

A Contest of Hopes

The boy spied the pale glimmer of a shark, and his mouth watered. He swam between the rays of moonlight, hoping it wouldn't sense him coming.

Above, he saw a black square on the surface of the sea. Two pale feet dangled at its edge, blurred by the rippling waves. Somehow, the boy knew he mustn't eat them, as surely as he knew he was hungry.

He would eat the shark instead.

He swept his massive tail and the water thundered round him. At the last moment, the shark darted left, right, left, and the boy felt a thrill rush from the tip of his nose to his fins. He snapped his jaws, missed, then snapped again. His teeth grazed the shark's skin and blood filled the water. So close. The shark's tail struck his face and the boy

lunged forward and bit down hard, his teeth shredding flesh and bone and –

‘SETH!’ Ellie yelled, hitting him on the head with the handle of her screwdriver. ‘Get off!’

‘*Muh?*’ said Seth, his eyes wide.

‘You’re *biting* me!’

‘What?’ said Seth, scrabbling backwards, causing the whole raft to tilt so that Ellie had to grab the mast. The teeth marks on Ellie’s arm glistened with saliva in the moonlight. ‘I’m sorry!’

‘It’s all right,’ said Ellie, wiping away his spit with her sleeve. ‘You were dreaming.’

Seth rubbed the top of his head. ‘I wasn’t asleep,’ he said. ‘There’s . . . something underneath the boat. Something big.’

Ellie pulled her feet from the water.

‘Did it hurt?’ Seth said, eyeing the fading bite marks.

‘Yes, a lot,’ Ellie lied, picking up the small broken clock she’d been tinkering with. ‘You owe me another round.’

Seth groaned, flopping on to his front and burying his face in his arm. ‘No. I’m too hungry to think.’

‘But we need to *distract* ourselves from food. Especially now you’re turning into a cannibal.’

‘It wasn’t you I thought I was eating, it was that shark.’

‘What shark?’

‘I saw a shark. But I wasn’t me. I was . . . something else.’

‘You were in the sea again?’ Ellie said, and Seth nodded. Ellie felt strangely jealous whenever Seth cast his mind out into the sea. She worried that he was doing it to avoid her. They were often arguing these days, over the silliest things, only to make up again a few minutes later. It was hard being in one person’s company all the time, Ellie had discovered – even someone she liked as much as Seth – and by her count they’d been at sea for at least three months.

‘You go first,’ she said.

‘Do we have to?’ Seth rolled on to his back. He was so tall he had to fold in his legs to fit on the raft.

‘Yes, because you bit me,’ said Ellie.

The mast gave a mournful creak, the sail fluttering in the warm breeze.

‘Fine, okay,’ Seth said. He sat up, his brows furrowing irritably. ‘I wish –’

‘Hope,’ Ellie corrected softly. The word ‘wish’ was not a pleasant one for her any more.

‘Hope,’ said Seth, looking out to the horizon. In the moonlight, he resembled a pen-and-ink drawing, all sharp angles and messy black hair. ‘I hope . . . that on this new island we find a pair of proper beds, with pillows, where we can sleep until noon, without wolves trying to eat us.’

‘That’s not very imaginative,’ said Ellie. ‘I’m sure you’ve used that one before.’

‘I still see those wolves in my dreams, you know. Their glowing red eyes.’

‘Their eyes did not glow red,’ said Ellie, though they hadn’t been friendly, either. They’d woken Seth and Ellie with their howling, on a tiny islet a month ago.

‘Okay, it’s my turn,’ said Ellie, rubbing her hands together. ‘I hope that on this new island we find lots of people who need me to invent things for them, so I can create amazing machines to turn the island into a paradise where everyone is happy all the time and nobody suffers.’

Seth stared at her. He had large, wintry blue eyes and sometimes it was like being stared at by a cat.

‘I think mine wins, don’t you?’ said Ellie brightly, fetching a penknife from one of the countless pockets of her old, stitched-together coat. She crawled on her elbows to one corner of the raft, where many vertical lines had been scored into the wood, some beneath a crudely inscribed letter E, others beneath the letter S. Taking the knife, Ellie scored a new groove under E.

‘Why not hope the island is already a paradise?’ said Seth.

‘What?’ said Ellie, cheerfully blowing the hair away from her face.

‘Why hope to find somewhere you can turn into a paradise? Why not hope for an island that already *is* a paradise?’

Ellie wrinkled her nose. ‘But then . . . what use would I be?’

Seth studied her. ‘Let’s just focus on getting to the island,’ he said, glancing suspiciously over his shoulder. ‘And fast.’

‘Seth, for the last time, no one is following us.’

‘I saw a sail, Ellie. A black sail. It must be the Inquisition.’

‘Why would the Inquisition be following us? They think I’m dead.’

