it until it has a heart attack? Wake up to yourselves. We’re not here to hunt monsters. We’re not here to save Pacifico. We’re not even here to have fun. We’re here because some wacko wanted a laugh. The only ‘mystery’ that needs solving is our way home. End of story.’

‘Aw, c’mon, Sis,’ Luke said. ‘Surely even you must be getting a kick out of all this. Let’s catch this creature and go home. We can walk through the Knock-Knock Door at any old time.’

‘Really? Well, Mr Know-It-All, unlike you, I was paying attention at dinner last night and not stuffing my face. When Michael blabbed to the Queen that we’d taken the wrong door, she didn’t know what he meant. So I’ve been asking around myself and guess what? No one has ever heard of a Knock-Knock Door.’
They gaped at her.
‘You mean –’
‘Congratulations! We’re stuck here. If you don’t believe me, check your electronic thingummyjig.’

Luke did just that. Each time he keyed his wristpad, his electronic library scrolled with information about wooden doors, metal doors, garden gates, door-to-door salesmen, knock-knock jokes and even woodpeckers, but nothing about Knock-Knock Doors. ‘What are we going to do then?’
‘Find another one,’ she said.
‘Or return to that waterfall at the Weeping Mountains,’ Michael offered.
‘We’re not going back there. We escaped the monster once. I’m not pushing our luck again.’
‘But it might be the only way home.’
‘Then you go and get yourself killed. Count me out. There must be another Door in this city, and I’m going to find it first.’

She spiralled downstairs and crossed the dock, scaring away some manta rays. Luke and Michael lingered before looking at each other, wondering how the other felt. Michael grinned and said, ‘First pick at the monster’s treasure!’

Laughing, they ran across the island and began making plans for their hunt. After they left, a patrolling marine stopped at the base of the belltower and blinked at the statues above. Strange. He swore one just moved.
Michael wanted to puke. He staggered along a dark palace hallway, rubbing his stomach that sloshed with too many honey prawns. They’d looked so delicious at dinner, but now, bloated at two o’clock in the morning, he just wanted to press his belly button and flush them out. If only he could find a doctor – or a footman to fetch him one.

Suddenly, a hand seized him. It pulled him into a holographic painting and a second clapped over his mouth. Michael fought back. He heeled his attacker’s foot and readied to elbow him in the guts when a boy quietly yelped, ‘Ow! Mikey! It’s me!’


‘Shhh!’

His brother gagged him again and pulled him deeper into the alcove. He then scoured the empty hallway as his visor scrolled with unhelpful data. Michael only saw squares of moonlight and readied to speak up when the holo-painting flickered. Its portrait of a king riding a chariot twisted and distorted like bad television reception before fading to black with a whine. One by one, the other paintings lost power too and left the boys standing in the darkness.

Luke snapped back from the edge, his visor also failing. He shouldered Michael sideways and pressed him against the wall. For long seconds, they stood paralysed in the silence until the door at the end of the corridor slowly opened. No footsteps followed it. But an unseen presence entered, scouring the shadows.

It was swift, dangerous and unsettling. Evil seeped from its body like mist on a cemetery. It flitted between the windows as a blur, careful not to be spied by human eyes. It stopped at each curtain then flashed to a couch or marble bust without a sound. Purposefully, it stalked the hallway with the hunger of a predator.

Shuddering, the brothers tensed as they realised what approached them. The monster, here in the palace.

It stopped at a bedroom door and eased a knob to slip inside. Its dark form crept around the sleeping guest, who, awash with an instant prickling, twitched and rolled over in his sheets, unaware of the intruder. A few moments later the creature returned to the corridor and tried the next room. Again, its tingling
presence hovered over the dormant occupant before re-emerging undetected. The brothers trembled as it stole into a third chamber and realised it had found the right room – Luke’s room! It tore back the sheets, rifled through drawers and opened cupboards in the dark. Foolish curiosity got the better of Luke and he curled his head around the corner, but Michael yanked him back. Just in time, too. The door clicked shut and the monster filled the hallway again, breathing thinly through its teeth.

Determined now, it dismissed the other quarters and headed towards the end of the hallway where Michael’s room was located. The brothers cowered in the holo-painting, conscious that any second now they’d have to fight or flee.

Michael flinched. His little finger vibrated under his gauntlet. Startled, he jumped and his armour squeaked. The monster halted. In the stillness, it held its breath at the edge of the painting and listened. Both boys paled. Their stomachs clenched.

But just as it was about to strike, the monster retreated. It hurtled down the hallway then vanished.

It wasn’t until all the holo-paintings powered up again that the brothers dared move. They groaned then slumped to their knees.

‘Idiot!’ Luke said, punching Michael on the shoulder. ‘Give us away, why don’t you!’

‘It’s not my fault,’ he answered. ‘You try living life inside a giant garbage can.’

‘I already do. It’s called school.’

Luke turned on his bedroom light. Rather than finding his quarters ransacked, it was spotless.

‘It doesn’t make sense,’ he said. ‘What was the monster looking for?’

‘This,’ Michael said, removing his gauntlet and the dead man’s ring. It vibrated on his little finger three more times before stopping. He now felt a lot more nervous about the sugar merchant’s warning about curses. ‘I think it might be a detection device. It only buzzes when the monster gets close enough.’

‘Then how stupid is that?’ Luke said, handling it. ‘The monster was close enough to eat us.’ He ran his thumb around the ruby then the inscription. ‘Hey, what does “Omnes aequo animo parent ubi digni imperant” mean anyway?’

‘Say that again,’ Michael said.

Luke did and, thanks to the slipper snail shell pendants round their necks, they both heard: ‘All men cheerfully obey where worthy men rule.’

‘It’s Latin!’ Michael said, feeling both relieved and foolish. He could have used his pendant to translate the inscription by now.

‘It’s a quote from some ancient guy called Syrus,’ Luke said, checking his
database. ‘Source of origin: unknown. How come a planet on the other side of
the universe is using an old Earth language?’
‘This is getting stranger all the time. We need to crack this code.’
‘What code?’
He pointed to 6-8-2235 engraved on the fake ruby under the seahorse.
‘No, I’ve asked. It’s way too far in the future.’
‘A maths puzzle?’
‘Not that I can tell.’
‘Then do the numbers spell out a word?’
Michael picked it up again and brightened. ‘That must be it! 6-8-2235 means
the sixth letter, followed by the eighth letter, followed by the second, the second
again, the third then the fifth letter.’
‘Okay, so what’s the sixth letter of the alphabet?’
‘But is it our alphabet or theirs?’
The question dampened their enthusiasm until Michael had a brainwave: ‘I
think we’re meant to use the inscription: Omnes aequo animo parent ubi digni
imperant.’
‘Then what’s the sixth letter?’
They counted until they reached A in ‘aequo’.
‘The eighth?’
‘Q.’
‘The second?’
‘M.’
‘And M again. The third?’
‘N.’
‘And finally, the fifth letter is S.’
‘A-Q-M-M-N-S?’
‘That doesn’t spell anything, even with our translators.’
For several long minutes they stared at it until they reached the same
conclusion. ‘It’s not the sixth letter followed by the eighth letter, followed by the
second twice, then the third and the fifth –’ Michael said.
‘6-8-2235 means the sixth letter, followed by the eighth letter, followed by
the twenty-second, then the thirty-fifth!’
‘A-Q-U-A.’
‘Aqua!’
‘Water!’ they both shouted at once.
They filled a pitcher with tap water then plopped the dead man’s ring inside.
Fearing that it might explode or trigger a poisoned needle, their guess was
rewarded when the fake ruby flipped open and projected a hologram. It swivelled with a three-dimensional image of a theatre then a red-haired girl’s face. They retrieved it and heard a smooth, elegant voice ordering: ‘Lady Isabelle. Piermarini Theatre. Twenty minutes.’ The ruby closed again.

‘Lady Isabelle is Nobleman Guido’s sister, isn’t she?’ Luke asked.

‘She must be headed to the theatre now. But that also means –’

‘The ring isn’t a warning device, but a receiver and that –’

‘The monster has one too!’

The brothers sprinted past a trio of marines, across the royal bridge and into the fog. The city was completely deserted.

‘Why were you hiding in that holo-painting anyway?’ Michael asked, his stomach sloshing as he tried to keep pace.

Luke smirked. ‘I’d just put an octopus in Sam’s room.’

They followed his electronic radar to the eastern district, the hub of the city’s playhouses. The Piermarini wasn’t the biggest theatre of its type, but it was certainly the grandest. Crafted from sandstone, its interiors were painted blue, gilded with gold and lined with marble statues of actors and opera singers. Its main auditorium seated thirteen hundred patrons across four arcing tiers.

Chandeliers hung from a lofty ceiling and private balconies came with high-backed chairs. Props from a previous performance gathered dust amid a dozen or so crates on a large wooden stage above an orchestra pit.

Luke and Michael paddled towards the last of these, abandoning haste for caution. If it wasn’t suspicious enough that the front doors were unbolted, the lights were switched on.

‘Anything?’ Michael asked.

Luke shook his head. ‘My radar doesn’t work inside. Wait! What was that?’

Both boys dropped behind a pair of seats and Michael drew his sword. He found the experience unnerving – he’d never readied it for real combat.

Soon, delicate footsteps crossed the wooden stage and a girl with red hair appeared from behind the curtains in a brown and yellow hourglass gown trimmed with mink. ‘Hello?’ she called out. ‘Friend, are you here?’

The two brothers stood up. ‘Lady Isabelle! Down here!’

‘Sir Michael? Agent Luke?’ she called out, pressing a hand to her bosom. ‘Good sirs. You gave me such a fright. I’m relieved to find you here and not some other stranger at such an hour.’

‘Why are you here?’ Michael asked, sheathing his sword and moving towards her.

She stopped. ‘Was it not you who sent this note about my brother, Guido?’

The trio blinked at each other as they realised the same awful truth.
‘It’s a trap!’

The chandeliers flickered as they drained of power, and Michael yelled, ‘Quick! The monster’s here!’

They fled into the streets, racing past the clock tower, across the central plaza then north towards the markets. Behind them, blink! blink! blink! Electric lamps snuffed out in pairs. The night sky collapsed and the alleyways lost shape. Frantic, they tumbled through the fog.

SHHHRRRIIIIEEEKKK!

Their minds swirled in agony and their knees buckled. Luke was first to recover. He helped Isabelle to her feet then Michael, who again felt the monster’s evil presence. It spread wide among the columns, arches and stairwells, flapping above their heads and itching on their necks. It shadowed, cornered and teased them, ready to strike at its choosing. One moment it flashed across the flagstones; the next, it jumped between the rooftops!

‘I can’t see anything!’ Luke shouted, scanning with his infra-red as they ran.

‘The monster has no body,’ Isabelle yelled back. ‘Don’t let it steal your life!’

She veered into a maze of terraces and laneways devoid of moonlight. The brothers chased her across a footbridge then leapt back to the original side further along the canal. Just when they thought they’d lost the creature, the fog swirled and split with a distant –

SHHHRRRIIIIEEEKKK!

The creature was too far away now to affect them. However, they faced a new danger. Prowling along the streets were two great white pointers!

They turned into the canal, heads swinging side to side with jagged rows of hungry teeth. Their eyes were an unnatural milky colour and their movements jerky, as if they weren’t in full control of their powerful, gun-metal grey bodies. Trembling behind a steel bench, Luke and Isabelle crouched alongside Michael, who hoped they’d remain unseen. The sharks’ internal sensors were smarter, however. They locked on the trio and thrust forward.

Bang! The first shark crashed into a footbridge as the trio sprinted under it and further along the canal. The second also torpedoed but chomped stone as they dashed right into a colonnade of arches. Frantically, they shook door handles and strained against a bank window, screaming for somebody to let them in. But it was nearly three in the morning; everyone was at home.

The second white pointer flashed past on the other side of the arches to cut them off. The trio braked hard as the shark lunged at them, jaws open. Michael gripped his sword. Luke reached into his pouches, found the pull-string parcel and lobbed it into its mouth. The shark swallowed then thrashed away, choking on an inflatable six-man raft.
‘Behind us!’ Isabelle shouted as the first white pointer hurtled the length of the colonnade. It flushed them out alongside the canal again, past rows of gondolas and mooring poles, before curving in for the kill. They leapt inside a tight-fitting shed where a wooden powerboat hung suspended from the roof. **Crack!** It rocked violently on its chains as the shark accidentally rammed it.

Fleeing through the rear, Isabelle grabbed the brothers and dragged them down into an empty underground tavern called the Lobster Pot. Breaking inside, they shut the door behind them then hid behind a sticky bar, listening to the second shark hammer against the door. Soon, the poundings stopped and the seconds sweated by. The relief was short-lived, how ever. A street lamp flickered outside and their fright nearly brought them undone.

The front door clicked open. The hinges whined. Soon, foul breathing engulfed the room and slipped among the upturned chairs. Michael trembled. He wanted to reach for his sword but was racked with fear. Some hero he was.

Suddenly, an alarm bell pealed and voices shouted from above, ‘Shark! Shark!’ For the second time that night, just as the monster readied to attack, it was forced to retreat. It slipped into the fog as leather boots ran in their direction. ‘Marines!’ Luke whispered, watching dozens of silhouettes stretch across the Lobster Pot’s walls. Sensing the monster had fled, he and his brother peeked over the bar until Isabelle touched their arms.

‘Leave them,’ she said. ‘They won’t find the creature. Come. We must talk.’

Standing outside a run-down church, Michael stomped through the planks boarding up the back door then tore off a faulty lock to enter. Lady Isabelle lit several candle stubs while Luke double-checked the confessionalists, pews and mezzanine level. Above a crucified Christ was a holy verse printed large and in Latin: **Administer true justice; show mercy and compassion to one another. Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the alien or the poor.**

‘Did anyone see what the monster looked like?’ Luke asked, rewinding his visor’s recorded footage, looking for clues.

‘No,’ Michael said, swallowing, grateful to still be alive!

‘One thing’s for sure: it’s more than an animal. It’s too smart.’

‘Animal or not, you must show it no mercy,’ Lady Isabelle said. ‘You must kill it as it has killed. Too many good people have lost their lives, and more are in danger if you fail to stop it.’

‘How many people have gone missing?’ Michael pushed, trying to sound in control.

‘A dozen – maybe more. Even Father Valentino – the priest of this church – disappeared at its hands. He’d started asking too many questions.’

‘What kind of questions?’
‘Questions no one seems willing to answer. Questions like, why do the marines deny the creature’s existence yet clearly seek to catch it? Why is Captain Cavalli telling relatives of missing people not to warn others? And why is the Prime Minister not asking other worlds for help? Now tonight, I add a question of my own: who sought to trap me with this note?’

The brothers examined it by candlelight. However, like Michael’s diary, it was penned on self-correcting paper and the handwriting was universal. There was no way they could identify the author. Isabelle torched it.

‘I fear the fate of my brother, Guido, will soon be mine.’

She sobbed into her gloves. The two boys glanced at each other before Michael eased her to a pew.

‘We don’t know what’s happened to Guido yet,’ he said. ‘He’s probably still alive, but we need your help in finding him.’

‘Yes – anything!’ she answered, staring up at him.

‘Tell us what you know about the monster.’

She dried her face with a silk handkerchief then walked towards the candles. ‘It came to our world about four years ago. How? We don’t know. Some say it’s a curse for opening our skies to the galaxy; others believe that it’s always lived on the Broken Isles and awakens every few centuries to feed. Most, as you’ve discovered, pretend it doesn’t exist at all. What we do know is that it has grown bolder in its movements over time. At first, a few small ships met disaster while sailing the Western Seas, but these were dismissed as “death by misadventure” by captains who refused to heed warnings about the whirlpool or magnetic rocks. But then yachts and small cruisers were found drifting on our borders with no crew or passengers – ghost ships, if you like. There would be no explanation and no markings that indicated a struggle or even a shark attack. The marines again reported these disappearances as accidents – possibly there was mutiny among the crew and they had fallen overboard.

‘These past few seasons, though, there have been rumours of the monster stalking our city at night. No one has actually seen it face-to-face, but the stories are similar: nobles waking up to the sound of barking dogs and going downstairs, only to find their front door open and their pantry raided. Sometimes they’d hear a scratching noise on their rooftops; other times the flapping of leathery wings. A young girl who lived on the waterfront is believed to have seen a large creature, but she went missing shortly afterwards.’

‘And this is when other people started disappearing?’

She crossed herself. ‘One or two at first. The marines treated it as nonsense. They told us that these people had left unexpectedly or stowed away on a cruise liner. But then some more well-known citizens vanished – people like Father
Valentino, Romano the playwright, Mayor Marcello of the Thirty-eighth Island, Salvatore the sergeant-at-arms, Lord Aldo and – and –’

‘Why would the monster want him?’ Michael asked.
She began sobbing again. ‘My brother is a lovely, lovely man. He is well-respected among the Jewellers’ Guild for his integrity and knowledge.’
‘Has … has he been acting strange recently?’
She blinked at him like it was a rude question, then nodded. ‘Several weeks ago, he returned home early and locked all the doors. When I asked him what was wrong, he said not to worry. Later that evening I found him asleep in his study with letters and drawings detailing the monster’s movements. He was also holding a nugget of gold that I’d never seen before. From that night onwards, he became obsessed with finding the creature – even contacting your Hall for help. I believe he learnt a secret that ultimately cost him his life.’

She broke down again.
‘Do you know that secret?’ Michael asked.
‘Is it in any of those letters or drawings?’ Luke pushed.
‘No. Guido feared my life would be in danger too if he shared what he’d uncovered,’ she said. ‘And all his documents have been stolen. I have my suspicions what was in them, though. I hear whispers among the politicians’ wives.’

‘What are they saying?’
‘That the creature is not acting alone.’
The boys traded glances. She’d just confirmed what they’d learnt that very hour.

‘Lady Isabelle, this is why your brother was kidnapped,’ Michael said. ‘It’s called a dead man’s ring. It receives secret messages from the person controlling the monster.’

‘What secret messages?’ she asked.
‘Give me your canteen,’ he ordered Luke, who rummaged in his pouches.
‘Have you ever seen it before?’
‘No. It just looks like a signet ring.’
‘Your brother gave it to me. He said to use it to help the lost. I thought he meant poor people, but he really meant the people who are missing. It only works after it’s dunked in water. The ring starts to buzz –’

‘What’s wrong?’ she queried, when he fell silent.
‘It’s buzzing again!’

Luke handed him the canteen and they urgently wet the dead man’s ring, which popped open with a new holographic message.
‘Father Valentino’s Church. Now.’

‘Get out!’ Michael roared as a tile fell from the roof. Somebody was spying right above them.

‘Go! We’ll hold them off!’

Michael drew his sword as Lady Isabelle fled through the back exit. Luke stepped outside and struggled to get a reading on his radar. ‘Wait! To the left! The monster’s chasing after Isabelle!’

The boys screamed into the fog, hoping to alert the marines. No more hiding. It was time to fight.

They cut off the monster before it tried to swoop on Isabelle. It bobbled in front of them, as tall as two men and without fear. It didn’t run, lope or crawl. It didn’t have a body, arms or feet – just a pair of fluorescent eyeballs hovering above two mouths sawing with fangs.

‘Leave her alone!’ Luke shouted. ‘Come and get us!’ He powered up his jetpack and clenched his fists. ‘It’s cannonball time!’

He blasted straight at the creature, focussing his attack on its belly. As he swung a punch, his knuckles failed to connect with anything solid and he zoomed right through. His visor flashed WARNING! COLLISION IMMINENT! as he overshot his mark and sped towards a wall. Only fancy flying saved him from splattering against the brickwork.

Michael was next. Releasing all his fear in one yell, he ran at the monster and lashed out. His blade cut high and deadly. It connected with the creature’s head and split it in two. Both hunks of meat thumped to the ground as the other eyeball and mouth spun away.

‘YES!’

He’d killed the monster!
‘Hero’ wasn’t the first word Samantha used to describe her brothers when she found them at the crime scene. It was ‘stupid’. In fact, she repeated it so often it gave the large crowd of onlookers the impression it was the only word she knew. Wrapped in her pirate coat and suffering from a bad case of pillow hair, she stood over the beheaded carcass, scratched her beard then snorted. The cobra hissed at her brothers, who averted their gaze. ‘Stupid,’ she said, before walking back to the palace.

The brothers wished the snickering rubberneckers would do the same, including the swashbucklers, who stood cross-armed and laughing.

‘What’s the manner of this disturbance?’ Captain Cavalli demanded, snapping his marines to attention. ‘A messenger brought news of a creature being killed.’

‘Not the one we were expecting, sir,’ his sergeant answered. ‘It seems our friends here from the Hall got a fright.’

The captain shone his lantern over the body of the ‘monster’ cleft in half. Instead of a hideous creature double the size of a man, he found a gruesome fish with fangs and an orb dangling from its forehead. Except now that it was dead, the orb no longer glowed. ‘Is this a joke?’ he asked, kicking half the fish with his boot.

‘How was I supposed to know it was a deep sea angler?’ Michael said. ‘There were two of them floating together. They looked like eyes.’

Captain Cavalli glared at the brothers then barked, ‘Sergeant, send these people home. I’ll personally escort our heroes here back to the palace.’

‘But the monster was here,’ Luke said. ‘We saw it. Ask your men.’

‘And pray tell, what did this one look like? A barracuda? Or a goldfish?’

The crowd laughed as the brothers fell into step behind the captain, each burning with shame.

*

‘Fools!’

Captain Cavalli’s angry bellow was loud enough to wake the dead. It was a
fitting description considering where he held his secret meeting: the royal crypt. Silhouettes of sarcophaguses and their ornamental kings and queens were thrown on the stony walls by a low-burning lantern, which was almost kicked over by the raging marine.

‘How close did our young heroes come to meeting their deaths?’
‘Very close, sir,’ a teenage boy answered from a darkened corner. ‘At the last moment, the sharks chased them in the wrong direction.’
‘How fortunate! Their own stupidity saved them. I guarantee it won’t happen a second time!’

Cavalli stopped and double-checked the door to the crypt was sealed from prying ears, then asked, ‘What of Lady Isabelle?’
‘Taken.’

Cavalli bared his teeth and pointed at the teenager. ‘She brought doom on her own head. I clearly warned her not to ask questions, like her brother. Now she’s met his fate.’

‘What of the swashbucklers? My spy in the Sandcastle Tavern says she hired them and a handful of crab-hunters to investigate the link between Guido’s disappearance and the Broken Isles.’

