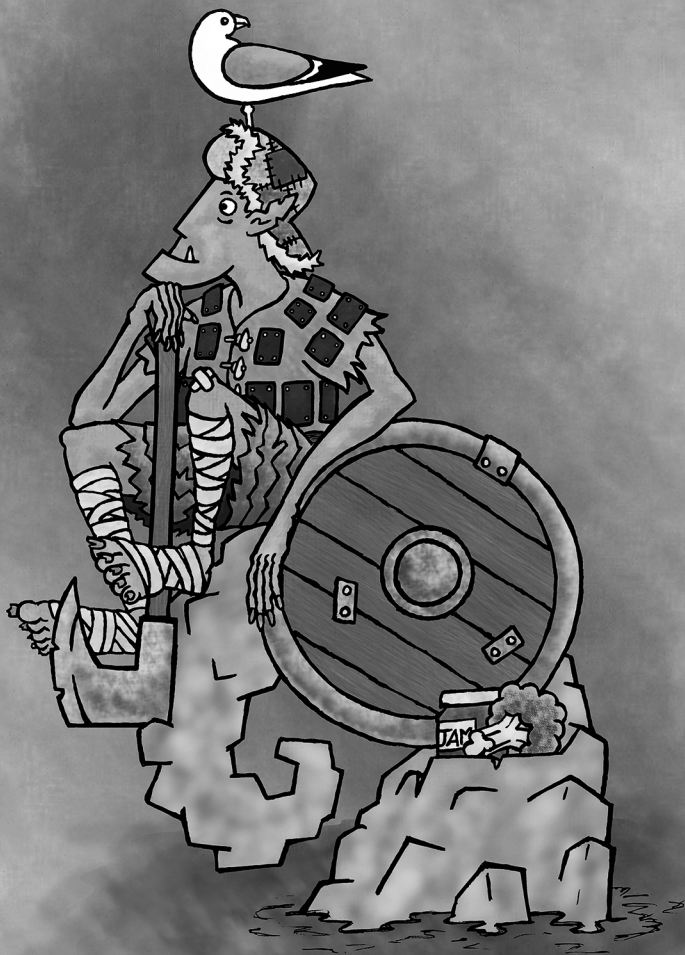


Shanks Family Curse



L. R. G. Carter

SHANKS FAMILY CURSE

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Chapter 1

The Shanks Family Curse could strike at any time. Great Aunt Hilda was the oldest victim yet, eaten by a lion at the age of ninety five. Second-cousin Clarence was in the prime of his life when a tiger adoption charity made a terrible mistake. A honey-related mishap in a cave full of bears finished Baby Bobby before he was even three. Many tried to escape their fate while others tried to fight it, but whatever they did it never worked and often made things worse. Some fell to crocodiles, others fell to wolves, and never was there a Shanks who was not eaten in the end.

Daddy Shanks dealt with the curse by ignoring it completely. When asked if this was wise he would puff out his chest and inflate his cheeks and wave his arms about saying, “As it is beyond my control, it is also beyond my concern.”

This may explain why he failed to notice the emergency radio broadcast warning of shark sightings at the local beach.

“A special day approaches,” he announced, speaking over the news. “But I cannot remember what day it could be.”

Armitage tried to speak, but his mouth was full of breakfast cereal. As ever, Daddy Shanks had chosen the optimal moment to ensure nobody could stop him talking.

“Father’s Day, perhaps,” said the parent, sucking marmalade from his moustache. “Or Pancake Day, I do so like pancakes.”

Armitage chewed faster and faster but now his daddy was in full swing.

“National Shed Day, maybe. That would be helpful, so soon after the accident.”

Armitage swallowed as many Munchy Flakes as he could, before spraying the rest across the table as he shouted, "It's. My. *Birthday!*"

"Really? Didn't you have one of those already? Almost twelve months ago? Oh well, I suppose I have just a few weeks left to buy you a present then. Soap, I think; I can't imagine anything a child could want more than vast quantities of soap."

Armitage was about to voice his disgust when Mummy Shanks walked in, hanging up the phone.

"Well, this is a fine turn of events," she said. "That was Milo's Mother. It seems some older boys broke into school last night and made some mischief with Farmer Giles's chickens."

"Farmer Giles has piles," said Armitage.

"Tis true you know," said Daddy Shanks. "I heard Doctor Niles say Farmer Giles has chronic piles when I bought some files from the hardware aisles."

"Stop that," said Mummy Shanks, giving Daddy Shanks a clout round the ear. "As I was saying, the school will be closed today. Much of the damage was structural and the chickens seem to be organising."

"Huzzar," cried Armitage. "No school today!"

"Armitage," said Daddy Shanks. "If you are having a holiday, then we will too. Your mother is an important business executive who may take time off whenever she wants, and I shall phone my boss and pretend that I am sick. Pack the wicker basket, for we'll spend today by the sea!"

Within an hour the family Shanks was spreading a picnic out on the sands. The smells of jam and ginger beer lured wasps and ants towards the feast, while seagulls waited patiently for the perfect moment to strike. A red flag flew over the coastguard's hut and the shapes of silent predators moved swiftly through the

waves. Still people splashed about regardless, the silhouettes of their bodies and floats combining in the most appetising of ways.

Armitage ran off across the beach, fighting an alien invasion with the sound of spit swirling around his mouth. When Mummy Shanks was certain that the child was fully distracted, she turned to her husband with whispered words.

“How was your journey to the city last night? Did you find the perfect present?”

“Indeed,” said Daddy Shanks. “A mysterious man lurking in an ally sold me a gift that Armitage will never expect.”

“How very intriguing, whatever could it be?”

“We should not talk of such things here. The ears of little boys can be surprisingly keen when it comes to presents.”

Daddy Shanks stood up and stretched his hairy arms.

“I fancy going for a swim. Would you care to join me?”

“That sounds delightful,” said Mummy Shanks. “I shall just tell Armitage to keep an eye on our things.”

As Armitage turned to answer his mother’s call, a giant mutant maggot erupted from the beach. Its pulsating bulk rose out of the sand and twisted through the air. It swallowed Armitage’s parents and burrowed back into the ground in a single, graceful, twisting motion.

A well-dressed man seated nearby turned from his paper to watch. Then he made his way to the nearest phone-box and called a number that features in no directory.

As the dust cleared, Armitage stared at the slimy hole that lay beside the untouched picnic.

“Well,” he said. “I have mixed feelings about that.”

This was the first time that Armitage witnessed the Shanks Family Curse. It would not be the last.

Chapter 2

The pirate stood alone in the office. He studied a sign next to a bell, inviting him to 'Ring for Assistance'.

"Could be a bomb," the pirate pondered. Then he remembered his family motto and pressed the button anyway.

The woman that appeared at the desk found him huddled on the floor. She began reaching for her poking stick as the pirate realised he was still alive.

"Not a bomb!" he cheered, rearing back to his full and impressive height. Glass doors caught the sun behind him, lending the man a glittering aura, while a gentle breeze lifted his beard and played with it in mysterious ways.

The woman turned off the reception desk fan and the pirate's pose crumbled before her stony glare.

"Can I help you, sir?" she asked.

"Your ransom note said you have Armitage prisoner. I am here to save him!"

"Ah yes, Mr Shanks, we have been expecting you." The woman pushed a button hidden under her desk to trigger a silent alarm. A lot of large people in dark and menacing suits appeared at every available exit.

"Oh dear," said the pirate. "Let's not resort to violence. Just tell me how much money you want and I'll sort something out."

"Mr Shanks," the woman seethed. "We are social workers, not kidnappers, and we are certainly not holding your nephew to ransom. My name is Ms Klaket, and it has fallen upon me to resolve what the papers are calling 'The Mernanshire Maggot

Mystery'. I don't suppose *you* have any idea why your brother and his wife were eaten by a giant mutant maggot?"

"Oh yes," the pirate nodded. "That would be the Shanks Family Curse."

"That is not an adequate explanation, Mr Shanks."

"There is no adequate explanation for the Shanks Family Curse. Some say that one of our ancestors met a dark figure on a dusty road ..."

"Yes, Mr Shanks, Armitage has told me that story already, and I did not find it at all convincing."

"Not even the bit with the rhino?"

"*Especially* the bit with the rhino," said Ms Klaket. "If we could please stay focused on the matter at hand, we need to discuss your criminal record. Under the title of 'The Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks', you have gained quite a reputation as an infamous pirate ..."

Henry brushed the tricorn hat from his head and tried to hide it behind his back in what he hoped was one smooth, inconspicuous movement.

"Is infamous a good kind of famous?" he asked.

"No," said Ms Klaket.

"Oh," said Henry.

"While at sea, your crimes included the kidnapping of an Egyptian princess ..."

"Yes," said Henry. "Urbi Hotep. She's outside keeping the engine running. And it wasn't a kidnapping, it was a rescue, her evil uncle was trying to kill her!"

"This is the uncle you pushed into a pit of poisonous snakes, yes?"

"No," said Henry. "Urbi pushed him into the snake-pit. I was tied-up in the path of his crystal-powered-death-ray. The rescue

didn't go quite as planned."

Ms Klaket seemed deaf to Henry's justifications as she continued her relentless listing of his various misdemeanours.

"You've plundered ships, you've raided castles, you've smuggled and smiggled and smaggled. Those last two were not even words before you invented the crimes. Since returning to our shores, you have settled in a meadery, and claim to brew the best mead in the world. This hardly seems like a suitable environment in which to raise a child, does it?"

"That's not a problem," beamed the pirate. "I don't have a child!"

"This could soon change, Mr Shanks. You are currently the most eligible person to become Armitage's new guardian."

"Who, me?" Henry spluttered, "I don't know how to look after kids! Why not give him to my other brother? *He's* got previous parenting experience."

"We are well aware of *that*, Mr Shanks. Last month his son built a robot that went on a killing spree in the local shopping centre. I do not wish to expose Armitage to such bad influences."

"A robot, 'ey?" said Henry, stroking his beard. "His granddaddy would be proud."

"His granddaddy disappeared some years ago while exploring Antarctica, and there do not seem to be any records of his grandmother's existence at all."

"Well no, there wouldn't be," said Henry.

"Altogether, it would seem you are the best of a bad lot, Mr Shanks. I have little choice but to send Armitage into your care. You will need to sign these forms while I go and get him. Oh, one last thing, Mr Shanks, to spare the child any more misery. Are you aware that tomorrow is a very special day?"

"National Shed Day? I could do with ..."

“No, Mr Shanks, not National Shed Day. Tomorrow is Armitage’s birthday. Please try to make sure it is a happy one.”

Ms Klaket left Henry Shanks fumbling at forms with hand and hook. Crisp white pages turned yellow at his touch and a brush of his fingerless glove mixed the ink into smeared brown stains. By the time Ms Klaket returned, the folder was twice as thick with crumpled paper and smelt really bad.

“There we go, all signed,” said Henry, pushing the heap towards the social worker. “Is that everything?”

“Not one of the Family Shanks has ever met with our approval,” said Ms Klaket, spraying the paperwork with air freshener. “And though they call you ‘The White Sheep of the Family’, you are certainly no exception. You may take Armitage with you and return home; but never forget, Henry Shanks, *we’re watching you.*”

This last threat chased after Henry as he whisked his nephew past the looming goons and bundled him into a car outside.

“Drive!” he cried, and they took off through the traffic. Henry looked back to check no-one was following, then settled into his seat.

“Well, that was easier than I anticipated,” he said. “Turns out they weren’t holding Armitage for ransom at all! You remember Urbi, don’t you, Armitage?”

“Hello,” said the driver. “Sorry we took so long to collect you; Henry’s made it pretty difficult for people to find us.”

“Well, you know, I am wanted on at least five continents.”

“I’ve been living with those social workers for ages,” Armitage mumbled.

“Oh, it hasn’t been that long,” said Henry.

“It’s been over two weeks.”

“Ah, I guess that is a fair old while,” Henry pondered.

“Especially given what happened. Never mind, you’ve got a new family now! The same family as before, I guess, but now with more Uncle Henry!”

Urbi shot Henry a stern look, but the pirate continued regardless.

“Yes indeed, with all the fun we’ll be having, you’ll forget about your parents in no time!”

“Henry Shanks!” snapped Urbi as Armitage began to cry. “Will you just stop talking!”

The rest of the journey was a dour affair. Urbi did her best to offer Armitage some comfort while Henry sat in silence, trying not to make matters worse. They reached the meadery as the sun was setting behind its thatched roof. Urbi pointed out the kitchen and the toilet, then led Armitage up to his room.

“Sorry it’s a bit ... crowded,” she said. “We didn’t have time to clear it out.”

The bedroom was full of the usual unusual things that always gather in ageing houses. Armitage squeezed between a broken old grandfather clock and a broken old television, then collapsed on a broken old bed. Urbi followed close behind, pulling a distinctively shaped package from a broken old chest.

“We bought you a little something for your birthday,” she said, placing the present on his lap. “Maybe it would cheer you up if you opened it now, give you a proper welcome to the meadery.”

Armitage peeled away pictures of balloons and birthday cakes, then spent a moment enjoying the bubble-wrap before ploughing on to the prize within. He was left holding the biggest toy pirate ship that he had ever seen.

“Captain Corsair’s Maraudering Man-O’-War!” he cheered, brushing luminous orange hair from his previously glum face. “With genuine maraudering action, and sails that furl and unfurl

just like they do in the adverts!” The tug of a toy rope let loose the sails for Urbi’s approval.