‘Maybe they figured out that you faked your death. There was definitely a ship – I could sense it in the water.’

‘Just because there was a ship doesn’t mean it was following us. Now come on, let’s play another –’

Seth jerked to one side, his eyes fixed on the sea.

‘What is it *now*?’ said Ellie. ‘Inquisitors chasing us on the backs of dolphins?’

‘No, it’s that shoal of fish.’

‘What shoal of fish?’

‘The one I told you about earlier,’ Seth said excitedly. ‘They’ve come back. I think they’re drawn towards me.’

Ellie rolled her eyes. ‘Yes, because you’re so interesting. Why not try catching one?’

‘With what, my hands?’

‘Your *powers*, Seth. You should really be practising every day so you don’t forget how to use them.’

Seth looked at the sea like it was filled with writhing worms. ‘I don’t *like* using them,’ he said, pouting petulantly.

‘Fine. Stay hungry.’

He glared at her, then hunched forward over the water, closing his eyes and gripping the edge of the raft. His fingers tightened, nails digging into wood.

Then, dark swirls appeared on the surface of his arms. He grimaced, like he was in pain.

‘Seth?’ Ellie said, inching towards him.

Seth’s eyes flashed open and he held out one hand above the waves. There was a *splash* and something small and glossy wriggled free of the ocean and straight into his outstretched fingers.

‘That was amazing!’ said Ellie, clapping, then wincing as Seth whacked the fish hard against the mast. It stopped wriggling after that. He grabbed the penknife and quickly sliced off the fish’s skin, then presented its flesh to Ellie. It glowed in the moonlight.

‘I think I’ll wait until we can build a fire,’ said Ellie, though her stomach whined. Seth tore into the fish, slurping it down.

‘You’re disgusting,’ Ellie said.

Seth shrugged, and Ellie kept watching, then shuffled over to him. ‘How did you do it, then? Did you make the water spit up the fish, or did you convince the fish to jump out?’

‘Not sure,’ said Seth, his mouth full. ‘You really don’t want any?’ He pulled a bone from his teeth, then dangled the mutilated fish in front of her.

Ellie inspected it suspiciously. ‘Uncooked fish can make you sick.’

‘Not eating can make you dead.’

Ellie took the fish. Its head was hanging at an angle, held on by a sliver of spine. She sniffed, then took a bite. It tasted salty and sweet at the same time, the flesh melting on her tongue.

Seth smiled, and his eyelids drooped. He got tired whenever he used his powers over the sea. A few times during their journey, he'd needed to calm the wild sea, or propel the raft along when there'd been no breeze. He'd collapsed afterwards every time, his skin cold as morning frost.

'Shall we play one more round?' Ellie said brightly. She knew it was selfish, but she didn't want Seth to fall asleep and leave her alone. When she slept, she dreamed she was being chased along twisting alleyways. When she was alone, she thought she could hear a voice on the wind. 'Please?'

Seth looked at her through half-shut eyes.

'Okay,' he sighed. 'I hope . . . that on this new island, you can find someone else to play this pointless game with.'

'*Seth!*' Ellie batted his arm. 'Be serious.'

Seth tried and failed to suppress a sleepy smile. 'Sorry. I hope that on this island, I can learn how to fish properly, without using my . . .' He looked at the fading blue swirls on his skin. 'You know.'

Ellie waited, expecting more. 'That's it?' she said eventually. 'Why *wouldn't* you want to use your powers?'

'Because they make me tired.'

'Don't you want to make new friends on the island? *They* could teach you how to fish without using your powers.'

Seth hugged his legs. 'I don't trust people.'

'They won't be like the people in the City,' said Ellie. 'They might be nice. And you trust me, don't you? And I bet you trusted your brothers and sisters.'

‘My brothers and sisters weren’t people, they were gods. And they’re all dead. Except for the Enemy.’

Ellie winced, her chest tightening.

‘Sorry,’ said Seth.

‘But . . . we don’t know for sure that they’re all dead. I mean, everyone in the City thought only the Enemy was left, but then you turned up. Maybe if we found other gods, they could help you get your memories back? Help you remember who you really are.’

‘I know who I am. I’m Seth. I’m happy that way. Your turn,’ he added curtly.

Ellie glowered at him. ‘Fine. I hope that on this new island –’ she paused to think – ‘there are people who . . . are like me. Like my mum. People who want to invent things – who want to make the world better. I hope there are people there who’ll see that I’m special.’

As she spoke, she felt the hairs on her neck stand on end, and her chest twisted with painful longing. Seth looked down at his hand. He seemed to have become very interested in a small cut on his finger.

‘What?’ Ellie said flatly.

‘I don’t think this game is good for you. You’re getting your hopes up too much. We’ve no idea what we’re going to find on this island, if it even exists.’