‘My men will deal with those cutpurses – arrest them for loitering or carrying concealed weapons if need be. The monster will dispatch them next if they don’t return to whatever unloved moon they travelled from. In the meantime, you continue watching our young heroes, for I suspect they’re about to encounter more of the monster.’

The teenager stepped into the light and pulled back his blue hair into a ponytail. ‘As you wish,’ Aurelio said.
The first warnings of disaster came just past noon. Buoys chimed as the harbour grew restless and the horizon turned purple then black. Lightning split the sky and boiled the sea, drawing tourists from the marketplaces and galleries on the western islands to the waterfront. Choruses of excitement rose with each thunderclap until a hard grey rain fell and people sprinted for cover. Waiters rescued table umbrellas. Merchants threw tarpaulins over their gondolas and shouted at others to move. Painters snapped shut their easels, and zoo animals shrieked in their cages. Busking harlequins watched as their afternoon crowds streamed away.

Buffeted by the strong winds, Luke touched down outside a bait shop on a southern island close to the volcano. He hopscotched over puddles and fresh horse manure to reach a small white building with a green dome and round windows.

‘Phwoar! What is this place?’ he asked, cupping his nose. The main chamber was square and high with faded mosaics of dolphins, starfish and seahorses swirling around a large staid pool. Wooden benches rotted along all four walls, next to dead ferns shrivelled up in terracotta pots. ‘And what is that smell?’

‘It’s the public pool,’ Samantha said, walking in from an adjacent room, also holding her nose. ‘Although I don’t think it’s been used in ages.’

Unable to breathe in any more of the putrid stench, Luke rummaged through his pouches until he found eucalyptus balm to smear across his top lip. His mum had told him some police detectives used it to deal with the smell of corpses. He threw the small blue tub to Samantha.

‘Look! Something’s dead on the bottom of the pool.’
‘I think it’s a stray dog.’
‘Glad I left my swimming costume back home then. Why are we even in this dump?’
‘First, where’s Michael?’
‘He wasn’t in his bed and the chair was moved when I woke up.’
‘What? He’s still sleeping with that wedged against the door handle? It’s bad enough that you’re sleeping in his room now. Hasn’t it been a week since you supposedly killed the “monster”?’
‘Mock us all you want. Lady Isabelle has been kidnapped.’
‘Don’t tell me he’s still trying to find her.’
‘I think that’s what he’s doing now.’
‘Then you’ll have to bring him here. This is our Knock-Knock Door.’
‘In this hole? No way!’
Lightning whitened the room, followed by thunder. Then, unexpectedly –
Fish attack!
Hundreds of purple-pink creole wrasse hurtled through the front door,
 fleeing the rain, darting straight for Luke. He crouched into a ball as they
 ricocheted off his hips, shoulders and arms. Some flopped on the ground next to
 him, stunned, while most cowered deep in the change rooms.
‘Are you all right?’ she asked, helping him off his backside.
‘Now I know what it feels like to be hit by a hundred golf balls.’
‘At least you didn’t kill any this time.’
‘Hardy har-har.’
She disappeared into an adjacent room then returned with a cracked pitcher of
 water.
‘What’s that for?’
‘To find a Knock-Knock Door.’
‘Are you kidding?’
‘Think about it. What do we know about these Doors? First, they’re well
 hidden. Second, they ask riddles. Third, they’re found near lots of water. And
 most importantly, fourth, their one giveaway is their weird magnetism. If we go
 through all these rooms and tip out this water, then hopefully it’ll lead us to
 another Door, just like that cola bottle we smashed.’
‘That’s a dumb idea.’
‘No, it’s not. It’s quite smart.’
‘If it’s so smart, wouldn’t the rain be streaming in here too?’
Stunned, she looked at the window. After another flash of lightning, she
 dribbled out the water to prove herself right. It just puddled at her feet. She
 repeated the experiment in the change room with the same results. More thunder
 hammered the city and she screamed in frustration. ‘At least I’m trying! We’d
 get home quicker if you and Michael weren’t wasting time fishing.’
‘We’re doing what we were sent here to do, Sam: catch the monster. Isn’t
 saving lives just as important?’
‘People die every day back on Earth. I don’t see you trying to rescue them.’
‘When was the last time you saw a monster walking down the main street?’
‘Not monsters. People die in wars or of starvation or disease.’
‘This is different. We can do something about it here.’
‘You’re wrong. You can do something about it on Earth, too, but you chose not to. There’s no difference at all.’

He wrestled with a smart comeback – one that never came. Smugly, she explored deeper into the building, finding more pools and scaring the wrasse.

‘Okay, so you’re right about the Door not being here. We’ll try looking elsewhere. I need you and Michael to find a map of the city so we can mark off all the places that – Luke? Luke!’

But he was gone. Turning from the main doorway, she kicked a bench, chopped a terracotta pot then tossed dead ferns into the water. She grabbed the pitcher and threw it against the brickwork then stood in a corner, controlling her breathing. When a silhouette appeared behind her, she whirled on it, thinking it was Luke, only to hesitate when she faced a teenager with wet blue hair and a coral pipe.

‘Begging your pardon, Captain Sam,’ panted Aurelio, drenched with rain. ‘It’s Sir Michael. He’s in danger.’
Armed with a wooden staff, Captain Cavalli circled the garrison’s stony courtyard and lunged. He speared it straight at Michael’s belly then thrust it upwards, trying to land a crippling blow. Michael batted it away and counterattacked with a jab to the ribs, but the older boy easily fended him off. Jeers roared from the balconies as forty marines pumped their fists and egged them on. Cavalli smiled through the rain as he feigned another attack and forced Michael off balance. Michael stumbled back between archers’ targets but forgot the straw dummy. He collided with it, and, startled, gave the captain his opening. Cavalli chopped his staff down hard and crunched Michael’s fingers. The golden gauntlet absorbed the impact but not the jarring. *Clang!* Michael dropped his weapon, allowing the captain to strike again. The blunt end punched him in the chestplate and down he went. All the marines cheered.

‘You are vanquished,’ Cavalli said, poking the staff under Michael’s chin. ‘Yield.’

The sky thundered as Michael batted aside the weapon and sat up to shake the tingling from his knuckles. ‘I yield.’

The marines applauded a third time as their young captain twirled his training staff and triumphantly strolled away. Prime Minister Pasquale appeared beside Michael and helped him to his feet. ‘Sir Knight, are you not the mightiest of men? The most honoured of the honourable? Stop toying with this scoundrel. He might be a pup, but he still has teeth.’

He slapped Michael on the back and pushed him into the centre of the open courtyard. The marines cheered again as Cavalli welcomed the rematch.

The captain chose a defensive stance this time, allowing his opponent first strike. Michael lashed out with his staff, but his inexperience showed. Cavalli parried, twisted and knocked the weapon aside before hammering him in the guts. The armour took the blow but Michael still crumpled in half.

‘Yield, sir.’

‘I yield,’ Michael coughed, feeling more tingling across his body.

The marines roared as Cavalli strutted around the younger boy. Amid the cheers, the first whispers poisoned the triumph. Some were questioning the Gold Knight’s willingness to fight.
Shattered, Michael stayed on the ground as Pasquale knelt beside him. ‘My liege, don’t dishonour these boys by taming your sword arm. They are as proud as you and I. Fight the captain as if he was the Giant of the Lost Lake and show these marines how it is done!’ He then lifted him up despite his protests.

Cavalli leant against his staff and asked, ‘How fare you, my liege? Have you lost your heart for battle?’

‘Show respect, young captain,’ the Prime Minister answered for him. ‘Your trousers are far too clean for a fighting son of Pacifico, and our liege here has just promised me he’ll sit you in the mud.’

Howls filled the garrison as Cavalli accepted the challenge. Michael tried calling off the fight, but his pleas were deafened by the noise.

‘Sergeant!’ Cavalli yelled. ‘Let’s make this interesting, shall we? Steel against steel!’

He threw his wooden staff at the young officer, who exchanged it for a sheathed sword. Cavalli drew his blade and tested its balance. Michael froze. No way had he agreed to this!

‘Your sword, my liege?’ the sergeant asked, crossing the courtyard to Michael’s belongings.

Thunder drowned him out. This was crazy! He knew he had to flee. He retreated one too many steps, though, for his sword leapt from the distant bench and jumped into his hand. The marines cheered as one.

‘No, I didn’t mean – It’s my armour –’

Captain Cavalli attacked.

One, two, three – the blade slashed at Michael’s head. He ducked the first then blocked the others. Cavalli swung wide and low, catching Michael’s sword again. But rather than a stalemate, it was a trick. The captain stabbed forward and almost skewered the younger boy. Michael swept his hip away before being killed.

Frustrated, he lashed out and punched Cavalli’s chin. It connected and sent him flying. The forty marines fell silent as their captain skidded across the wet stones, stunned by the extraordinary blow. Groggy, Cavalli staggered to his feet as Michael flexed his gauntlet. How did he do that?

‘Yield!’ he said, pointing his sword.

Cavalli smirked. ‘I think not.’

The captain attacked with greater ferocity this time, spurred on by the punch. He swung, cut and thrust. No one embarrassed him in front of his troops.

Michael wilted under the renewed zeal. Their swords clashed again and again, his arm growing heavy. His defences couldn’t outlast the captain’s fury. He was just a boy – not a knight.
Cavalli sensed weakness and pounced. He caught Michael’s guard down, kicked his legs from under him and stabbed a heel into the fallen boy’s guts. As he pointed his sword at Michael’s throat, the courtyard hushed. Only the rain fell. Michael felt tears as he looked along the nicked blade to the captain’s conquering grin.

‘Hero of all heroes, are you, my liege?’ he asked. ‘The greatest swordsman in all the Seven Worlds of Wonder? Then what does that make me, Sir Michael? A fool?’

The sword tip hovered as Michael searched those grey-purple eyes for mercy. Deep inside, something shadowy and cruel threatened to overpower the captain.

Suddenly, armour scraped and clattered about the garrison. En masse, the young marines knelt and saluted with fists across their chests. His concentration broken, Captain Cavalli twisted round to discover why. Behind him, protected by umbrellas held by her servants, stood young Queen Oriana. Her stance was as fierce as the lightning.

The captain dropped to one knee as Samantha rushed to aid her brother, Aurelio close behind. ‘Your Majesty, I did not –’

‘Captain Cavalli, why are my western and northern watchtowers unmanned?’

‘I –’

‘The crew of the Lord Lyndoch radioed my government on the emergency frequency no less than five minutes ago with news of giant waves heading for our shores. Why hasn’t the alarm been raised and your marines mobilised to deal with this threat?’

‘Begging your patience, Your Majesty, we were just enjoying some sport. We didn’t –’

‘What sport is worth risking the four million lives placed under your care, captain?’

‘None, Your Majesty.’

She turned to the junior officer. ‘Sergeant. Take command of this situation. Captain Cavalli is relieved of his duty. I want all boats launched immediately and the barricades in place. I’d prefer to have Pacifico above the sea rather than at the bottom of it.’

‘You heard Her Majesty!’ the sergeant yelled at his marines. ‘Move!’

A siren screamed from the top of the garrison as the young soldiers rushed down the steps towards the marina. It was answered by another siren, then another.

‘Mercy on my soldiers, Your Majesty,’ Cavalli said, head bowed. ‘The Prime
Minister and I thought a show of arms would inspire our troops in the ways of the Hall. I know now it was folly and the fault rests entirely with me.’

‘That I already know, captain. You have shamed our city with your “sport”. Holding a sword to the neck of one of our most treasured guests insults us all. You will be punished, if indeed your hot-bloodedness hasn’t condemned us first. Prime Minister Pasquale, stand your ground!’

He froze by the front gates. Pulling off his orange cap, he wrung it between his hands as he turned back to her. ‘Y-Yes, Your Majesty?’

‘Is this true? You share in this guilt?’

‘Please, Your Majesty, the young knight’s life was not threatened. Our good captain here gave his word. He wanted to test his arm against our friend, who himself agreed to the display. Isn’t that right, Sir Michael?’

‘Not like that,’ he heaved.

‘This is your second indiscretion, Prime Minister,’ Queen Oriana said. ‘I strongly advise you to avoid a third.’

He bowed deeply, his robes jingling with bells.

‘Be gone – both of you. You’re confined to your quarters until I send for you. Let’s hope for both your sakes that the city is still standing beyond this hour.’

Pasquale and Cavalli slunk away: the Prime Minister – pale and fretting; the captain – dark and scheming.

The Queen wasn’t alone in her condemnation. Aurelio grabbed Cavalli’s arm as he left but was shrugged away. The teenage piper held on, stared at the marine with anger then had his hand forcefully prised away.

Nearby, Samantha waited for Michael to regain his breath as more sirens wailed. ‘Finished being a human chopping board?’ she asked.

‘They tricked me, Sam. They wanted me to watch their training – not be a part of it. Cavalli told his men to lock the gates. Something’s not right with him. You have to teach me some kendo moves –’

‘So you can fight him? Ain’t gonna happen, Squirt.’

Aurelio gave a puzzled look. ‘You can no longer fight, my liege?’ he asked, but was interrupted by Her Majesty.

‘Sir Michael, are you injured?’ The young Queen softened her voice and stood before him, holding her own umbrella. She’d dismissed her servants outside.

‘No, I’m okay. Thanks.’

‘My deepest apologies, friend, for my captain’s folly. His actions are inexcusable. I hope word of his indiscretion won’t leave these walls.’

He nodded. ‘But I’d be happy never to see him again.’
She glanced at the gates. ‘I understand. Cavalli is an excellent marine but a troubled one. When he was a child, a Scorned hunting party killed his father. I fear he still tastes that bitterness.’

A freighter blasted over the garrison and cut her off.

‘We must leave,’ she said calmly. ‘Come. I have a personal transport ready to fly us above the storm. The giant waves won’t reach us there.’

‘But what about Luke? The people?’ Samantha asked. ‘Won’t the whole city be wiped out?’

★

The streets were chaotic. Tourists sprinted to the marina as ships launched into the stratosphere. A squall howled across the emptying plazas and smashed together bobbing gondolas. Frightened Pacificans nailed up their windows and doors, while children huddled in their bedrooms.

Aboard an intergalactic cruiser he’d fled to to escape his sister, Luke ran past lifeboats and deckchairs – and saw impending death. Three gigantic waves rolled towards the city, wide as the horizon. They threatened to smite the ninety islands flat.

His earpiece received another emergency transmission: ‘Category one storm! Category one storm! All ships must leave Pacifico immediately!’

The cruiser lurched below him. Its giant engines fired and the behemoth pulled free of the harbour. Shields began cocooning each deck before space flight. He had to fly!

BOOM!

Thunder scared the stranded tourists back into the city as the last ships vanished among the lightning. Heading into the squall, dozens of marines scrambled into boats and rowed towards the watchtowers. The first crews spiralled up the titans’ hollow middles and then, from one to the next, came a rapid stuttering like an anchor in free fall. Chains – held aloft by the giant hands – snapped taunt and the sea foamed and exploded. Suddenly, enormous concrete blocks surfaced between the titans and formed the beginnings of a barricade.

More ringed the city as marines berthed and scaled the towers. However, a dozen walls weren’t enough. The massive waves would easily surge through the gaps. Spotting the other crews still fighting the conditions, Luke threw himself into the buffeting winds and tunnelled towards a stony king.

He almost smacked into a wall as he powered full-throttle through an open window near the top. He tumbled on a landing then sat up, aware that a few centimetres to the left and he would have fallen into the tower’s hollow middle. More chains stretched from the crown to the sunken depths, and stairs spiralled
around them. Forget walking! He jetted upwards and found six giant wooden levers poking from the floor.

‘The first one!’ a young marine yelled far below him, hurrying up the steps.

‘Pull the first one!’

Luke did so. The lever was tight. Shouldering it with all his strength, the heavy chains suddenly whipped up and down on squealing pulleys as part of a counterweight system like an elevator. He rushed to the window on the right and saw a barricade surface between his titan and the next.

‘Now throw the locks!’ the marine ordered, closer this time.

‘The what?’

‘The second and third levers. You need to secure the barricades.’

Again, he didn’t argue. He thumped them hard. From the middle of the watchtower, two giant bolts swung outwards and locked the barricades in place.

‘The waves!’ yelled another marine below. ‘They’re on top of us!’

Luke grabbed the fourth lever and pulled. Again, the chains spun and rolled. The barrier on the left emerged when –

‘Too late!’

The first massive wave slammed into the titans and barricades with an explosive force. It threw Luke off his feet and smacked him headfirst into a wall. Water gushed through the windows and drenched all hands. The next thing he remembered, a marine held him by the armpits to stop him being washed down the middle. ‘Secure yourself!’ he warned as his companions slammed the shutters. ‘The second wave’s about to hit!’

It punched the blockade harder this time, as did the third. When the fourth and fifth crashed against the walls with less energy, the marines listened, counted the time between following impacts, then gingerly pushed open a top-hatch into the rain.

From their vantage point on the crown, they surveyed the wreckage. To the left of them, houses on the nearest island drained with floodwaters and cafe tables slid from roofs where a barricade had been torn from its chains. A shaky jetty collapsed into the sea as follow-up waves pounded the shoreline with planks, seaweed and filth. A horse-and-cart bolted through the streets without its rider, and the first few doors cracked open as the brave wondered if their city was safe.

Luke sagged against the edge until a marine grabbed him in a bear hug.

‘My friend! You’ve saved Pacifico!’
The city faced a new threat two mornings later. It wasn’t a freak storm or more giant waves, but bleary-eyed nobles in their silk dressing gowns. From their balconies, they shouted and shook their fists at hundreds of Scorned workmen, who scaled rooftops shouldering loads of new tiles or set about sawing planks for the new jetty. When the only answer was more hammering, the lords and ladies – looking anything but prim – slammed their French doors, promised to petition the Prime Minister then crawled back into bed.

Several islands away, Michael sweltered in the morning heat as he waited by the Grand Canal with Samantha and Luke. Around them, a large crowd had gathered, taking holo-photos or calling out the Gold Knight’s name. He felt exposed without his hood but, thankfully, today he wasn’t the main attraction. Just like him, they expected the arrival of somebody far more important.

The marine sergeant ordered his young soldiers to rope off the tourists as the goodwill evaporated and feet grew sore. Two quick-thinking harlequins – a green and a yellow – eased the tension by staging an impromptu show. They juggled throwing pins, the contents of a woman’s handbag and a trio of hapless turtles before distant cheers stole away their audience. Four white stallions adorned with starfish clomped towards the canal, pulling a sea snail carriage coated in gold. Michael felt his chest hitch as they reined to a stop, a door opened and Queen Oriana waved to her people.

‘Show off,’ Samantha whispered into Luke’s ear. Then, glimpsing inside the carriage, she asked, ‘So do you think it turns into a pumpkin after midnight?’

‘I don’t know about pumpkins,’ he said, ‘but look at Mikey’s face – it’s definitely turning beetroot!’

Their brother blushed as Queen Oriana accepted his arm and alighted from the carriage. She wore a clownfish dress with high shoulders and seams that bristled with white and orange threads. A diamond necklace rested across her small bosom, and her purple hair bloomed upwards under a conch tiara. The five small amethysts freckling each cheek caught the sun as she smiled. It was clear to all who was the fairest in this land.

‘Thank you kindly,’ she said, waving for silence. ‘But it is not I who should accept your praise today, but our dear friend, Agent Luke of the Star Ranger
Corp, whose quick thinking this week saved all our lives.’

The people roared their approval as she lifted his hand in victory. She stepped aside and let him bask in the moment as they chanted his name. Bewildered, Samantha shook her head: if Michael was the colour of beetroot, then Luke was turning plum. ‘And I’m going bananas,’ she said.

Michael led Queen Oriana to her royal ferry before joining her at the bow. Luke and Samantha were shown the stern of the black and gold boat, while the captain, crew and marines kept their own company in the central cabin.

‘Sit,’ the young queen said to Michael, patting the dozens of velvet cushions beside her. ‘Let us enjoy a morning free of politics and the worries of state.’

‘Thank you, Your Majesty.’

‘And please, Sir Michael,’ she smiled, ‘now that we are away from my court, call me Oriana. Even royals seek to be treated as friends.’

He blushed. ‘Okay, but as long as you just call me Michael.’

Shouting children chased the royal ferry along the Grand Canal until they reached a footbridge. Oriana waved them goodbye as her party chugged on.

‘You look a little pale,’ she said, noticing him close his eyes. ‘Are you ill?’

‘Boats and I don’t get along,’ he said, squeezing a cushion. ‘My dad took me fishing once when I was seven. He rocked the sides to scare me as a joke. Except I fell in and drank half the river.’

She pursed a smile. ‘Well, Michael, if the captain dares shake this boat, you and I shall both fall into the canal, and come sunset he will be hanging from the gallows.’

Michael was horrified until she gently laughed. Soon, he joined in.

More people cheered from windows as the ferry navigated a bend. ‘Long live Her Majesty! Long live Queen Oriana!’

She waved back then savoured the smells of thyme, rosemary, oregano and basil wafting from balcony gardens. Schools of emperor red snapper, little spinefoots and scissortail sergeants drifted around them, as did a baby stingray and a pair of pineapple fish. Even a nosy seahorse hovered above her outstretched glove, fluttering its little fins.

‘Do all your fish fly?’ he asked.

‘Yours do not?’

‘No, they swim.’

‘But how do they breathe?’

‘Through slots behind their heads called gills. I don’t know how they work, but they help extract oxygen from the water.’