“We thought you and your Uncle would be able to play with it together. I think he misses our days of adventure.”

“Thank you, Auntie Urbi,” said Armitage. He tried to hug her, but found it difficult to move beneath the weight of the ship.

“You’ll have plenty of time for playing tomorrow,” said Urbi, lifting the Man-O’-War from Armitage’s lap and placing it on top of an old broken cabinet. “Now, it’s time to sleep, so get into your pyjamas and dream of all the other wonderful things that your birthday will bring.”

An embarrassed cough floated across the room. Armitage and Urbi looked up to find Henry hovering in the corridor.

“I’m going to say good things this time!” he promised. Urbi climbed back over the clutter and left her love with a forgiving kiss. Henry waved her goodbye and set out across the room before being completely distracted by the Maraudering Man-O’-War.

“Wow, when did I get this?” he whispered in amazement, admiring the authentically unfurling sails. Then he remembered why he was there and fell onto the bed beside Armitage.

“I thought you might like to open one of your birthday presents a little early,” he said, waving a wrapped and tangled mess in Armitage’s face. “You never get used to the Shanks Family Curse, but this might help take your mind off it. It certainly helped me when my Daddy disappeared on his last epic quest to Antarctica.”

“It’s not the same, Uncle Henry,” said Armitage as he began wrestling with unbreakable tape. “You were much older when he disappeared.”

“Ah, but I was younger than you when I first saw the curse

strike. It was in the summer of my fifth year, and *your* Granddaddy had left us with *our* Granddaddy while he went off to do some of his world famous exploring. We were walking across the village green when the sun was blocked out above us. A feathered behemoth fell from the skies, throwing our Granddaddy into the air with talons that could tear through elephants. It swallowed him whole, right there in front of us, but did we stand there crying? We did not is what I'm saying. We picked up all the rocks we could find and stoned that bird until it was utterly dead! That's what your parents would want from you if they were still alive. They wouldn't want you sat here crying, they'd want you out there stamping on maggots, avenging their deaths!"

Henry finished his tale as Armitage threw away the last of the newspaper. He was left holding a bottle of Uncle Shanks's Home-Made Mead.

"That is the finest mead I have ever made," said Henry. "And my mead is the finest mead in all the world. So I hope you enjoy it. Goodnight, Armitage."

Henry fought his way back across the room and left his nephew to enjoy his drink. The cork came out with a pop, filling the air with festive fumes. Armitage was far from certain that stepping on maggots would help, but the mead was warm and reassuring. It helped him forget his troubles, soothing him into a smiling sleep as the old broken clock struck twenty seven.

Chapter 3

During the night Armitage grew an entire year older. He awoke to find all that growth had put quite a strain on his body. His arms and legs ached from being stretched into their new shape, and the throbbing in his head told him lots of extra knowledge must have been squeezed right into his brain.

“I’m sure all this must be part of getting older,” he said to himself. “But I’m not sure why growing up should make you feel like throwing up.”

“That’s what you get for drinking half a bottle of Uncle Shanks’s Home-Made Mead,” said a voice from both nowhere and everywhere at the same time.

Armitage did that thing people sometimes do with their eyebrows.

“Did I just say that?” he asked the empty room.

“No, that was me. You can easily tell the difference as my voice is deeper and my view of the world is more realistic.”

“I see,” said Armitage, experimenting with lying to himself. “Nope, doesn’t work. Who said that?”

“Me,” said the voice. “Up here, on top of your head.”

Armitage did that thing with the eyebrows again, this time emphasising the role of the other side of his face. He crawled out of bed and searched through the tangled furniture, finding an antique mirror hidden beneath a pile of pants. A box of his uncle’s spare wooden legs provided tools to push the pants aside, allowing Armitage to scrutinise his face within the tarnished glass. Purple shadows hung under his eyes, clashing against skin that

was sticky and yellow. Armitage hoped this was a result of sleeping with an open bottle of mead, rather than a sign that old age was turning him into a fish.

Then Armitage turned his attention to the hair atop his head. It was still as short, scruffy, and luminous orange as it had been the night before, but now there was something different. He regarded it from many angles, before finally deciding this difference was probably the fact that it was now speaking to him.

“Was it you speaking to me?” Armitage asked, just to be sure.

“Yes.”

“Ah.” Armitage blinked a few times, as it seemed the right thing to do in that situation. “Well, I suppose this is normal for someone my age. I bet everyone wakes up on this birthday and holds interesting conversations with their hair.”

“Perhaps,” replied the Hair. “That’s one possibility, certainly. Or it could be because you’ve recently suffered the trauma of seeing your parents get eaten alive by a horrible crawling monster. I don’t think this is the sort of thing that happens to all the young children in the world, or there would be far fewer parents and many more mutated maggots.”

“Well,” said Armitage. “Though I do not understand how it is that you’re talking to me, you seem to be a decent enough mop of hair. I’m sorry I haven’t shaken your hand, but you do not have one to shake. It is a pleasure to have you living on me.”

“Well it isn’t a pleasure to be here,” said the Hair, almost spitting the words despite lacking a mouth. “Waking up in the morning to find yourself stuck to the top of a small child is not my idea of fun. You stink of mead and your face looks stupid.”

Armitage started laughing. “You have a funny voice, Hair. I think I’m going to enjoy having you around. Now then, I think it would be a good idea if we went to get some breakfast.”

“And I think it would be a good idea if you shaved your head,” sneered the Hair, “but we can’t always get what we want.”

Armitage paid no heed to his Hair’s complaints. He went bouncing down the stairs, leaving all memories of headaches and belly-pains behind him, running through the kitchen door to find Urbi and Henry in the middle of a food fight.

“Surprise!” shouted Henry, as Urbi poured a bowl of Munchy Flakes all over him.

Armitage cast a cautious look around the room.

“What surprise?” he asked.

“It’s your birthday,” said Henry, picking Munchy Flakes out of his beard and popping them into his mouth.

“That’s not a surprise, I’ve known about it all year”

“What did I do to deserve this?” moaned the Hair.

“Oh, shush you,” said Armitage, drawing strange looks from his uncle.

“Oh no, not you,” Armitage apologised. “I was talking to my Hair, who is being very grumpy this morning.”

“Ah,” said Henry. “That’s all right then.” He gave Urbi a worried look then turned back to his nephew. “Hey, Armitage, why don’t you go open your other birthday presents while Urbi and I ... er ... just go and talk in this corner for a bit.”

Armitage began ripping into the presents, discovering that many were objects Henry had found just lying around the house.

“Urbi, my exalted princess,” said Henry in the corner. “As I watch Armitage ploughing through all that Christmas paper, I cannot help but notice that he is talking to his hair.”

“Yes, I heard him earlier as I walked past his room; it’s sweet, isn’t it?”

“Sweet? It is not sweet! It’s how it all begins! My father started hearing voices before he went to Antarctica, and the

Grandparents started hearing voices before they adopted his brother! It's a bad start to both his birthday and his life in this new home! What are we going to?"

"The poor thing has watched his parents get eaten alive by a giant mutant maggot," said Urbi. "If talking to his hair helps him cope with this, then we should let him carry on. All we need to do is show that we love him, spend some time with him, and get him out of the house a bit. That way, he'll soon grow out of needing imaginary friends."

"You're absolutely right!" said Henry, picking up Urbi for a vigorous hug. "What he needs is a distraction, and who better to distract a small child than I, the Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks, rescuer of princesses, slayer of dragons, and maker of mead! Armitage, come over here ..."

Setting down his birthday spade and birthday boot, Armitage hopped along to his uncle.

"Look out there, lad," said Henry, pointing out the window. "The sun rises on a cloudless day, the waves glisten as they roll onto land, and the sky blends with the ocean in a wash of brilliant blue. Yet cast your eyes south-west, just below the horizon, and tell me what you see."

Armitage followed the path of his uncle's gesturing hook.

"I'm not sure. There's certainly something, but the only mist for miles around seems to want it kept a secret."

"Exactly! All the winds in the world could not chase away that fog. In those waters lie the Isles of Shayde, a cluster of rocks that have forever lain shrouded in mystery. They have been hidden from sight every day of every year for as long as any remember. Many have searched for a cause, but none that have journeyed beyond the veil have ever returned. To this day, no-one knows the reason those isles lie eternally hidden."

"Perhaps it's magic!" said Armitage.

"Or another curse," said Henry.

"Or a fog-farting-monster!" said Urbi.

"Oh yes, that sounds most likely," the others agreed.

"Well, there's only one way to find out for sure," said Henry, leaping onto the kitchen table, striking a dramatic pose, and putting his wooden leg right in the butter. "We must set off on an adventure to the Isles of Shayde!"

"Why don't you have some breakfast while we go and pack some supplies," said Urbi to Armitage. "Quickly, before Uncle Henry steps in it all."

Henry and Urbi left Armitage besieging a boiled egg, while the Hair made sure the child was aware of their objections. "In my opinion, the sentence 'We must set off on an adventure to the Isles of Shayde' is quite comparable to 'Let's go play by the Old Abandoned Well' or 'Mr McGregor's Haunted House, that's a good place to spend the weekend'. Am I the only person here that thinks this is a bad idea?"

"It would seem so," said Armitage. "At times like this, Mummy Shanks always taught me to remember the Shanks Family Motto."

"So what is the Shanks Family Motto, and why do I have the feeling I'm not going to like it?"

Before Armitage could reply, Henry and Urbi returned with clothes perfectly picked to protect everyone from the elements. The family was soon dressed and ready, the old pirate becoming increasingly excitable as he dragged them outside and down to the seafront. There, at the foot of a moss-covered cliff, sat a boathouse patched together from stolen garden-gates. Henry threw open the door with a flourish and introduced the ship within.

“Behold! The *Ironclad*!”

“We are all going to die,” said the Hair.

“Uncle, I don’t mean to sound, well ...” Armitage stumbled, searching for sensitive words. “But ... first of all, the name *Ironclad* suggests it should be clad in iron. Secondly ...”

Armitage’s list of observations drowned in the tide of his uncle’s enthusiasm.

“True, she may not be the finest ship I’ve ever captained. She’s not as big as the *Thunderchild*, nor as fast as the *Arethusa*, but she’s as reliable a sea dog as any that have sailed her. She’ll get us to the Isles of Shayde and back before the King himself is out of bed!”

Armitage hesitated for just a moment, worrying about the fragile plastic, rusty nails, and other bits of the boat that he was not convinced could float. Then he remembered the Shanks Family Motto, and turned to Henry with a smile.

“It’s wonderful, uncle. Are we ready to go?”

“One last thing. I have a final present for your birthday, and this is actually a good one.”

Henry pulled a small package from his coat and gave it to Armitage.

“It’s a bike,” he lied. Armitage tore the gift open, discovering a battered telescope hidden at its centre.

“It used to belong to your Granddaddy,” said Henry. “He gave it to me when he found better ways of seeing, and now I am giving it to you. Just because all us old folk have retired from the adventuring game, doesn’t mean you should stop having fun. You probably won’t be able to see much with that today, not on the Isles of Shayde, but I’m sure it’ll come in useful eventually.”

Armitage peered around through the distorting eye, talking to his grumbling Hair as Urbi and Henry made sure the boat was fully packed. Then they cast the *Ironclad* into the surf, and the four

of them set off for the Isles of Shayde.

Chapter 4

Ms Klaket was fighting the urge to say rude words. She stood atop a nearby cliff, watching the Shanks family sail away.

“Audio Surveillance reports they’re heading to the Isles of Shade,” said the person standing beside her, poking a radio receiver in their ear with a thick, muscular finger. “Why would they do something like that?”

“Because in all our years of watching the Family Shanks, we have seen time and time again that they are as moths to misadventure,” said Ms Klaket. “Wherever they go they find strange troubles. Giant birds, mutant maggots, quests to Antarctica. It would be easier for all concerned if we nailed their feet to the floor.”

“We could just let them go,” said her colleague. “Let them find the trouble they search so hard for and turn our backs on them forever. There isn’t much of the family left now, just them and that lot with the robots.”

“No,” said Ms Klaket. “If we acted on our frustrations then we would be neglecting our duty. Are we not bound to make life a better place for all? Are we not bound to watch such self-destructive elements of society and encourage their return whenever they stray? *Are we not Social Workers?*”

“We are,” the other person nodded. “Let us continue with that which must be done. For the greater good.”

“For the greater good,” agreed Ms Klaket, following her companion into a long black car with mysterious, tinted windows. The windows were in fact so tinted that neither of them noticed

the pirate ship anchored in the next bay, flying the Jolly Rodger over a hull bristling with cannons.

This was the Bad Ship *Blackthorn*, named after her captain, the purple-bearded Blackthorn McArrgh. He stood atop the ship, slamming his wooden leg upon the poop deck, calling for his crew to rally before him. Out from every hatch they came, and sliding down the rigging; some with bandannas and others with earrings and all of them sporting stubble and swords. They gathered on the deck below, and when all were present and ready the captain began his speech.

“Listen here, shipmates! Through my telescope I have just seen a sight that has filled this old sea dog with cheer! A man has returned to the waves today who has hidden too long in the safety of landlubbers’ law. A man whose death would make his killers the most feared and famous pirates the world has ever known. A man who carries the Legendary Moonstone Eagle, greatest of all treasures and now ours for the taking!”

Murmurs and whispers spread through the crew. There could be no doubt who the captain had seen.

“You speak of the Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks!” one of the pirates called out. “Rescuer of princesses, slayer of dragons, and maker of mead!”

