

## **THEY ARE NOT ALONE**

Following the explosive events at the Portsmouth Museum of Historical Artifacts, the Beans find themselves with much to do. With mad scientists running amok and monsters on the loose, things have gotten slightly out of control.

Hoping for answers, they embark on a journey of scientific inquiry and exploration, beginning their search at nearby Smuttynose Island. As so oftentimes happens for the Beans, however, things don't exactly follow the intended plan.

Soon enough, they become stranded on the island, confronted by a series of obstacles that challenge them on every level... and it doesn't take long for them to realize Smuttynose might not be as deserted as they once believed.

A mysterious figure moves among the shadows, attempting to foil their every move. An even more disturbing suspicion is that some thing might be on the island, as well... a thing that just might be beyond the Beans, despite their growing experience in the realms of weirdness.

**THE GREEN BEANS**  
**VOLUME FOUR**  
**SHIPWRECKED ON SMUTTYNOSE ISLAND**

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## Chapter One Into the Teeth

“Hang on, boys!” Lefty O’Houlihan hollered, raising his voice to be heard above the roar of thunder, the pouring of rain, and the crashing of waves. “We must hang on!”

His words were directed at Jack and Neil, a pair of ten-year-olds who currently had their eyes forced wide by what seemed to be impending doom – a staggering storm of epic proportions. They were riding aboard a smallish boat, the modest size of which further contributed to their significant unease. It was a vessel that seemed ill suited for the task of safely navigating a storm of such formidable power.

The wind whipped across their faces with astonishing speeds, soaking them with sea spray and pounding rains. They watched as the waves that surrounded them moved like liquid monsters, rearing back before striking. These massive waves surged and smashed down upon the hull of the boat, making it lurch this way and that with each impact.

The storm was almost as if a living thing, imbued with an angry, rambunctious personality, snarling and sneering at those who dared to infringe upon its territory. It raged and roared, thrashing the vessel upon which Lefty, Neil, and Jack rode, hanging on for their very lives.

Each of the boat’s passengers felt strange, superstitious thoughts creeping into their heads... thoughts that the storm was indeed a living thing, and that it was determined to capsize them. But that was impossible... wasn’t it?

How could a storm take up a vendetta against anybody? A storm couldn’t have feelings. It was nothing more than a force of nature... wasn’t it?

The taste of salt was plastered upon their lips, and the smell of it was burned into their noses. They were thoroughly soaked by the swelling waves, which rose above the hull and smashed into their bodies, relentlessly assaulting them.

Their hands were clenched upon the rails of the boat, but even with their efforts focused on the task, it was all they could do to hang on. There was not a moment’s relief to be had, not a second to catch their breath - as soon as one wave collided with the boat, another would strike from a different direction, keeping them in a perpetual state of disorientation. It was like being aboard a toy in a tub, subjected to the wrath of an angry toddler at bath time.

“I certainly can’t say I was expecting this to happen!” Neil shouted, as his body was whipped about in the chaos. Despite his unease, he couldn’t help but whoop with delight each time the boat was rocked by the elements. “But it is kind of fun, don’t you think? The rides never get this exciting at an amusement park!”

Jack could not quite bring himself to respond. He wasn’t handling the wrath of the storm as easily as his friend (who was demonstrating a remarkable seaworthiness), and his efforts were focused on keeping his breakfast where it belonged - inside his stomach. His face had turned a rather suspicious shade of green, and his eyes were bulging from his head.

Grasping anything he could find within reach, he watched the storm increase its fury, raining down punishment upon their boat. The effect upon him was unsettling, to say the least.

“Not your cup of tea, eh?” Neil asked with a boisterous chuckle. He risked removing one hand from a railing, so he could slap his friend on the shoulder in a gesture of encouragement. “Can’t say as I blame you, buddy. But you must admit... by the beard of Archimedes - as Lefty would say - this is pretty exhilarating, don’t you think?”

Jack looked at his friend with a mixture of awe and bafflement, as if he were incapable of comprehending Neil’s enthusiasm for the matter at hand, and unable to understand the goofy grin that was plastered on his face. He opened his mouth, quite possibly to point out that this venture was looking more and more as if it would end in disaster.

After only a moment’s effort, however, Jack realized speech was impossible for him under the current circumstances. He wisely elected to refocus his energies on holding tight to the railing that was beneath his fingers, as well as the aforementioned breakfast, which had recently taken up inclinations which could only be described as rebellious.

Complicating this daunting task was the fact that Jack could only use a single hand to grip the side of the boat. His other hand was occupied with the responsibility of hanging onto his dog, Nibbler.