The seahorse flew away. She blinked. ‘How strange. All those colourful creatures hidden for no one to see.’
‘I guess so. I’ve never thought about it that way.’
A sunfish lazed by, soaking up the heat. It looked at them then rolled over on its belly. ‘Where are all your birds then?’ he asked.
‘You’ve seen a bird?’ she asked, grabbing his arm.
‘Of course. Thousands of them.’
‘Please, describe one for me.’
He did something better. He opened his journal and drew parrots, eagles, owls, pigeons, penguins, emus and even the hawk that nested above his apartment. With each new picture, her eyes grew wider, like a child hearing her favourite fairytale.
‘Our world once had such beautiful creatures,’ she said, the excitement fading from her voice. ‘That was until they were stolen and held for ransom, which we refused to pay. As punishment, they’ve never been seen again.’
‘Stolen? Every single one? How?’
She glanced at Samantha, who was thumping Luke with her hat in retaliation for hitting her with a cushion. ‘It’s best you ask your companion,’ Oriana said. ‘The way of the pirate is foreign to me.’
He saw the ostrich feathers on his sister’s hat and under stood why many Pacificans snarled when she walked by.
Flotsam and jetsam slapped against the walls of the Grand Canal and grew thicker as the captain carefully entered the harbour. In the shadow of the royal watchtowers, barges cleaned up the destruction left behind by the gigantic waves, while pumps continued draining still-flooded islands.
‘We are fortunate no lives were lost,’ she said, spotting a red gown rippling on the surface. ‘One-fifth of our gondolas are sunk; many houses are damaged; part of the water supply has been compromised; and the western eateries will need demolishing, but we shall rebuild. Repairing people’s trust may take more time, however.’
Beside the moored cruise liners, tourists berated staff about stranding them during the emergency. Meanwhile, business was still business, and gaggles of new visitors disembarked, eager to explore the destruction.
Queen Oriana glanced down at the sound of tearing paper. Michael pulled a page from his journal, ripped it into a square and began folding. ‘For you,’ he said, presenting her with the finished gift.
‘What is it?’
‘An origami crane. It’s a bird that lives on my world.’
‘You come from Origami?’
‘No.’ He smiled. ‘Origami is the art of paper-folding, see? I learnt it at school.’
She held it in her smooth glove until a sharp breeze gave it flight. She caught it again and laughed, the ten amethysts flashing on her cheeks. ‘Thank you. Thank you, kindly.’

On the other side of the cabin, Luke snickered. ‘Did you see that? Mikey’s in love.’

‘He can’t be in love,’ Samantha said. ‘He’s only twelve.’

‘Hello, you’re twelve and in love with Rajan Sudhakar.’

‘Am not. And I never was, thank you very much. I pretended to be nice to him so I could copy his maths exam.’

‘He copied yours! And you both failed!’

‘Whatever. Anyway, Smarty Pants, how could I date a boy with less facial hair than me?’

At the bow, Oriana and Michael turned at the wild laughter. ‘Your companions seem to be in good humour,’ she said.

‘Yes, and that’s what worries me.’

The ferry headed for a northern island clearly different from the others. Devoid of buildings except for an enormous mansion, it was landscaped with thousands of rose bushes as well as hedge mazes, rotundas, statues and jets of water shaped like tunnels to walk under. ‘The royal retreat,’ she explained. ‘I must beg your indulgence on its size. The main house only has twenty-seven guestrooms.’

As they powered towards the Island of Roses, they passed waterbuses, buoys, dolphins, gondolas, windsurfers and giant amphitheatres. A trio of elegant blue spaceships shaped like vertical boomerangs hummed overhead before splashing down into port.

‘Pardon the late notice,’ she said, sliding a party invitation from her sleeve. ‘I was unsure as to how long you’d be in our company.’

Holographic fireworks exploded from the invitation’s middle before fizzing into the number 300. ‘Please, be my honoured guest,’ she added. ‘My lineage has sat on Pacífico’s throne for three centuries now, and the city wishes to honour my forebears with a week-long celebration.’ She looked away with a flutter of nervousness. ‘I was hoping – I mean – I’d be grateful if you’d also honour me by escorting me to the royal ball.’

Their eyes met. He couldn’t breathe. The prettiest girl in all Pacifico had asked him out? ‘Absolutely!’ he answered. Then, realising he sounded too excited, he said, ‘Thank you, Your Majesty. It should be a lot of fun.’

Samantha fell back into the cushions and groaned. ‘Oh no. What trouble is he getting us into now?’

‘Do you think they’ll kiss?’ Luke said, staring. ‘I wonder if she kisses like
toffee.’
   ‘Toffee? What are you babbling about?’
   ‘Eddie Reynolds says kissing girls is like touching warm toffee.’
   She gawped at him. ‘Eddie Reynolds thinks cheese comes from cow boogers.’
   ‘Well, how would you know it doesn’t feel like toffee, Miss I-Don’t-Love-Rajan-Sudhakar?’
   ‘I just do, okay? And stop being such a boy. Remember why we agreed to get on this dumb boat in the first place: to ask Queen Purple Hair about Knock-Knock Doors.’
   ‘Maybe it’s like caramel fudge. Justin Jones thinks so.’
Samantha’s anguished cry caught Michael’s attention. He looked to his brother, who made silly smooching signs, then to his sister, who pointed at Oriana and drew a door in the air. Thankfully, the shudder of the ferry docking at the jetty gave him an excuse to turn away.
   The crew secured the boat while Oriana led Michael into the gardens of the Island of Roses. Samantha and Luke followed them when two footmen rushed from the mansion bearing urgent news.
   ‘Your Majesty, forgive us. May we speak?’
   ‘Yes,’ she said. ‘What troubles you?’
   ‘There’s been an accident.’
   The Queen rushed past the mansion to the opposite shore, where all the workers had gathered. Scuttled in the shallows lay a capsized yacht. When Oriana saw its name, The Duchess of Northumberland, she clapped her hands over her mouth and backed away.
   ‘We’ve searched the entire island, Your Majesty,’ the footman said. ‘I’m afraid we cannot find any sign of your friend.’
   Sobbing, Oriana fled to the mansion, Michael dashing after her.
   ‘What’s so special about The Duchess of Northumberland?’ Samantha asked.
   ‘Sir, it’s Lady Isabelle’s boat,’ the footman answered. ‘She must have been lost in the storm.’

★

A sole church bell mourned deep and low from the capital. A minute later, another answered it from an outer island, then a third. Shortly, ninety bells tolled before there was silence once more.
   Tourists faded from the city as the sky changed from blue to pink to purple. Pacificans sat in parlour rooms and raised toasts to Lady Isabelle. Nobles lost their appetites for feasts. Flags hung at half-mast. And marine patrols scoured
the shores out of thoroughness rather than hope.

Michael broke the strange calm. He sprinted from the docks, crossed the royal bridge, hiked up the giant stairway, then searched the palace for the head servant. Pointed in the right direction, Michael spiralled up four floors to a domed observatory overlooking the city. Standing on a balcony surrounded by marble angels and saints, Queen Oriana stirred and glanced over her shoulder. She was dressed in a new orange-pink outfit with tiger stripes and spines similar to a lionfish. He tried entering, but two pikes scissored in front of him.

‘Let him pass,’ she said to the Royal Marines. ‘He comes in peace.’

Michael didn’t wait. He pulled off his helmet then navigated through the telescopes, harps, mandolins and baby grand piano to join her. ‘Oriana, are you okay?’

Tears rimmed her eyes as she grimaced. Her lavender hair matched the shade of evening falling across the terracotta roofs. ‘I could do with your courage.’

Gingerly, he removed his gauntlet and placed a hand on her shoulder. He feared it was the wrong thing to do – he being a commoner and all – but it felt right. She warmed at his touch, placed her own gloved hand over his then leant her cheek against them both.

A few moments later, she moved to the edge of the balcony. ‘Isabelle and I have been friends since childhood. We played at my father’s feet of an evening after the affairs of state were finished. For this tragedy to strike such a wonderful, wonderful –’

She broke down and cried. He stood beside her and offered his strength.

‘Are you sure Isabelle was on that boat?’

‘Why do you ask?’

‘Maybe she didn’t drown. Maybe she’s been taken, just like her brother.’

She blinked at him. ‘But Guido is away on business. Captain Cavalli informed me of this himself.’

Michael fumed at this last name. He gripped the balcony then blurted, ‘Oriana, the monster is real.’

‘The monster?’

‘Yes, and working for someone here in the city.’

Her eyes widened. ‘Who?’

‘We don’t know, but they’re using the monster to kidnap people.’

‘For what end?’

‘I’m only guessing, but I think they’re trying to overthrow your crown.’

Oriana stumbled. He caught and righted her as the two marines also rushed to her aid. She waved them away and wiped her eyes with a silk handkerchief.

‘You’ve known about the monster all along, haven’t you?’ he asked.
Absently, she stared across the empty city before walking to the other end of the balcony. ‘My government and I have kept proof of its existence to ourselves for some time now, fearing the panic it would create. But I see that ploy has now failed, and good people have died because of it.’

‘You have to warn your people. You have a better chance of catching both the monster and the traitor if everyone knows the truth.’

She pondered this gravely before nodding in resignation. ‘I will do as you ask. The blame must be solely mine.’

He left her to her thoughts as she retreated inside the observatory and ran her fingers over a mandolin crafted from silver and pearl. She drifted to the baby grand piano and tinked a few keys until she slammed down her fists.

‘I hate being queen! Sometimes I’m a prisoner in my own kingdom.’

He reached out his hand and gently led her down the spiralling staircase. ‘Hopefully, I’ve something that’ll cheer you up.’

After ordering her two marines to come no closer, Oriana stood at the crest of a steep boulevard lined with closed cafes and shops. Its cobbled street wound for three hundred metres without a single soul in sight. Michael handed her a thin but sturdy object with four wheels. He’d paid a craftsman to make a matching pair based on his journal sketches.

‘What is it?’ she asked, half-averting her eyes as he shed his armour.

‘Madness!’

He jumped on his skateboard and hurtled down the boulevard. His armour flew after him and his yahoo howled all the way to the bottom.

Bursting with mirth, Oriana looked at her own roughly made skateboard then at the marines, who appeared more nervous than her. In a very unlady-like manner, she hitched up her lionfish gown, stepped on the ride, then fell on her bum. She laughed as the marines rushed to help her. The moment she got to her feet, though, she was off! She zipped down the street, a little unsteady, but screaming with delight.

*  

Back at the palace, on the same balcony, a sticky tearing sounded from above. A puff of white flecks dusted the ground as a statue did the unthinkable – it moved! First, his eyes blinked, then his fingers flexed, before his whole body ripped away from the wall. Painted completely grey-white to camouflage himself, the spy swung around the outstretched arm of a real statue, double-checked the marines posted on the bridge below, then snuck down the observatory’s spiralling staircase. He stepped inside a holographic painting and pushed open a secret door, which descended to the hidden dungeon.
The boss would be pleased. The boy-knight was now at the centre of this conspiracy. It was time for him and his siblings to play their final part – and be killed by the monster.
Faces glowed red, green then gold as fireworks cannoned and bloomed above the gondola-filled harbour. A dozen more rockets shot from the docks, spiralled each other then exploded into cheers. On the wharves and promenades, great masses of people whistled, sang and pounded bongos amid giant floats. From the overlooking balconies, revellers tossed shimmering confetti and danced to the beat of street parties.

It was carnivale night – the start of the royal family’s tricentennial celebrations – when no expense was spared. Everyone wore elaborate costumes. Tradition required that all citizens don capes and masks to allow nobles, politicians – even queens – to walk the streets anonymously and share in the hospitality of their neighbours. The boy dressed with the horse’s head could be a young scholar. The girl with the cat mask could be a famous singer. Guessing other people’s identity added to the buzz.

Sporting a frog disguise, Michael followed three Scorned waiters carrying platters of expensive cheese, caviar and smoked salmon downstairs from a rooftop into a noblewoman’s parlour. Hundreds of guests clustered around antique lounges, armchairs, grandfather clocks, curtained doorways and low chandeliers, laughing and hugging the late arrivals. He spotted Samantha by a cold fireplace wearing a Zorro eye mask and, a few metres away, Luke picking at a two-metre high pyramid of chocolate doughnuts.

‘Now that Her Majesty has confirmed what we already knew, when are you and your companions going to confront this ghastly monster?’ a politician asked.

‘Probably next week,’ Luke answered, lifting his jester’s mask to eat. ‘We’re planning on trapping it.’

‘Whatever for?’ asked the politician’s fiancée.

‘Imagine how much money we’d make selling it to a zoo – or even a circus.’

‘Yes, and why don’t we make it a two-for-one sale by throwing you in for free,’ Samantha said, yanking Luke away by the arm. ‘I thought I warned you not to talk about the monster.’

‘How? Look around you, Sam. That’s all everyone’s talking about.’

They listened into the conversations nearby. He was right. Six days after Oriana’s shock announcement, fear had been replaced by insatiable fascination.
‘Okay, then stop telling people we’re going to hunt it,’ she added. ‘It’s the marines’ job now. And lay off the junk food, would you? Your body is finally catching up with your big head!’

He glared then threw the doughnuts at her. ‘No wonder everybody hates you!’

She grabbed his jacket, but he pulled free and slipped through the masses. ‘Go on!’ she yelled. ‘Run! About time you did some exercise!’

The din lowered as all eyes turned towards her. Saving her from embarrassing herself further, Michael steered her into another room before the volume rose again. There, laughter snorted from a couch as a portly man in an elephant mask reeled at some joke’s punchline. It wasn’t hard to guess his true identity.

‘What does Pasquale actually do again?’ Samantha asked, cutting off Michael before he spoke up. The last thing she needed was a lecture.

A pair of ladies laughed outrageously at the Prime Minister’s antics.

‘What do any of them do except sleep all day and party all night?’ Michael replied.

‘Since we’ve arrived here, have you seen any poets, actors, painters or nobles actually work?’

He shook his head. ‘Only the Scorned.’

‘So how come the Pacificans are so rich?’

‘Well, I heard some boys over there asking each other how much money the government gives them. It sounded like a lot.’

‘So then where does the government’s money come from?’

★

Drummers pounded giant papier-mâché heads of kings and queens as the street party closed in on the central plaza. Revellers whistled and bashed cymbals. Luke stood in a doorway, waiting for a break in the crowd. Thank goodness for fresh air. It was too stuffy inside that parlour room. And Miss Stuffy herself was only stifling it more.

How dare she call him fat. Wasn’t she the same girl who Aunt Vanessa called ‘Pudding’ before she took up kendo?

He was about to blast into the sky when he heard a strangely familiar Belgian accent.

‘Make way! Make way! Any slower and it’ll be yesterday.’

He searched the crowd until he spotted a man in a blue pinstriped suit, matching gloves and a derby hat. The man was pushing against the flow, and clearly in a rush.
‘Mr Goode Deed!’ Luke yelled. ‘Hey! Over here!’

But the drummers were too loud. Luke fought past the giant papier-mâché floats, desperately trying to reach the shop owner, until the crowd grew too thick. *Enough of this*, he thought, before rocketing upwards.

★

‘Where is he?’ Samantha growled, searching the central plaza, where the main show was about to start. ‘He better not be sulking.’

‘Over there,’ Michael pointed. ‘Look.’

It wasn’t Luke but Cavalli. He’d also spotted them and started pushing his way through the masses to reach them. However, no one willingly stepped aside for him now that he’d lost his uniform and rank, and people complained when he grew more forceful. Two marines intervened and asked him to leave.

‘Serves him right,’ Michael said. ‘He’s just a citizen like everyone else now.’

‘But still as dangerous,’ she added.

The plaza dimmed into an excited darkness. The crowd hushed and a spotlight blinked on a drummer boy in a harlequin mask. He began to play. Two more drummers blinked into existence behind him, then another four, then another eight, before the entire stage rumbled with their marching rhythm. They split into pairs then rolled across each other’s backs – without missing a beat!

The still rapture broke into laughter as Prime Minister Pasquale, full of festive courage, tumbled through the onlookers in his elephant mask and wiggled his sizeable paunch to the beat. Two marines grabbed him by the armpits and escorted him off – and received applause of their own.

At once, the drumming halted. The boys disappeared with the lights. There was a long silence, a few impatient calls from the audience, then – *flash!* – a white harlequin appeared. She had a beautiful mask with rich red lips, a gold forehead and a hairline of large curled triangles made from sheet music that dangled with a dozen gold bells. She pretended to be a ten-year-old girl rolling an orange ball. Skipping around it, she licked an oversized lollipop and teased the crowd like a spoilt brat. She grew cocky and refused to let anyone touch the ball when, suddenly, it braked. Confused, she tiptoed towards it, only for it to spin away. She chased it, screaming, as it jumped over her head or zigzagged out of reach every time she got close. Finally, suffering from a serious case of the grumps, she caught it when – *SSSSPPPLLLRRRRRRRR!* – the ball deflated, causing the crowd to laugh again and the girl to squeeze out fake tears. A section of the audience sang, ‘*Oooh!*’ before a purple harlequin on a unicycle rode into view and handed her a foot pump. She tried inflating it but nothing happened, so she signalled for everyone to stomp their feet in unison. Michael joined in.
Samantha stood, arms crossed.

Quickly, the ball grew. And grew. It reached the size of a hot-air balloon before the unthinkable happened: it began chasing her! She shrieked around the stage as the crowd swayed and cringed, fearing it too would be squashed. The purple harlequin returned. He crept up behind it with an enormous pin and – \textit{BANG!}

From its middle burst dozens of other harlequins!

‘\textit{Wark! Wark! Wark!} Lords and ladies, boys and girls, honest citizens and, well, politicians, welcome to the Tricentennial Masquerade Carnivale!’

The crowd roared as the Vulture backflipped into the main spotlight, holding a microphone under his enormous beak. Michael clapped furiously too before a girl in a lioness mask squeezed beside him. He knew those lavender eyes. He reached out and held her gloved hand.

‘Tonight, my friends, we harlequins will perform for you a multitude of death-defying feats and acrobatic skills that have never been seen on any world before. We promise to daze, amaze, scare and leave you gasping for air at our array of impossible tricks. But enough squawking! Bring out the Fireflies!’

Two burly blue harlequins sprouting silver bull horns and shouldering ropes pulled from the shadows a massive drum crafted like a girl’s smiling face. However, this disguised its true purpose. A line of orange harlequins ran and leapt on top of the drum then trampolined into the sky. Somersaulting, they juggled flaming pins, burst through fiery hoops or breathed fire.

Act after act followed. Trapeze artists, sword swallowers, strongmen, contortionists, singers, musicians and wall dancers on bungee ropes dazzled the crowd. The scariest of all was the shark hypnotist. The green harlequin entranced flying tiger sharks and hammerheads then rode them bareback. Just as impressive was the red harlequin. Dressed in a red gown, gold mask and a large, red, heart-shaped collar, she was part-gymnast, part-illusionist. She rolled a glass ball up and down her arms, across her fingers and behind her neck, only to coax two more from the air and repeat the trick with all three.

‘\textit{Wark! Wark! Wark!} How about the Lady of Hearts, folks? Sensational, isn’t she? Just don’t go tenpin bowling with her. She takes an hour to line up one ball.’

Older onlookers chuckled.

‘Now, do we have a treat for –’ the Vulture continued until a man shouted over him.

‘Bravo! Bravo! Keep laughing everyone! Come now!’ Prime Minister Pasquale said, walking into the spotlight and trying to turn up the tempo. The audience humoured him until he pushed its patience. ‘You can do better than
that. Cheer louder!’

‘Wark! Wark! Wark! My, isn’t Prime Minister Pasquale quite happy tonight, children. I think he’s eaten more food than even his big belly can store. Then again, politicians never go to bed feeling empty – only the taxpayers who voted them in.’

A drum *ba-boomed* in the background and the audience laughed. Before the Prime Minister could challenge the Vulture, six marines streamed onstage and starred in a comedy routine of their own making. They chased Pasquale round the plaza until he tripped over his orange robes and crashed – bells and all – next to the popcorn seller. Finally, he was hauled to his feet and escorted away, much to everyone’s relief. Beside him, Michael felt Oriana sigh.

He asked her if she was okay when a clap of thunder struck. He cringed, worried about a repeat of the mega-storm, but, bizarrely, found the skies clear. Other onlookers shared his nervousness – then lightning flashed. It blazed bright blue from one rooftop to the next before two bolts collided and showered everyone with sparks. Fear turned to celebration as everyone looked up at an electric sign throbbing with the number 300. Another massive lightning bolt exploded in the middle of the plaza. When the smoke cleared, a tall man in a cloak strolled forward with a *tap, tap, tap*.

‘The black harlequin!’ a young girl in a cat mask whispered fifty metres away.

He swivelled upon hearing his name, pointed his ebony cane at her, raised his other hand and snapped his fingers. In a blink, the central plaza fell dark. Seconds later, more lightning flashed and he materialised right in front of the same girl!

‘Bravo!’ the crowd shouted. ‘Encore!’

The black harlequin had one more trick. Spying to the left, then to the right, he twirled his cane, tapped it on the flagstones once –

Twice –

Three times before –

*Fwoosh!*

– he vanished in a puff of smoke. Stunned, the crowd searched for him across the plaza until a spotlight powered up and traced the length of the clock tower. At its top stood the black harlequin, waving his three-cornered hat and throwing handfuls of candy.

‘C’mon, Lancelot,’ Samantha said above the cheers, tugging on Michael’s cloak. ‘Show’s over. Say good-night to your girlfriend. We’ve got to find Luke.’

‘Trouble?’ Oriana called out as they parted.

‘It’s what we’re good at,’ he yelled back.
Now that looked suspicious. It wasn’t Mr Goode Deed but someone just as evasive. Luke scrambled along the rooftop of the palace and shadowed a thief sneaking among the rose bushes of the royal grounds. The man wore a hooded cloak stitched from animal skins, shouldered a heavy sack and moved as if sporting a sprained ankle. Spooked by the sudden applause drifting from the main plaza where the harlequins held court, the thief hurried to a sea wall, double-checked he hadn’t been spotted then dropped into a waiting boat. With the marines busy policing the tricentennial celebrations, it was an easy getaway.

Luke trained his night vision on the man, who rowed to a small outlying island that harboured a mix of middle-class homes and light industry. The thief grabbed the sack, covered his boat with a tarpaulin then broke into a dilapidated shipbuilding yard by scrambling an electronic lock. Within seconds, Luke touched down a safe distance away and followed him inside.

Despite its appearance, the warehouse was still operational. Giant mining trucks and drilling equipment were parked next to a dividing wall of wooden crates stacked to the roof. Maps were unfurled on a wide desk, pinned down by speakers covered in tropical mud and kapok leaves. And most importantly, on a computer keyboard, he spotted another dead man’s ring.

Luke crept between shelves of spare parts, oil and tools, before hiding behind a bulldozer. In front of him, the unsuspecting thief lit a lantern and scoured the crates until he discovered the encircled symbol of a howling wild dog. Unable to prise one open, he disappeared to the rear of the warehouse to search for a crowbar. Luke was ready to scurry across the room and follow him, when his visor fizzled. Glancing round, he discovered the source of the interference: pebbles stuck like warts to the scoop of the bulldozer, which had been pummelled and smashed. He tried picking off one, only to have it snap back with a metal ping. He shone his flashlight closer and reeled. Magnetic rock. Specifically, widow rock. The same stuff found at the Broken Isles.

But how? Wasn’t travel to the Western Seas banned?