Ellie felt a stab of irritation. ‘But we *saw* it – on the map in the Inquisitorial stronghold.’

‘Yes, and the Inquisition has *always* been trustworthy,’ Seth said, rolling his eyes.

Ellie took a deep breath. They’d had this conversation many times. But she understood why Seth was so wary, given that the Inquisition had tried to burn him to death.

‘And if it *does* exist,’ Seth grumbled, ‘it might be dangerous. Why else would the Inquisitors keep it a secret?’

Ellie frowned. ‘Maybe because it’s a wonderful, amazing place, and they don’t want everyone in the City to try and escape to it?’

‘That doesn’t sound very likely.’

Ellie scowled and turned away, finding she didn’t want to see his face any more. ‘I think I won that round,’ she announced, picking up the knife and scoring another vertical line next to the thirty already beneath the letter E. She looked at the six lines below the letter S. ‘You’re doing terribly,’ she added.

‘I really don’t care, Ellie.’

Ellie felt a surge of fury bubble in her gut. She grabbed the mangled remains of the fish and hurled them at Seth’s head. He ducked and they fell into the sea with a *splash*.

The water rose up in a black, glistening mass that split across the middle to reveal sharp teeth and a fat pink tongue. The mouth snapped shut and the fish was gone, but the creature kept rising, spraying water from its sleek surface. Its white stomach fell against the raft, rocking it so hard that Ellie slipped and rolled backwards, the raft

vanishing from under her. She choked on salt water as it rushed up her nose and into her mouth and all the spaces between her skin and her clothes.

She opened her eyes, and through the murk she saw it: a killer whale, white patches on its side, a tall fin on its back. It looked at her for an instant, then twisted and swam away in a flurry of foam. Relief rushed through Ellie as it vanished into the dark. She kicked up towards the surface, risking a glance down into the depths, frightened that a shark might have been drawn by the commotion. But there was just an endless emptiness that sucked away the light.

Ellie frowned, blinking against the salt water. Because there *was* something – she could have sworn it. Deep down in the dark, somehow even blacker than the gloom.

A figure. Something in the shape of a human.

For long seconds she stared, trying to decide if what she saw was real. It kept fading in and out of her sight. When it was there, it was motionless. Not swimming, but fixed in place. She could feel it watching her.

She blinked, and the figure was gone, and then something rushed up against her from beneath, and she was rising, rising. The waters parted and warm night air swept against her skin and filled her lungs. The moon shone above her, and Seth's bright eyes did too.

He pulled her off the back of the killer whale and on to the raft, wrapping her long sealskin coat round her. There

was a splash as a dark tail rose above them, then vanished with a watery *glug* and a pop of froth.

‘Are you okay?’ Seth asked, patting her on the back. Ellie coughed, seawater gushing from her nose. She shook her head.

‘It’s fine,’ said Seth. ‘The whale was never going to hurt you. I think it came here because of me. Let’s light the oil lamp.’

‘It’s not the whale, Seth,’ said Ellie, shivering and huddling close to him for warmth. ‘I think I saw it.’

‘Saw what?’

Ellie took in a trembling breath, and Seth swallowed. ‘Oh.’ He was quiet for a moment. ‘Did it look like your brother?’

‘No. I don’t think it can take Finn’s shape again, after what I did to it. I could only see a shadow, really. But it was definitely . . . *it*. It was looking right at me.’

‘But it can’t hurt you any more, Ellie. You won. So long as you don’t ask it to grant any more wishes, it can’t regain its power.’

‘Yeah,’ said Ellie, managing a weak smile. ‘Yeah, you’re right.’

‘And you’ve not made any more wishes, and you’re not going to. So it can’t ever hurt you again.’

Ellie nodded. ‘Thank you, Seth,’ she said, pulling her coat more tightly round herself. She risked a glance down into the deep, but saw nothing but her own reflection.

When she looked up, Seth was still watching her. There was a mischievous twist to his smile.

‘I hope,’ he began, ‘that on this new island, there are nice people who will let us live there with them, who’ll feed us and welcome us. That it’s an island where you can make friends, and invent amazing new machines, and where no Inquisitors can find us. Where no one has ever heard of the Enemy.’

Ellie smiled too, wiping a strand of wet hair from her eyes. ‘I think you win that round, to be honest.’

‘But you didn’t hope for anything?’

Ellie picked up her penknife, and scored a line beneath the letter S. ‘Nothing could beat that,’ she said, looking back up at him.

But as their eyes met, Seth was distracted by something over Ellie’s shoulder, gazing in sudden wonder. Ellie turned to look too.

It lay upon the horizon. A dark, jagged shape, picked out by the moonlight.

A new island.



Praise Her

For hours, the island sat on the horizon. It didn't seem to be getting any closer, just bigger, and Ellie wondered if they'd ever reach it at all. She pulled a telescope from her coat pocket, rubbing the lens with her thumb. She squinted into the eyepiece.