The furry Labradoodle was thoroughly soaked, and he had been slipping and sliding about the wet surface of the boat’s deck, until Jack began holding onto him, grabbing him by the collar. He wore a yellow rain jacket that had been fashioned for dogs, and a life vest was snapped into place over it.

Despite the horrendous weather, Nibbler seemed to be enjoying himself as much as Neil was, and his tail wagged about in clockwork fashion, as he took in all that was unfolding before his doggy eyes.

It was quite the spectacle to behold, for humankind and canine ambassadors alike. All those present were enraptured by the meteorological sight that lay before them, regardless of whether they were possessed of hands or paws, nose or snout, skin or luxurious, curly coat of Labradoodle fur.

It was just that kind of event - when an epic storm erupted from previously calm skies in a matter of moments, it really got your attention, no matter your species.

Neil, Jack, and Nibbler were toward the front of the boat, where the waves broke against the bow, drenching them with each impact. Theirs was a position of unquestionable soggianness, given their proximity to the forward position of their ill-placed vessel.

The boat was not a sizable one, so there were few places they could retreat to, even if they had somehow been able to miraculously summon a measure of balance amid the raging tempest. It was a modest craft that had seemed more than adequate for the task at hand, when they had departed the shores of New Hampshire only a half hour earlier. However, it was clearly not up to snuff, now that this momentous storm had arisen from nowhere, focusing its wrath upon the strange band of seafarers.

Near the stern, Lefty stood behind the boat’s console, centered on the steering wheel. He clenched it so tightly that his knuckles had turned white, and he fought against the resistance with all his might. The wheel had become like an angry animal within his

hands, fighting against him. It tried to wriggle from his grasp, but he held fast, straining for control, his teeth clenched together with effort.

In the face of the powerful storm, it was all he could do to keep the boat on any kind of reasonable course. He struggled valiantly, and with every ounce of his being, but it seemed to be a battle he was losing.

Lefty gasped with the exertion of his labors, fighting against the wheel as best he could. His glasses were splattered with water, obscuring his vision to a great extent, and his signature lab coat - a white, multi-pocketed thing - billowed out behind him in the face of the strong winds and sideways rains. Like the boys, he wore a bright red life jacket and a yellow rain slicker, which had been secured to his torso over his lab coat.

Upon his shoulder, there rode a curious companion - it was Murphy, the King of the Squirrel Folk. The small rodent dug his paws into the fabric of Lefty's coat, hanging on for dear life, swaying amid the wind and water. A tiny, yellow raincoat protected him, as well as a pair of aviator goggles, but he had still gotten plenty wet. Around his midsection, some bubble wrap had been taped, serving as an improvised life jacket.

Murphy chirped and squeaked in his squirrely language as he beheld the wrath of the storm, salty drops of seawater clinging to his whiskers. He seemed to be encouraging Lefty, willing him toward a successful navigation of the treacherous elements.

This, of course, was opposed to the intelligent odds, which were so heavily stacked against a favorable outcome. But Murphy was an optimist, and encourage he did, rooting his companion on, squeaking into his ear.

No matter the encouragement he might receive, however, there was nothing Lefty could do to escape the unparalleled ferocity of the storm. The dark clouds, high winds, and raging rains had arisen so suddenly, and grown to such a tremendous circumference so quickly, it had completely enveloped the boat.

There was no question about it - they were headed straight into the very teeth of the storm, and it went without saying that nothing pleasant could result from that particular foray.

The most troubling aspect to this weather event played upon the minds of the boat's imperiled passengers and captain. The storm seemed to have come from nowhere, granting the impression that there were otherworldly forces behind its power and origin.

This was far from a comforting notion, given their current, dubious circumstances, and it further enhanced the notion that the storm was not simply a force of nature, but a living thing that was... well, that was out to get them.

But how could a storm... how could the weather itself... exhibit the traits of a personality? The answer was simple - it couldn't.

Could it?

## **Chapter Two**

### **Seeking Safe Passage**

Only a few minutes ago, the occupants of the boat had been wearing T-shirts, happy to absorb the rays of sunshine and the pleasant winds. It had been a fine spring day off the coast of southeastern New Hampshire, and their mood had been upbeat and jubilant as they anticipated the adventure that lay ahead of them.

But as they had neared their destination, a place called Smuttynose Island, everyone aboard the boat had recognized a distinct transformation in the way the air felt upon their skin and within their lungs. Temperatures had plummeted, as had the barometric pressure, signaling the onset of precipitation. The pleasant winds decreased and finally stilled, ushering in the calm before the storm.