The question almost cost him his life. Suddenly, an engine rumbled from the rear of the warehouse and a long-necked excavator ploughed through the crates. Luke leapt to safety as several almost crushed him. He quickly regained his feet,
only to have the heavy bucket swing straight at him! Urgently, he hit his thrusters and blasted out of reach of the excavator, which missed and slammed into the wall, shattering the windows.

The thief jumped from the cabin and hobbled through the front door. Luke landed and pursued him, leaving behind scattered boots, toys and clothes.

Bright beams of light flashed about them as they raced through the streets. The lone marine guarding the nearest watchtower had heard the noise and swivelled his searchlight. With a star ranger and a soldier now chasing him, the lame thief had no option but to abandon his boat. Panicking, he threw aside a grate and plunged into a dark hole.

Luke hesitated on the top rung. In the open, his flying gave him an advantage over the thief. But in these old service tunnels, he’d be vulnerable. This was confirmed twelve metres underground in the dankness when his radar showed no readings. He switched to night vision again and chased after the ringing footfalls.

He was quickly rewarded. Weighed down by his loot, the thief dropped his sack and kept running. Luke opened it, expecting to find money, silver or even jewellery. Instead, to his surprise, he recovered flour, jam, seeds, matches, blankets, books and smashed eggs. He opened a book, searching for clues, only to find it full of arithmetic. Who would steal that?

He resumed the hunt, zigzagging right then left then right again, bouncing off concrete walls and ducking under pipes. The tunnel straightened and the floor dipped. Droplets falling from the ceiling tasted of saltwater, and for the first time he realised he was running under the harbour. Spurred on by images of billions of litres caving on top of him, he zoomed his visor on the thief struggling to run at any great speed. This should be easy, Luke thought. He aimed at the man and fired his thrusters, only to lift too high and slam into the roof! He crash-landed into the water, grazing both hands and cheeks. Stupid! Stupid! Stupid! There’s not enough room to fly! Use your feet!

The tunnel sloped upwards again and connected to the capital island. The overhead pipes widened and slithered down dozens of new passageways, which the thief clearly knew. He disappeared into one and Luke kept pace, fighting off a stitch. Bang! He ran into a chain-link gate. Argh! He backtracked but lost valuable time.

Electric bulbs flashed by and Luke turned off his visor. Ahead of them, an open metal door reverberated with pipes, pistons, shouting – and thunder? A roaring crowd answered his question. The central plaza! It was right above them.

The thief barged into an underground chamber hot with steam. Mechanics turned round as Luke continued his chase, jumping over cables and dodging
generators. From above, a trapdoor collapsed and the black harlequin almost fell on top of him. Twenty metres away, a lever was thumped, and, dressed identically in black, a stunt double rocketed up a platform to the top of the clock tower. ‘You there!’ a mechanic shouted. ‘This is a restricted area!’

Luke didn’t have time for explanations. He charged out the opposite door and – too late! – the thief was gone.

Beaten, Luke collapsed against a wall and sighed. The tunnel split in five directions and, with no clues or energy left, he accepted defeat. As more cheering echoed from above, he rewound his visor’s recording and searched for a glimpse of the man’s face. Waitaminute. It couldn’t be! What was he doing stealing from the palace?

Marching boots caught him off guard and he hurriedly merged into the shadows. Luckily, they turned west, unaware of his presence.

‘Don’t you know who I am?’ an older man’s voice demanded in an excited ramble. ‘You will lose your hides for this! I’ll personally tell the Queen herself!’


The protests trailed off as the trio marched deeper into the tunnels. Luke followed them until they knocked on then entered a heavy metal door with a peephole. Now that was weird. Why would anyone build a security room down here? He had one chance to find out.

Soon, three marines returned to the door – two stepping into the tunnel, while the last remained behind as a sentry.

‘What are our orders?’ the first asked.

‘Return to the celebrations and be on alert for the Heroes from the Hall,’ the third answered. ‘The monster hunts them tonight.’

The men laughed before carrying out their duties.

Hidden inside an adjacent locker room full of marine uniforms, Luke blanched at this news. He frantically whispered into his mouthpiece, desperately hoping to hail help, but heard static. Rather than sneak back out, he wanted to record further proof of this conspiracy. He cracked open the locker room door, clung to the shadows, scurried past the remaining marine, and crept further into the bunker. From what he’d already seen, he shared Pasquale’s fears. Whips hung from hooks. A nest of leg irons lay in a corner, ready to snap. And crude wooden bits used as muffles had fresh sets of teeth marks. Suddenly it occurred to him: this was more than a secret bunker – it was a dungeon!

There were no windows and one door. A path curved down to the left that stank of body odour, sweat and waste. His mind prickled as he heard breathing, sobbing and the rattle of chains. Finally, he entered a square chamber and froze. Dozens of heavy eyes turned to him, swollen with tears and puffy with bruises in
the shape of fists. Never in his life!

‘Lady Isabelle?’

Rolling glass startled him. A globe filled with red vapour followed the curve of the path then bounced against his feet.

‘Don’t touch it!’

Too late.

Hissss!

Knock-out gas enveloped him and he fell limply to the flagstones.

★

‘Tomorrow, we’re buying a leash!’ Samantha fumed as she barrelled through the last of the revellers hurrying home, ripping off her party mask. ‘Luke shouldn’t have run away like that.’

Michael trailed behind her, apologising to each person. ‘He’s probably still mad at you for calling him fat.’

‘At me? He picks on me all the time but can’t handle it when he gets his own back.’

‘You were kinda mean.’

She whirled on him, her cobra flaring. ‘Why do you always take his side, Michael? You never defend me.’

He shrank and didn’t say another word. They pushed past the papier-mâché heads then searched the closing food stalls.

‘Look, I don’t mean to get all huffy, but you boys seem to forget why we’re even in this stupid city,’ she said.

‘To find the monster –’

‘No, to get back to Earth. We’ve been here three weeks now, and we’re no closer to finding another Knock-Knock Door.’

‘Three weeks? Are you kidding?’

‘See? That’s my point. I’m homesick, Michael. I want to curl up on the couch and watch football. I dream about eating burritos. I can’t wait to find out if Carrie-Anne Duncan got glandular fever from kissing Rajan. But most of all, I want to see Mum and Dad.’

‘Maybe we can bring them here,’ he offered weakly.

‘And how would we explain that? These people think we’re from this dumb Hall of Heroes. You heard those nobles tonight. They’re wondering why we haven’t caught this monster yet. It won’t be long before they find out we’re just a bunch of school kids. What will Oriana think of you then?’

She marched ahead, leaving him stinging.

When the clock tower struck twelve, they finally admitted they were lost.
They’d never explored this far from the palace and couldn’t see any of the city’s familiar landmarks. They kept close together as they homed in on music coming from a badly tuned piano. It stood in the middle of a street lined with broken lamps and boarded-up terraces. A Scorned woman sang and played it as her laughing family warmed their backsides around a fire.

The Bowmans walked into the light and the piano clunked to a halt. All eyes stared unblinkingly, first at the pirate costume then the gold armour. A boy backed away, but a hand grabbed him and forced him to stand his ground. The rest of the Scorned spread out in a threatening semicircle, forcing Michael and Samantha to retreat. They stopped when, across from them, a grate rattled aside and a tattooed man surfaced from the tunnels. He was panting. He glanced at the Bowmans and immediately paled. It was the lame palace footman.

‘Leave, heroes,’ the pianist said. ‘Traitors aren’t welcome here.’

The pair left. And fast.

‘What was the footman doing underground?’ Michael asked, looking behind them. Some of the Scorned had followed at a distance, making sure neither he nor his sister came back.

‘Nothing that’s any of our business,’ she answered.

They sought safety further away. A horse’s whinny drew them into a small common square, which sprouted with several chestnut trees. On one side was an old-fashioned flour mill, on the second a fire station and on the third a long stable. In the stable they found a young man with cropped blue and lilac hair scrubbing down a white gelding.

‘Thank goodness,’ Michael started. ‘Can you help us? We’re looking for –’

The stable hand turned and scared the remaining words from Michael’s lips.

‘Out fishing again, are we, my liege?’

Cavalli threw his scrubbing brush into a bucket of dirty water and advanced on them, his eyes narrowing. He smelt of straw and manure – and no longer wore cheek gems.

Samantha pushed her brother behind her. ‘We don’t want any trouble, Captain. We just need directions back to the palace.’

‘That’s Private Cavalli now, thanks to you. Our young Queen thought it fitting that because I acted like an animal at the garrison that I should now work with them.’

‘You deserve it,’ Michael said. ‘You tried to kill me!’

‘For what gain? To kill you would have forfeited my own life. No, Sir Knight, I was merely testing you to see if you are who you claim to be. And we both know the answer to that question, don’t we?’

Behind him, the horses started whinnying and pulling on their ropes. The
electric bulbs also flickered.

‘I’ve been protecting you children since you arrived,’ he continued, oblivious to the power drain. ‘Whose marines have been guarding you at the palace? Whose marines saved you that night near Father Valentino’s church? Who enlisted Aurelio to keep watch over you and protect you from harm?’

‘Aurelio?’ Michael asked. ‘He’s been spying on us?’

‘Let’s go,’ she growled. ‘You’re only going to get into another fight.’

He stood his ground but she wasn’t having any of his boyish bravado. She frogmarched him past a metal fire cart parked under the chestnut trees until Cavalli yelled out, ‘Beware the streets at this hour, heroes. You are being hunted.’

‘By your pet monster?’ Michael asked, stopping.

‘My pet?’ Cavalli laughed. ‘Foolish boy. Have you not learnt who is behind this conspiracy yet?’

‘Yes – you! You ordered the monster to kidnap Nobleman Guido, afraid he’d tell me about all your enemies you’ve removed during the past four years. You didn’t have much time for a cover story, so you lied that he’d rushed off to meet the Jewellers’ Guild and forged a farewell letter. Only problem was, no ships leave this city at night. When Lady Isabelle didn’t believe you and threatened to expose you, you got the monster to snatch her, too. You sank her boat at the Island of Roses and used the mega-storm as an excuse.’

‘Child, you are delusional. Until you dishonoured me, only I and the few honest men under my command were stopping more people being kidnapped. Now the enemy prowl unchecked and help hide this city’s greatest secret.’

The horses brayed louder.

‘What secret?’

‘Who suffers to let Pacifico live in peace?’

‘Huh?’

‘How can our nobles afford monuments to themselves, yet none labour? How can they live on the fat of the land, yet not plant seed? How can they wear the finest woven cloth, yet not a single dainty finger be pricked by a sewing needle? Stop listening to stories, boy, and discover whose table you’ve really been plundering.’

The horses bucked and kicked in their stalls. Seeing their heightened alarm, Samantha tugged Michael’s cloak. ‘We have to go – now!’

‘Enough riddles!’ he said, shrugging her off. ‘If you know who the monster is, then tell us!’

A blur flashed behind them. Samantha saw it and drew her sword.

‘Too late,’ Cavalli said, retreating. ‘They’re here!’
The stable doors banged open and the horses charged straight at them, released from their stalls. Samantha tackled Michael and threw him under the fire cart for shelter, barely avoiding being skittled. The team swerved around them and clattered away into the empty streets, whinnying into the night.

Once the danger had passed, Michael and Samantha crawled to their feet and raised their swords. Backs together, they circled and searched the courtyard for attackers, only to hear the lonely rolling of a kicked water bucket. Glancing towards it, they realised the horrible truth. It was Cavalli’s.

Now he’d been taken.
Pound! Pound! Pound! Samantha’s banging woke the entire palace. Footmen kept a safe distance from her until the head servant arrived wearing a silk gown, matching pyjamas and a none-too-pleasant frown. ‘Sir, may I inquire what you are doing?’

‘Get the Prime Minister – now!’

He pinched a smile and steered her away from the door. ‘Unfortunately, sir, you’ll have to wait until morning. The Honourable –’

‘Oriana then!’ Michael demanded. ‘She’ll listen.’

He leapt three steps at a time, only to have a pair of pikes force him back downstairs.

‘Young man,’ the servant said. ‘No one wakes Her Majesty at this hour. Not even Heroes from our beloved Hall.’

‘This is an emergency!’ Samantha yelled. ‘The monster has just grabbed Cavalli – and probably Luke too!’

‘I’m sure the marine sergeant is quite capable of –’

‘There is one person who can help us,’ Michael said, running past her. ‘Stay here. I’ll be back.’

★

Dawn broke and a gentle hand Startled him from sleep. A teenage boy with blue hair, a scarred neck and gold ear chains squatted beside him. ‘Not the most comfortable of beds, my liege,’ Aurelio said.

Michael sat up and felt the gondola rock beneath him. He pushed aside the tarpaulin covering him and found the boat still moored next to a cafe, where the pied piper had hidden him. A cold, softening sky drift ed with clouds, and shimmering schools of fish still slept in doorways. He must have dozed off. ‘Any luck?’

Aurelio offered him a banana and pear for breakfast. Their meeting wasn’t coincidental. The piper had been searching for him during the tricentennial celebrations, hearing word that he and his companions might be in danger.

He nodded. ‘And a brave ride she is.’
‘Then let’s go get Sam.’
Michael found her asleep on a couch outside the Prime Minister’s office. Within seconds, she jerked awake and pounded Pasquale’s door again.
Frowning, the head servant appeared a second time, albeit dressed more formally in his white wig, royal-blue and gold coat, breeches and neck scarf.
‘Sirs, when I said return in the morning, I did not mean dawn. As you are well aware by now, the Prime Minister is rarely awake before –’
‘Either you open this door right now or it’ll be the only thing left standing of this palace!’
The head servant unlocked the door as a messenger arrived and whispered in his ear. Samantha and Michael found Pasquale’s office empty, and, now even more determined to find him, stormed out into the corridor.
‘Sirs!’ the head servant yelled after them. ‘Please, follow me. The Prime Minister will see you in the parliament chamber.’
‘So he is awake!’
The head servant ushered them inside a giant room with red leather benches and oak desks then closed the door behind them. The Prime Minister stood on the other side of the chamber, staring across the harbour.
‘Where’s Luke?’ she demanded. ‘And what’s happened to Cav –’
She choked on this last word as he turned round beaming. Except it wasn’t Pasquale. It was a complete stranger in his thirties who wore the same woollen white and orange robes.
‘I’m glad you both came to see me this morning,’ the stranger said in a slippery voice. He twisted a sapphire into each cheek, bringing his total to eight. ‘A footman just delivered troubling news to my hand.’
‘Where’s Prime Minister Pasquale?’
The man smiled. ‘Relieved of office. As you witnessed at the celebrations last night, he is no longer fit for government.’
‘And who are you?’
‘Federico, the new Prime Minister.’
Michael snorted. ‘Pretty quick replacement.’
‘He’s not with you?’ Federico asked.
‘No, he’s missing. Cavalli, too. Order your marines to search the entire city – right now! We think the monster has taken them both.’
Federico calmly pulled a parchment from his robes.
‘What’s that?’ Michael asked.
‘A watchtower report. Agent Luke was seen chasing a shadowy figure through the old warehouse sector last night. There was an explosion –’
‘An explosion!’ she repeated, snatching away the parchment.
‘– but our marines couldn’t find him when they investigated.’
She tried reading the report but it was all in Latin. She screwed it up and shoved it into his chest. ‘This city is full of liars and traitors.’
Just as annoyed, Michael pushed open a window and whistled. For the first time, Prime Minister Federico dropped his smug demeanour as, outside, an enormous blue whale levelled with the parliament’s balcony. Aurelio straddled its back, playing his coral pipe.
‘Where to, my liege?’ the piper asked.
‘To search that warehouse,’ Samantha answered for him.
Michael shook his head. ‘Luke’s not there.’
‘How do you know?’
He showed her the dead man’s ring. It was vibrating.
‘The monster’s on the move again.’

*

Straight and fast, the blue whale soared across the coral cays and towards the Broken Isles. She flew above shipwrecks, beaches and rainforest before circling the Weeping Mountains. Heartened by the piper’s tune, she descended through an open patch in the canopy and landed next to a rock pool of water lilies. Michael and Samantha dismounted, while Aurelio handed them a lantern, box of matches and a pink conch.
‘Blow it like a trumpet and I’ll return,’ he explained. ‘If I don’t hear from you by evening, then I’ll assume the worst.’
‘You sure you won’t come with us?’ Michael asked.
‘My liege, to expose this conspiracy we need friends. They exist, but only if I seek them out.’
They shook hands.
‘Look after yourself,’ Michael said. ‘Sorry for putting you in danger.’
‘Do not fear. Such is the only life I’ve known.’
Aurelio then flew away.
They hiked through the rainforest, swirling with seeds and pollen. A howler monkey called out to her mate, while a giant flowering plant self-combusted at the first touch of sunlight.
‘I don’t get it,’ Michael said. ‘Why didn’t this dead man’s ring alert us to the monster last night when we found Cavalli?’
‘Because we’re walking into a trap.’
‘A trap?’
‘Think about it. You cracked the code the night you talked with Lady
Isabelle. The monster and its master also figured that out. Now they’re using it to lure us here.’

‘But why?’

‘Because they want to get rid of us too.’

An hour later, they discovered a cave. A stale set of hoof prints circled it; a pair of boots led inside. Before Michael walked in, Samantha held him back.

‘What’s that?’

She pointed to electrical wiring that had been covered by mulch until tripped by a feeding deer. They followed it along the mountain slope and among the ferns to a set of large speakers.

‘And look,’ Michael said, finding a small electronic sensor. He unknowingly crossed its invisible laser beam and — boom! — flinched in a blast of leaves. He knelt and cleared dirt from the buried machine that had ejected them. ‘I don’t understand.’

‘So our monster likes gadgets and listening to tunes, does it?’ she said, sceptically. ‘What other secrets are inside this cave?’

‘Let’s find out,’ he answered, drawing his sword.

Again, she pulled him back. ‘Now, remember what we agreed. Stick by me at all times. Don’t — and I mean don’t — go wandering off. And if this monster comes after us, then I want you to run, okay? Find Aurelio and return with the marines.’

‘No way. I’m not leaving you here.’

‘Michael, no arguments. I’m trained to fight with a sword —’

‘But you’ve been teaching me —’

‘I said no arguments.’

Tears threatened and he glanced away. For the first time, he realised the deadliness of the situation.

‘Do I have your word?’ He remained quiet. ‘Do-I-have-your-word?’

He breathed, then answered thinly, ‘Yes.’

Firing up the lantern, they entered the cave with their swords raised. The shaft itched with crickets and beetles before opening into a large, dark cavern split by a river. As the light crawled deeper around the stalagmites and stalactites, thousands of eyes near the roof blinked open, bared their tiny fangs and dive-bombed.

‘Duck!’

The pair shielded themselves as hundreds of chattering creatures flapped past, scratching and thumping them in the panic. Only when the colony disappeared into the sunlight did its shape become known. They’d been scared by bats. Harmless bats.
The Bowmans continued until, high above, they heard a distant snort. Their glances met. That was no bat.

They hauled themselves up a shaft by grabbing stalagmites, catching each other as they slipped on slime and small streams. Soon, they reached the top and stood across from King Amadeo’s Ghost.

‘A building in a mountain?’ he whispered. ‘It just gets weirder.’

‘Your sword.’ She nudged him, redrawing her own as they traced the rim of the enormous pool towards the busted iron doors. As they crept near, the lantern cast light inside.

Before them stretched a flooded great hall – five storeys high with dozens of yellow marble arches, staircases and balconies – that disappeared into the darkness behind rows of red marble columns. Shards of a collapsed roof jutted from the foul black water like an archipelago. A few bookshelves lined the lower floors, although mould had devoured their collections. It appeared the building had been a great library – although how it came to be in the mountain was a mystery. The strangest discovery hung from the walls. Dangling from unlit oil lamps like hoops, thirteen shark jawbones served as a warning to intruders.

Bravely, the pair chased the flame. Water dripped on their heads and sludge oozed into their boots. The air tasted powdery and old. Samantha explored a side room while he stood between the two main staircases, squinting at the two grey-white statues. The left one was chopped off at the knees; the right one reading a scroll.

A chain rocked above them and she hurriedly returned to the main chamber, waving for Michael to stand back. Again, the chain clinked, which was followed by a waking boy’s yawn.

‘Luke?’

‘Mikey!’

Samantha and Michael thrashed through the water towards the middle of the chamber and lifted up their lantern, trying to spot their brother. They’d almost found him when –

**SHHHRRRRIIIIEEKKKK!**

‘Run!’ she shouted at Michael, pushing him towards the iron doors.

**SHHHRRRRIIIIEEKKKK!**

‘No, Sam –’

‘Run!’

**SHHHRRRRIIIIEEKKKK!**

The horrible noise shattered his mind as it chased him towards the doors. Legs, bodies and sinister faces flashed past his lantern as he staggered haphazardly in the flooded water. What was this monster? What were they?
SHHHRRRRIIIIEEEEKKK!
‘Watch out!’
Black teeth speared down from above and swallowed him whole.
He was alive … and kicking!

He lashed out with his boot as he slipped about in stomach acid and bile. He punched and flailed, scrabbling to find his sword in the darkness. However, instead of a slow, painful death squeezed through the creature’s intestines, he paused when he heard the library echo with laughter.

Lots of laughter.

‘Leave them alone or I’ll –’

‘Or you’ll what, Luke Bowman?’

Michael slowly stood up and yelped after he collided with metal. He wasn’t inside the creature’s belly. He hadn’t even been swallowed. Clang! He was trapped within a cage, and the long dark teeth were iron bars.

‘How do you know his real name?’ Samantha demanded fifteen metres away, captured by another cage and just as surprised to hear the monster talk.

‘I know all your names, Sam,’ the same male voice answered from above in a smooth and delicious tone. ‘Or should that be Samantha? How horrible it must be to wake up every morning and find that beard stuck to your face. No boy will find you attractive now.’

More laughter bounced around them.

‘Who are you, creep?’ she shouted into the darkness. ‘Show yourself!’

There was no answer. No laughter. No splashing through the water. No rocking chains. Just dripping.

Then – slam! – feet landed on Michael and Samantha’s cages and hands reached through the bars to grab them. Luke screamed to let them go as they were stripped of their swords.

The struggle ended when a dark figure landed, cat-like, on a fallen boulder. With a snap of his fingers, blue electricity sparked in his hand and dazzled off his smiling gold mask. He wore a black and red cloak, a three-cornered hat and a rooster pin.

‘Wark! Wark! Wark!’ announced a second voice. ‘Ladies and gentlemen, boys and girls, heroes and zeroes – the black harlequin!’