“What you say is true!” cried another. “Killing him would indeed make us the most feared and famous pirates ever, but as long as he carries the Legendary Moonstone Eagle we stand not one chance of defeating him!”

“Besides,” came a third pirate’s voice, “isn’t his family cursed? Wouldn’t we have to eat him or something?”

The captain rumbled with rage at his crew’s cowardice, snarling so hard that big drops of spit flew out between his yellow teeth.

“Henry Shanks may be the most popular pirate in the world, but I am Captain Blackthorn McArrgh, terror of the oceans and scourge of the seas. I lost my hand drowning wolves and my leg kicking crabs, and I did it all for fun and I would do it all again! Henry Shanks will know my name and fear me when I come for him, me and the three others here who have more of a spine than all o’ you put together.”

At that, three hulking shapes lurched forward, as though mountains moved from the shadows. These monstrous thugs had been hired after an embarrassing encounter with a bear, which the captain had no desire to repeat and even less desire to explain. They were named Yarr, Arr, and Grr, after the only words each were known to say. At their appearance the pirates knew their victory was assured.

“And as for the curse,” Blackthorn continued. “If needs be I will eat the man alive myself! So set sail and prepare for battle. Before the day is through, ours will be the fame, ours will be the glory, ours will be the Legendary Moonstone Eagle!”

The crew threw their bandannas into the air, shouting huzzar and things of that nature; apart from Yarr, Arr, and Grr, who instead said “Yarr”, “Arr”, and “Grr” respectively. The pirates set about their piratical tasks and as they did so the youngest turned to the oldest, saying, “Well, that speech explained the hook and the peg, but why does he wear an eye-patch?”

“Quiet you,” came the reply. “The captain don’t like to speak of his eye, and you know how he empties his pistols into anything that displeases him. All we know is he has a deep fear of seagulls, which is a poor thing indeed for a pirate to be afeared of.”

There was certainly no shortage of seagulls along that coast. They floated above the cliffs and beaches, and even around the

window of the *Blackthorn's* galley where the cooks threw them food despite the signs that told them not to. Yet gulls were not the only birds floating over the sea that morning. Three ravens crossed the waves far ahead of the *Ironclad*, hurtling through the haze to find their master in the mist.

He stood atop a faded carpet hovering in the clouds, listening to the birds and their ancient chattering language.

"They are on their way," the man mused, rubbing the stone in his ring. The air around him twisted and seethed and began to glow a putrid blue. There was a shape there, there in the air, there in the air right there, an unpleasant and unfriendly shape that smelt of unwashed socks and spoke with the voice of a thousand monkeys.

"Yep, it was easy; Henry's completely suggestible. I simply opened up his head and poured in the idea like slimy cheese. Anyone else would've completely rejected the thought of coming to the Isles of Shayde, but he wanted to take the child on an adventure to stop them talking to the voice in their Hair."

The man did that thing that people occasionally do with their eyebrows.

"The voice you put there?"

"Nope, nothing to do with me I'm afraid. Just like their uncle, the child is somewhat detached from reality. Just like all the other people in Urbi's life, if you think about it."

If the man noticed any insult in that last remark, he did not show it. His name was Anum Hotep, and he paid little attention to his genie unless he had wishes that needed granting.

"It has been five years since I killed my brother," he muttered, losing himself amid the memories.

"I know," said the genie. "I was there. I saw it happen."

"I was to marry his daughter that night and become ruler of

Hotepia. Then that accursed pirate interfered, dragging my plans to dust and ruin along with the city itself.”

“That’s one interpretation of those events,” said the genie, “I know, on account of how I was there. I saw everything that happened.”

“Ever since the night I crawled from that snake pit I have hunted them both, pursuing them around the world. Yet always they have escaped my vengeance while I have lost fine clothes and fortunes, reduced to beggars’ rags and scavenged scraps.”

“Again, I know,” said the genie. “I was there for all of that as well. I haven’t had a single day off in all that time.”

“But now it all comes to an end; out here where there are no chandeliers to swing from, or carpets to pull from under my feet, or inconvenient fertiliser salesmen whose carts I will inevitably fall into.”

“Oh yeah,” said the genie, rolling their eyes. “None of those here. Especially carpets, no sir.”

Anum snapped his fingers, forcing the genie to curtail their mocking.

“Genie, when they are within your power, smash the boat with wind and rain!”

“What, even though your niece is on board?” said the genie.

“I want his body shattered into a thousand pieces and ripped apart by all manner of mystic forces!”

“The niece you need alive, so you can marry her to legitimise your position as ruler of Hotepia?”

“Then when his body is washed ashore, burn the remains, that no trace may ever be found of that so-called Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks!”

“Ah, whatever, one smashed family coming right up.”

With that the matter was settled. The genie floated off to do

what Anum requested, shaking their head at the state of humanity.

Of course, the crew of the *Ironclad* had seen none of this. They did not know about the social workers, or the pirates, or Urbi's uncle with his genie and ravens. Even if they had known, they would probably still have sailed to the Isles of Shayde anyway, for they always tried to follow the Shanks Family Motto:

Never will a Shanks be afraid to do something just because it is a stupid thing to do.

Chapter 5

Armitage had been little more than a baby when scientists last tried solving the mystery of the Isles of Shayde. Experts had come from all over the world, dressed in long white coats with colourful pens in their pockets. They had spent days poring over lists of lost ships, plotting their last known locations on maps, and comparing blurry photos of local monsters with blurry photos of monsters from other parts of the world. Yet despite all their hard work, the scientists could not decide what was causing either the mist or all the strange disappearances.

The frustrating conference finally came to an end when a grumpy old scientist shouted, “Look, it’s simple. These are *islands*! That does not mean they are all little piles of sand, floating in the ocean with a coconut tree and a stranded hermit. It means they are rocks! Sticking out of the water! Some of them will lurk just beneath the waves, invisible even in good weather! These are the sort of rocks that tear up boats, leaving their crews to drown and die! Avoiding them in such mist is almost impossible! That’s why so many ships have been lost in that area! It’s not magic, a curse, a fog-farting monster, or anything weird like that! It’s nature! It just *does* that sort of thing!”

The other scientists let the grumpy old one finish, then shook their heads and said, “No, no, no, do you not see? It cannot simply be nature or human error causing all these strange events.”

“Why not?” cried the grumpy old scientist.

“Because,” came the reply, “that would be really *dull*.”

At their words, the grumpy old scientist broke down in tears,

making everyone else feel so uncomfortable that they all made their excuses and left.

The grumpy old scientist had never been lucky enough to go on a birthday adventure with a pirate and a princess and a full head of Living Hair. However, while it is true that there are unusual things afoot on the Isles of Shayde, the grumpy old scientist did have a good point about all those dangerous rocks.

The Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks was famed for slyly slipping out of deadly situations. He had not purposefully sought out this reputation, but had acquired it accidentally by constantly stumbling into situations that seemed perfectly safe until just before he arrived. Although Henry had always followed the Shanks Family Motto, he was also always careful to keep safe those he loved. He had seen too many of his friends taken by the sea to forget his responsibilities, so steered the *Ironclad* with cautious restraint. The boat crept past rocks that rose up from the waves and gave wider berth still to those lurking beneath; for Henry knew water does strange things to any sense of perspective.

As Henry navigated the treacherous waters, Armitage wondered at the curling rocks that emerged from the depths. To him they seemed like twisting tongues of stone, hungry for victims to drag to their doom.

“Hair?” said Armitage.

“I don’t want to know,” said the Hair.

“Is it just me, or does that dark shape over there look like a goblin?”

“I deeply hope not. An irritating inhuman creature is the last thing this doomed adventure needs.”

The goblin was perched on a nearby rock, leaning on his axe and shield. He shoved a dirty green finger up his snotty green nose, then inspected what was found there with wide green eyes.

“Um,” said Armitage, as the *Ironclad* drifted by. “Hello there, we ...”

The goblin became a mess of spinning elbows. He took up his shield and axe, swinging them both blindly as his hair fell over his face. Then he stepped towards the *Ironclad’s* cowering crew and promptly fell into the cold, cloudy water.

“Ohhh, Jeff,” sighed Urbi and Henry together. They dragged the wet and squelchy goblin on board in spite of his frantic flailing.

Armitage looked at the two adults in amazement.

“Do ... do you know this goblin?” he said.

“Yes, we’ve met quite a few times,” said Urbi. She covered the new arrival with a warm picnic blanket, then poured him a cup of hot, sugary tea. “Are you all right, Jeff?”

The goblin quickly looked up at his rescuers and beamed with a smile wider than his face.

“Yees!” he cried in triumph, taking hold of the tea. “It takes more than an extra yearly bath to kill a *goblin!*” As he spoke, the cup decided it did not like its handle, so broke away and landed in Jeff’s lap. Burning liquid flowed across the goblin’s kilt, causing an embarrassing stain while Jeff made pained squeaking noises. The two adults shook their heads with knowing smiles.

“It’s good to see you again, Jeff,” said Henry.

“But how?” said Armitage. “How do you know it?”

“Armitage!” said Urbi. “Where are your manners? Jeff is not an ‘It’. He is a real person like you or me. Show some respect.”

“Hah ha, you got in trouble” sang the Hair.

“I’m sorry, Mister Jeff,” said Armitage. “But I have never met a goblin before.”

“Missster,” Jeff muttered. “I like that word, it rhymes with lobssster.”

“We’ve met Jeff a few times, as I said,” Urbi continued. “He’s the sort of person who just, well, turns up occasionally.”

“To break things,” added Henry.

“If you have your back against a wall,” said Urbi, “and no way of escaping the heavily armed guards in front of you, Jeff is just the sort of person you want to see. He’s highly skilled with that axe and shield.”

“He uses them to break things,” said Henry. “Often, those things are people.”

“And then, after he’s fought the battle and won the day, no matter the odds set against him, he’ll have a nice hot cup of sugary tea ...”

“Wombats!” shouted Jeff, for no apparent reason.

“Before disappearing off to fight other battles in distant lands,” Urbi finished, valiantly overcoming all the interruptions.

“And break things,” said Henry, in case Armitage had missed his previous comments.

“So what are you doing on the Isles of Shayde, Jeff?” said Urbi. “The last time we saw you was in the tropical city of Coisas Delicadas.”

“Where’s the tropical city of Coisas Delicadas?” asked Armitage.

“It used to be in the depths of the Amazon rainforest,” said Jeff. “These days, hard to be sure. Somewhere else, definitely.”

The adults chuckled and shook their heads.

“There was a volcano, and lava, and fire! It wasn’t my fault!” said Jeff, waving his arms dangerously in the air. He added the word “much” as an after-thought. “Anyway, as to what I’m doing here on the Isles of Shayde, well, I probably shouldn’t tell you, and you mustn’t tell anyone else, but I’m looking out for boats.”

“So you can break them?” said Henry.

“We’re looking for a particular boat that we think might be moving through the area. A *big black boat*, with *distinctive markings*.” Jeff waggled his eyebrows and tapped his nose suggestively, though what he was trying to suggest the Shanks family did not know.

“You failed to see us until Armitage called out to you,” said Urbi.

“Ah, yes, well, you know how it is ...” Jeff wiggled his arms in a way that was meant to imply he was innocent of something, despite being incredibly guilty. “I had my mind on other things.”

“Such as?”

Jeff rolled his eyes, and his mouth, which made it seem as though he was talking to his nose as he mumbled something inaudible.

“What was that, Jeff?” said Henry.

“The colour green? Bashing things with my axe?” said Jeff, making these sound more like questions than answers.

“You were meant to be looking for boats but were instead thinking of the colour green and bashing things. You never change, do you Jeff?” With that, Henry gave Jeff a big, vigorous hug. “You want to look for your boat while sailing in ours? We can crack open a bottle of mead and talk of days past, as folks of our age are meant to do.”

“Sounds good,” said Jeff, spitting greasy hair from his mouth as the surrounding winds began gathering speed.

“Looks like there’s a storm brewing,” said Henry, as the *Ironclad* began rocking about on churning water. “You seen anywhere we can shelter while this blows over?”

“There isn’t time,” said Urbi. “Can’t you see the blue smoke on the winds? This is a magical storm! Henry, get Armitage into that life jacket. I’ll get the box and rope, and ...”

Demonic cackling cut through her words. Rain and spray and fish were tossed through the air. The hull of the *Ironclad* cracked and winds threw the crew apart. Armitage lost sight of Henry, lost sight of Urbi, lost sight of Jeff. Waves piled over his head, filling his lungs as he screamed for help. Thunder crashed behind his eyes as black lightning pierced the mist. Images of goblins and mutant maggots blurred together in his darkening mind. His final thought before he passed out was that, overall, this was far from being the best birthday ever.

Chapter 6

Anum hovered on his carpet beyond the maelstrom as his ravens danced through the turbulent squall.

“Genie!” he bellowed. “To see through the eyes of the birds, what a marvellous idea!”

“Well, you know,” said the floating face behind his shoulder. “I *am* a *genius*.”

“I can watch it all from every angle, the pain and suffering of that accursed pirate.”

“Genius,” said the genie, waggling their eyebrows. “Do you see what I did there?”

“To see him smashed against the elements, his nephew pitifully screaming, his girlfriend food for the sharks ...”

“I’m a genie you see, so ...”

“Wait!” cried Anum. “That woman ... is my niece!”

“Oh great, here we go.”