'The island's got something growing out of it.'

'A mountain?' said Seth.

Ellie frowned. 'No. The shape's too regular. Like it was made by people.' She passed him the telescope. 'It sort of looks like —'

'A ship,' said Seth.

'Yeah,' said Ellie. 'A *huge* ship.'

'What's a ship doing on top of an island?'

'I don't know. Maybe it got stuck there? But how . . .' Ellie's palms prickled. 'Wait! Seth, maybe it's an

Ark. One of the four giant ships people used to escape the Drowning!’

The sun rose as the raft approached, painting the eastern sky pale orange, washing the darkness from the massive structure that rested atop the island. It was almost crescent-shaped, as if the moon had crashed down from the skies above. Ellie and Seth looked at each other – there was no doubt it was an Ark.

The island itself was shrouded in mist, except at one side, where a volcano jutted out at an angle. Even this was dwarfed by the Ark, which rose and rose until it was a swollen shadow above them. The raft drifted through the humid mist, leaving hot beads of condensation on their faces.

Then, houses appeared.

At first, Ellie thought that they were floating impossibly above the water. But, as the mists cleared, she realized they were raised on stilts – a village of wooden homes with straw roofs, connected by rickety bridges and narrow walkways. The mist parted, and sunlight struck the village, revealing a world of bright paintwork: cherry reds and cornflower blues and egg-yolk yellows, and lurid carvings of whales and fish and sharks that poked from the rooftop corners, grinning down at the sea.

A woman opened her door with a musical clatter of wind chimes, stepping out on to a walkway.

‘Morning, Alistair,’ she called, to an old man in a rocking chair on his front porch. ‘Looks like a lovely day.’



‘Aye, no doubt. Praise Her.’

‘Praise Her,’ beamed the woman. Her eyes glanced down at Ellie and Seth as their raft passed beneath. ‘Look at the state of you two,’ she said with a smile.

‘Did you come all the way from Ingarth Island on *that*?’ said the man.

‘Oh,’ said Ellie. ‘I mean, um . . .’

‘Yes,’ Seth said stiffly. ‘We came from . . . Ingurf Island.’

‘Hope you’ve got a place to stay,’ said the woman. ‘You look like you could both use a good bath.’

‘We do, don’t we?’ said Ellie, faking a laugh. ‘It must be all that mud we have on Ingarth Island.’

‘And a meal for you, skinny one,’ the woman said to Ellie. ‘Though it seems you’ve brought breakfast with you!’

Ellie followed where she was pointing, and saw a carpet of glittering fish trailing their raft, like a thousand shards of blue crystal.

‘Been a long time since I seen a shoal that big this close to the island. Perhaps our fortunes are changing, praise God,’ the man declared. ‘Praise Her.’

‘Praise Her,’ echoed the woman.

‘Praise Her,’ said Ellie, since it seemed like the right thing to do.

The raft floated lazily on between algae-covered stilts, beneath walkways and rope bridges. Seth was crouched on all fours, eyes darting from one house to the next.

‘We should have kept that spear,’ he said.

‘It’s fine,’ said Ellie. ‘We just have to act like we belong here.’

An old woman drew a trap up from beneath her house as the shoal passed by, laughing at all the fish wriggling inside. She spotted Ellie and Seth and narrowed her eyes. Seth threw his arm out protectively in front of Ellie, and Ellie batted it away.

‘Smile,’ she whispered, forcing one herself. ‘Look friendly.’

Seth gripped the edge of the raft so tightly that the wood splintered beneath his fingers. ‘Ow.’

‘Seth, relax.’ Ellie pulled some tweezers from her coat. ‘Don’t worry.’

‘Why not? The last time I arrived in a new place, all the people there tried to kill me.’

‘Except one,’ said Ellie, plucking a splinter from Seth’s palm. She smiled at him, but he just rubbed at a scar on his arm – a legacy of his interrogation by a particularly brutal Inquisitor called Hargrath.

‘It’ll be okay, Seth,’ Ellie told him. ‘We’re together, we can do this.’

The raft drifted further through the village. Cats stalked overhead, licking their lips as they watched the shoal of fish. One man paddled behind the raft in a canoe, fishing net at the ready, ignoring the looks Seth was giving him.

Finally, a strip of beach appeared through the gaps in the stilts, the colour of burnt sugar. Golden sandstone buildings hugged the island above it, climbing in rows towards the

massive bulk of the Ark. Some huddled close like dear friends, others stood alone, surrounded by colourful potted plants. And trees – actual *trees* – erupted from the ground, not wizened and emaciated like those few sad specimens that grew in the City, but lush palm trees so tall they sagged over at the top, weighed down by clutches of fat, hairy coconuts. They sprouted between the buildings, and in some places *through* the buildings, bursting from the thatched rooftops.