★
‘Surprised?’ he asked, clicking his fingers again. A mess of lights stuttered throughout each level and lit up the lair. What was once a library was now rigged as a giant trap. Scores of metal cages hung from the roof by chains – some with floors, others with none. The last of these were positioned near the front and rear entrances. If any intruder wandered inside then – bang! – they were snared just like Michael and Samantha.

‘Don’t you dare hurt them!’ Luke shouted from his cage, suspended in the middle of the fourth floor. He’d been stripped of his jetpack and pouches, which lay on the roof of his prison.

Watching from the different levels, the rest of the harlequins chortled: the yellow, the purple, the white, the blues, the moon and the sun, the red Lady of Hearts, the green shark hypnotist, three Fireflies and the Vulture himself.

‘Out!’ the Lady of Hearts demanded, dragging Samantha from her cage.

‘What are you going to do to us?’ she answered, bucking in the harlequin’s grip. ‘Feed us to the monster?’

‘A nice idea but unfortunately an impossible one, my dear,’ the black harlequin said, leaning against his ebony walking cane. ‘We are the monster.’

Stunned, she shouldered off the Lady of Hearts. ‘You? And these circus rejects? Who’d be scared of you?’

With mild amusement, he hummed behind his gold mask. ‘Everything is theatre, my girl. Until the lights came on, you too believed the monster had fangs and claws, and a hunger for young children cowering in their beds. You heard the rumours. You felt the prickle of fear. It’s so hard to know what is real when everybody else is telling the same story.’ Suddenly, he swivelled and pointed his cane. ‘Seize him!’

Escorted from his cage, Michael waited for the right moment then elbowed the green harlequin in the guts. He bolted for the front doors, desperate to find Aurelio. He glanced behind him, only to see no one chasing him. He quickly learnt why. As he surged between the two main staircases, the unbroken statue holding the scroll leapt in front of him and kicked his chest. Michael crashed backwards into the putrid water.

‘You disappoint me, young master Bowman,’ the black harlequin said, as the statue harlequin hauled Michael to his feet and shoved him into a new, floored cage containing his sister. ‘My spy here has been following you for these past few weeks, and not once did you recognise him.’

Michael glared at the human face of the statue harlequin and burned. How stupid of him! Of course. He looked like a statue at the Piermarini Theatre or the round belltower or that carving above Oriana’s observatory. The spy could have been disguised as any number of statues throughout the city.
‘Then again, we are the best spies in the galaxy.’
A blue harlequin locked their cage door.
‘So you’re telling us the monster’s not real?’ Michael said. ‘That you just made it up?’
‘Correct.’
‘Then what about that noise?’
‘You mean this noise?’

SHHHRRRRIIIEEEKKK! SHHHRRRRIIIEEEKKK! SHHHRRRRIIIEEEKKK!

The painful screech pierced the corners of the great library, bouncing the triplets against their cages. The harlequins chuckled again as the blues arrived upstairs to winch Samantha and Michael into the air.
‘That noise – it’s a recording, isn’t it?’ Luke said, shaking clear his head.
‘You’ve got a microphone and speaker in your mask.’
‘In all our masks,’ echoed the harlequins.
‘I can talk through my own mask,’ the black harlequin said, also climbing the staircase.
‘Or this one,’ the moon-face harlequin said in the same voice across from them.
‘Or even the Lady of Hearts.’ Bored, the red harlequin looked their way as she rolled three glass balls on her fingertips.
‘But the monster in the forest – the leaves, the wind –’
‘Mere special effects. A wire here. A laser sensor there. We just let your minds make up the rest. It works so well, in fact, that the natives think these mountains are haunted.’
The black harlequin stopped at their level then joined the Fireflies.
‘You’re some kind of secret police, aren’t you?’ Michael said. ‘You spy on people during the day then kidnap troublemakers by night.’
‘And no one suspects it’s you because everyone’s too busy looking for some sort of monster,’ Samantha said. ‘The perfect disguise.’
‘Thank you,’ the black harlequin said, bowing.
‘What have you done with Guido, Isabelle, Cavalli and Pasquale?’ Michael demanded.
‘Don’t worry. Your friends are still alive. We sent them away on – what would you call it?’
‘Work experience, boss,’ the Vulture offered.
‘Ah, yes. Work experience.’
The harlequins laughed.
Their leader leant over a gaping hole in the floor where a boulder had punched through and summoned the green harlequin. ‘Radio our contact. Tell
them I want these children off-world come nightfall.’

‘Where are you sending us?’ they shouted.

‘People know we’re here,’ Michael said. ‘They’ll come looking!’

‘Really?’ the black harlequin said. ‘Who? Your parents? Your piper friend who’s walking into a trap? Or maybe the Hall of Heroes? Ah, but you’re not actually from the Hall, are you? You’re just three children from a planet no one knows exists.’

As he shifted position, a string of electric lights buzzed and flickered before blacking out. He pressed a button on his walking cane and they powered up again. This wasn’t lost on Michael. He’d seen this before.

‘So it was you who broke into the palace. It was you who chased us through the city and from that church. And it was you who scared the horses from their stalls. We never saw you – only heard you – so it was easy to mistake you for a monster.’

‘If you had spotted me, then you too would have disappeared.’

His vivid blue eyes shone with a mixture of malice and cheek. ‘Oh, and thank you for returning this,’ he said, rolling the dead man’s ring across his knuckles. Michael removed his gauntlet, only to find the ring stolen. ‘I’ve been searching for this for some time now. A certain member of the Jewellers’ Guild was very crafty to pass it on to you, hoping it would lead you to me. Pity, like the thief who pawned it to him, he also lost his freedom. The last thing we want is for one to fall into the hands of our enemies.’ He turned and glowered at the sun harlequin.

‘Hey, goldie!’ Luke yelled out. ‘Who does this remind you of?’ He opened his jaw and rolled his head left to right like a carnival clown. ‘Anyone been busy putting ping-pong balls down your big, ugly mouth?’

The black harlequin shook his head. ‘Lady of Hearts, teach our guest some manners.’

A glass sphere shattered against Luke’s cage and released yellow gas. Against his will, he started sobbing.

‘Oh no, my lady,’ the black harlequin added. ‘Not tear gas. The noise is atrocious. How about something more cheerful.’

She lobbed a second globe. Blue vapour seeped from it and turned Luke into a giggling madman.

‘Stop it!’ Samantha screamed. ‘You’re poisoning him.’

‘Just like a rat,’ the black harlequin quipped.

He glanced up when the purple harlequin called out from a balcony. ‘Boss, take a look at this.’ He held both Michael and Samantha’s swords in his hands. They shuddered in his grip the further he moved away from the cages. Michael’s
armour shook too. ‘It’s just like the boy’s jetpack.’

The Fireflies cupped their hands and vaulted their leader to the top level. ‘Interesting,’ he said, testing the swords himself. ‘Whose handiwork is this?’

‘What should I do with them?’ the purple harlequin asked. ‘They might fly back into the children’s hands.’

‘Chain them to a column. Make sure they have no chance of slipping out. Come dusk, it won’t be our problem.’

‘And this?’ he asked, holding out the conch.

The black harlequin dropped it on the boulder below and watched it shatter. ‘Their friend has his own problems.’ The triplets protested as he turned to the others in his troupe. ‘The rest of you, to the skysled. Time to make an appearance at the Queen’s party.’

‘Leave Oriana alone!’ Michael yelled. ‘She’s done nothing to you!’

The black harlequin laughed as the others started leaving behind him. ‘Don’t worry, Michael Bowman. Your little doll is quite safe. Why would I kidnap the Queen and bring the wrath of Pacifico upon us? A secret police cannot operate if it’s not a secret.’

‘Wark! Wark! Wark!’ the Vulture sang. ‘Be good little birdies, won’t you?’

‘Why are you even on this world?’ Michael pressed. ‘Pacifico is peaceful. It shouldn’t need people like you.’

‘But it does, as all cities do,’ the black harlequin said, descending to their level. ‘There are always secrets to uncover and secrets to protect. Your beloved Pacifico is not as perfect as it pretends.’

‘What secrets?’

‘You don’t want to know, little knight. No one does. If they did, then the nobles would think twice before accepting money from the government to produce their operas and plays.’

Samantha gripped the iron bars. ‘“Who suffers to let Pacifico live in peace?”’

‘What?’ Michael asked.

‘Remember what Cavalli said before they kidnapped him? He warned us that the city’s food, money and clothes came from somewhere other than Pacifico.’

‘The Broken Isles!’

‘Clever children,’ the black harlequin said. ‘Now push yourselves. You’re putting the puzzle together.’

‘Something must be valuable here – something that you’re protecting at all costs,’ Samantha said.

‘In the warehouse,’ Luke said, between laughing fits, ‘I found drills and mining equipment.’
‘Go on,’ the black harlequin urged excitedly. ‘Say it. We’re mining the Broken Isles for –’

There was a moment of defeat until Michael saw the light reflect off the black harlequin’s mask. It was the same substance Lady Isabelle had found Guido holding while asleep in his study. ‘Gold,’ he whispered. Michael staggered away from the bars, embarrassed at how ignorant he’d been. They’d been surrounded by it since arriving at the capital. The palace was furnished with it. Metalworkers made trinkets from it. Mansions and carriages were bought with it. Only one group seemed to miss out on it.

The black harlequin delighted in their shock. ‘So if the nobles are too lazy to work, and the rest of the Pacificans are unwilling to do manual labour, who do you then force to mine that very same gold?’

The question hit like a second punch. They all cowered from the answer. Finally, Samantha broke the silence: ‘Slaves.’

* 

The last of the harlequins vanished through an opening on the top level. A hover vehicle waited for them outside, kicking up dust and pebbles. Their leader tapped the hidden earpiece on the side of his gold mask, nodded and warned them to keep watch for ‘savages’.

‘It’s the Scorned, isn’t it?’ Michael said. ‘They’re your slaves. They’re the same natives you talked about earlier – the ones who think this mountain is haunted. They either work in your mines or flee to Pacifico. But that means –’

‘Yes?’

‘– the Broken Islands are their home and –’

‘And what?’

‘– you’ve conquered them.’

The black harlequin strolled along a broken edge, pleased with their insight. ‘Close, my boy. We harlequins haven’t conquered these islands for ourselves. No, it’s for Pacifico – your beloved city of peace.’

The triplets gripped the bars. ‘You’re lying!’ Michael said.

‘Let me fill you in on the blanks, shall I?’ the black harlequin said, retracing his steps. ‘Pacifico is like a hippopotamus in a small pond. It’s grown too big for its home and needs a bigger one with space to move and food to survive. Except another hippopotamus lives in that bigger pond and refuses to share it with the first hippopotamus. What do you think the first hippopotamus will do?’

‘Fight the second hippopotamus,’ Luke answered.

‘Which is the Scorned,’ Samantha added.

‘Correct,’ the black harlequin said. ‘Pacifico ran out of land years ago. It no
longer had enough crops and fresh water to support itself, so it had to look elsewhere. It turned to the Broken Isles, which had plenty of space and resources – one of which, to our great delight, was gold. After centuries of war, the traditional owners – the Thirteen Tribes – were scattered and living in poverty. Many of their number had sought refuge in other outposts on this planet, leaving their homeland vulnerable. When the thirteen chiefs refused to yield to the government’s demands for colonisation, the government hired my friends and I to wage a secret war on these islands. To ensure that no one found out, we created the monster story to keep people away. As a result, now everyone stays fed; the Scorned threat is eliminated; and the flow of gold keeps the nobles happy and their mouths shut.

‘But you couldn’t keep all the nobles quiet,’ Samantha said. ‘People like Isabelle and Cavalli – they threatened to expose you with their questions, so you made them disappear. Guido even convinced the Red Samurai to come here.’

‘And he too had to vanish. Imagine if all the other worlds found out about these islands. It would be disastrous. Tourists would boycott the city. Planets would ban all trade. The nobles would lose their riches and have to work again. It would set Pacifico back centuries. The entire social system would collapse. Most of those rich fools have even forgotten where food comes from. Without their money, they’re helpless.’

The black harlequin tapped the side of his mask again as he received a new transmission. ‘Ah, time to bid farewell. Thank you for taking part in my conspiracy.’

‘Our part?’ she said. ‘We’ve done no such thing.’

‘Really? Then ask yourself: if I’ve known your true identities all along, why have you been allowed to continue your game of heroes?’

‘Because you were afraid we’d defeat you!’ Luke said.

‘And yet, here I am, standing as a free man – and you are locked in a prison.’

He walked towards the exit.

Michael tried stalling him. ‘It’s because we interrupted your plans, isn’t it? When we arrived in Pacifico unexpectedly, it gave people hope. They believed we really were from the Hall of Heroes. You couldn’t get rid of us straight away, because you knew they’d tear the city apart to find us. It’s the same reason why you can’t touch Oriana. Too many people adore her. But what’s going to stop them tearing apart these isles to find us now?’

The answer came swiftly. ‘Your deaths.’

The threat echoed throughout the entire library. All three pressed their faces against the bars and checked the chains suspending their cages.

‘Don’t insult me,’ his voice carried down to them. ‘I’m much more inventive
than that. The monster has been such a good and faithful pet, but its demise is at hand. Secrets cannot last forever. For years to come, parents will tell their children how the Gold Knight and his two companions slew the ugly beast. With a fatal blow they ran their swords through its invisible heart, but its huge frame crushed them underneath.

‘You’re crazy!’ Samantha shouted.

‘In the next few weeks, the good citizens of Pacifico will mourn their champions and hold a state funeral. Among the crowd, a rumour will start. It’ll move rapidly from the taverns, into the homes and up to the palace before finally reaching the Queen’s ear. People will say that the Scorned controlled the monster, that their age-old enemy had ordered the Gold Knight’s death. The nobles will demand action. The Queen will have no choice but to send her new marine captain to investigate. Within a week, there will be no word, but lo! What’s that drifting on the horizon? An empty boat covered in spears. It’s an act of war! The Broken Isles are ours!’

‘You’re risking war over a lie?’

‘You’d be amazed, young one, how many wars are fought over just that.’

The lights powered down, leaving King Amadeo’s Ghost in complete darkness. Metal chains stopped clinking as the triplets paused in their cages, straining to hear the harlequin leave.

‘What are you going to do with us?’ Michael shouted. ‘Answer me! What are you going to do with us?’ He shook the cage door and bars, but it was hopeless. For such a vast hall, he felt increasingly claustrophobic.

‘Nothing,’ the black harlequin said from far away. ‘That’s for your new masters to decide.’

‘You’re selling us as slaves?’

Again, silence.

‘Who are you?’ Michael demanded. ‘Who’s behind that mask?’

A voice startled him. It whispered in his ear – not from above but only half a metre away. It had no solid form, but definitely belonged to the black harlequin. ‘You should already know. I have a hundred different names on a thousand different worlds. And, yes, one of them is Earth.’
'Look on the bright side,’ Luke said. ‘At least we know who the monster is.’

Ten minutes later, Michael finally prised a screaming Samantha from the bars. ‘The bright side is I’m not in the same cage as him!’

No one spoke for a long time. The triplets withdrew into themselves until a weak voice crossed the blackness. ‘Mikey?’

‘What?’

‘Thanks.’

‘For what?’

‘Trying to rescue me. I thought –’

‘That we wouldn’t?’

‘Don’t be so stupid,’ Samantha snapped. ‘Who else was going to tell you you’re an idiot for flying off on your own?’

‘You shouldn’t have called me fat,’ Luke said.

‘Well, you are. Get over it.’

‘Sam!’ Michael said.

She huffed and pouted until the quiet overpowered them. ‘Look, I’m sorry, okay? I’m just tired of you never listening to me.’

‘Because you treat me like I’m dumb,’ Luke replied.

‘Only because you never take anything seriously.’

‘What, and be dull like you? No thanks.’

‘I am not dull!’

‘Oh yeah? Do you know what the other kids at school call you?’

‘What?’

‘The Drill Bit – because you’re skinny, twisted and boring.’

The insult lingered. When Michael heard sobbing, he moved towards his sister, only to be shrugged away.

Hours seeped by like the dripping from the roof. Bats returned to their roosts in the cavern below and the winds scoured the shafts. As Samantha and Luke accepted defeat, a metal thunk! startled them.

‘What are you doing?’ she asked.

Thunk! An edge of marble crumbled across from them.

‘What’s that noise?’
‘I’m not giving up,’ Michael answered as his gauntlet boomeranged back to his fist. He tore it off his hand and threw it a third time. *Thunk!*

‘Can someone tell me what’s going on,’ Luke said.

‘I’m trying to hit that lever. It’s connected to the chain that’s holding up this cage. If I can knock its locking mechanism, we’ll drop to the ground and the door’ll smash open.’

‘It’s a thirty-metre drop! We’ll smash open!’

‘It’s better than waiting for those slave traders.’

Again and again he tried, unable to even see the lever. He hit the marble walls, punched a bookcase and even bashed the chain, but not once did he find his target. In the end, he tore off his helmet and chucked it into a corner of the cage. ‘If only we had some light.’

‘My utility belt,’ Luke said. ‘It’s on top of the cage.’

Michael and Samantha cheered him as he ran from one side to the other like a wrestler bouncing off the ring ropes. Soon, the cage seesawed dangerously and threatened to spin. With one more jolt, his utility belt, jetpack and earpiece slid from the roof but fell past his outstretched hands.

‘No!’

‘Don’t panic,’ Michael said.

The gear plummeted towards the pool but bungeed straight back up. Just like the gold armour and pirate hat, the star ranger’s costume also boomeranged. The jetpack was too thick to squeeze through the bars but not the earpiece and utility belt. Luke fished through all the pouches and found his shoulder flashlight, but it needed recharging. Unable to find any matches, he grabbed the second best thing – a flare gun.

*PPPHHHFFFFFFFFFFF!*

Red fire flashed and blinded them. Once their eyes adjusted, Michael renewed throwing his gauntlets.

‘Give me your other one,’ she said, also aiming for the lever’s locking mechanism. Just one hit would bash it free. But it was harder than it looked. It was like throwing pebbles at a pin. ‘Hurry! The flare’s running out!’

‘And I’ve only got two more left,’ Luke said. He desperately scouted the storeys below and above, before firing nowhere near the lever.

*PPPHHHFFFFFFFFFFF!*

‘What are you doing? We need light over here!’

The flare exploded against an archway before sinking into the black mire.

‘Luke! Stop wasting them! We won’t be able to see.’

He ignored her. With the last flare, he took aim at the same spot and squeezed the trigger.
‘Luke!’
It blazed towards a pillar then roared into a fireball. When the flame shrank, light burned from a fixed oil lamp.
Michael and Samantha looked at each other. ‘Genius!’ they shouted.
‘Not so dumb, eh?’ he said, striking a pose.
The flame was the most precious thing they’d seen. They renewed their attacks on the lever but only managed a glancing blow. Soon, the time between thunks slowed as their muscles tired. Michael slumped against the bars, his armour scraping down the metal. Samantha lay on the floor opposite him, rolling a cramp from her shoulder. Only Luke kept up his enthusiasm. He scummaged through his utility belt’s pouches, hoping to find another hidden treasure.
He jumped to his feet when he fished out a small tool kit. ‘Hey! A lock pick!’
He worked his cage’s keyhole with the two strips of metal as his siblings egged him on. They flopped down again, though, when they realised he lacked one vital skill. ‘A lock pick’s useless if you’ve never used one before,’ he said.
The oil lamp burned lower as they drew their coat, jacket and cloak around themselves. They shared lemony rations and drank dripping water.
‘How did the harlequins catch you, anyway?’ Michael asked.
Luke paused after emptying the last item from his pouches – that silly tin of sardines from the Now-Or-Never Wagon. ‘The red harlequin ambushed me in these underground tunnels,’ he said. ‘She hit me with her knock-out gas. The next thing I remember is waking up here.’
‘What were you doing underground?’
‘Chasing someone, I think. It’s hard to remember. Everything’s still a bit hazy. I thought it was the monster but – wait! Yes! That’s it. There was this man. He’d stolen food from the palace and carried it in this sack –’
His brother and sister looked at each other. ‘The lame footman!’
‘Yeah! But how do you know?’
‘When we were searching for you, he just appeared out of a grate in a Scorned community,’ she said. ‘When he saw us, he knew he’d been busted.’
‘So how’s he mixed up in all this?’ Michael asked.
Luke shrugged. ‘No idea. But there’s something else. A room. No, not a room. Er, it’s in the tunnels too. I remember sneaking inside and’ – his eyes widened. ‘Oh no! All those people!’
‘What is it?’
‘We’ve got to get out of here. We have to get back to Pacifico!’
‘We know that. But why?’
‘Because there’s a secret dungeon. It’s where the harlequins keep their prisoners. And Lady Isabelle – she’s there! We can still rescue her!’
‘Only if we get rescued first,’ Samantha said.
Her bluntness crushed their last hope and they said no more. Luke repacked his pouches, while the others wrestled with their fears.
Watching bats flap out the upper passageway, Michael noticed them pass the levers and their swords. Slowly, he stood as a plan formed in his mind. But for it to work he’d have to open the cage first.
‘Luke, can you use your jetpack to burn through your lock?’
His brother tried twisting around its rocket cylinders pressed against the bars. ‘Not without burning myself.’
Michael pounded his cage with his fist. He’d almost figured it out.
A tingling ran through his gauntlet.
‘I’ll do it anyway,’ Luke said. ‘We have to get out of here.’
‘No,’ Samantha said. ‘You’re not setting yourself on fire. I’d prefer to be a slave than watch you suffer.’
They looked at each other. Nothing was spoken. Nothing had to be.
Michael hit the bars again in frustration. ‘C’mon! Think!’ He hit them again and again, until he left a sizeable dent.
‘How’d you do that?’ Samantha asked, alarmed. ‘You can’t even twist off a jar lid.’
Michael looked at his gauntlets and felt strength ebbing away. It was the same sensation he’d experienced during his fight with Cavalli at the garrison. The marine had knocked him off his feet several times before he’d retaliated and sent the captain flying across the wet stones. He’d just thought it was a lucky shot. Now, he wasn’t so sure.
‘My armour comes with some sort of power,’ he said. ‘I can’t figure out how to use it.’
Not wanting to waste the chance, he grabbed the bars and tried prising them apart. They held fast.
‘I don’t know. Suddenly I feel weak again.’
‘What were you doing before?’
‘Hitting the cage,’ she answered for him. ‘Do it again.’
He did. He struck it flat on the knuckles and drew his hand away in pain.
Nope, that wasn’t right.