Most unsettling of all, dark clouds had materialized, blotting out the sun and swirling about in patterns of charcoal and onyx. The bright of day had been extinguished in a matter of moments, displaced by what seemed an improbable encroachment of night - as if the sun had forgotten what time it was and retired early. Hard weather had been on the move, and they sensed it would be upon them in instants.

Sensing what was to come, Lefty had instructed the others to adorn their life jackets and rain slickers. They had hurriedly done so, the hoods of which had been pulled up for additional protection against the rains and seawater, for what little good it did against the torrential pounding.

The small size of their boat, which was called the Quantum Conundrum, had a great deal to do with the state of unease that Lefty and his strange crew felt. It was nobody's first choice, should they be caught upon the winds and rains of such an unearthly storm - but then again, nobody could have predicted such a weird development. They had never seen or heard of weather of this magnitude developing so quickly.

When the group of explorers had embarked upon their voyage, there had been little concern as to whether or not their boat would be capable enough for the task at hand. Their destination was not far, and the weather forecast had been for nothing but blue skies and sunshine - a forecast that had turned out to be disastrously incorrect.

It was true that the aforementioned pleasant weather had indeed been in abundance until a few moments earlier. But now... now, the skies told a different story.

The heavens had turned shadowy, broiling and roiling with clouds, ranging from grays to blacks that were of the darkest pitch of night. It was a frightening sight, but it was equally mesmerizing, projecting a strange sort of beauty that was instantly appreciated... even as those in its presence were humbled by its ferocity.

In the face of such a display, those upon the boat were made painfully aware of the vast power of nature, and of how insignificant they were by comparison. They were but ants in the face of an angry, impassable giant.

Lightning bolts lurched from the skies, exploding upon the surface of the ocean with flurries of spectacle. The winds were so forceful, they created a visual impression of horizontal movement, sending rain sideways.

Smuttynose Island was the place where Lefty and his crew had pinpointed their goal to exist. They were on a mission, one of exploration and scientific inquiry, where they planned to study a mysterious creature that had recently made a splash in their community. The island was only six miles off the coast of Portsmouth, New Hampshire, and centered among the Isles of Shoals.

Seeing how as reaching the island would only take a half hour or so, Lefty had believed his small boat and its sparse supplies would be more than enough. And he would have been right... if not for the monstrous storm that had erupted from thin air, with only the scarcest of warnings of its formation.

“This makes no sense...” Lefty murmured to himself, as he struggled against the steering wheel. His glasses were spackled with so many drops of water, it was a wonder he could see at all. He continued thinking aloud. “There must be some explanation for this weather event. But it can’t be... surely, those legends can’t be true...”

Murphy squeaked into Lefty’s ear, encouraging him to continue the valiant struggle. The rodent was beginning to look a shade seasick, but he gamely stuck to his guns, retaining a stoic countenance upon his squirrelly features.

Behind them, there stood Noodles, the gangly, solar-powered robot that Lefty had built some time ago. He had a surprisingly good center of gravity, considering his ungainly height and thin limbs. The robot held onto the boat’s console for balance, uttering beeps and boops of alarm from his spherical head as he watched the foul weather envelope them.

Fortunately, his body was built from waterproof titanium, and the seals at his joints protected the sensitive electronics that were housed inside of his noodly body. The manner in which he was weathering the storm was most impressive, considering he was the least likely of all the passengers to be thrust into such a situation.

And so it was that this seafaring vessel, full of such an odd array of occupants, continued forth into the storm, seeking safe passage where it seemed there might be none to be had.

They were a strange fellowship, to be sure. But they had a great deal of faith in one another, and they knew they were in good company, for they had banded together and survived harrowing adventures before.

“Oh, come on, Jack, it’s not that bad!” Neil shouted, raising his voice to be heard above the gale force winds and bursts of thunder.

Jack could not respond, his head and stomach being in such a state of tumultuous turmoil. He did, however, cast his friend a sideways glance, and the expression on his face was clearly an inquisition as to the sanity of his friend. His eyes seemed to ask, have you gone bonkers?

Periodic booms and thooms and cah-chooms roared through the sky, as the thunderbolts seemed to tear the very air apart. The sound was like a volley of cannonballs from a warship, and the sky lit up with jagged forks of lightning.

“Just hang on, and try to enjoy the ride!” Neil shouted, whooping with glee as another surging wave rocked the boat.

Jack could only groan in reply, but he did tighten his grip even further upon the rail of the boat with one hand, and he squeezed the collar of Nibbler with the other until his fingers ached with exertion.