‘It’s *beautiful*,’ said Ellie.

‘That doesn’t mean it’s not dangerous.’

The raft washed against the beach. Before them was a large lime-green wooden house. A little girl sat on the doorstep, chewing a blade of grass.

‘*See* – nobody here wants to kill us,’ said Ellie.

Seth grumbled, glaring at the girl like she might be concealing a harpoon gun. Ellie used the mast to hoist herself to her feet. ‘What should we do with the raft?’

‘I suppose we could just leave it.’

‘What if someone steals it?’

They looked at the raft, barely more than a bundle of sticks tied together with dead vines, then laughed. It was hard to believe they’d spent three months on such a dismal thing. They’d abandoned Ellie’s underwater boat after only two weeks at sea, its mechanisms corroded by salt water. She sighed at the memory – it had been arguably her greatest invention, even if it had only worked in the first place because the Enemy had fixed it. They’d left it on

a rocky islet, along with the small collection of tools and prized books she'd brought from the City. Now all she owned were the clothes she was wearing, the contents of her coat pockets, and the coat itself: a drab grey thing stitched together from scraps of cloth and sealskin. She pulled it on, despite the clammy heat, comforted by its familiar weight.

'You're going to be too hot,' said Seth.

Ellie gave him a warning look, and Seth nodded in understanding. Wearing her coat made Ellie feel more like an inventor – more like her mother – and, most importantly, it put another layer between the world and the terrible secret she carried everywhere.

'Here you go,' said Seth, picking up a long, polished rod of wood, which they'd salvaged from the rudder of the underwater boat. Ellie glared at it resentfully.

'Thanks,' she grumbled, using the cane to lower herself from the raft. She had hurt her right leg while fleeing the City three months before. It wasn't healing, and Ellie worried this was something to do with the Enemy. Soon after her injury, the god had almost taken a physical form inside her – a process that would have killed her had she not found a way to stop it, with the help of Seth and her best friend, Anna.

Ellie crossed the beach to join Seth, the sand fluffy beneath her bare feet. Seth was inspecting a tall wooden statue of a woman that sat outside the house. She had

purple hair down to her waist, large yellow eyes and a kind smile. Bunches of lilacs grew by her feet, and she wore a chain of wilted daisies on her head.

‘Who do you think this is?’ said Seth.

‘Maybe it’s the woman everyone keeps praising,’ said Ellie, leaning in close to admire the carving.

‘That’s not how you do it!’

The little girl shoved between Ellie and Seth, kneeling before the statue.

‘Thank you, Divine Queen, for bringing the fish and the flowers and keeping our island safe. Please could you bring me a new puppy and fix Grandma’s hip.’

The girl looked at them scathingly, a blade of grass still sticking out of her mouth.

‘Who is —’ Ellie started to say, but Seth clapped a hand over her face and pulled her aside.

‘We shouldn’t ask obvious questions,’ he whispered. ‘If people realize we’re not from here, they might think we’re dangerous.’

Ellie scrunched up her nose. ‘She’s only little. Anyway, that man asked us if we were from Ingarth Island. And he hardly seemed worried by the idea, did he?’

‘It’s rude to whisper, you know,’ said the girl. ‘Especially in front of the Queen.’

‘Sorry,’ said Ellie. ‘Um, praise Her,’ she added.

The girl’s face lit up. ‘Praise Her,’ she said, then bent to pull a wad of grass from the sand.

Ellie and Seth walked away along the beach, glancing back at the girl, who was kneeling before the statue once more.

‘She’s a queen?’ said Seth.

Ellie nodded. ‘But that girl’s *praying* to her. In the City, people prayed to the saints, but . . . did you hear what that old man said?’

‘“Praise Her”,’ said Seth, shrugging.

‘Before that. He said, “Praise God”.’

Seth grimaced.

Ellie checked around to make sure there was no one listening. ‘What if the Queen is a god, like you?’ she asked, excitement tickling the back of her neck.

‘How do we know that’s a good thing?’ Seth said, eyeing the statue with a dark expression. The little girl was now gathering daisies, making a new chain that she placed on the statue’s head to replace the old one.

Ellie had known two gods. One had saved her life, and she trusted him completely. The other had spent three years trying to destroy her.

‘What kind are you?’ she whispered.

Leila's Diary

4,753 days aboard the *Revival*

I want to cry but I can't because I've got to write this down first. Feels important.

Blue Eyes wasn't himself this morning. A seal swam right by his mouth and he didn't even take a nibble, so I thought I'd see if that old medicine woman could do something about it. I dug my heels in and swore at Blue Eyes until he swam us back to the Ark, on to the sea-soaked platform sticking from its side. I tore my feet from the stirrups and leapt from the saddle.