‘Why doesn’t anything make sense?’ she said, exasperated.
Michael refused to give up. He shook his hand then used the side of his fist to hammer the bars. The tingling sensation returned and, within moments, he was bashing them with both gauntlets. It became so intense he stopped hitting the cage and just ripped off the door and threw it into the murky pool below.


‘Good job,’ his sister said, patting him on the shoulder. ‘Now we need to get down.’

They stood at the open doorway and looked below. The thirty-metre drop was too far to jump. But the bats had inspired him.

‘Luke, you said your earpiece records and plays back music, right?’

‘Yep.’

‘Do you have a radio station for whale sharks?’

Bats screeched and scattered as ten minutes later Ningaloo and her pilot fish soared into King Amadeo’s Ghost. She circled Luke’s cage, heeding the music recorded from their first meeting with Aurelio. Only problem was, they had no way of controlling her.

‘Go to Michael and Samantha,’ he said, waving her away. ‘They need to hop on your back.’

‘Over here, girl,’ Michael said, clicking his fingers. ‘C’mon.’

‘Fish taxi!’ she added. ‘Want a fare?’

Michael glared at her. ‘You’re not helping.’

The throbbing of a descending starship’s engine outside reverberated through the cavern and into the library. More bats fled their roosts below, while the whale shark curved away. Luke only managed to stop Ningaloo fleeing by turning up the piping’s volume.

‘Slavers!’ Samantha guessed.

‘We’ve got to do this now,’ Michael said. ‘But the only thing she understands is Aurelio’s music.’

Luke produced the tin of sardines. ‘Or food.’

He tossed it to his brother, who fumbled and dropped them. However, his sister had far better reflexes and caught it before it fell into the mire. Within moments, they lured the whale shark to their cage with the tiny fish, boarded her and steered her – carrot-and-stick – to the levers. Releasing the right one, Michael slowly lowered Luke’s cage to the ground before meeting him there.

‘Quiet!’ she said. ‘Listen!’

Voices echoed from the cavern below.

‘They’re inside!’
Luke grabbed his jetpack before following his brother and sister upstairs. They recovered their swords then tried reboarding Ningaloo, but, in the absence of piping she turned away and disappeared down the shafts again. Instead, they took the path of the harlequins, where, further along, dusk glowed. They surfaced among the mountain tops whistling with a chill wind and saw a vast plain stretching towards the ocean. Directly below, the highest dome of King Amadeo’s Ghost poked through, covered by centuries of rockslides. Long ago, the library had been swallowed by an earthquake.

A few minutes later, when the slavers reached the exit, they were out of patience and puff. Their leader snapped at them to turn around and fetch their ship. ‘Contact the harlequins! The children have escaped!’

The man stood on a rocky outcropping, surveying the vast plain through a pair of electronic binoculars until he spat in disgust and followed his crew. His boots dislodged a scattering of pebbles, which bounced past the triplets cowering underneath. Once the slave ship blasted into the skies, a relieved Michael, Samantha and Luke sought shelter further along the mountain and, in no time, fell asleep.
Dawn crept over Michael’s shoulder as he returned to camp holding his bear helmet like a bowl. Water from a small rock pool sloshed around inside and threatened to spill. His sister finally woke Luke as the shadows shortened around their stony hideout. Dozens of floating islands hovered above the long-grass plains, which thickened into forest to the west. ‘Here,’ he said, offering the water. But when Luke looked around them, startled, he added, ‘Don’t worry. We’re safe.’

Luke sipped from the helmet then passed it to Samantha, who announced, ‘We have to keep moving.’

‘We need to reach that forest,’ Michael said as the air heated up. ‘It should give us shelter.’

‘What about Aurelio?’ Luke said. ‘He still might be –’

‘You heard the black harlequin. He’s been captured.’

‘We don’t know that. He could have –’

‘We’re heading west.’

‘But Pacifico’s to the east,’ Luke said, frustrated. ‘We have to get back and warn Queen Oriana.’

Samantha and Michael exchanged glances. Neither said anything. He emptied his helmet then trudged down the mountain.

‘What’s going on?’ Luke asked as his sister straightened her coat and sword.

‘The Knock-Knock Door we arrived through is on the other side of these mountains,’ she said, falling into step.

‘What about Isabelle? Cavalli? All the other Pacificans? The harlequins are about to start a war!’

‘Just pick up your stuff and move.’

Luke stood his ground. ‘I don’t believe this. Yesterday you charged in here, ready to fight a monster. Today, you’re running away? After all the help people have given us, this is the last thing I expected us to do – especially you, Michael.’

‘Hey!’ she snapped. ‘Don’t think for one second any of us are happy about this. But what can we do? We don’t have an army. We don’t have the skills to beat them. We don’t even have a boat. Michael does want to help but he’s just a
kid. We all are. We can’t stop a war. We need to go home. Pacifico has to fight its own battles.’

‘If my girlfriend was in trouble, I’d do everything to save her!’

Below them, Michael flinched before continuing down the slope, keeping plenty of distance from his siblings.

As the sun rose, warm winds swirled among the plains. Waves broke on the distant shores and the floating isles rumbled like one giant herd. The triplets spoke little, even when they reached the shade of the forest mid-afternoon. They marched up and down gullies, refreshed at streams and cringed when yellow toadstools pop! pop! popped! high into the canopy. Fear kept them moving whenever they ached for a rest.

Discovering trees tied with red rags, Luke, now in the lead, whistled for everyone to stop. They froze until they also heard the low throb of a cargo ship. ‘Slavers!’

Leaves and mulch gusted about them as they rushed behind a boulder to hide. The orange and red cargo ship cruised into view from the east, sweeping the forest with its own sensors. A laser cannon shrieked. A rock exploded and rubble bounced around a fleeing boar. The triplets pressed together, fearing they’d be next.

As the ship neared, Michael felt his armour tremble.

‘W-W-What’s g-g-going on?’ he asked, grabbing the rock. An unseen force was trying to drag him into the open.

‘I don’t know,’ she answered, her sword tugging against her red sash.

It felt like an earthquake but the ground wasn’t moving. Luke tried his radar again – all the readings were twisted and warped. He dared sneak a look. A giant floating isle headed their way. The captain of the slave ship spotted it too and urgently increased the throttle. The engines glowed bright blue as they struggled to escape the magnetic pull. Instead of going straight, the ship curved to the right as the isle reeled it in. Two torpedoes fired and blasted the widow rock into thirds. The sudden jolt freed the ship and allowed it to escape, tailed by flying shards.

‘Did you see the symbol painted on its side?’ Luke asked. It was a logo of an encircled wild dog – possibly a coyote, wolf or dingo – but moved like an electronic billboard. Every five seconds it silently howled. ‘It’s the same one on the crates at the harlequins’ warehouse.’

Samantha rolled up her sleeve and showed her hissing cobra. ‘They’re not just slavers,’ she said, noting the matching style of artwork. ‘They’re pirates.’

★
More trees sported red rags. Thousands more. But there hadn’t been any clues as to why. As the rainforest thinned and the understorey died away, they hiked to the top of a bald ridge and found their answer – fields of tree stumps.

‘Who could do this to a rainforest?’ Michael asked, spotting several felled logs tied with the red rags.

‘Guess,’ Samantha answered. ‘Pacifico has run out of land. All that furniture, timber and paper come from somewhere.’

‘They’re locusts,’ Luke said.

‘No, that’s civilisation.’

Michael descended a trail worn into the ridge’s side. ‘It’ll take at least half an hour to reach those far trees. Maybe twenty minutes if we hurry.’

‘What if the pirates come back? We can’t hide among those stumps.’

‘I don’t think we have a choice,’ Luke said, his visor scrolling with information. ‘My radar’s just gone haywire.’

‘I don’t see any more floating islands,’ Michael said.

‘There are eight – no fourteen – signals coming straight at us!’

‘I can’t see anything.’

‘I know, I know!’

They drew their swords. No matter what buttons he pushed, Luke couldn’t pinpoint their attackers.

Suddenly, a Scorned warrior – tattooed and cloaked with camouflage netting – dropped from the canopy armed with a spear. Thirteen more men and boys landed around him, jabbing their stone tips forward. Luke readied to blast off when strong hands grabbed him from behind and wrestled away his jetpack. They quickly disarmed his brother and sister as well.

The triplets stopped struggling when the warriors parted for their chieftain: the lame footman.

★

Marching under armed escort, the triplets headed north at a brisk pace in the middle of the Scorned hunting party. They avoided the open plains and stayed deep in the forest. Occasionally, the teenage boys scouted ahead of them in short bursts then returned, clicking their tongues. The older warriors fanned out and wrung their spears. They were clearly spooked.

With his hands tied, Michael snuck glances at the palace footman hobbling beside him. Stripped of his coat, breeches and neck scarf, he wore a loincloth made from boar hair, a woven straw belt, long jade earrings and a fish net cloak matted with leaves. He no longer stooped like a submissive footman but shouldered the confidence of a chieftain. He was broad, toned and imposing.
Tattoos not only covered the right side of his face, but his whole right arm and leg as well. A necklace of shark’s teeth hung around his throat, and cowry shells bulged under the skin of his chest. Nicks scarred his body, recounting the many battles he’d fought. The most serious injury he’d survived was nasty – most of his left calf was gone, bitten off, it seemed, by the same killer whose teeth he now wore.

Noticing him staring, the chieftain placed his spear tip on Michael’s cheek and pointed his face forward.

Samantha had had enough. ‘I’m not going any further until you tell us where we’re going.’

‘Move!’

‘No!’

‘I don’t have to tell you anything, pirate,’ the chieftain said. ‘I’m not your servant anymore.’

He clicked at a warrior, who butted his spear into her back. She bristled but kept marching.

An urgent call sounded from ahead. Trees swayed as a low throbbing bullied the canopy and warned of the slave ship’s return.

‘Hurry,’ the chieftain said.

Hands grabbed the triplets and pulled them in separate directions. All three screamed, kicked and struggled, hoping to escape. No way were they going to be sold into slavery! But rather than flagging down the ship’s captain, the Scorned dragged the triplets towards the largest trees, pulled open curtains of stiff bark and pushed them inside hollowed-out trunks. Three or four warriors joined them and huddled together, gripping the makeshift curtains against the winds stirred up by the hovering vessel. The throb grew louder and louder until it paused right above them, drumming against their skulls. One moment the ship’s radar had picked up blips. The next – nothing.

The slavers lingered for a long time until thethrobbing disappeared and everyone cautiously stepped outside.

‘Now will you tell us what’s going on?’ Michael asked.

‘Soon,’ the chieftain replied.

They continued through the forest, spared from the afternoon sun, before stopping at the fringes, which faced a beach. Most of the warriors shared gourds of water as the chieftain cut the triplets free and ordered Michael to remove his armour.

‘Everything metallic,’ he said.

The triplets watched as a pair of warriors dug up two long ropes from the sand and hauled them over their shoulders until a wooden trapdoor lifted up to
reveal a buried bunker. They stored Michael’s armour, Luke’s jetpack and their swords before the hatch clattered down again and was locked. When the triplets walked twenty metres away, they could hear their belongings slam against the trapdoor. Michael felt his civilian clothes being tugged as that strange magnetism linked to his costume kicked in.

‘You realise we’re defenceless now, don’t you?’ Samantha whispered.

‘Yes,’ the chieftain said, surprising them, ‘but if I wanted to harm you, my people would have abandoned you to those pirates.’

They didn’t speak again for hours. The triplets sheltered in the fringes of the forest, sitting away from the warriors, greedily eating juicy, yellow papayas they’d been handed, increasingly uneasy about why they hadn’t decamped. At last, a warrior in his mid-fifties climbed down a tree and clicked his tongue. Concerned, everyone stood.

Specks appeared in front of an enormous, distant, floating island and grew in size. At first, Michael suspected they were sharks, but as they approached they sharpened into a dozen dolphins escorting a giant blue whale.

‘Aurelio!’ he yelled.

The piper was in bad shape. He had a bandaged head and an arm in a sling. By the look of the blue whale, both had survived a ferocious battle.

‘A harlequin ambush,’ he explained, as Michael climbed behind him. ‘They waited for me near the ruins. I’m glad you’re alive, my friend. I tried warning you –’

‘It’s okay. For once, it’s good to know who to trust.’
Under the twilight stars, the triplets navigated on foot through thick trees and approached a small camp in the middle of the same enormous floating isle. They passed children dressed in oversized clothes salvaged from shipwrecks and a huddle of mothers and daughters cutting up mangoes, pineapples and coconut for a tropical fruit punch. The chieftain pointed for the triplets to sit on the ground before summoning the warriors together and talking to them in their private clicking language. A few metres away, an elderly medicine woman tended to Aurelio’s wounds as he lay on a torn couch.

The tribe largely ignored the triplets as it prepared the evening meal and quietly laughed at jokes. The only contact occurred when a young girl offered them hot vegetable soup in a turtle shell, which they greedily drained.

Samantha readied to stand and get answers before Michael held her back. The camp fell silent as women ushered girls into the trees, and the men and boys sat in a circle around a fire. An elder carried forward a bowl sloshing with hundreds of black dots that the triplets couldn’t immediately recognise and placed it before those involved in an initiation ceremony. Four boys aged twelve and thirteen passed to the older tribesmen sleeves woven from thin palm leaves before the elders then picked from the bowl. Between their fingers they held big bullet ants, which they wove into each sleeve, stinger-first. As the ants woke up, they found themselves trapped and became enraged. They stabbed and stabbed as they tried to wriggle free.

The chieftain clicked his tongue and the same four boys stood up. They gritted their teeth as the elders slipped the sleeves over their outstretched arms, and two hundred raging ants needled their tender flesh with burning stingers. As the name bullet ant implied, the pain was like being shot. The boys did not flinch, however. They sucked in the hurt and sweated it out as the men stood, looped arms, sang and danced.

The triplets squirmed. Personally, they would have thrown the ants into the fire and howled with tears.

After twenty minutes of such torture, a cheer erupted and the elders removed the sleeves from the Scorned boys, who clutched their swollen and numbed arms. They had entered manhood. They were now full members of the tribe.
‘They’re nuts!’ Samantha said.
‘We better not be next,’ Michael agreed.
‘I’m glad I’m a girl.’
‘Forgetting something?’ Luke asked, stroking his chin.
She reached up and touched her beard. Her eyes widened.

With the initiation ceremony complete, the chieftain moved among his people with humour and respect. He shook the good hands of the four initiated boys, hugged them, then bent down and helped some men clear away dirt covering a steaming hole in the ground. Hours earlier it had been filled with hot volcanic rocks. Removing a layer of banana leaves, they hauled up woven baskets of vegetables and the carcass of a wild boar they’d buried and cooked. They carved up the flesh with stone knives then served it with pumpkin, sweet potato and carrots.

‘Eat,’ he said, offering it to the triplets on shipwrecked plates.
They stared at the meal with upturned noses. ‘But it’s been cooked in dirt,’ Samantha sniffed.
‘Then go hungry.’
He turned away with the food but Michael and Luke stopped him. ‘We’ll try it!’ Luke said, breathing in the steaming pork.
‘Why do you cook everything in the ground?’ Michael asked, accepting a plate.
‘We can’t light too many fires here or the enemy will find us,’ the chieftain answered.

The brothers tried the meat first before wolfing down the whole lot. The boar was succulent and juicy, and the vegetables fresh and crisp. They stuffed their faces, grateful for the meal, before Samantha followed suit.

Luke wiped his mouth of the fruit punch then asked, ‘You’re a chieftain, right?’
‘I am Tahoke – the last of the Great Chiefs of the Thirteen Tribes,’ he said, crossing his arms. ‘Those who welcome you tonight are the remaining free men and women of my people.’
‘You’re not going to force us to wear those ant sleeves are you?’
‘No. It’s a ceremony only for brave young warriors.’
Both brothers cringed. They didn’t need bullet ants to feel that sting.
Michael nodded towards the man’s tattoos. ‘Do they mean anything?’
Tahoke angled his body into the light. ‘They are the four stages of manhood. These on my right leg were inked by the elders when I was a boy. They show that I no longer crawl as a baby, but walk among my people. These along my arm were done when I was twelve and remind me of the strength of brotherhood.'
This on my right shoulder is fatherhood – I carry the weight of my family each day. The fourth on my face is the most important: wisdom. It is only half complete, because Man is not perfect and can never reach full wisdom on his own.’

‘The tattoo on your shoulder,’ Michael said. ‘That means you’re married?’
Tahoke’s muscles tightened. A few women within earshot heard the question and shooed away their children, encouraging them to play elsewhere.

‘Yes, I have a family,’ he said. ‘I have a wife and three sons. They are lost to me.’

‘Come. I will show you.’

Gathering several warriors together, Tahoke flew them by dolphin-back to the far end of the Weeping Mountains and landed in the centre of an ancient village. It was built of drab, grey stone around a common square and splotched with lichen. Some of the dozen single-storey buildings were shaped like beehives; others were long and rectangular with square columns and peaked roofs. Decades of rain had eroded the battle stories carved into their walls, and the roots of strangler figs had clawed down and crushed what remained of them. No one had lived there for years.

Michael walked among the ruins and touched the rough, furry stones, recalling a similar village he’d seen in a school documentary about Cambodia.

Running feet startled him. The warriors readied their spears as the triplets retreated. Pushing aside the ferns, a Scorned boy appeared, barely four years old. He stared at them and readied to shout behind him when Tahoke knelt and gave him a mango, which he greedily sucked and ate. Handing over a second one, Tahoke asked in clicks where he’d run from. The boy pointed past the trees.

They hiked down a slope, picking up distant voices. Other sounds became clearer too: chipping, cracking and mechanical hums.

The commotion grew louder as electrical lighting glowed through the thinning forest. Tahoke signalled for the young boy to run along, before urging the triplets to crouch down. They reached the abrupt edge of the forest and gasped. Across a huge pit, Michael, Samantha and Luke witnessed a horror far worse than any monster they could imagine.

Eating into the mountain was a deep open-cut mine. Thousands of slaves swung picks, drilled holes, shouldered heavy baskets of rubble or manned water pumps. Most were brown-skinned; the rest, pale-white Pacificans in rags. They laboured at the rock face or slumped on the zigzagging pathways, awaiting death. Overseeing the mining were modern-day pirates. They threatened, bullied or whipped any slave who slackened off.
‘Welcome to Pacifico’s lost city of gold,’ Tahoke said. Michael turned away and retched as the whip snapped down on another worker.

‘There are two more mines on the other side of the mountains. And beyond them – the timber mills. This is what your people are doing to my island.’

‘But they’re not our people,’ Luke said.

‘Then why have you been helping the Pacificans and not us? Or has the Hall of Heroes forgotten us as well?’

The triplets shrank as a mining ship launched into the night sky.

‘Stay close,’ Tahoke snarled. ‘There’s more to see.’

They crept further along the edge of the mining pit, using the darkness as cover. The foulness of sulphur struck them and they covered their noses. ‘Look there,’ he added, pointing to a dozen stone buildings similar to those in the ruined village. ‘That is where they hold our families.’

Inside the dimly lit huts, hundreds of women and children sewed expensive gowns and suits, cobbled together leather boots or laboured as dye-makers by stirring noxious-smelling weeds in wooden vats until they ran blue. Outside was worse. Young boys slit open the bellies of sheep and watched as fatty guts plopped into wooden buckets. The small intestines were then removed, milked clean by hand then fumigated in sulphur pits to be later twisted into violin strings. Beyond them, girls gathered together long sheets of spun wool and placed them into wooden tubs full of stale urine. The girls then stepped in and squelched the cloth underfoot for hours to remove the grease and make it soft.

‘That’s disgusting!’ she said.

‘These are the jobs no one else wants to do.’

‘But they’re kids.’

‘Not to the slavers. They’re just another means to make more money.’

‘Are they –? Are they –?’ Michael began.

‘Yes. The clothes you see are the same ones sold in Pacifico’s shops.’

As Michael burned with shame, Luke pointed to a path hewn into the rock face. A young Pacifican man with a blunt nose and cropped messy blue hair refused to carry any more baskets. A group of pirates descended on him, curling their fists.

‘Cavalli!’ Michael breathed.

They all turned away in horror when the inevitable happened.

‘Get us away from here!’ Samantha begged.

All three Bowmans remained dumbstruck as the dolphins returned them unseen to the giant floating island.

‘My people you saw are just a small number of those whom the pirates have
captured,’ Tahoke said as the triplets sat inside the camp. ‘Those who are healthy work the mines. Others who are a threat are sold off-world.’

‘Your family?’ Michael dared ask.

The chieftain dug his spear into the dirt. ‘I’ve been searching for them for two years. No one knows where they are.’

‘Why hasn’t anyone stopped this?’ Luke said. ‘Like Queen Oriana?’

‘We live at the end of the world. How can your Queen help when she’s ignorant of what’s happening here?’

‘But have you tried telling people?’

‘Many a time – nobles, merchants, tourists! But after a few days, their hearts forget and their ears no longer listen. Also, there is a long history between our two nations. Too much blood has been spilt in battle.’

‘But someone must have listened,’ she said.

‘Yes, and when they complained too loudly, they ended up in those mines. People seem to grow very quiet when their freedom is at risk.’

‘But many of your people live in Pacifico,’ Michael said. ‘They’ve got jobs. They’re not working the mines. Why don’t they tell people?’

Tahoke’s face darkened. ‘They might as well be slaves. They left these islands before the start of our troubles. Pacifico lured them with its promise of riches, only to treat them like paupers. Now they do the work that the nobles no longer do themselves. They launder their clothes, cook their food and clean their streets. Where is the honour in that?’

‘You work as a footman.’

‘To spy on our enemies and help my people – not to serve the lazy. We need medicine, food and knowledge. I’ve been smuggling supplies out of the palace for ten months now with the help of a brave friend, whom, I fear, will now be hunted like the rest of my people.’

He looked at Aurelio, who slept.

‘That explains the sack of food I caught you with in the tunnels,’ Luke said. ‘You should have told us. If we knew –’

‘I didn’t trust you. And I still don’t trust you. The Hall of Heroes has lost its way. We must help ourselves.’

‘We’re different,’ Michael said. ‘We do care. We just –’

‘Didn’t know,’ his sister finished.

Tahoke rose from his seat. ‘Now you do.’

Michael followed him towards the island’s edge, where a ship’s bell lay crushed on the rock face. Silver and purple moonlight salted the waves. ‘How have your people survived this long? Surely the slavers know you’re up here.’