“The niece I need to marry so I can take my rightful place as the ruler of Hotepia!”

“Yes, I *did* point this out before ...”

“The niece that pirate stole from me, destroying my long and complicated plans!”

“Well, she wasn’t *stolen* from you because you didn’t *own* her.”

“The niece that is now once more within my grasp ...”

“I *could* stop the storm if you want.”

“Genie! I command you to stop this storm! Hold back your infernal winds, soothe your raging waters, and bring Urbi to me alive!”

The genie sighed, for Anum's possession of their enchanted ring locked them in a deeply imbalanced power dynamic. With a simple tweak of the universe they stopped the winds, calmed the sea, and restored the local weather to its usual grimness. Then the genie floated off through the air in search of Urbi, but found only that mist is very hard to see through.

All that remained of the *Ironclad* were a few shards of plastic, bobbing amid the lingering spume. Its crew had completely disappeared.

"Ah," said the genie. "Pants."

Armitage awoke to find a goat in his face. It was sniffing at him with rasping nostrils and poking his ribs with an ebony cane. Armitage rolled over, coughing up water as the animal blared in his ear.

"Shanks!"

"What?" Armitage spluttered.

"Do not say what!" said the goat. "Say pardon! You are a Shanks, yes?"

"I think so," said Armitage, trying to stand. The creature picked him up and set him on his feet. It was the best dressed goat Armitage had ever seen.

"My name is Lord Ramsheart," said the beast with a bow. "You are wet. Come with me."

It twisted on one hoof and gambolled away across the island, chased by flaring coattails. Armitage looked around at the surrounding grey seas and decided he had little choice but to follow.

The island was much like the others; a snake's tail of stone spiralling high above the water. As Armitage climbed the rock it

seemed that he walked over nothing but murky clouds.

“Are you still there?” he whispered to his companion.

“Just about,” said the Hair. “I must have blacked out at the same time you did. I think I need to keep a very close eye on you. Stop you from getting me into any more trouble. We can start by forgetting your silly family motto.”

“Oh, but the Shanks Family Motto leads to no end of adventures,” called Lord Ramsheart. “Never let worry-warts stop you from doing stupid things.”

The goat led them to an ornate set of patio furniture and motioned for Armitage to take a seat.

“What, how can you hear me?” said the Hair. “Oh, wait, I understand. You must be another figment of the child’s imagination. Perhaps there are lots of us, who can all hear and talk to each other.”

“Possibly,” said Lord Ramsheart. “You need tea. I shall put the kettle on.”

Long talons dragged a suitable kettle from the mist and balanced it on top of the goat’s top-hat. Armitage hopped onto a patio chair next to the patio table, and tried to make sense of the situation.

“Are you a faun?” he asked.

Lord Ramsheart replied in a way that made Armitage blush and the water boil.

“Mummy Shanks always taught me it’s wrong to swear,” said Armitage.

The goat regained its composure and began to measure scoops of smelly leaves into a finely decorated teapot.

“Quite right, young child, quite right. I do apologise for the vulgar response, but people ask me that question with such regularity that it does so irritate me. Do I truly resemble some

common sprite? I am a being of a much higher order. I am the Six Horned Goat-Man, the one who lives between the lines and in that space on a football table that neither side can reach. I am neither animal, vegetable, nor mineral, but something else entirely. Enough about me, what are you, child? Divulge your dark secrets while the tea brews, and I will try to find us some scones.”

“Well,” said Armitage, once Lord Ramsheart and the Hair had stopped arguing over how to say the word ‘scone’. “My parents were eaten by a giant mutant maggot, so my pirate uncle and an Egyptian princess have brought me on an adventure to solve the Mystery of the Isles of Shayde.”

“I see,” said Lord Ramsheart sincerely. He poured two cups of tea and pulled a plate of scones from somewhere not entirely normal. “And which particular Mystery of the Isles of Shayde do you seek to solve?”

“Oh,” said Armitage. “I didn’t know there was more than one. The mystery of why there is so much mist, I suppose, and why ships keep disappearing and stuff.”

“Well that’s easily answered,” said Lord Ramsheart. “These waters are what some call a ‘Vile Vortex’, a place where ships crash and people disappear and none who search for the cause are ever seen again. There are thirteen of these around the world, and this is only the smallest. Llama?”

This last word was spoken in a disturbing yet familiar tone as the goat brandished a jug in Armitage’s face.

“What? Oh, yes please.”

“Wombat?”

“Two please.”

Milk and sugar were dropped into the cups and stirred with a silver spoon that had not been there before. Lord Ramsheart watched with eager eyes and an encouraging nose as Armitage

sniffed at the tea.

“Well, I suppose that wraps up my adventure then,” said Armitage. “No, wait, just calling it a Vile Vortex doesn’t explain anything. *Why* do all these things keep happening here?”

“Ah, now that is not so easily answered,” the goat replied. “Is it because of the crawling fish-things that stalk the shadows and eat the dead? Or perhaps the alien beast is to blame, the one that some say is trapped in these isles. You never know; even if scientists think it unlikely, it *could* still be because of a fog-farting monster.”

“I think it is because of a fog-farting monster,” nodded Armitage as he tried a mouthful of tea. It felt good to drink something hot, sitting as he was in soaking clothes amid cold and clammy air. He drank the whole cup in one go and was left mightily refreshed.

“Thank you,” he said. “That has left me mightily refreshed.”

“You were tired,” said Lord Ramsheart, slurping at his cup. “As well you would be, sailing unprotected through the Isles of Shayde. It was fortuitous indeed that I saw you floating away. Few who fall asleep here ever awake again. An adult may last a day at most, but a child? It is for the best that you have drunk of my *special* tea.”

At the word “special”, Lord Ramsheart waggled his eyebrows and tapped his nose suggestively, but what he was trying to suggest Armitage did not know.

“By special,” said the Hair. “Do you mean that it contains an unhealthy amount of sugar?”

“There is nothing quite as pleasant as a good cup of wombatty tea.”

“That doesn’t answer my question.”

“Hold on,” said Armitage. “Why would sailing through these

islands make me tired?”

“Why indeed,” said the goat, bouncing on his seat as if there were ants in his pants, which there probably were not as he was not wearing any. “What do you think?”

“Well, the only thing that makes the Isles of Shayde different from everywhere else is all this mist,” said Armitage, waving a hand at the mist in case Lord Ramsheart had failed to see it.

“So ...” prompted the wriggling snout.

“So ... the mist must be some kind of sleeping gas!”

“Oh well done, you are indeed a true Shanks. This slumbersome smog has sent many a ship to sleep on the bed of the sea. Now let us answer the next question, why do you think the mist is here?”

Armitage tried to reply but his mouth was full of scone, and his Hair took advantage of the pause.

“Armitage, I realise that this new imaginary friend is probably helping you work through the problems that you have in your head, but should we not be worrying about Urbi and Henry?”

“You’re right,” said Armitage, almost choking on the scone and learning a valuable lesson about talking with his mouth full. “But what can we do? We are stuck on an island in the middle of the ocean with no boat or plane or submarine to save us!”

Lord Ramsheart leant forward on his cane as he considered the child and the Hair atop their head.

“You’re all alone, aren’t you?” he mused, stroking his goatee beard.

“Well, yes,” said Armitage. “Hadn’t you already noticed that?”

His host rose from his chair and made a big show of searching in all directions through the fog.

“Ah-ha,” he called, pointing in a direction that looked much like all the others. “There they are, washed up on Focks’ Island.

Well, the focks are most hospitable; your uncle and his friend will be perfectly safe. They are, after all, accustomed to far worse troubles than the ones they face now."

Well," said the Hair. "That's really good to know. Thanks a lot, Mr Figment of the Kid's Imagination."

Lord Ramsheart crouched down on his very bendy legs and rested what could only be called a claw upon the child's shoulder.

"You know, it is only your Hair that claims I am mere make-believe. You *could* take advice from something not yet a day old, or you could listen to one who speaks with the wisdom of the ages. I assure you, your associates are safe. Trouble not over how you will reach them, for I will lend you my Patented Unsinkable Coracle and you shall see how real I am when it completely fails to sink."

Now the Hair had much to say to this, and much of what it had to say was very rude indeed. The argument grew quite loud and the goat and the Hair had just started calling each other names when Armitage reached his decision.

"Will both of you please be quiet!" he shouted. "Hair, you might be right. Lord Ramsheart may not be real, but he is offering us a way off this island. At least, I think he is, what exactly is a coracle?"

"A small round boat, often made out of leather stretched across a timber frame," grumbled the goat and Hair together.

"Oh. Right. Good, that's good. We will borrow this coracle, thank you very much, and set out among the islands regardless of the danger. I'm sure everything will work out well in the end."

"Marvellous," said Lord Ramsheart, clapping his hands together and leading them back to the bottom of the island. "Take this flask of wombatty tea and this plate of jammy, creamy scones, and have fun on your adventure or you might as well not

have had one at all.”

The coracle wobbled as Armitage climbed into it, but he remembered Lord Ramheart’s words and was almost entirely convinced that it would not sink.

The goat-man cast them off into the mist. He waved as they disappeared, then turned to the abhorrent form behind him. Jeff stood there with his shield, his shoes, two crabs, a greenish rock that he had found particularly interesting, and a big pile of seaweed, all balanced upon his head.

“Jeff,” said Lord Ramsheart. “Are you playing the ‘How Many Things Can I Fit On My Head?’ Game?”

“No,” answered Jeff unconvincingly, with much rolling of the eyes and mouth.

“Well, stop it. I have a job for you to do. Keep an eye on that questioning child, we may find a use for them in the future. Try to ensure they return to the mainland alive, for these are dangerous waters and the road of a Shanks rarely runs smooth. Their parents were up to their eyebrows in all kinds of unpleasantness, and we never did hear from the Granddaddy after he left on that quest to Antarctica. Still, they have Living Hair, which will certainly work in their favour.”

“Ah,” said Jeff. “I knew I could hear an extra voice, but I couldn’t see where it was coming from. I thought maybe I had made it up, as I am prone to do such things if I think it will make life more interesting.”

Their conversation was interrupted by a silent dark shape looming into view. A boat glided between the rocks, a boat better built than the *Ironclad* and more modern than the *Blackthorn*, with a triangle of interlinked circles painted in yellow on its hull. It moved darkly through the waters with an air of purpose and determination. Jeff gripped hard the handle of his axe, and Lord

Ramsheart stroked his beard once more.

“Then it is true,” he muttered, doing that thing goats sometimes do with their eyebrows. “They are here. Probably to wake it up, but we cannot yet be sure. You keep the child safe, Jeff, and I will deal with the Corporation as best I can.”

Chapter 7

While the *Ironclad* had been small enough to weave between the dangerous rocks, and the *Mysterious Black Boat* was *so* mysterious that it could ignore them completely, the *Blackthorn* was neither small, nor mysterious, nor anything else that was helpful at all. The bulbous, wooden galleon stood little chance of sailing through the islands without being completely torn to pieces, so it lay anchored outside the wall of fog as the pirates pondered what to do.

“First mate!” called the captain, stroking his purple beard in a manner that was becoming very fashionable. “Fetch us ... The Box of Interesting Maps!”

The first mate’s name was Cut-Throat Colin, but everyone called him the Crimson Crab because he always walked sideways. He scuttled off through the depths of the ship, and soon returned with a big, wooden crate that he emptied across the deck. Scrolls and parchment and crumpled up papers were poured at the pirates’ feet and they all dived into the pile, searching for a suitable map.

“Well, this one is useless, I’ve never even heard of Ultima Thule,” said Snotty Sally, who picked peoples’ pockets with the very same fingers she used to pick her nose.

“This one of Skull Island is even worse, look how large they’ve drawn that Gorilla!” said Murderin’ Mavis, who got her name by doing regular murderin’.

“Didn’t we already find the treasure on this map?” asked Noisy Nelly, who was really bad at playing the piano.

“No, that’s a map of Zombie Island,” said Buccaneer Bess, who kept bees in her beard. “You’re thinking of the time we went to Demon Island, though I’ll admit they do look similar.”

“Ah ha!” said Captain McArrgh. “Here it is, shipmates, a map of the Isles of Shayde!”

“How very convenient,” said Penguin Pete.

“Stop being sarcastic,” said the captain. “And put that sledgehammer back where you found it.”

Penguin Pete did what he was told; though why he was holding a sledgehammer to begin with no one really knew. The other pirates were often confused by Penguin Pete. After all, he was a man who wanted to be a penguin who wanted to be a pirate. Thankfully, Penguin Pete really was a pirate, so that had all worked out for the best. The rest of the crew loved Penguin Pete regardless, except for Captain McArrgh who had never loved anyone in his life.

Once all the other charts had been cleared away, the pirates unrolled the one showing the Isles of Shayde.

“Now if you were the Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks, which of these islands would you end up on?” asked the captain.

“I think he’ll end up on that big one, right there in the middle,” said Noisy Nelly, jabbing at the map with her cutlass.

“Monster Head Island,” read Murderin’ Mavis. “What an unusual name.”

“It sounds right though, doesn’t it?” mused the captain. “Yes indeed, just the sort of place he’d go. Right then, ready a row-boat then ready your weapons, we’ll be needing both soon enough!”

Blackthorn McArrgh entertained himself with a maniacal laugh as the other pirates went to work. All was going well until Cut-Throat Colin sidled over to ask a question.

“Um, Captain McArrgh sir, pardon me asking, but why are we risking our lives in these dangerous waters? What exactly do we need this Moonstone Eagle for?”