'Get the Crone!' I roared, splashing ankle-deep through the water. Timothy looked at me in terror. 'NOW!'

He scarpered up the rickety staircase towards the Sky Deck. I knelt at Blue Eyes' side to check him over. His black skin was scarred and bumpy as usual, but the big white patch on his side was yellow as old paper.

The staircase creaked and I looked up and saw the ancient woman, a wild cloud of wispy grey hair and a face lined ten thousand times. She had a big hump for a back, and her eyes were a tight bunch of wrinkles, like shrivelled walnuts.

‘How’d you get here so fast?’ I said.

‘She was already coming down the stairs!’ said Timothy behind her.

‘My whale is sick,’ I told the Crone.

She hobbled towards me on a crutch made from a tree branch. ‘Your whale isn’t sick, child.’

‘It is so. And don’t call me child – I’m thirteen years and eight days – don’t call me child.’

‘Your whale isn’t sick, old child.’

‘Then why won’t he hunt?’

‘Because *he’s* old. Much too old for a whale of his kind.’

‘Fine – you’re a healer. Heal him.’

The Crone closed her eyes intently, like she kept secret knowledge behind her eyelids. ‘Old things must die. This one especially.’

‘No!’ I snarled. ‘We are bonded – we will hunt together until I am as wretched and wrinkled as you are. He will not die!’

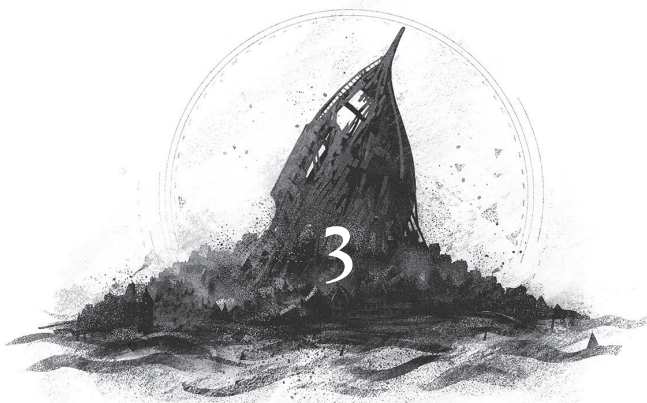
‘My child. He is already dead.’

‘He’s not, he’s breathing, look!’ I pointed at his side, which was clearly rising and falling.

‘That is not him,’ said the Crone. ‘A new life comes. We must help it.’

She moved too fast for something so old. I saw a flash of metal, then a thick red slash across Blue Eyes’ side. I raised my fist to strike the Crone, then screamed when I saw what was reaching out from the cut she’d made.

A hand.



Shipwreck Island

‘Come on, Ellie,’ said Seth. ‘I can smell food, and I’m starving.’

Ellie lingered, studying the statue of the Queen.

‘Mm? Oh, oh yeah, I’m coming.’

She was about to turn when she noticed something else far along the beach, where the mist still clung to the shore.

A dark shape, blurred like a mirage at its edges.

‘Seth, is that a ship?’ she asked. It was always worth checking whether he could see the same things she could.

Seth frowned. ‘Yes.’ His eyes widened. ‘With a black sail.’

‘It’s not the one you saw following us, is it?’ Ellie asked.

‘I . . . don’t know.’

They watched as the ship slid up the beach. It was small, built for two or three people at most. As Ellie watched, a tall figure leapt down from the deck and looked around.

‘Can you see that as well?’ Ellie whispered. It reminded her all too much of the dark shape she’d seen beneath the waves.

Seth nodded, squinting through the misty haze. ‘Come on. Whoever it is, I doubt they want to help us.’

They hurried along the beach to the bottom of a wide, splintery wooden staircase that rose out of the sand, built into the side of a low cliff face. Ellie could smell sizzling tomatoes, sweet vanilla and rose perfume, and hear the bustle of a crowd above. She glanced over her shoulder, and saw the dark figure had stopped further up the beach.

‘Are they . . . watching us?’

She took Seth’s hand, leading him up the staircase to the top of the cliff. Into a land of music and colour.

Children darted past, giggling and throwing oranges at each other, then tumbling to the ground in a heap and wrestling across a yellow sandstone street like excitable puppies. Beyond was a market square teeming with shoppers in tunics and dresses the colours of autumn leaves. Every person was smiling or chatting or happily haggling, crowding round an assortment of lace-covered market stalls that spilled over with creased leather shoes, glittering threads of pearls and carelessly piled hats.

In the centre of the market was a whale.

It lay on its belly with its tail curving up and its head rising to meet it, glittering with jewels that studded its hide like barnacles, a beard of green and blue paper

streamers trailing from its jaw. Its eyes were made of black coal, its body from grey wood. Its mouth gaped open like a cave, and inside was a small orchestra of flutes, lutes and violins. Two women in floor-length embroidered dresses were singing, their hair tied up in yellow ribbons. Their voices vibrated deep in the belly of the wooden whale, as if *it* was singing. A crowd of children sat rapt in its shadow.