‘We move among the islands. The magnetic rock keeps their ships away. We
hunt at night, so as not to be seen.’

‘It was a hunting party that my sensors picked up our first night here, wasn’t it?’ Luke said, stepping into view. ‘Back on the other side of the mountains.’

Tahoke nodded. ‘Your pirate friend almost cost you your lives. You’re lucky an elder stopped our hunters filling your bellies with spears and let Aurelio discover your motives.’

‘Then why didn’t Aurelio tell us about what’s really inside the Weeping Mountains?’ Samantha asked. ‘Tell everybody for that matter?’

‘He’s a piper – not a warrior. I’ve lost too many brave men to those haunted shafts, and dare not risk him as well. The monster can have its lair as long as it stays away from my people. Our fight is with these pirates.’

The triplets stared at each other.

‘But the monster isn’t real,’ Michael said. ‘It’s a story made up by the harlequins.’

The triplets explained the secret police force, what they’d found in the Weeping Mountains and the plot to officially invade the Broken Isles. As Tahoke listened, anger fired in his brown eyes.

‘Call a war council – now!’

Men and teenage boys stood around the fire, consumed by the same anger as they heard the full story. Women and children stayed hidden, although within earshot, as the arguments grew heated and more and more talk turned to battle. Michael shook his head until his sister pulled him back through the trees. They joined Luke next to a rusty ship’s boiler.

‘This is backfiring,’ she said. ‘We’re starting a war, not stopping it.’

‘There are only fifty of them,’ Luke said. ‘What can they do?’

‘All get killed,’ Michael answered.

‘They’re crazy if they think they can take on the pirates,’ she said.

‘Not to mention the harlequins,’ Luke added.

‘Maybe we can enlist the marines,’ Michael suggested. ‘They could help.’

‘They’re boys,’ she pointed out. ‘Security guards at best. Besides, Cavalli warned us that some are working for the harlequins.’

The voices grew more heated, forcing the triplets to move further away.

‘Do you get the feeling that everything we do on this planet ends in disaster?’ Luke asked.

‘Same as the last one,’ she snorted.

‘Maybe we’ve failed,’ Michael said. ‘Maybe Mr Goode Deed was wrong picking us.’

‘Or maybe we weren’t sent here to fix it after all,’ Luke said.

A war cry was followed by frantic activity. Mothers hurried away their
children as the warriors grabbed weapons hidden among the trees. The triplets found Tahoke testing the weight of his wooden clubs.

‘We raided the mines tomorrow night,’ he said matter-of-factly, pushing past them. ‘We free our kin then attack Pacifico.’

‘You can’t!’ Michael said. ‘People will die.’

‘People always die in wars. We must defend ourselves by striking first.’

‘We can help. We can go back to Pacifico and –’

‘No,’ he said, towering above them. ‘We’ve waited long enough for help. It’s time for my people to reclaim these islands and remove the invaders. If you want to help, then stand by my warriors and fight.’

★

WHUMP!

A curved sword barely missed Samantha’s head. It jabbed into the ground beside her ear and wobbled. Wide-eyed, she jumped from under her fur blankets and glanced around for attackers. Finding none, she shook Luke, who was still asleep among the other snoring islanders.

‘Wha –?’

‘Get up.’

‘No. It’s too early.’

‘Get up!’

She strained to free her cutlass, but the magnetism held it tight. She needed a greater force to yank it away. Luke blinked at her and gradually pushed himself up. ‘Hey. How come your sword’s here? I thought it was trapped in that –’

WHUMP!

His jetpack and visor hit him in the face.

She hushed him as other bodies stirred and stretched at the noise. He struggled into his gear against the strong pull of the island as they both looked at Michael’s empty bedroll. Aurelio was also missing.

‘Here we go again,’ she said. ‘Michael’s gone off and done something stupid.’
Leeuwin, the blue whale, surged east with Michael and Aurelio on her back. Thin clouds crisscrossed the skies and the piper’s melody filled their ears. The tune would have been fitting for such a glorious day, if not for their urgency. They needed to reach Pacifico and warn Oriana. Only she could stop this war.

‘Are you okay?’ Michael asked, as the music paused.

‘Yes, I’m a little winded, that’s all,’ Aurelio hissed and gently kneaded his ribs.

Michael looked at the floating islands shrinking behind them. He felt uncomfortable leaving Samantha and Luke behind but he was riding towards danger. If he failed, he hoped his siblings would find the Knock-Knock Door and return home.

As they neared the whirlpool, the pilot fish scattered. Leeuwin slowed and Aurelio played louder. It didn’t work. The blue whale began descending.

‘What’s wrong?’

The giant eye of the whirlpool churned less than two hundred metres below.

‘The fish aren’t responding. Something’s scaring them.’

‘Wark! Wark! Wark!’ a familiar voice crowed high above. ‘Experiencing engine problems, are you?’

The pair looked upwards as a skysled silently dropped from the clouds. It was little more than a winged flying platform with railings, a steering console, harpoon gun and a cargo of wooden crates. At the helm stood the black harlequin, his cape billowing behind him.

‘Now why would two young gentlemen such as yourselves be in such a rush to reach Pacifico?’

Before Michael and Aurelio drew their swords, a glass ball shattered beside them and leaked red knock-out gas.

‘Haul them up!’ the black harlequin said.

★

Michael woke with a headache. His hands were tied behind his back and his shoulder was numb from leaning too long against a wooden crate. Next to him
slumped Aurelio, still unconscious. They’d been stripped of their weapons by the blue harlequins, who stood cross-armed, scouting the horizon. The rest of the troupe lazad about, saying little and listening to the white harlequin strum her silver and pearl mandolin. The whirlpool twisted below them.

A crate creaked above Michael. He looked up to find a tangle of multicoloured feathers. ‘Hello, little birdie,’ the Vulture said, yanking back Michael’s head with a wooden fighting staff. ‘Escape from your cage, did you?’

‘Ow!’ Michael screamed.

‘Vulture,’ the black harlequin said, holding his spyglass steady. ‘Play nice.’

‘Any sign?’ the red harlequin asked, joining him.

‘Not yet. But our impatient buyers will be here shortly. I’m counting on it.’

‘Yes, counting gold. Wark! Wark! Wark!’

Sniggers broke the boredom.

Still a little wobbly, Michael stood, attracting the attention of the blue harlequins, who growled and squared their shoulders. He advanced towards the black harlequin. ‘Don’t you care that people will die in your selfish war?’

‘Why should I?’ the black harlequin answered, collapsing his spyglass and meeting him halfway. ‘I use people or push them out of my way.’ He did just that by jabbing his walking cane into Michael’s chestplate, sending him sprawling.

‘Knock me down and I’ll just keep standing up again.’

The black harlequin hummed as Michael stubbornly returned to his feet.

‘Brave words, but words still the same.’

He nodded to the Vulture, who whirled his fighting staff and tripped Michael to the deck, much to the amusement of the others. ‘Oooh!’ they catcalled when he stood again. Finally, some fun.

‘Untie me! Or are you afraid I’ll beat you in a fair fight?’

The black harlequin turned. ‘May I remind you, you might be dressed like the Gold Knight, but you’re still a boy in a costume. This silly bravado will only end in pain.’

‘Coward! But hey, you’re so gutless you kidnap people when they’re asleep.’

The black harlequin sparked with a fistful of blue electricity. ‘Child, respect your elders.’

A lightning bolt threw Michael against the crates. His whole body spasmed as sharp pain sizzled through his bones and along his jaw.

‘Still eager, Sir Michael of Earth?’

The black harlequin leered at him, and when Michael turned his face away it was clear who was in charge.

The white harlequin returned to strumming as boredom settled across the
Michael grimaced as he rolled forward and tried sitting. Every joint ached. He wasn’t complaining. The black harlequin had spared his life. No doubt he had enough power in his hands to kill.

Sweat ran down Michael’s cheek. Instinctively, he tried mopping it with his shoulder. As he flexed his arms, the ropes tying his hands gently ripped. He stopped. He glanced around and checked no one else had heard. He flexed his arms again and felt superhuman strength surge through his armour. The fibres tore like cobwebs and dropped to the deck. When the blue harlequin turned, Michael looked away, keeping his wrists behind him.

That was it! His armour’s special power. If it received a blow, it absorbed that energy and stored it. The more blows it took, the stronger Michael became. So when he crash-landed among all these crates, his armour had recharged with enough strength to break the ropes.

The mandolin’s strings caterwauled. ‘Gentlemen!’ the white harlequin yelled. ‘The boy!’

The nearest blue harlequin reacted first. He ran forward to tackle him, but Michael spun away and clambered over the crates. He desperately sought his sword until a lightning bolt pulsed past his ear and nearly fried him. Helplessly exposed, he crouched as several harlequins advanced, readying their lethal tricks. The Lady of Hearts rolled another glass ball on her fingertips; the Fireflies breathed flames; the green harlequin unfurled his shark-tamer’s whip; while the purple one switched on an illusion generator and multiplied himself with three duplicates.

‘My lady – finish this!’

The red harlequin twisted her globe, which smoked with orange gas. As she readied to throw it at Michael, she vanished!

‘WAHOO!’ Luke yelled as he hurtled across the twisting sea, holding the Lady of Hearts. By the time she realised she’d been kidnapped at high speed, she stood on a coral cay, marooned.

Her globe of orange gas had still fallen to the deck, however. Instead of smashing at Michael’s feet, it cracked open among a cluster of nearby harlequins. They hacked inside the smoke cloud until silence overcame them. When the air cleared, each one stood paralysed.

The rest discovered they were under attack. An armada of dolphins and whales darted towards the skysled, carrying fifteen Scorned warriors. At the front rode Tahoke and Samantha.

‘Stop them!’ the black harlequin yelled.

Michael dropped down the starboard side to reach Aurelio, but the two big blue harlequins blocked his way. He also stood firm. The two lugs exchanged
glances, smiled and closed in. Perfect. Michael used his super-strength to launch a crate at the nearest one and smacked him squarely in the chest.

The second blue harlequin roared in anger as his twin collapsed unconscious on the metal deck. He picked up the same crate and launched it back at Michael, who ducked and watched it disappear straight down the dark, deep middle of the whirlpool.

Another crate splintered near Michael’s head, and he backed away from the bullish man. Tahoke came to his rescue, leaping off his dolphin and tackling the blue harlequin to the ground. They wrestled and fought each other with brutal punches until the chieftain yelled, ‘Get control of the ship!’

Battle cries rang out as the Scorned boarded the skysled and clashed with the remaining harlequins. Michael retrieved his sword then cut Aurelio free, only to be set upon by the white harlequin armed with a blowpipe. She breathed in and fired a poison dart, only to have it swatted away by the piper’s glowing red magnetic broach. She readied to shoot a second, but a cutlass chopped her weapon in half. Shocked, she turned to face a snarling Samantha, who yelled, ‘Am I allowed to be a pirate now?’

‘Yes!’ Michael shouted back.

The white harlequin screamed and plucked a poisoned dart from her belt. She lunged at Samantha, who sidestepped at the last moment. The dart sank into the shoulder of the yellow harlequin, who shook violently then buckled.

The white harlequin shrieked again and lashed out. The punch missed Samantha but not the railing. The harlequin screamed and crumpled, nursing her right hand.

‘Watch out!’ Luke yelled, tackling his sister as blue lightning exploded next to her. They sheltered behind the crates, as the black harlequin gained the upper hand.

Any Scorned hunter that charged his way was easily dispensed with a blue bolt of energy. It also gave his troupe time to coordinate their tactics. The sun harlequin dropped blinding flash grenades. The purple harlequin and his holographic triplets befuddled their attackers. The green harlequin called sharks to the battle and scattered the dolphins. And the Vulture cartwheeled, leapt and knocked out any remaining opponents with his wooden fighting staff.

‘This ends now!’ the black harlequin said, firing a warning shot over the steering wheel. Michael backed away. The mutiny was quashed. ‘I’m the captain of this ship. Surrender your weapons.’

Samantha and Michael’s swords clanged on the deck, but Tahoke charged forward, swinging his club. The black harlequin easily blasted him into unconsciousness.
‘Pathetic,’ he said, stepping over the bodies of the fallen warriors. ‘You!’ he growled at the white harlequin. ‘Radio our friends. Find out why they haven’t arrived yet, then tell them we’ve got extra cargo for pick-up. Premium dollar.’

She glared at him but heeded his orders.

Snapping his cloak around him, the black harlequin strolled forward and slammed down his walking cane. ‘Your little rebellion is finished. The last Great Chief of the Thirteen Tribes is captured. His islands will now fall just as fast. Well done, children. You’ve secured our final victory.’

‘You’re forgetting one small problem,’ Michael said.

‘Oh yes? And what would that be?’

Their swords magnetically flew back into their hands with the help of a pied piper.

‘A blue whale playing ten pin bowls.’

The remaining harlequins whipped round to see Leeuwin soar straight at them with Aurelio on her back. She skittled the Fireflies, the Vulture, the green and purple harlequins – and just missed their leader. The white harlequin straddled a dolphin and fled as the blue whale curved upwards then circled for another strafe.

The black harlequin rushed to the harpoon gun and aimed. Michael charged at him but –

**BOOM!**

‘Aurelio!’

The piper looked at his friends one last time before he and the big blue whale, mortally wounded, plummeted into the whirlpool. To the sound of horrified cries, the enormous hole swallowed them both.

‘NO!’

Luke grabbed a spear and rushed at the black harlequin, who swivelled, parried and sent the boy tumbling across the deck. Samantha attacked next. Her sword connected with his cane, and, with a jerk, he disarmed and dispatched her with a kick.

Nimbly, he toed her cutlass into his hand and spun to block Michael’s blade. They separated then slashed, chopped and hacked in a deadly duel. Metal rang against metal as neither gave any quarter. Michael boiled with the anger of his friend’s death. Finally, Michael feigned a clumsy counterattack, let the black harlequin lunge, then at the last moment changed direction and knocked away his cutlass. He punched the harlequin in the chin and sent him spinning.

Michael booted the cutlass back to his sister then circled the black harlequin, who knelt on all fours to pick up his mask. It had been dislodged, along with his three-cornered hat. As Michael tried to see the man’s face, the black harlequin
urgently secured it in place and plugged the electricity leaking from inside.

‘Enough!’ the black harlequin hissed, his blue eyes no longer human but raging sparks.

Lightning hit Michael square in the chest and threw him across the deck. His body jolted and burned against the railings. Luke pushed his sister aside and cannoned straight for the black harlequin, but was also shot down.

He then spun on Samantha and said, ‘Want another go, princess?’

Prickled by fear and anger, she ground her teeth and asked, ‘Did you just call me “princess”?’ She threw aside her hat, swapped her cutlass for the Vulture’s staff then twirled it to gauge its weight. She chose a middle-guard kendo stance, stood with her right foot forward, slightly lifted her left heel and relaxed her shoulders, just as her sensei had taught her. ‘Victory means survival, defeat means death,’ she whispered.

He unsnapped his cloak, scooped up a spear and, amused at fighting a twelve-year-old girl, lashed out. Swiftly, she blocked each deadly strike with ease and kept her cool. He, on the other hand, soon grew frustrated. He jabbed the spear at her several times before swinging it like a baseball bat. She caught another blow next to her cheek, smiled, then retaliated with precision. She crunched his wrist, hip and stomach; smashed his elbows; and numbed his shoulders. Soon, his spear spilt across the deck and she pushed him back with every hammering, steering him towards a gap in the railings. Three more steps and he’d tumble from the skysled into the whirlpool.

Her heartbeat fluttered as the harlequin reached the edge. Feeling the salty winds blow up his back, he suddenly realised her plan. “You need to learn patience,” her sensei had warned. She squeezed the hilt of the staff, drew on all her strength then thrust forward.

Unfortunately, the slight hesitation saved him. He leapt over her head, landed behind her then swept her feet from under her. Forlornly, she slammed on the deck and heard the wooden staff bounce into the sea.

‘Bravo,’ he said, yanking hold of her long black hair. ‘A cunning tactic, young miss. Pity you’re not one of us. You’d make a great harlequin.’

She clawed, kicked and screamed as he spun her by the hair towards that very same gap. Below her, the wide, hungry hole of the giant whirlpool roared.

‘Murderer!’ Michael yelled.

The black harlequin’s eyes blazed as the boy-knight crash-tackled him around the waist. Forced to let go of Samantha, the black harlequin grabbed at a railing but caught nothing but air!

Screaming, he fell overboard.

Victory came at a cost, however. Michael had rushed at him with too much
speed and, heavy with armour, couldn’t slow his momentum. Luke and Samantha yelled as he, too, tumbled overboard.
A blue flash forced Luke and Samantha back from the edge of the skysled. For a few moments, everything was caught in a time stutter. Unknowingly, Luke ran in reverse, stopped, yelled with outstretched arms, rushed to the railing, then zipped backwards again. His sister did likewise – jumping to her feet and lying down over and over. The hover engines whined and the flying platform shook underfoot, but within seconds the stabilisers kicked in and full power returned. Luke and Samantha blinked away the stinging blindness then looked at the whirlpool, fearing for their brother.

But rather than see Michael splash into the sea, their hearts filled with relief. Dangling midair and stripped of both gauntlets and helmet, he twisted in the wind, arms stretched to breaking point.

‘Get me up!’

Luke’s jetpack gave one final blast before he returned his brother to safety. Using Samantha’s jacket as a pillow, they laid him on the deck. And just in time, too. Michael’s shoulders were ready to pop their sockets.

‘But how?’ she asked.

‘The crates,’ he pointed, still weak from the lightning surge.

Luke rushed over and found the Gold Knight’s gauntlets, helmet and sword wedged among the crates. When he fished them out, they boomeranged back to their rightful owner.

A wide grin cracked across Michael’s face. ‘The magnetism works both ways.’

Samantha smiled, too, her eyes red. ‘Don’t do that again, okay? Dying’s a filthy habit.’

He laughed as she cried.

Half an hour later, the three of them tended to the surviving warriors of the Thirteen Tribes the best that they could. Some had lost their lives; others needed a hospital.

‘Has anyone ever survived the whirlpool?’ Michael asked, leaning hard against the railing as he stared below. He wiped away a tear before anyone noticed.

Tahoke winced as he hobbled beside him and spied the swirling vortex. ‘I’m
sorry. Our friend, Aurelio, has joined his fathers.’

Michael closed his eyes and mumbled a prayer.

Across from him, his brother and sister removed a tarpaulin covering some crates and discovered a cage with leg irons. It had clearly been used to smuggle captives to the Broken Isles. As fitting justice, they locked the harlequins inside.

‘Who’s a little birdie now?’ Luke asked. ‘Wark! Wark! Wark!’

The Vulture spat. Just like the rest of his troupe, he’d been stripped of his weapons, costume and mask. To the triplets’ surprise, each one was human. Not Pacificans. Not monsters. Not hideous beings. Just plain humans.

‘We should get moving,’ Michael said, heading to the steering wheel to distract himself from his grief. ‘That slaver ship should have found us already.’

‘The same slaver ship whose frequency I’ve been jamming?’ Luke asked, tapping his wristpad.

Michael laughed with a pang of guilt. He should never have left his siblings behind at the Scorned camp. They worked best as a team.

‘Well, I’ve got my pirate ship,’ Samantha said. ‘What do you say? Time to find a good drive-through?’

‘We must return to the mines and free my people,’ Tahoke said. ‘We need to raise an army against these Pacificans.’

‘No,’ Michael said firmly. ‘War will only mean more deaths. Besides, we’ve almost won the battle. All that’s left to do is to tell Queen Oriana, who’ll arrest the surviving traitors and free your people.’

‘What are we waiting for?’ Luke asked. ‘Let’s find out who they are.’

A subdued laughter rolled from the deck of the skysled as it hovered off a coral cay. The Lady of Hearts shrieked in frustration as her last glass globe sailed past Luke, who playfully jetted around her. After another hour of standing in the glaring sun without food or water, she surrendered.

‘Now, missy,’ Samantha said, walking up to her. ‘Let’s see if I’m right about who’s behind this mask.’ She ripped it off but ended up disappointed.

The Lady of Hearts snarled at them with an unfamiliar face. She had strawberry blonde hair, pale skin and wrinkles spreading from her eyes. She too was human: an off-worlder, not a Pacifican.

‘Secret police need people in power to protect them,’ Samantha said. ‘Who are you working for?’

The Lady of Hearts smirked and turned away. Undeterred, Samantha repeated the question. ‘And remember, there’s still a shipping ban on the Western Seas. It might be a long, long time before you’re found out here.’

‘We harlequins work for no one!’

‘Suit yourself. You better hope the sharks don’t get you first.’
The skysled sped across the seas towards Pacifico. Tahoe piloted the controls while Samantha rifled through the harlequins’ costumes for clues.

‘Wait!’ Michael said. ‘We’ve got to turn back.’

‘Why?’ she asked.

Michael hobbled to the stern and pointed back towards the whirlpool. ‘Don’t you see? It’s the Knock-Knock Door!’

His siblings joined him, but they didn’t share his excitement.

‘Think about it. It attracts lots of water.’

‘But there’s no Door,’ Luke said. ‘It’s just a giant hole.’

‘Maybe it’s on the seabed. What else can hold that much water except an ocean?’

Sceptical, Luke turned to his sister then Tahoe, who clicked in frustration to his surviving warriors. None looked too pleased. ‘I’m not with you on this one, Mikey.’

‘What did you just say?’ she interrupted.

‘It’s on the seabed,’ Michael repeated.

‘No, after that. “What else can hold that much water except an ocean?”’ She groaned and slapped her forehead. ‘How stupid of me. I’ve been thinking too small.’

‘Sam, start making sense because the nearest loony house is a million planets away.’

She joined Tahoe at the steering wheel. ‘I know where the Knock-Knock Door is. It’s not the whirlpool. It’s back at Pacifico.’

‘Are you sure?’ Michael asked.

‘Absolutely. Let’s rescue the Queen Bee then go home.’
Stingrays soared beside the skysled as it descended into Pacifico. Below, among the streets and canals, the city was at its busiest. Royal yachts and presidential starships from a hundred worlds were moored in the marina under tight security as their leaders joined the tricentennial celebrations.

‘Take your positions,’ Tahoke warned, dressed in the blue harlequin’s costume. ‘We’re approaching the titans.’ The triplets finished securing the tarpaulin over the cage and crates then stood defiantly in their own harlequin disguises. Two marines on the giant stony crown stared at them with a mixture of suspicion and loathing before turning away, allowing the skysled to continue unopposed.