A hush fell over the pirates. They stopped readying the boat and turned to watch Colin and the captain. The first mate realised, far too late, that he had just asked why pirates go hunting for treasure; a very silly question that most pirates would not think needed an answer.

“Why? *Why?*” screamed the captain, hopping up and down in a dance of rage. “Look, lad. This isn’t just any old eagle we’re talking about, it’s the *Legendary Moonstone Eagle*, the most magical eagle statue in the whole world! That eagle is one of the Seven Treasures of the Seven Seas, and has made Henry Shanks the greatest pirate that ever lived. It gives him intelligence, and charm, and charisma, and riches, and ...”

“But surely,” interrupted the Crimson Crab, “he gets all these things because he’s a kind, generous man, while you kick kittens and have a face that would look like a badger’s bottom if only a badger’s bottom had yellow, crusty teeth. It’s nothing at all to do with the eagle.”

Colin suddenly understood what his parents had meant when they told him his big mouth would be the death of him. The captain pulled his pistol from his belt and sent a shot of lead blasting through the first mate’s heart.

“Oh dear,” said Cut-Throat Colin. “I needed that to live.”

And then he fell down dead.

“Snotty Sal!” called the captain. “You’ve just been promoted!”

“Yippee!” cheered Snotty Sal, failing to see the dangers of her new position.

“Now get back to work!” the captain ordered, a zealous fire blazing in his one good eye. “We’re off to Monster Head Island!”

Chapter 8

Focks' Island was a craggy expanse of stone that sat in a fog-filled realm of its own. From the centre of the isle, not even the sea could be seen through the mist. As such, the focks were thoughtful things, for living on a stone in a realm of its own left them little to do but think. They thought about the cold grey skies. They thought about the cold grey waters. They thought about the boats that smashed onto their island, and about the screaming humans that died as they drowned or were snatched from the surf by scaled, fish-like beasts. Sometimes the focks would think about what those cold grey creatures did to the people they dragged into the ocean's depths, but they would not linger on such thoughts for long. Even the hardy focks found such thoughts unsettling.

Henry Shanks had survived plenty of magical storms in his life, and had even caused a few himself on the odd accidental occasion. Recently, however, Henry had tried to leave such exploits to younger adventurers, claiming that it was unfair for those as old as he to hog all of the fun for themselves.

Fortunately for the drowning pirate, Urbi was exactly that sort of younger adventurer. She found Henry's body spinning through the sea, dragged him up to the surface onto Focks' island, performed the necessary first-aid techniques, then rolled him into the recovery position. Gripping at the rope tied around her waist, she pulled ashore the watertight and buoyant box that experience had taught her was essential for storing sailing supplies. From this box she took blankets to keep away the cold and a flask of hot

sugary tea, the smells of which awoke Henry in an instant.

“By all the sinister things that I’ve ever found in my socks! How long has it been since I last washed those blankets? They smell worse than that jelly we once left in the — ohh, hot sugary tea, just the thing!”

“Henry, we’ve lost Armitage!”

There was an intense look in Urbi’s eyes that Henry had never seen before. He rested his hand on her shoulder in a way that he hoped would reassure her.

“Urbi,” he said. “Have I ever introduced you to my mother?”

The look of concern on Urbi’s face turned into one of confusion. “What? No! What has that got to do with anything?”

“My mother is a special person, in more ways than I shall ever know. One thing I do know is that she can swim. Really she can. She can swim and swim and swim all day. Then, when she gets tired out from all that swimming, she can keep on swimming. That’s how good a swimmer she is. Armitage is her grandson, and he’s a Shanks. Unless the family curse would permit the sea to metaphorically eat him, he’ll have nothing to worry about in these empty waters.”

“How can we be sure the waters are empty? That was a magical storm! Maybe it was just another of the mysteries surrounding these isles, but what if some malevolent mind purposefully set it against us?”

Urbi paused for a moment, contemplating their situation while sipping her tea.

“And yet the ties of the family Shanks run thicker than any I know,” she said. “The bonds of your blood always hold firm, even when those it runs through get lost in Antarctica or eaten by maggots. If you think Armitage is still alive, then I trust you. If we are to find him, we need to get off this island. We should

fashion ourselves some kind of raft from convenient palm trees, or ... a really *big* tangle of seaweed?"

"Well said, my love. We'll be reunited with Armitage in no time at all." Henry tried to hide the doubt in his voice. With a flick of his hook he waved off a particularly annoying raven as it tried to land on his shoulder.

"I wonder if I can properly remember the language of dolphins, coincidentally taught to me by an uncle on my mother's side. That would certainly be helpful in a situation like this."

He waded out into the sea and began making clicking noises with his tongue, slapping his arms together and wiggling his bottom.

"Hey," hissed a voice from near Urbi's feet. "Your friend is a little strange."

Urbi stared curiously at the thing that had just spoken to her. It was a rock, no larger than her fist, with folds and facets that seemed to form a kind of face. Although human features can often be found in the random shapes of nature, Urbi was certain she had never before heard such a fake face talk.

"My Henry is just the way he wishes to be, thank you very much," she said, crouching down to study the stone. "If he says he can talk to dolphins, I am willing to believe him. After all, I'm currently sat here talking to a rock, so who am I to ..."

Urbi trailed off as various strands of thought unravelled and intertwined in new and revealing ways.

"We should have taken Armitage and his Hair more seriously."

"Well, I don't think the dolphins are going to help us," said Henry as he returned from the ocean. "I just managed to insult the shape of their noses and cast aspersions on their ancestry. I never could get my syntax right. What do you have there? Does my eye deceive me or is that a real and genuine fock?"

“Ello,” said the rock. “We’ve got a quick one here.”

“A what?” asked Urbi.

“A fock,” answered Henry. “A mixture between a face and a rock. My brothers once tried to sell me one, but I saw through their felt tip fakery straight away. I didn’t realise there were any of you living this far south.”

“Tis no surprise you’ve never seen our kin before,” sounded a voice from behind. “For there are few humans in the world who can tell a fock from a rock.”

Henry and Urbi span around in surprise. All over the island talking faces were popping up, saying hello, and apologising for not having hands with which to tip the hats they also lacked.

“Ah ha!” said Henry. “The previously presumed mythical Focks’ Island, here in the Isles of Shayde! I don’t know why it didn’t occur to me earlier, where else would it be? I don’t suppose you have any convenient palm trees lying around, do you?”

“Afraid not,” answered a vast face right under his feet. “Plant roots play havoc with a fock’s back.”

“I can imagine,” said Henry, trying not to fall into the cavernous mouth. “How about really big tangles of seaweed?”

There was the sound of a hundred turning grindstones as all the nearby focks shook their heads.

“All right,” said Urbi. “How about some rocks conveniently shaped like boats?”

“Oh! Are you looking for a way off the island?” asked a lump of stone covered in a limpet wig. “I think we may be able to give you a hand, there. Does anyone know if Millie is still around?”

The Focks began to mumble to each other, agreeing that Millie would definitely be able to help. A whisper ran through the rocks, like the rippling clatter of pebbles caught in the turning tide. Then came a call from the far side of the island, begging for

the humans' attention.

Moments later, for the island was really rather small, Henry and Urbi were stood before a large grey boulder. Its features were old and wise, and it had a voice like the sound of crunching gravel.

"Hello, my dears, pleasure to meet you. My name's Millie, Millie the Mill Stone. I hear the two of you need some help leaving Focks' Island. It would warm me to my stony core to be able to aid you."

Henry and Urbi introduced themselves and wondered at how the fock could help.

"Well my dears, any geologist knows that every rock can tell a story, and I am no exception. I hail from Ireland originally, many years ago, where I lived quite happily minding my own business. Then one day some humans decided it would be fun to tie one of your lot across my face and throw us both to the ocean's mercy. Well, fortunately I have always been a fast learner, so it didn't take long to figure out how to do that swimming thing that non-silicon-based life forms seem to enjoy so much. I swam as far as I could, further than any fock has swam before, which admittedly isn't that far to begin with, until I ended up here. Well, I nipped by the mainland first, to drop off my passenger, before coming to Focks' Island and sleeping for a few hundred years. Was hard work, all that swimming, especially with me being a rock and everything. The poor kid survived, so I hear, and got made into a full-blown saint!"

"Pft, they'll make anyone into a saint these days," said Henry, shooing away another intrusive raven. His own requests to be canonised had met with rude responses from the Pope.

"Yes, well, there you have it," finished Millie. "I can swim you round the islands if you wish. Did you have any particular

destination in mind?"

"We're not sure," said Urbi. "If you were a young human child with luminous orange hair, where would you be?"

Millie considered this carefully, furrowing her stony brow.

"Well, if I was a young human child with luminous orange hair, I'd end up somewhere like Monster Head Island."

"Yes!" said Henry with a victorious smile. "That sounds exactly right. Prepare to set sail, Millie, we're off to Monster Head Island!"

Through the ears of the raven, in a patch of mist not too far from Focks' Island, Anum Hotep had heard every word of this.

"Well," he laughed as he called to his genie. "I'm sure you can guess where we are heading next!"

"Gee, I don't know," said the genie in a mocking voice. "Could it be Monster Head Island?"

Anum opened his mouth to speak, paused for a moment, then continued. "Yes. Yes, I like that plan much better. Onwards, my magical carpet, we're off to Monster Head Island!"

Chapter 9

“This coracle smells funny,” said the Hair.

“I like it,” Armitage replied, as the gently spinning boat drifted through the islands. “It smells of ginger and elderberries.”

“What? What do ginger and elderberries smell like?”

“Like this coracle. It feels as though the smell is quietly talking to me, promising me that we will certainly never sink.”

“Great. That’s reassuring. Do you have any idea where this thing is taking us?”

“Well, Lord Ramsheart mentioned an island full of foxes, but seeing as we have neither oars nor a map, I suppose we just have to trust that the boat knows the way.”

“How very optimistic you are.”

“Why, thank you very much.”

They floated under an arch of barnacle-infested stone, listening to the sound of water lapping against the rocks.

“Those rippling waves sound just like scuttling feet,” said Armitage, chewing on a scone.

“They do,” said the Hair. “And the strange echo of this arch makes it sound like the scuttling is coming from above us.”

There was a noise that sounded like something large and heavy plunging into the sea, and the crew of the coracle quickly searched for other things to talk about.

“So, what kind of leather do you think this boat is made from?” asked the Hair.

“A minotaur?” said Armitage. “Or perhaps even a dinosaur! Whatever it is, it seems very tough and completely and utterly safe.”

“Oh yes,” agreed the hair. “Completely and utterly safe, no question about that.”

They passed a few moments in awkward silence.

“There could be sharks in these waters ...” began the Hair, but Armitage was not listening. There was something unpleasant scratching at the back of his head and a sticky, salty taste swirling around his throat. Bells and bubbles rang through his ears, and the stench of rotting seaweed smothered the coracle’s soothing scent.

The ocean exploded. A shape made of scales and warts reared up in front of them, grasping at the boat with wide, webbed hands. Armitage leapt backwards as the thing crawled on board. The coracle rose to meet him, tipping under the monster’s weight. The sluggish bulk slid back into the sea, but kept its hold on the unsinkable craft that now stood on its side in the water. Armitage clung to the opposite edge, dangling above a gaping jaw and countless rows of teeth. The Hair screamed as his hands slipped. As he fell, the maw disappeared, pulled beneath the brine with a strangled gasp.

Armitage hit the froth as a violent struggle erupted beneath him. The coracle slowly floated away while he thrashed his arms through the turbulent water. The struggle behind sent shimmering oils seeping through the sea. Armitage could taste this sticky tar with every desperate breath. Black waves washed over his head, stinging his eyes and burning his skin. He pulled himself towards his boat, the pain lingering as he escaped the oil and reached the capsized coracle.

The boat was overturned, yet still seemingly unsinkable. As Armitage tried to climb onto its hull, a fresh mound of fishy flesh rose up to block his path. Armitage watched through blurry eyes as several rattling scorpion tails unfolded from its sides. Jaw

bones stretched in all directions, roaring at the child with quivering tongues and dousing him in a spray of slime.

“Genie!” came a commanding cry. “Give me a weapon!”

The creature’s dozen eyes went searching for this voice, finding the source as a wooden plank smashed into its face. Tendrils waved in confusion as it fell back into the sea, and that lofty voice rang out once more. “Genie! Get rid of that thing!”

Armitage wiped the water from his face, and stared up at the flying carpet that hovered in the mist. There was a man with a plank stood upon it, and behind him a third monstrosity came leaping through the fog. Armitage shouted a warning. By the time the creature hit the carpet the man had elegantly skipped away, landing on the coracle while shouting; “Carpet! Rise!”

The carpet shot up into the sky, carrying away the bewildered toad. The man pulled Armitage onto the coracle and used the plank to push the boat away from the churning waves. The first monster still struggled in the darkening waters, and by the time the writhing ocean settled the coracle had left it far behind.

Jeff burst up through the ichor, treading water with one hand and holding his axe high above his head with the other. After a quick victory cry he twisted around in search of his ward, but found only that mist is very hard to see through.

“Ah,” said Jeff. “Pants.”

A large and bulbous frog-like fish fell from a great height, smashing into the sea nearby. Jeff made his thinking face as he pondered whether he should chase after Armitage or bash at the monster. He did not consider the matter for long before coming to the only decision possible. After all, it would take just one moment to break his new foe, what could possibly happen to Armitage in such a small time?