Ellie blinked, trying to take it all in. How could such cheerfulness exist? Seth took a few careful steps forward, and Ellie watched as his scrunched-up, tightly wound frame relaxed, his shoulders settling, the white of his knuckles returning to brown as his fists unclenched.

‘Looks like this island might be everything we hoped for,’ said Ellie.

‘What if we’ve been followed?’ said Seth. ‘That ship . . .’

‘Well, what better place to hide than an island full of people? I hid *you* in an island full of people, didn’t I? From three hundred Inquisitors.’

Seth stared round the market. ‘It is nice,’ he admitted.

Ellie breathed in a wave of smoke from chicken legs searing over a fire pit. The smell made her stomach squirm with hunger.

‘We need money,’ she said.

‘Huh?’ said Seth, watching a woman teeter by on stilts, tossing flowers to children below.

‘*Money*. For food.’

Seth shrugged. ‘I can just catch fish.’

‘We need more than fish, Seth. We don’t even have any shoes! And where are we going to sleep? We should get jobs. Then we can get money *and* blend in. In case someone really has followed us.’

Seth squinted into the distance, then pointed. ‘Look at all those fishing boats! That must be the port. Come on!’

The crowd parted to let Seth through, smiling at him approvingly and whispering to each other through half-hidden grins. They didn’t part for Ellie, or even look at her, except to frown. She found this irritating. She caught up with Seth, panting for breath and scrutinizing his appearance. With his unblemished skin, large eyes and symmetrical features, she was forced to admit that other people probably thought him attractive. She found this irritating too.

‘Look,’ said Seth.

They’d reached the top of a hill overlooking a bright ocean dotted with boats. Each one was sleek and as riotously coloured as the rest of the island, sails dyed and hulls splashed with garish murals, so the docks appeared like some water-drenched flower garden.

‘We can get a job on one of those,’ said Seth.

‘Oh,’ said Ellie, pulling at the tattered hems of her coat sleeves. She pictured them on a boat, Seth hauling in huge mountains of fish, Ellie tangled up in a fishing net, helplessly stuck while sailors pelted her with questions about who she was. ‘Um, they’d never let a woman fish. Even Castion didn’t allow women on his ship.’

Seth pointed to the wooden jetties stitched between the boats. ‘Ellie, half the sailors are women.’

‘Well . . .’ Ellie raised her cane. ‘What about my bad leg!’

‘That woman there only has *one* leg. Come on,’ said Seth, dragging her down a rickety wooden staircase. The sea was green like molten emeralds, and Ellie spotted tiny glittering fish and blushing coral beneath the gentle waves. There were no spires or rooftops poking above the surface, like in the City – all the buildings here must have been built after the Drowning. Maybe the Ark had crashed into the island, and its occupants had decided it was as good a place as any to build a new home.

Ellie and Seth wandered the docks, watching sailors carry cratefuls of gleaming fish along the walkways, to be hauled up the hillside on a system of primitive winches that Ellie eyed critically, dreaming up plans for improvement. They came to the end of one jetty, where a huge man sat in a chair. He had a square, weather-beaten head and thick dark limbs, scarred and knotted like bark. He sank down behind a large sheet of paper, as if hoping to make himself invisible.

‘I’m looking for work,’ said Seth.

The man grumbled, then scratched at his eyepatch, studying Seth carefully.

‘Fine,’ he said. ‘Grab a mop. The deck will need cleaning when Viola gets back.’

‘I don’t want to mop,’ said Seth. ‘I want to fish.’

The man rolled his eye and retrieved a pipe from the pocket of his jerkin, which he began stuffing with tobacco. Ellie peered round Seth’s shoulder, annoyed that the man hadn’t even looked at her. ‘You’re from the outer islands?’ he said.

‘Ingarth Island,’ Seth said with confidence.

The man snorted. ‘Islanders always come here thinking jobs will fall on their heads. Just arrived, have you?’ He looked at Ellie for the first time. ‘Seem a little young for newlyweds.’

Seth let out a low laugh that Ellie found insulting.

‘We’re not newlyweds,’ she said, punching Seth’s arm. ‘My name’s Ellie L—’ She winced, thinking of the dark figure on the beach. ‘Ellie Stonewall. And this is Seth. We’re . . . brother and sister.’

‘Really?’ The man looked from Ellie to Seth in surprise. It was true that it would be hard to find two people who looked less alike – Seth was tall and strong, while Ellie was small and sickly-looking, her hair lank and thin, her body almost vanishing inside her oversized coat. The only sensible explanation would be that Seth was adopted, Ellie decided.