“I’m going to try to steer us toward the coast of Smuttynose! It’s our only chance to land - if we can power our way onto the beach, we should be okay!” Lefty shouted. He was hunkered over the wheel, fighting against the elements with every ounce of strength at his disposal. He peered into the wind and rain, trying his best to see. As his eyes fell upon something that startled him, his jaw dropped in astonishment. “Great Pythagorean Theorem! What is that?”

## **Chapter Three**

### **Here There Be Monsters**

Neil and Jack looked in the direction that Lefty was gazing. In the distance, through the sheets of rain and seawater, the shores of Smuttynose Island appeared, materializing like a shadowy apparition. There were many rocky outcroppings, areas of sand, and windswept dunes. Further inland, the ground became elevated, and the edge of a thick forest could be seen.

None of that was what had captured Lefty's attention, however. The thing that had captivated him was the fantastic beast that had appeared, rising from the ocean like an angered sea serpent.

On one side of the island there was a cove: a sheltered bay that was full of rocky shores and the entrance to a large cavern, the mouth of which loomed like a yawning, toothy mouth. It was within this cove that the creature rose, defying the imagination of all who turned their eyes upon it.

The beast was built from muscle and sinew; an ancient, reptilian creature that was covered in wet, green scales that glittered like liquid emeralds. Ornate antlers rose from behind its pointed ears. It had a mustachioed snout, piercing eyes, and when its jaws opened, rows of pointy teeth were revealed.

Some distance behind the head of the beast, its long tail emerged from the surface of the ocean. It was feathered with gold and green accents, and it swept about as if it were an elaborate flag, flicking the seawater and raindrops through the air like an angry waterspout.

The creature's emerald eyes, startling in their clarity, were clearly directed at the Quantum Conundrum. The boat's occupants withered beneath that terrible gaze, feeling the power within those ancient eyeballs.

As it stared at the boat, its tail flicking from side to side and its mouth yawning open, the creature released a growl. It was a noise of such powerful bass and formidable sound, it traveled to the ears of the seafarers, even over the noise of the thunder and waves. The creature snorted, and dark smoke streamed from its nostrils, curling into the air amid bright orange sparks.

"Just look at the size of it!" Lefty hollered. "It must be the creature we're seeking, that's for sure... It must be Pan Gu!"

"Here there be monsters!" Neil shouted with glee (a phrase he had always hoped to have the chance to belt out, ever since he had read it in a book featuring pirates).

The beast's green eyes flashed each time a bolt of lightning streaked across the sky, and its chest expanded with a rhythm of breath that seemed to mirror the heartbeat of the storm. The passengers remembered what they had been told of Pan Gu - legends said that the monster was nothing short of a force of nature, and it had the ability to alter the weather, bringing destruction in its wake.

Had the creature summoned this storm? As unimaginable as such a thing might have seemed, they were witnessing the rather convincing evidence firsthand. This was a

monster whose very existence transcended what might be considered “possible” or “normal”, and its true capabilities were a mystery.

Pan Gu’s emerald eyes shifted to darker colors, and they began to swirl like the storm itself. As he looked into those mesmerizing orbs, Lefty seemed to become hypnotized or weakened, and he slumped at the wheel.

“Uh-oh. This is no time to be sleeping on the job, Lefty!” Neil shouted, peering over his shoulder as the boat began to wildly spin.

He recalled that his friends, Maria and Sara, had described a similar effect befalling the adults in their presence, when they had encountered the beast. Lefty, it appeared, had been stupefied by forces that were not easily understood.

“Noodles, take the wheel!” Neil hollered, doing his best to resist his increasing dizziness.

“Beep-boop!” the robot answered in the affirmative.

Noodles supported Lefty with one hand, making sure he didn’t fall to the deck in his newfound, oblivious condition. With the other, he reached down and grabbed the steering wheel, wrapping his strong, noodly fingers around it.

The robot was very powerful, and he immediately gained some control over the boat. The Quantum Conundrum slowed its spin, though it was still buffeted and rocked by the waves and wind. Noodles beeped with alarm as his blue eyes observed the inclement conditions, trying to adjust on the fly to the challenges that hurtled at him with alarming rapidity.

Despite his strength and willingness, there was only so much Noodles could do. The small boat had its limitations, and it was not fit for traversing a storm of these epic proportions.

“It’s a rogue wave!” Neil hollered.

He pointed to the starboard side of the boat, where a gigantic wave approached. It was the largest one they had yet seen, and far taller than the boat itself.

“It’s a real monster of a wave, I tell you,” Neil said with admiration and wonder. “We’ve got no choice but to face it head on! If we try to outrun it, that thing will broadside us and capsize the boat for sure!”

Jack had still not found his voice, but he did manage to utter an alarmed gasp in response to Neil’s declaration.