‘That was too easy,’ Michael said.
‘Just more proof someone in power is involved,’ Samantha added.
‘Set us down there,’ Luke pointed. ‘It’s the same warehouse.’
‘What do we do with them?’ Tahoke asked, nodding towards their captives.
‘Leave them until we find Queen Oriana,’ Michael said. ‘She’ll arrest them for treason.’

The warehouse’s roof opened automatically, allowing the skysled to land among the broken mining machines. The triplets and injured Scorned warriors ditched their costumes then regrouped outside.

‘Hopefully, the tunnels will take us to the palace,’ Luke said, lifting up a grate. ‘We can sneak in without attracting trouble.’

He swapped his flashlight’s battery with one from the warehouse and climbed down. Samantha followed, then Michael, who paused when Tahoke’s men left for the streets.

‘We’ll meet you at the palace,’ the chieftain said. ‘First, my people need to learn the truth. They have a right to know their homeland is in danger.’

Reluctantly, the triplets watched them go. Discretion was vital. They hoped to reach Oriana first without tipping off the surviving traitors.

‘So who is it?’ Luke asked his siblings as they followed the service tunnels under the harbour.

‘The black harlequin told us he’d been hired by the government to invade the Broken Isles,’ she said. ‘It must be a politician.’
‘I reckon it’s Prime Minister Federico,’ Michael said. ‘We didn’t know he existed until he got rid of Pasquale. He’s probably been slowly working his way into power.’

‘You better be right,’ Luke said. ‘We don’t want to accuse an innocent man.’

Further along, as his flashlight swung through the darkness, he was stopped by Michael. ‘What are these?’

The walls were covered with graffiti and children’s paintings. Some were of animals and flowers. Others, though, were gloomier. They depicted a battle between Pacifico and the Thirteen Tribes. Warriors on sharks rode through the streets and darkened the skies with arrows, while marines defended themselves with swords and pikes. Among their feet lay the dead and wounded.

Other items – broken clay pots, metal soup cups, chalk stubs, blackboards, books squeezed into cracks and a mouldy blanket hanging limply across the doorway of a makeshift sick room – provided clues that a large number of people had once sheltered down here. A lingering fear left the triplets cold.

‘Tahoke said there had been a lot of blood spilt between both nations, didn’t he?’ Michael stated.

‘And Cavalli’s father had been killed by the Thirteen Tribes,’ she added. ‘But this looks like a long time ago,’ Luke said. ‘Possibly decades.’

‘Let’s move on, hey?’ Michael said. ‘Let’s not worry about it now.’

Several more turns later, Luke hastened their pace. He led them through the steam room then towards the metal door with the peephole. ‘That’s it,’ he pointed. ‘The hidden dungeon. Lady Isabelle could still be inside.’

‘Then hurry up,’ Samantha said, impatiently. ‘Let’s rescue her.’

‘No, wait! It’s guarded.’

He pulled the green harlequin’s mask from the largest pouch, placed it on his face then knocked. Footsteps approached and the peephole slid across. The marine paled before throwing open the bolt. Michael rammed the door and Samantha hogtied the guard so he couldn’t escape. Luke yelled ‘Clear!’ after discovering no more marines. He lifted a key ring and hurried down the curving pathway.

The smell was vile, but it was nothing compared to the shock of facing dozens of grey eyes. The prisoners spotted the Hall of Heroes’ costumes and stared at the triplets with hunger, confusion and anger. Luke dispelled any fears that they were conspiring with the jailers. He unlocked each cell as his siblings found food and water.

‘Get to the surface,’ Michael said. ‘Tell everyone what you know.’

‘Isabelle’s not here,’ Luke said, looking through the prisoners – both Pacifican and Scorned alike. ‘Or the Red Samurai.’
‘We’re too late. They’ve already been sold into slavery.’
‘We have to find them.’
‘One heroic gesture at a time,’ Samantha said. ‘Time’s running out. The traitor will soon know we’re in the city. We need to find Oriana – now!’
As they fell into step behind the prisoners, a couple of stragglers turned a hook and a secret door swung open. They disappeared through it, just as they’d watched their jailers do. The triplets followed.
It branched into several more tunnels, including one dipping deep underground. ‘That’s the way to the palace,’ offered a prisoner.
He was right. At the other end, they discovered a spiralling staircase, which surfaced three floors above at a second secret door. When the triplets cracked it open, they covered their eyes against the brightness of a holo-painting. ‘It must be how the black harlequin snuck in at night,’ Luke said.
Staying hidden, they spied a cloakroom. It was full of mirrors, couches, suits, shirts, walking canes, hats, shoes and colognes.
‘I’ve got an idea,’ Michael said.

*D*

Dignitaries from across the universe filled the enormous ballroom, entertained by dancing troupes, trapeze artists and a full orchestra. They drank, discussed politics and marvelled at four giant cone-shaped cakes – each assembled with three thousand white-chocolate roses.
Disguised as nobles, and with most of their costumes locked in the cloakroom, the triplets moved among the guests, keeping an eye out for the newly elevated Prime Minister Federico. A few times they thought they heard his sly voice, only to be disappointed by a case of mistaken identity when they got close enough.
‘There he is,’ Samantha said, pointing to a set of folding doors.
Applause overwhelmed the last hum of violins before four trumpeters quieted the din and turned the guests towards the new Prime Minister. He threw open his arms and announced, ‘Distinguished friends, in this, her family’s three hundredth year in power, let us all welcome Her Majesty, Queen Oriana of Pacifico!’
The doors opened and everyone applauded. Beautiful as ever, Oriana sashayed through, wearing elbow-length gloves, a shell crown over her purple hair, a downy azure dress with a long train, and a giant blue butterfly mask. She curtsied to the dignitaries then brought the room to a hush. With a snap of her jewelled fingers, her mask suddenly flapped its wings and fluttered away! The guests erupted with more applause. But that was not all. With another snap, her
entire blue dress exploded into thousands of smaller butterflies. Laughter soon filled the ballroom as the colourful insects landed on the noses and shoulders of nobles, monarchs and presidents.

As the orchestra struck up a rousing symphony, Oriana walked among the celebrations in a lavender silk gown, which had been hidden underneath. The chatter returned and Michael slipped through the crowd, trying to reach her, but Oriana’s friends swarmed first. Against his better judgement, he held back to avoid causing a scene. Samantha and Luke had surrounded the Prime Minister anyway.

‘Are you sure Federico’s the traitor?’ Luke whispered, finding the pair of handcuffs in one of his pouches. ‘I still think we’re going after the wrong person.’

‘Who else could it be?’ Samantha answered above a group of laughing lords and ladies. ‘Just stay back until Michael gives the signal, okay?’

The dignitaries continued to press Oriana, making it impossible for Michael to speak to her alone. As far as he knew, she hadn’t even spotted him under this disguise.

Conversations were loud, animated and occasionally broken by a footman announcing the arrival of an important world leader. One dignitary in particular caught everyone’s attention – an elderly woman, whose skin was painted completely white. She wore a silver crown of rubies, a necklace of sapphires and an all-white gown adorned with white peacock feathers fanning from her back. Her head was shaved completely bald except for a single topknot of black hair, which ran down her nape, just like the sugar merchant. And drawn around her eyes were circles of yellow, blue and green that matched more traditional peacock colours.

‘Your Majesty,’ the woman said, curtseying. ‘My world wishes to honour your royal household’s three hundredth anniversary with a gift.’

Her entourage wheeled forward an enormous cage containing eight strawberry finches. The birds leapt among the plants and chirped like silver bells.

‘Empress, you honour me greatly!’ Queen Oriana mirrored the Empress’s curtsey then wiggled her left fingers through the cage, hoping to attract a pretty finch. ‘Can my household return this favour in any way?’

The Empress smiled. ‘Word has reached even our ears from across the Seven Worlds about your musical prowess, Your Majesty. Would you indulge your guests and play from your mandolin?’

Oriana moved away from the cage and hid her right glove. ‘Respectfully, I cannot this day. I injured my hand in a fall.’
Amid the sighs, Michael screwed up his face. His memory flashed with images of their evening together among the instruments at the royal palace’s observatory, and the battle with the harlequins – specifically the white harlequin. Oriana played the mandolin?

She nodded to the orchestra to resume its symphony, and the guests returned to their conversations. From the fringes, the marine sergeant – now promoted to captain – pushed through them until he reached Oriana. He begged her indulgence then whispered into her ear.

‘No!’ she answered, reeling away. ‘They cannot be dead!’

Again, the ballroom hushed.

The Empress turned her wide, feathered gown around and asked, ‘Your Majesty? What news disturbs you?’

‘It’s – It’s the Gold Knight. He –’ Michael reversed his direction, struggling to reach his siblings. ‘He is slain!’ she yelled.

Shock overwhelmed the guests. The room whirled with grief and speculation, until fear bullied its way into people’s hearts.

‘Who has committed such an act?’ the Empress asked above the din. Several more voices echoed the same question.

‘The monster that lives on the Broken Isles and those who control it,’ she said, sobbing.

‘Who controls it?’

‘The Scorned! They seek our riches for themselves and have declared war!’

All reason was lost among the noise and madness. The wild rumour soon became truth. Nobles called for the marines to take arms. Others promised to fight the savages and drive their kind from the Western Seas once and for all.

However, the growing anger drained away as a holographic recording beamed above their heads. It flashed with images of the pirate ship scouring the Broken Isles, thousands of slaves mining for gold, children sewing clothes, the harlequin sky battle, Aurelio’s death and haggard prisoners locked away in the hidden underground jail. Everyone stood transfixed.

‘Who is responsible for these atrocities?’ Prime Minister Federico suddenly shouted.

‘One of your own,’ Michael yelled, throwing off his noble’s disguise, alongside Luke and Samantha.

Again, the guests were taken aback. ‘The Gold Knight! He lives!’

‘Sir Michael?’ Oriana asked, wide-eyed.

‘Healthy as you can see,’ he answered. ‘But the same can’t be said about the monster.’

‘Because it never existed,’ Samantha yelled for the whole gathering’s
benefit. ‘It’s a lie to scare people away from what’s really happening on the Broken Isles.’

‘Which you’re watching, thanks to my built-in camera,’ Luke said, tapping his earpiece’s projector. ‘All this footage has been filmed during the past twenty-four hours.’

There was a great intake of breath. ‘Those mines are real?’ Federico asked in a rising voice.

‘Yes, as your government well and truly knows, Prime Minister,’ Michael answered. ‘And so are the slaves.’

‘Slaves owned by pirates,’ Samantha said.

‘Pirates working for someone in this room,’ Luke said.

‘Who?’ the guests shouted.

‘Yes, who?’ Oriana asked. ‘They will forfeit their life!’

‘Then, Your Majesty, Pacifico needs to find a new queen,’ Michael said.

The news ambushed everyone. Lords and ladies stared at each other, while presidents and kings waved over their advisers. The initial confusion was expected but not what happened next. Rather than demanding she be arrested, the triplets encountered anger. ‘Outrageous!’ people shouted. ‘Lies!’

Oriana silenced the courtiers clustered around her then strode forward with the demeanour of a viper. ‘Your disgraceful accusation, Gold Knight, is untrue and unfounded. Today, you have brought great shame not only to my royal household, my city and my people, but to yourself and the great Hall.’

‘Then explain this, Your Majesty.’ Luke played the scene where the white harlequin put away her silver mandolin and tried poisoning Michael with a blow dart. After being disarmed by Samantha, the white harlequin then misjudged a punch and broke her right hand.

‘Look familiar?’ Michael asked.

‘Why should she?’ Oriana asked. ‘Who is this villain?’

‘You, Your Majesty. You and that harlequin are the same.’

This incensed the court even more. Nobles called for the triplets to be arrested.

‘Nonsense! Just because one strums a mandolin does not mean one associates with traitors!’ Oriana shouted.

‘Show us your hand.’

‘I will not! Captain! Arrest these three. I have reason to believe they are impostors – and not from our beloved Hall of Heroes!’

The marines rushed towards the triplets, but were quickly surrounded themselves. The Scorned footmen dropped their platters with a crash and revealed themselves as Tahoke and his men.
‘Show us your hand!’ Michael repeated.
‘How dare you use that tone with me, child. I am a queen and you are a charlatan. Captain, you have your orders!’

The marines couldn’t move. Both they and the Scorned warriors faced each other in an armed stand-off. Concerned about bloodshed, Michael snatched a glass of water from the Empress and threw its contents at Queen Oriana. It splashed her waist and arm in a harmless and seemingly juvenile act of rebellion.

However, as the water dripped down her left hand, her smallest ring – a silver signet with a false ruby – suddenly burst forth with a holographic image. It showed the Weeping Mountains then Luke’s face.

‘Monster’s lair,’ the Vulture’s recorded voice said. ‘Now. We have captured one of the children.’

The room became chaotic. Marines didn’t know what to do. Dignitaries didn’t know what to say. A bold noble even grabbed Her Majesty’s hand from behind and removed her right glove. Underneath, her knuckles were bruised and badly swollen.

‘The rest of her secret police are caged in a warehouse!’ Michael shouted to anyone who would listen. ‘Go and ask them who they work for! They’ll tell you it’s her!’

‘Captain of the Royal Marines,’ the Empress said, ‘I strongly suggest that you place Her Majesty under house arrest until a time deemed fit by an emergency sitting of your parliament.’

‘What?’ Oriana said. ‘Captain, you shall do no such thing. Marines! Stand down!’

The captain and his men hesitated.

‘Captain, arrest her!’ Prime Minister Federico repeated. ‘That is an order! The Queen is relieved of duty as spelt out in our Constitution.’

‘And arrest the politicians,’ Samantha said. ‘Until we can figure out how many are involved as well.’

Prime Minister Federico paled as the marines blocked off the exits.

Nearby, the captain was caught between conflicting orders until the crowd forced his hand. ‘Arrest her!’ a lone voice shouted, before echoed by several more.

‘Queen Oriana of the Pacifican royal household,’ the marine captain began, ‘I regret to inform you that I am placing you under house arrest until a date to –’

‘You can’t arrest me! You do not have the authority. None of you do! I will be proven innocent and all of you jailed for treason!’

‘I don’t think so, Your Majesty,’ Michael said, facing her. Their eyes locked – hers with anger; his with hurt and betrayal. ‘Only one person holds enough
power on this planet to order a ban on shipping lanes. Only one person can guarantee pirates safe passage to the Western Seas. Only one person can stop her marine captain from investigating nobles who have been kidnapped from Pacifico at night. And that person is you, Your Majesty.’

The dignitaries watched with a mix of alarm and fear as she, a queen, was marched out in shame. For someone they had once considered an ally, she was now treated with revulsion. Whatever happened from this day on, her rule was finished.

As the commotion grew louder, the triplets slipped away. Finally, the real monster had been caught. It was time to go home.
Standing on a pebbled beach in their costumes, the triplets watched as the remaining royal yachts, presidential starships and cruisers jetted away without fanfare. The citizens of Pacifico were caught up with news of their queen’s betrayal.

‘I always knew she was behind this,’ Samantha said, following streams of water flowing upwards from the sea.

‘Really?’ Luke said, trudging behind her through the trees and long grasses that covered the slopes of the extinct volcano. ‘And when were you going to tell us?’

‘When Michael stopped looking at her all lovey-dovey.’

‘Was not!’ he answered, cheeks burning.

‘Yes you were!’ Luke said, slapping him on the back. ‘You do know because the special mineral water here makes people look so young that Oriana was probably as old as Nanna!’

He made puckering noises, which only embarrassed his brother further. Michael chased after him, but was slowed down by his armour.

They hiked towards the lake nestled inside the extinct volcano’s crater. Several pipes had once carried water between it and the Ninety Islands, crossing under the harbour.

‘So tell me again, how’d you figure out the Knock-Knock Door’s up here?’ Luke asked Samantha.

‘Knock-Knock Doors need a lot of water, right?’

‘Probably as a coolant,’ Michael said.

‘Thank you, Doctor Brain. Anyway, remember our Knock-Knock Door on Earth – it was close to a stormwater drain, correct? On the Broken Isles, it was under a waterfall. Here, it’s this volcanic lake. We’ve been looking at it all this time.’

‘Oh!’


‘That sugar merchant! He told me the lake had gone salty. That meant water was being drawn up from the sea into the crater.’

She whirled on him. ‘You mean, you’ve known about this since we got here,
and you’re only figuring it out now?’

‘Sam, I –’

‘You mean, I’ve spent the last few weeks being chased by stinky fish, hunting a monster that doesn’t exist and fighting circus freaks because you forgot?’

‘Look, I’m sorry, okay. It –’

‘You mean, I’ve been scratching this beard – this ugly, prickly, sweaty man’s beard – FOR NO REASON WHATSOEVER?’

Luke laughed as he watched his brother sprint up the path, Samantha screaming after him. With a tap of his wristpad, he recalled his satellite into his jetpack and grinned. ‘Guess that makes me the favourite brother from now on.’

An hour later, he found them collapsed against a hidden entrance halfway up the volcano. Water defied gravity and streamed into its jamb, just like the sewers back home. Other rivulets continued upwards to fill the crater.

‘What are you two arguing about now?’ he asked, watching Michael rub his shoulder. Not even all that armour could protect him from one of Samantha’s pummellings.

‘Oriana,’ she said. ‘How could she watch the tricentennial celebrations, but at the same time perform in front of all those people as the white harlequin?’

‘Even I know that one. It was just another actor taking her place,’ Luke said. Michael shook his head. ‘She didn’t want anyone to be suspicious about her double life.’

‘But why would she want to be a harlequin?’ she asked. ‘Oriana’s a queen – or was a queen. She had all the power in the world.’

‘I don’t think it was about power. That day of the ferry ride to the Island of Roses, she was mobbed by thousands of people. All her life, she’s been the public face of the city. She’s never been able to step outside without being recognised. Afterwards, she told me she felt like a prisoner in her own kingdom. As a harlequin, she could be faceless and free of rules. And for evil people, that normally means making others suffer.’

They pushed open the hidden entrance then took a last look at Pacifico: the royal palace, mansions, docks, markets, plazas, theatres, conservatorium and stables. Despite its sinister queen, for three weeks it had been their home. They’d made friends there – one of whom was dead and the rest missing. Their only disappointment was failing to free them from the slavers. They hoped the new government would rectify that. But that was someone else’s story.

‘We did pretty good, didn’t we?’ Luke asked.

She nodded. ‘You did pretty good. Both of you. Not bad for a couple of boys.’
The brothers smiled, thinking back to how much they’d each grown since falling from the sky into a waterfall – Michael and Samantha quite a lot, but Luke? Well, he wanted to stay a kid forever.

The triplets had seen enough. They entered a cavern and discovered their last surprise. Before them, large and bold, was another Knock-Knock Door. But this one was made from red obsidian – not unusual considering they were inside an extinct volcano. It was fastened shut by a giant round lock in the shape of two fish, and another pair of carp held the knockers in their mouths. The floor was made out of pretty celestite chrysanthemum – or black ‘flower stone’.

After rapping the knockers, the streams of water flowed quicker; the lights glowed brighter; and the familiar gold-painted ironwork of bells and cogs started to tick-tick-tick and ding-ding-ding.

Samantha did the honours. She’d waited for this moment too long.

Knock. Knock.

Who’s there? a cuckoo bird asked on a piece of tickertape.

‘Carmen,’ she answered.

Carmen who?

‘Carmen see for yourself!’

Luke laughed as cogs rolled and stuttered, whistles blew and the giant double fish lock, twisted and separated. An enormous rush thundered above them as the lake emptied itself behind the Knock-Knock Door. ‘Good one, Sis.’

Do you like riddles?

‘Yes,’ Michael answered. ‘We like riddles.’

Unlock the answer and I’ll open for you.

More cogs tick-tick-ticked and bells ding-ding-dinged until a second cuckoo bird scissored forward and asked its riddle: If there are two of you but one of me, what am I?

‘A mirror,’ they all answered.

As before, the triplets stepped in an enormous star chamber with the whole universe charted out before them. They could explore any planet in all creation, but they were united in their decision.

‘Take us home,’ Michael said.

The chamber blinked from black to white then black again, before the triplets farewelled Pacifico and vanished.
Back on Earth and three weeks previously, a trio of forgotten monsters crept along the subterranean tunnels below the old pumphouse. They homed in on a bright cavern with chequerboard tiles and an enormous red double door, but slowed when they heard children’s voices. Surprise, surprise, the lead girl smiled. The Bowman losers.

‘Don’t make a sound,’ April hissed, holding a stolen sledgehammer.

The Thornleigh sisters kept well hidden at the top of the steps behind the plaster cavity and spied on the geeks. That giant door they’d discovered was out-of-this-world – and that meant one thing: money.

The middle sister, May, pestered April to charge down there and grab them, but she had other plans. She wanted to learn what they knew. Besides, these losers were trapped, and she owned the only lighter. They’d have to turn back – and not before a good pounding.

Again, June caused a problem. She slumped against the wall in boredom, unaware she’d caught her red cloak on a chunk of plaster. In a flash, April caught it before it bounced down the steps. ‘I warned you upstairs about making a noise!’

The mistake was quickly forgotten when the weedy Michael Bowman yelled, ‘Door, it’s the letter “o”!’ The strange red exit answered by chiming and opening to let the triplets inside.

After a metal cuckoo bird whizzed past them, the Thornleighs snuck down to the same door, only to have it suddenly swing shut. There was a great whooshing, like a crashing wave, then nothing but dripping.

‘What do you think’s behind it?’ May Thornleigh asked, shaking the golden ironworks.

‘I don’t know,’ April said, running her hand across the double door. ‘But I reckon it’s gotta be big.’

An hour later, when they still hadn’t opened it, April reached into her costume pocket and pulled out a small silver bell. It was tied to a business card, which read on one side: In case of emergency, and on the other: Mr Deed’s Curious Curios.

She rang it.
Soon, the cavern echoed with *tick-tick-ticks* and *ding-ding-dings*, and the gateway rumbled apart.

And so, one by one, Little Red Riding Hood, a cyborg and a particularly nasty spideress walked through the Knock-Knock Door.
Scott Monk is a monster hunter. Beyond the Knock-Knock Door is his first contemporary fantasy novel for children. Respected for his ability to get even the most reluctant readers to pick up a book, Scott has written four novels for teenagers, including Boyz ‘R’ Us, Raw, The Crush and The Never Boys. When he isn’t busy travelling the universe looking for stories, he works for a newspaper in Sydney, goes to the football or eats chocolate. Lots of chocolate.