Although Mummy Shanks had taught Armitage to be polite to everyone he met, she had also taught him not to talk to strangers. This left him a little confused over how to deal with the person that both he and the Hair were now calling 'Plank Man'. Plank Man had used his plank to land the capsized coracle on the nearest suitable island, and was now trying to right the overturned vessel. With nowhere to stand that would not be in the way, Armitage was giving the man space while considering his conundrum.

"He appeared out of the sky as if from nowhere," said the Hair. "He definitely counts as strange."

"But he also saved us from those fish-things," whispered Armitage. "I think that earns him a little politeness."

There was a wet thud as the coracle fell into its proper position.

"That would have been much easier if I had my genie," said Plank Man, who preferred the name Anum but had failed to properly introduce himself. "Come on boy, let's get you back on board."

Before Armitage could respond to this, the air convulsed and heaved, giving birth to some form of gaseous nightmare.

"Right, I've left that thing in the middle of the Pacific and picked up your flying carpet, an action which you will notice I was not commanded to perform and which I did off the back of my own initiative so that you might listen to me when I tell you we need to leave this place, now! Those fish-"

"Are of little concern," said the man, ending the genie's rattling request with a dismissive wave of his hand. "Egypt has something of a history with Sea Peoples, they are nothing I have

not dealt with before. This boy, meanwhile, is soaked to his soul. A coat, genie! Give me a warm coat for this unfortunate child!"

"Right, sure, don't listen to the ancient force of nature, what do they know? One jacket coming right up."

Armitage found that he was now wrapped up in an oversized yet exceptionally comfortable jacket.

"Okay Armitage, that one is really *not* a figment of your imagination," said the Hair about the genie with considerable urgency. "I do not like this, I do not like this at all. Nothing good can smell that bad, and I don't like the way your eyes can't focus on it."

"Thank you for your help back there," said Armitage, risking a step closer to the man. "And for this oversized yet highly comfortable jacket. I would offer you some buttered scones and wombatty tea, but I think I lost them when the coracle capsized."

"Not a problem," said the genie. "Just say the word, and you can have all the scones and tea you desire; though I may have to travel some way to find any wombats."

"I worry not about food or drink, genie. I worry only that a young boy is adrift and alone in these dangerous and uncharted isles! How did you find yourself so far from land?"

"I was with my family, Auntie Urbi and Uncle Henry," said Armitage. He stared wistfully into the haze, and as such missed the hunger that gripped the man's eyes. "There was a storm. We were separated. I need to find them again. Would you and your genie be able to help us, or have you used up all your wishes?"

"Ha!" laughed the genie, "that whole three wishes thing isn't really true, it's just something we spread around to get people to give up after their first attempts at world domination go hideously wrong. I've been in this line of work for thousands of years and let me tell you, it's not the big wishes that change your life; it's the

little ones that hardly seem worth making. I can't just snap my fingers and make your family appear ..."

"Especially as you don't have fingers," said Armitage.

"Indeed, but I can help you in other smaller ways. May I?" asked the genie of Anum. He nodded, and the genie waved their tentacles through the air. Between the weaving appendages appeared a small black box, to which the genie whispered, "Find Henry Shanks."

A picture appeared on one side of the Box that looked a little like the mist that surrounded them. An arrow pointed into the clouds and a voice rang out, loud and clear, "Turn ... Left."

"There you go. Follow these directions, and we will soon find your family."

The Hair was about to ask how the genie knew Henry's full name, but Armitage got there first with an observation of his own.

"But we have no way of steering the coracle," he said. "We've just been letting it take us wherever it wants to go."

Before he had even finished the sentence, tentacles had been waved once more, and now there was a motor attached to the back of the boat.

"Huzzar!" said Armitage.

"Oh yay, a death trap!" added the Hair.

Of course it was not a death trap, for this was no ordinary boat. This was Lord Ramsheart's Patented Unsinkable Coracle, and as long as it was sailed at a sensible speed, all within would be quite safe. Armitage agreed to join Plank Man and the genie and they were soon back afloat and following the magical direction box. The genie entertained Armitage with stories of their long and eventful life, while Anum plotted various methods of using the child in his final confrontation with his prey.

Chapter 10

“... so I spent the next century or so on a dragon’s hoard,” continued the genie. “Dragons don’t go in for making wishes much, and that fiery glow behind their teeth is *not* sparkling conversation. I spent most of that time talking to myself while they just lay there sleeping. Occasionally they would crawl out of their hole, burn a nearby village, and steal all the cattle and jewellery. Never have I met anyone more content with their life. Being cooped up in that cave was not my idea of fun, so I didn’t lose any sleep when they got food poisoning from some ironically under-cooked sheep. The next person to find my ring was the young woman sent up as a sacrifice by the locals, who had yet to realise the dragon was dead. Her first wish was for me to get her as far away from that unfortunate land as I could, which shows some good sense on her part. Obviously I couldn’t just magic her away, humans shouldn’t travel through the same folds in reality as us genies. So I made the floor of the cavern, *aha, cave in*, and we landed in the secret subterranean tunnels that even then criss-crossed around the world ...”

“At the next jagged rock, turn ... left,” said the black box.

“Look!” said Armitage, “A cave!”

A cliff loomed through the mist as the coracle weaved past twisting pillars. Armitage and the black box were both pointing at a crevice that emerged from the water beneath a curling stone spiral.

“The box must know what it’s doing,” said Armitage. “If my family are going to be anywhere, they’ll be somewhere like that

cave. Slow down a little and steer us in.”

“Of course, young master Shanks;” said Anum. “Your wish is my command.”

“Hey, that’s my line,” said the genie.

Anum turned the motor to its lowest setting and steered into the tunnel.

“At the end of this cave,” said the black box, “Turn ... up.”

“What?” said Anum. He twisted the motor this way and that and found that neither of these ways would steer the boat ‘up’.

“Armitage,” said his Hair with an uneasy voice, “I think some sort of mucus just fell on me.”

Armitage raised his hand and found slime dribbling down his face. He looked up to the roof of the cave. It was covered in a network of squirming, oozing, rubbery tubes. The walls were covered in folded flesh, shimmering as the genie’s glow lit up their creamy coating. Long and flexible limbs twitched and wriggled, scratching at other bits of what seemed to be a single, living thing.

“Could this be those fish again?” suggested Anum.

“No,” said Armitage and the genie together, before looking at each other with suspicious glares.

The coracle floated out into a vast chamber, a cavern crowded with rolls of wrinkled muscle. Leaking sacs of gloop hung from the ceiling, while others rose floating from the depths. Armitage began to feel very unsettled. He tried to avoid seeing the sacs as ‘maggot like’, but still his mind was gripped by the image of his parents’ death.

“I don’t feel well,” he muttered, staring at his knees.

A dripping, articulated stalk curled its way down from the bulging mass and waved its end in front of Armitage’s nose. A virulent voice filled the expanse, saying, “Go on, pull my finger.”

The crew of the coracle exchanged confused glances, then Armitage reached out to take hold of the slippery appendage.

He pulled it. A blast of pungent gas burst out of the sluggish lump that floated beside them, rocking the boat and sending Anum toppling overboard. While he clambered back onto the coracle, Armitage watched in wonder as the gas swirled in the air. It condensed into a cloud of mist, and floated off through the cave.

"I suppose you think that's very funny," growled Anum as he struggled back into the coracle.

"I certainly did," smirked the genie.

"Hello," said Armitage to the creature that had wrapped itself throughout the maze of tunnels. "I don't suppose you could possibly be the legendary Fog-Farting Monster that so many white-coated scientists have denied the very existence of?"

"I am indeed," replied the face that lowered itself to greet them. It belonged to an animal that was not insect nor lizard but a mixture of both, and many other things as well. "Sorry about soaking you, I just love to do that when I meet new people."

"A Fog-Farting Monster," said the Hair. "Well I suppose that makes as much sense as anything else."

"So then, how can I help you folks? I was just about to eat, care to join me?"

"Thank you, Mr Monster, but I'm a little full of scones at the moment," said Armitage.

"Not a problem, and please, call me Hank."

"Your name's Hank?"

"No, but it's a nice name that you'll be able to pronounce. Is it difficult, only having one mouth?"

"I seem to get along okay."

"Wow, fascinating," said Hank, who seemed to be genuinely

interested. "How about you two, anything I can get for you?"

"I want a towel!" snapped Anum.

"Hmm, don't have any towels I'm afraid," Hank apologised.

"I wasn't talking to you!"

"Oh, yeah, right," said the genie, before conjuring an exaggerated array of towels and hair dryers while Armitage resumed the conversation.

"So, what was it you were going to eat?"

"Sea cows!" said Hank, as one of his numerous talons plunged into the water and returned with a plump, squirming meal. Another blast of noxious air was released from a nearby gas sac, causing a considerable rise in temperature and charring the sea cow that dangled in its path.

"Some of my glands produce nice gasses that attract them here," said Hank, "and then others produce less than nice gasses to cook 'em. In goes the meat, out comes the heat!"

"Eww!" said Armitage with a revolted look.

"Oh, right," scoffed his Hair. "This from someone who once used his hands because there wasn't any toilet roll."

"I washed them afterwards!" Armitage shouted. Everyone looked at him with confused expressions.

"Oh, don't mind me; I was just talking to my Living Hair."

"Sure you were, kid," said Hank. "Sure you were. Well I must say it's not often I get visitors here in the Isles of Shayde. What brings you folks to these unwelcoming parts?"

"I was here with my family," said Armitage, explaining his story for what seemed to be the thousandth time. "We came to solve the mystery of the Isles of Shayde. There was a storm and we got separated, but the goat-man gave me scones and tea and made it all ... okay, though I cannot remember how."

The confused look on Hank's face showed no sign of easing.

“Right. Sure. Well, if you wanted to know why the islands are always shrouded in mists, then you’ve sure as anything found your answer in me. I’ve lived here for millions of years, minding my own business, doing my job, belching and farting enough gas to keep the beast asleep.”

“What beast?” said Anum, before Armitage could even begin to consider this statement.

“The beast I was left here to guard and imprison, until the end of time.”

“Armitage,” said the Hair, “I’ve been good enough not to suggest that Hank is yet another imaginary friend but, while this is all very interesting, we still need to find Henry and Urbi.”

“You’re right,” exclaimed Armitage, to everyone’s general bemusement. “Excuse me Hank, I don’t mean to insult your hospitality, but we need to go and find my family. They’re lost on the islands somewhere, and they could be hurt, or ... or ...”

“Of course kid, of course. This here is the biggest island in all these misty isles. Your folks are sure to come by these parts eventually.”

One of the insectile limbs descended, picked Armitage up, and lifted him across the cavern. It placed him at the mouth of a tunnel that climbed steeply into the darkness.

“That there tunnel will take you up to the surface. Come on, you too,” said Hank as another limb wrapped around Anum, soaking him once more in clammy secretions. “I’ll send up your little boat through one of my high-powered venting chimneys.”

“Thank you!” called Armitage as he rushed up the flue.

“What’s happening now?” said the genie, who had been paying more attention to drying Anum than to following the conversation.

“The boy’s escaping,” said Anum. “After him!”

“Bye then,” Hank shouted as they scurried up the tunnel. A slurping noise sounded through the darkness, like a straw sucking up milkshake from the very bottom of a glass.

“Ahh,” said Hank. “That is some real tasty sea cow.”

Chapter 11

“We’re lost aren’t we,” said Snotty Sally.

“We are not lost, Sally,” said Murderin’ Mavis. “I know exactly where we are. This is most definitely Monster Head Island.”

“Can you not get any more accurate than that?” said Captain McArrgh.

“Yes I can. We are somewhere by one of these cliffs, just outside the thick forest that sprawls across most of the island.”

“And you can tell that just by looking at the map, can you?” said the captain with a sigh, stood as he was between a cliff-top and the thick forest that sprawled across most of the island. Even though they were very fearsome pirates, they had all been looking for a reason to avoid heading into that forest. It had thorns that were sharp and pointy, nettles that were scratchy and stinging, and noises that were like the sound of trees being ripped apart by some unknown horror that none of them wanted to meet.

“You’re holding the map upside down,” said Noisy Nelly, the ship’s navigator; who, the captain reflected, would have been a much more obvious choice for the task of map reader.

“It’s not upside down; it’s the same way up as the island.”

“Eep!” squeaked Penguin Pete. He pointed across the cliff top, to where the back of Armitage’s head was emerging from a hole. The pirates launched themselves into the bushes and tried to be as stealthy as possible; a task Penguin Pete found increasingly difficult as he landed in a nettle patch.

Armitage clambered to his feet and turned to admire the thick sprawl of tangled undergrowth. Mist wove its way between the

colourless hulks of unhealthy trees. Insects that should have died out with the dinosaurs flew through thickets of black writhing ferns, and there was a croaking of toads in the background that seemed for some reason subtly wrong.

"I'm surprised there's enough light for plants to grow on these islands," said the Hair.

"Perhaps dead trees don't need light to grow," said Armitage.

Anum and his genie crawled out of the tunnel in time to see Armitage setting off along the cliff.

"So, what's the plan?" whispered the genie, alone with Anum for the first time since they had rescued Armitage.

"It is a beautifully simple plan. I will threaten to kill the boy unless that accursed pirate returns my niece to me."

"You've been quietly plotting for all this time and that's the best you've been able to come up with? It's no wonder you're so close to ruling the world with all those thoughts going on in your brain! If you want my advice, we should be leaving already, there's too much about this place that just doesn't seem right. Can you hear the sound of something crashing and bashing this way?"