‘She was adopted,’ said Seth, and Ellie scowled at him. ‘Someone left her on our doorstep. My parents were horrified.’

The man chuckled. ‘I can see why,’ he said, and Ellie scowled at him too. ‘It’s mopping or nothing. Ah, here’s your chance.’

A small boat with two sails drifted in alongside the jetty, pulled on a rope by a sailor. Carved on its prow was a disgruntled pig. A crate was lowered from the deck by two more sailors, and the old man peered inside. His eye widened in horror.

‘It’s barely half full!’ he cried.

‘That’s because there are *barely* any fish, Dad,’ said the last sailor to climb down from the boat. She was about the same age as Ellie, with thick black hair and dark brown skin, and her long arms looked capable of beating even Anna in an arm-wrestle. A tiny grey kitten was perched on her shoulder. Ellie thought it was a stuffed toy pinned to her tunic, until it gave a plaintive miaow. ‘Not today, not yesterday, not for the last month. And it’s more than just the fish – Jessica said her mum’s farm’s struggling, and the price of barley’s so high Molworth thinks he’s gonna have no ale left by autumn.’

‘It’ll all be fine after the Festival of Life,’ said the man, wringing his hands. ‘The Queen will provide. Praise Her.’

‘She’ll provide for Herself,’ the girl snorted. ‘She’s probably stealing all the food for Her and Her rich friends.’

The kitten miaowed loudly, as if in agreement.

‘Stop that blasphemous nonsense *right* now,’ the man snapped. ‘You’ll get yourself arrested again.’

The girl rolled her eyes. ‘Who’s this?’ she asked, nodding at Seth. She didn’t seem to notice Ellie at all.

‘No idea,’ said the man. ‘I’m trying to convince him to scrub the deck. He’s from the outer islands so I doubt he expects much pay. Also –’ he leaned towards his daughter and whispered – ‘I don’t think he’s too bright.’

‘Let me go out in this boat,’ Seth said firmly. ‘I’ll find where all the fish are. I . . . I have a special technique,’ he added, when the girl continued to look unimpressed. ‘I’m the best fisherman on my island. I’ll . . . bet you tonight’s dinner?’

Ellie grabbed him by the wrist.

‘Seth,’ she hissed in his ear. ‘If they see you use your powers, they might get suspicious.’

‘I won’t use them,’ Seth whispered. ‘The fish will come to me. They followed me before – and that whale did too. I didn’t even have to use my powers.’

The old man had already lost interest, and was muttering to himself over the half-empty crate. The girl was eyeing Seth curiously.

‘What sort of dinner?’ she said.

‘Viola, stop talking to that sea-sponge,’ said her father. ‘Take the boat out again and fill the rest of this crate!’

The girl yawned, stretching out her arm so her kitten could crawl along it. ‘All right. But I’m taking the sea-sponge with me.’

‘What?’

‘Either he’s telling the truth, in which case we get a better catch, or he’s crazy and I’ll get a free dinner out of

it. My name's Viola, by the way,' she added to Seth, with a slow, easy smile. 'This is my dad, Janssen.'

Seth shook Viola's hand. 'Seth,' he said.

'My name's Ellie,' said Ellie, though nobody seemed to hear her.

Viola swaggered off towards the boat, beckoning for Seth to follow. Seth looked back at Ellie. 'You coming?'

'Oh,' said Ellie. 'I . . .' She looked at Viola and the other sailors, and again pictured being tangled in a net, unable to stop them from questioning her. Finding out who she really was. 'I think I should stay here.'

Seth frowned. 'Why?'

'I . . . It's very hot. I'll get burned in seconds. Here, I have something you could use.'

She rummaged around in her pockets and, after pulling out a handful of pencils and a vial of sheep's blood, she found two hole-spotted gloves.

'Thanks,' said Seth. 'But they don't go with my outfit.'

'They're to cover the blue marks on your skin, *sea-sponge*,' she whispered. 'Just in case you get in trouble and *do* have to use your powers. Actually . . .' She looked at Seth's bare arms. 'Maybe you should take this too.'

Nervously, she clutched the lapels of her coat.

'Ellie, really, you don't have to do that,' Seth said, looking slightly alarmed.

'Better than you getting put on a bonfire again,' she said, and with a deep breath she removed her coat and

handed it to Seth. She wrapped her arms round herself, immediately conscious of the breeze on her neck, and of eyes, *eyes* everywhere.

Seth pulled it on. Despite being much too large on Ellie, the coat was nearly too small for him, though it covered his arms well enough.

‘Come on, mate, tide’s turning,’ Viola called. Seth strode off towards the boat, and Ellie felt a sudden emptiness, like she herself was somehow lacking, without all the parts necessary for a human being.

Maybe it was because she’d given him her coat.