Anum began to reply when the bush beside him threw up an axe-wielding goblin. A shield was rammed into Anum's face as Jeff piled into him with considerable force. The pair tumbled over the cliff and the genie followed in close pursuit.

"What was *that*?" hissed one of the pirates.

"*It's the boy!*" said Captain McArrgh, whose eye had been fixed on Armitage alone. "The one Shanks had with him in his boat. It must be his son! We can grab him and threaten to kill him unless that accursed pirate gives us the Legendary Moonstone Eagle!"

"What an original plan," whispered Buccaneer Bess. "I bet no one's thought of that one before."

"It *is* a perfect plan!" said the captain. "We can take him back

to the ship and deal with Shanks on our own terms. Yarr, Arr, Grr, grab the boy. Sally, get the sack.”

While the pirates were plotting, the sound of something striking the water below caught Armitage’s attention. He turned to discover his companions had completely disappeared.

“Hmmm,” he said. “It seems our companions have completely disappeared.”

“Good,” said the Hair. “That genie smelt of bad things.”

“You know, he never even told us his real name,” said Armitage. “Plank Man? Plank Man! Are you there, Plank Man?”

“Oh well, what a shame,” said the Hair, as the void below failed to answer. “Do you think your family curse might be contagious?”

“That’s not a very nice thing to say,” said Armitage. He was so lost amid bleak thoughts that he failed to hear the three blundering villains rushing up behind him.

Mummy Shanks had always taught Armitage that if he should ever find his head unexpectedly shoved into a sack, he should keep calm, listen to the noises around him, and try to work out what was happening. Now, as this was the exact situation Armitage found himself in, he kept calm, listened to the surrounding cries of “Yarr”, “Arr”, and “Grr”, and decided that he was probably being kidnapped by pirates.

“It’s like I always say, shipmates,” said a voice that sounded like it came from a captain. “A good pirate always keeps with them a sack strong enough to hold either their own weight in treasure, or one small boy.”

“It’s fortunate you had one then,” said a voice that sounded like the speaker had a finger shoved up her nose, “because you aren’t a good pirate at all!”

There was the sound of a gun being fired and a body falling

to the floor, and Armitage began to feel very afraid.

"Penguin Pete," said the captaincy voice. "You've just been promoted!"

"Yippee!" cried a distant voice which did not sound like that of a penguin at all. It sounded more like the moan of a human currently stuck in a patch of nettles.

"Now, as I was saying," said the captain, "tie 'im up, pick 'im up, and haul 'im back to the *Blackthorn*. I want to get off this island before it throws any more surprises at us."

At the same time that Armitage became embroiled in this adventure, Urbi and Henry had also been working their way over the island. They been following a convenient path through the forest that seemed to have been created by some blundering, axe-wielding horror. They reached the end of this trail just in time to see their nephew being carried off around the cliff.

"Pirates have kidnapped Armitage!" said Urbi. "They've bundled him up in a sack!"

"It looks like he's keeping nice and calm," said Henry. "Just like Mummy Shanks taught him. The last thing he wants to do is give them a reason to hurt him."

"We can't deal with all those pirates at once," said Urbi. "Not while they hold Armitage hostage. We need to come up with some kind of unbelievably inventive plan."

"Well, well, well, isn't this a pleasant surprise," said a voice behind them. "Put your hands above your heads and turn around slowly, no funny business!"

Pistols prodded at their backs, persuading Henry and Urbi to do as they were told.

“I said no funny business!” said Penguin Pete, who had been left behind by the other pirates as he searched the bushes for dock leaves.

“I know, sorry, couldn’t resist it,” said Henry and Urbi together, retuning their clown-noses to secret pockets. A strange and inexplicable pop sounded in the distance.

“I’ve taken the Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks prisoner! My name is going to go down in history!” said Penguin Pete. Then he was crushed to death by a coracle dropping out of the sky.

“I wonder what his name was,” pondered Henry, while Urbi contemplated the enigma that had landed in front of them.

“It’s a coracle,” she said. “With a motor on it. Now where do you think that came from?”

The Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks stroked his beard in a way that Urbi had seen him do many times before, often before he performed some unbelievably inventive plan.

“Urbi, my love, I have just come up with an unbelievably inventive plan!”

After a quick explanation, they began dragging the coracle back across the island. The forest was desolate and empty once again. The only thing left behind was a small unnoticed black box, calling out through the fog.

“Help ... me ... help ... me ... help ... me ...”

Chapter 12

There was a loud crack and flash as the genie appeared amid the mists. Towed behind came the flying carpet on which Anum sprawled in quivering terror.

“... Such space ...” he muttered, “The infinite desert ... those wild sounds ... those colossal *things* ...”

“Yeah, humans aren’t supposed to travel through the same folds in reality as us genies, but I had to break the rules a little and make a wish of my own. That was a goblin, and that means trouble. Goblins come with *other* things, things you don’t want as enemies, things you don’t even want as friends. So why don’t we just leave these islands, have a nice relaxing holiday, catch some surf, bathe in the sun, and you’ll be back to your old tricks in no time, yes?”

“... Must ... stop ... that ... *pirate!*”

The genie sighed. “Right, of course you must, and that plan has worked so well for us these past few years. Forget about the pirate! Let’s just go grab Urbi, fly back to Hotepia, and we can all live happily ever after. Well, all of us except Urbi, obviously, and I must admit I’m not experiencing the greatest job satisfaction myself ...”

“Must ... quietly ... bide ... my time!”

“I’ve worked for countless evil masters through the centuries and they always want to bide their time,” shouted the genie. “Frankly I’m sick of it! I want action, and I want it now!”

Anum tried to stand, but his legs collapsed beneath him.

“Well, okay, maybe not *right* now,” the genie conceded. “Don’t

worry, we have plenty of time really, it's not like these islands are going anywhere."

On the far side of Monster Head Island, the *Mysterious Black Boat* was not going anywhere either. Commander Ajax, captaining the voyage, stood watching a hole in the hull from behind her Mysterious Black Gas Mask. Water was flooding in fast, already reaching the knee plates of her Mysterious Black Armour.

"How exactly has this happened?" she asked her second in command, whose armour was just as black but slightly less mysterious due to having fewer pistons and bubbling pipes.

"We don't know. Engineering reports that the Mysterious Black Mystery Generator is fully operational, so we should pass through the rocks without noticing them at all. Nobody even felt any signs of impact. The entire situation is as mysterious as this boat itself. You could say that fairies did it and your guess would be as good as any other. I'm not sure what that smell is either, or how it is getting through our Mysterious Black Gas Masks."

"It's the smell of ginger and elderberry," sniffed the Commander. "But I don't think that is important. The *Mysterious Black Boat* is no longer needed. We will take the equipment onto the central island using the Mysterious Black Hover-Scooters and continue the mission from there. Dispatch both task forces immediately. I want the Really Big Fans set up within the next fifteen minutes, and the Industrial Trepanning Drills ready to run as soon as the mist has been dissipated."

The second in command ripped off a smart salute and waded off through the ship. Squadrons of soldiers in Mysterious Black Uniforms flew out across the water on advanced flying platforms.

One group carried with them all sorts of unusual equipment and headed around the island to find somewhere to land. Another group sped straight towards Hank's cave, weaving their way through the twisting tunnels until they reached the monster's cavern. As their hover-scooters slowed to a halt, a dripping, articulated stalk curled its way down from the bulging mass above and waved its end in front of their mysteriously masked noses. A virulent voice filled the expanse, saying, "Go on, pull my finger."

The Mysterious Black-Clad Soldiers pulled Mysterious Black Weapons from their Mysterious Black Holsters, and fired at the Fog-Farting Monster with laser beams of every colour.

Lord Ramsheart paced back and forth on the surface of the sea, worrying to himself as his goblin friend swam past.

"Ello," said Jeff, giving a little wave which made him sink momentarily beneath the surf.

"Jeff? I thought I told you to look after that child."

"Yeah, well ... there were these *fish*, you see ..."

"Oh, never mind," said the goat-man. "New developments have brought fresh concerns. I could not stop them reaching Hank without revealing myself to that which sent them. I still have some tricks up my well-pressed sleeve, but if the leviathan awakes I will need you to deal with it. Should you be willing, of course."

"Yesss! Jeff bash!" flailed the goblin, sinking once more amid a flurry of spray.

"We must not let it feed, Jeff. Once that thing regains its strength it will be unstoppable. If all else fails; just scare it off the planet; it can feast on the enemy's worlds."

Jeff nodded, then launched himself back through the fog. As Lord Ramsheart watched him leave, his nose wrinkled at the unbearable odour of dead seaweed.

“Don’t even think about it,” he growled, and the audience of fish-things behind him floundered back into the depths.

Chapter 13

The pirates had returned to the *Blackthorn*, and from the inside of the sack it sounded as though quite a party was about to begin. Armitage was thrown to the floor amid the raucous revelry, but the sound of a wooden leg ramming against the deck soon put an end to this happy mood.

“Quit those pitiful cheers, you mangy curs! What have you got to celebrate? The fact that it took the three strongest pirates among you to capture a small boy? Fools! The hardest part of this plan is yet to come. Chuck this child into the deepest, darkest hold of the ship. We’ll offer a trade, the boy for the Legendary Moonstone Eagle. Then, once the eagle is ours, we’ll set ourselves a place in history as the first people ever to have killed the Sly and Slippery Henry Shanks!”

Some of the pirates were about to ask how they could possibly be the second or third people to kill a man, but quickly thought better of voicing such questions and cried “huzzar” with the others instead.

“Then we might as well kill the boy while we’re at it, and that woman who was with them as well. Right then, I fancy a sandwich; someone fetch me a harpoon. There was a dolphin following our boats that will make us a good meal. Give our lowly lives some porpoise.”

The pirates set about their tasks; throwing Armitage into a cage in the deepest, darkest hold of the ship, then readying themselves for battle once more. Captain McArrgh never did get to eat his sandwich, though. The dolphin that had followed the

row-boats back to the ship, and danced about in the ocean during the explanation of the pirate's plan, was long gone by the time a harpoon was found. Now they were bouncing across the waves and back into the mist, finding another pirate awaiting their report.

"Rik-tik-tik," said the dolphin, doing that thing that dolphins sometimes do with their flippers.

"What's that?" said Henry Shanks. "They've chucked Armitage into the deepest, darkest hold of the ship and they're waiting for us to try and save him so that they can spring a trap and capture us and force me to give them the Legendary Moonstone Eagle in return for Armitage's life, a promise they won't keep even if I do give them their prize because the captain wants to kill me out of jealousy for my difficult yet successful career?"

"Tik!"

"Right, thank you! Sorry again for the earlier comments. I'll see you later, and tell your mum I said hello!"

"I do love the language of the dolphins, it's so poetic," said Urbi as she tied one end of the supply box rope to the coracle.

"Right, I'm ready," said Henry, taking hold of the other end of the rope. "Are you ready, Millie?"

"Rock and roll," replied the fock beneath his feet.

"Then off we go," said Urbi, and off indeed they went.

The pirates crowded on the deck, staring into the murky shroud that covered the Isles of Shayde.

"Is it just me," asked Buccaneer Bess, "or does there seem to be a lot less mist than there was before?"

“You know,” said Noisy Nelly, “you might just be right. Can you also hear the sound of really big fans?”

“I can indeed. Drills too. Drills and fans, how very mysterious.”

“Never mind drills and fans,” said Captain McArrgh. “Look at *that!*”

He was pointing at the coracle that had just burst through the fog. A determined woman sat at its motor, hurtling her boat towards the *Blackthorn*. Behind this curious craft was pulled a taut rope, and at the other end of that rope hung the pirates’ sly and slippery nemesis; surfing over the sea on the back of a floating millstone. The woman gave her coracle a sudden twist, skimming the stone over a curling tongue of rock and sending it flying into the air.

“You have to admit, that is pretty impressive,” said many of the pirates as Millie and Henry flew towards them.

“Don’t just stand there gawping! Shoot him!” screamed Captain McArrgh, and they all emptied their pistols at the incoming pair. The bullets bounced harmlessly off Millie’s rock hard body, and it was then the pirates realised that same rock hard body was hurtling towards them. Everyone scrambled to get out of the way, save for Yarr, Arr, and Grr, who growled their defiance at the oncoming missile. Millie hit the deck, tearing through it in an explosion of splinters and shrapnel, throwing Yarr, Arr, and Grr over the bulwark and into the ocean. Henry leapt to one side as the fock struck, rolling across the deck and rising among a web of swords.

“Good afternoon,” he said. “It’s a pleasure to meet you all. Now I believe you have my nephew Armitage somewhere about this ship. If you don’t mind, I’ll just take him back, and then I’ll be on my way!”

Everyone’s attention was fixed on Henry, so nobody noticed

Urbi climbing up the far side of the *Blackthorn*. She slipped across the deck and disappeared down a hatch, heading for the deepest, darkest hold of the ship.

In his cage, Armitage had managed to work himself free of his bonds. He pulled the sack off his head just in time to see a large rock smash through the ceiling and down through the *Blackthorn's* bottom.

"Uncle Henry!" cried Armitage. "It must be Uncle Henry! Hair, we're saved!"

"Yes, it must be indeed be Uncle Henry," said the Hair. "No one else would come up with the unbelievably inventive plan of drowning the hostages in order to save them."

Armitage frowned at the water that was rushing through the hole and in between the bars of the cage.

"I hope they hurry up."

"Give us the Legendary Moonstone Eagle, you landlubber, and then we'll give you back the boy!" cried Captain McArrgh from atop the poop deck.

"Sorry everyone," said Henry. "I don't carry it around with me everywhere I go, you know."

"A likely story!"

"I'm glad you think so."

"I don't! Get 'im shipmates. Rough 'im up a bit, but don't kill 'im. I want *my* blade to be the one that cuts his last breath!"

"Shall we all rush him at once?" asked one of the pirates.

“Of course not! Let’s at least be sporting, attack him one at a time!”

Noisy Nelly lunged at Henry, who stepped to one side and did something confusing yet skilful with his opponent’s arm. Now Henry Shanks was holding Noisy Nelly’s sword. The perplexed piano player stared for a moment at her empty hand, then Henry kicked her back through the circle of pirates quietly waiting their turn.

“Alright then,” sighed Captain McArrgh. “*Two* at a time.”

“Armitage!” called Urbi, wading in water up to her waist. “Where are you?”

“Auntie Urbi! Help!” Armitage spluttered. “I’m over here!”

Urbi swam past crates and barrels, finding Armitage locked in the cage. A quick search revealed the keys were inconveniently absent.

“Hang on, Armitage,” she said, searching for a way to smash through the lock. “I’ll get you out of there. Just keep your head above the water and try not to drown!”

“Well at least we’ve had plenty of practice at that today,” said the Hair.

Back on the deck, Henry had seen off a flurry of attacks from a variety of fighters.

“You can handle swords, Shanks,” said Buccaneer Bess, “but can you handle *bees*?”

At her words, bees of every size emerged from Bess’s beard.

They swarmed towards Henry, flying into his clothes and up his nose and everywhere else as well.

“Oh no! Bees!” Henry cried. Then Murderin’ Mavis released her Performing Poodles, and they threw themselves at Henry’s face.

“Poodles too!” Henry despaired. “What am I to do?”

Armitage paddled frantically, pressing the side of his face against the roof of the cage as the water rose around him.

“Ah ha!” said Urbi, searching through the hold. “A sledgehammer. This should do the job.”

Henry Shanks had managed to cover all the pirates in sausage meat and jam.

“How did you *do* that?” screamed Captain McArrgh, as the poodles and bees combined to spread chaos and disarray across the ship.

“I guess I’m just that sly and slippery,” Henry grinned.

“Beaten by one man!” the captain ranted. “An entire crew of the dirtiest sea-scum known to humanity, and they couldn’t best him! Can nobody rid me of this meddlesome Shanks?”

“Yarr!” came a fierce response, followed by cries of “Arr!” and “Grr!” as these three terrible titans climbed back on board. They cracked their knuckles and flexed their muscles, and advanced upon the legendary pirate.

“Ah,” said Henry. “Pants!”

Chapter 14

The clash of colliding steel rang through the deepest, darkest hold of the ship. Urbi rose the hammer again and sent it swinging at the cage. The lock failed before her blow. Shattered lumps of metal went sinking through the flood.

Urbi cast aside the hammer and dragged Armitage from his prison. Lifting the spluttering child out of the water, she turned back to the stairs up to dryer decks. A torrent of pirates tumbled against her path, screaming of their search for sweet release from eternal buzzing pain. Urbi showed them little concern, pushing them aside as she lifted Armitage to safety.

The pair emerged from the highest hatch into the cool evening air. On the far side of the ship, Yarr, Arr, and Grr had stolen Henry's hat, and were throwing it between them just beyond his reach. Beside them stood a purple-bearded pirate, cackling at Henry's predicament. To make matters worse there were bees and poodles everywhere, stinging people and biting people and generally being really annoying.

"Right then, one thing at a time," said Urbi. She carried Armitage across the deck and jumped down into the coracle.

"I'm just going to collect your uncle," she said, wrapping a blanket around the shocked and shaking child. "You stay there, we'll be right back."

Urbi climbed back onto the ship and marched toward the fight. A square shadow fell across her path and she turned in time to see Anum Hotep descending on his carpet, surrounded by the luminous cloud of his genie and a flurry of orbiting ravens.

“Anum Hotep!” said Urbi. “I should have known!”

“Yes,” said Anum, “and this time, it shall be your last!”

“That doesn’t make sense,” said Urbi.

“I kept telling him that,” said the genie. “Months of practice and it was still the best line he could think of.”

Anum snarled and lunged at his niece. Urbi responded by throwing a punch into his face which sent Anum reeling across the carpet. Down on the coracle, Armitage tried to muster the courage to come to the aid of his family. He rose to his feet, but a bombardment of angry, biting ravens stopped him from getting any further.

“Well isn’t this a perfect end to a lovely day,” said the Hair as birds clawed at their roots. “We’re getting pecked at by angry, biting ravens, Urbi is fighting a sinister man with an all-powerful genie, and Henry is getting taunted by three colossal pirates on a rapidly sinking ship. How could things get any worse?”

A deep, yawning cry rang out from the Isles of Shayde. The ravens stopped bothering Armitage and spiralled away amid shrieks of fear. The bees and poodles abandoned ship, and all the pirates turned to stare across the sea.

“Where did the mist go?” one of them called; for all the fog had disappeared as though blown away by really big fans.

Violent waves surged out from the islands, which were trembling and wobbling and cracking and crumbling. Sheets of stone tumbled into the ocean, revealing shrivelled skin that writhed and wriggled within. Tentacles broke free from the curling rocks, tongues unfurled out of stretching mouths, and a thousand shifting eyes fixed upon the *Blackthorn*. Then the whole morass began to lumber forward, smacking its many lips together as if they hungered for a breakfast snack.

“Ah,” said the Hair, “I’m guessing that’s the beast that Hank

was meant to guard and imprison until the end of time.”

“I hope so,” said Armitage. “Because if it isn’t, there’s still something *else* out there!”

“My dearest brother and sister,” said Yarr, surveying the scene, “I think it is time to stop being pirates.”

“Indeed,” said Arr. “We do not get paid enough for this.”

“Let us go and become fire-fighters,” said Grr, and so the three of them ran off to follow this new and exciting dream.

“What? What about Henry Shanks?” Captain McArrgh screamed after them.

“He’s got more important things to deal with,” said Henry, picking up his hat and snatching the captain’s pistol from its holster. He sprang towards a pile of barrels and boxes, neatly escaping the grasp of probing tentacles wrapping their way around the ship. Masts snapped beneath sinuous muscles as Henry chucked a powder keg over his shoulder then hurried to find his beloved.

“Hey wow, it’s Anum,” said Henry, as Urbi gripped her uncle in a headlock. “I’m off with this powder to go blow up that monster, do you need anything before I leave?”

“No, no, I’m just catching up with some family business.”

“Right you are,” called Henry as he ran to the side of the ship. “Hey, Millie, you still there?”

“I’m here, dear, don’t you worry about that,” said the fock as she swam past the coracle.

“Take us towards the heart of the beast!” said Henry, leaping down onto the stone.

“We’ll never get close enough, dear. Its tentacles will pluck us

out of the sea in no time.”

“Uncle, use this!” said Armitage behind them, tearing the motor from the coracle as it jostled about on the violent waves.

“There’s no way to attach it,” said Henry.

“I’ll just hold on to it,” said Millie.

“You don’t have hands!”

“Well that’ll only make it easier.”

“Yeah, that makes sense,” said Henry, and together they set off to defeat the mystery that lay at the heart of the Isles of Shayde.

The ship was collapsing around Urbi as she dropped Anum onto the carpet. She left him to revel in his well-deserved pain and turned to rejoin Armitage.

“Genie,” Anum spluttered, through a broken jaw and bleeding nose. “Do something!”

“Right you are!”

“I meant do something *useful!*”

“What?” said the genie, now engrossed in the making of incredibly elaborate balloon animals. “Oh, yeah, sorry.”

The demon flowed around Urbi, freezing damp air into a cage of ice. Urbi lashed out at her assailant, but her mortal form could not prevail against the atavistic powers of aeons long past. When Anum managed to pick himself up, he found himself facing a furious captive defiantly trapped in a frost forged cube.

“And why is it you have never thought to do that before?” he asked, trying to avoid reading the words on Urbi’s threatening lips.

The genie shrugged, which was an interesting thing to see in a

creature without shoulders.

“You never asked.”

Another lunge of the ship reminded Anum of his dangerous environment.

“Genie, load my niece onto the carpet. Without her that insufferable Shanks will not find life worth living, it is a fate worse than death. Let us return home and enjoy the spoils of victory.”

“What about the child and the monster?”

“What about them? Children are insufferable animals, and there shall be no place for them in my new and glorious empire of Hotepia. As for the monster, let Shanks deal with it. It is the sort of thing he does.”

“I hope so,” said the genie, “because if he doesn’t, that thing will eat the entire planet. I told you there was something wrong about those islands. I wish you all the luck in the world, Henry Shanks. You’re going to need it.”

The carpet rose elegantly into the heavens, as behind it the *Blackthorn* began to explode for no particular reason.

“A supernatural force of nature from before the dawn of time is kidnapping Auntie Urbi!” Armitage gasped. “Mummy Shanks ... never taught me how to deal with that, actually.”

“We could really do with your uncle’s legendary skills of princess saving here,” replied the Hair. “Where do you think he’s got to?”

Armitage pulled out his pocket telescope and scanned the expanse of appendages that dragged the monster through the sea.

“He’s right where he said he’d be, charging at the heart of the beast.”

Millie weaved beneath arches of flesh and around great ridges of chitin. Wind bounced through cavernous nostrils, piping the notes of unsettling tunes. The ocean turned to steam, boiled by the monster’s touch, and still more islands were splitting open, releasing enormous claws and large lumpish limbs. The millstone sped past Jeff, who stood on what looked like a giant black toenail, flailing his axe against a barrage of tentacles. A spray of luminous blood was churning through the air; but for every tendril severed, two more would take its place.

“Looks like it’s up to us!” shouted Henry to the fock, shifting the weight of the keg on his shoulder. A pile of the monster’s eyes followed the pair as they passed. Webbed claws casually reached out to swat this new annoyance, but they were too slow for Millie as she ploughed a furrow through the waves.

Legions of fish-things scuttled across the creature’s hide, crawling from its ears and clinging to its spines. Henry checked that the pistol was safe and dry in his coat, then pulled out his stolen sword as the fish-things leapt towards them. He slashed at their scales and stabbed at their talons and severed grey wobbly tubes that spewed brown slime everywhere. Millie skidded and span in the surf, throwing the frog-folk into the sea, speeding away before they could recover.

The jungle of appendages gave way to the bulk of the beast. Spikes and teeth and eyes and jaws were thrown together in a sprawling heap. Henry began to have his doubts as he cocked his pistol and pressed it into the top of the barrel.

“Perhaps I should have brought more gunpowder,” he said.

A ponderous tentacle rose from the depths, flicking the millstone into the air. A bundle of tongues plucked Millie and Henry out of the sky, dragging them into the nearest mouth and swallowing them both without bothering to chew.

“It ... it ate him!” whispered Armitage, lowering the telescope. “It ate Uncle Henry!”

The monster’s throat exploded. Armitage saw the eruption of innards even without the heirloom, and he ducked as a shower of gore rained down around his boat. The leviathan started screaming, thrashing about with all it could thrash. It plunged into the depths and a mountainous ring of water flowed out across the sea. Armitage rode the coracle to the crest of the swell in time to watch the monster launch itself from the ocean. It wormed through the clouds and out to the safety of space, leaving a hole behind it that the sea soon sought to fill.

Armitage clutched to the sides of his craft as it plummeted into the void. The ginger and elderberry magic saved him from the tsunami as the remains of the *Blackthorn* were blended to kindling. In the unseen distance, Mysterious Black-Clad Soldiers emerged from the whirling vortex on their Mysterious Black Hover-Scooters. They took off towards the mainland and disappeared around the coast, though how successful their mission had been few could really say.

Epilogue

The waters were once again as peaceful as they had been that morning, when the crew of the *Ironclad* had first set out for adventure. The surviving pirates were binding together a raft from the wreckage of the *Blackthorn*. Urbi Hotep was being spirited across the ocean to find adventures of her own. Armitage and the Hair were adrift in the coracle; without motor, or oar, or any other way of steering themselves back home.

“Well, it’s been a long day, so I’m off to bed,” said the Hair. “Wake me up if we’re still alive tomorrow.”

At that, the Hair began to snore in a very loud and annoying way.

Armitage soon fell asleep himself, curling up in the coracle beneath the darkening sky. Not even the deep, throbbing sound of a helicopter was enough to disturb him, nor the dazzling glare of searchlights sweeping through the night. The prowling beams fixed upon the coracle, and Ms Klaket descended with harness and cable. She scooped up Armitage and lifted him into the air, carrying him back to the helicopter without waking him even once.

“Do you think his other auntie and uncle will provide a better home?” the pilot shouted over the racket of the rotors.

“The ones with the carnivorous plant shop?” Ms Klaket called back. “We can but hope. After all, there isn’t anyone else left!”

The helicopter carried Armitage back to dry land amid dreams of maggots and monsters and mead. He had a lot for his sleeping mind to process, having now seen the Shanks Family Curse strike

twice in as many weeks. Yet there was still more of the family left to be eaten, still lots of things willing to do the eating, and still plenty of amazing adventures to come for Armitage and his Living Hair.