“I know, I know - I’m quite knowledgeable about this stuff,” Neil said to his friend, chuckling and grinning as the seawater pelted them. “Reading all those adventure books has really paid off, don’t you think?”

“Woof!” Nibbler assented, barking up at Neil.

“Noodles, you’ve got to turn directly into the wave! We have to face it head on - it’s our only chance to avoid being capsized!” Neil shouted.

“Beep boop!” Noodles answered agreeably.

With quick motions of noodle-like appendages, he spun the wheel. The Quantum Conundrum slowly turned, even as Noodles pushed the throttle lever all the way forward, utilizing every bit of power that the boat’s engine could generate.

The bow of the sea vessel came to point at the rogue wave, which had swelled to even greater size by this time. The engine roared and strained, and the boat pushed toward its looming, watery adversary. There were blasts of thunder, and the crashing of waves, and rumbling beneath it all - the chilling growl of Pan Gu.

“Woo! I’ve got to tell you guys, this is going to be a close one!” Neil shouted over the cacophony of raucous noise.

“Woof!” Nibbler barked.

“Boop!” Noodles beeped.

“Meep!” Murphy squeaked.

Jack, for the time being, still had nothing to say, but the expression of dismay and alarm on his features was certainly worth one thousand words.

Seeing his friend’s face, Neil chortled. “I really wish I had a camera right now! The look on your face is priceless!”

As he looked forward once more, he saw the rogue wave on top of them. It towered above like a liquid mountain that was ready to avalanche upon them and erase them from the sea. The front of the boat began to rise, as it attempted to best the tremendous obstacle.

With a defiant whoop, Neil raised his voice to be heard over the storm. “Hang on, and hope for-”

But he never got to complete his thought. There was a tremendous impact of immeasurable power. And then, for the occupants of the Quantum Conundrum... there was only blackness.

## Chapter Four

### Shipwrecked, Soaked, and Sandy

Neil swiped a hand across his face in irritation. Something was bugging him; a light that was penetrating his eyelids, trying to rouse him from the contentment of his slumber. His sleep-bogged mind assumed that morning must have arrived, and the sunlight was peaking through the blinds of his bedroom window.

But he wasn't ready to wake up just yet!

"Just a few... more... minutes..." he murmured, as he attempted to roll over in his bed, in order to turn away from the sunlight that was pouring through the window.

However, he could tell that something wasn't right, even in his groggy condition. His bed felt hard, lumpy, and sort of... grainy. And what was that terrible taste in his mouth?

He desperately searched for his blanket, so that he could pull it over his head and get the extra few minutes of sleep that he so desperately needed. After waving his hand around for a moment in a futile effort to find his blanket, pillows, or anything else that might resemble part of his normal bedding, Neil's mind finally awoke.

With a blast of realization, he understood that he wasn't in his bed... he had been in the boat, and the storm had been knocking them around, and then Pan Gu had appeared, seemingly in control of the incredible weather. The rogue wave had approached, towering above them, and then... and then...

Neil sat up with a gasp, his heart racing, his mind swirling as he tried to make sense of what had happened.

Though he was confused and disoriented, he was able to solve one mystery without much trouble. Immediately, he identified the source of the bad taste in his mouth. A large clump of salty seaweed had become entangled in his teeth, and he spat it to the ground with grand aplomb.

It tumbled across the sand like a huge wad of discarded chewing gum, coming to rest near a gathering of small crabs, causing them to scuttle about. They gazed upon the expelled lump of seaweed as if it were a gift from the heavens, clicking their pincers as they circled it in sideways shuffles.

"Blech!" Neil exclaimed, smacking his lips together. "I think I could have done without that particular culinary experience. If only I had a nice slice of pizza handy, to purify my taste buds..." he sighed wistfully, noting how parched his mouth and throat felt. "And water. I'll need fresh water to drink, as soon as possible."

Looking from side to side, he tried to comprehend his surroundings. His eyelashes were clumped together with salt and sand, and his vision had not yet adjusted to the bright weather that suddenly surrounded him, with a hot sun beating down upon him. He was sitting on a beach, soaked to the skin with seawater, and covered in a fine layer of sand.

Above him, the sun was shining as bright as could be, with only a few clouds drifting across an otherwise blue sky. The storm that had raged so violently had

evaporated completely, vanishing as quickly as it had appeared. If Pan Gu had indeed been responsible for summoning the phenomenal weather, it would seem that the beast had dispersed it with equal abruptness.

Had the monster's sole purpose for creating the incredible storm been to wreck the boat? Had its goal been to prevent the Quantum Conundrum from safely landing upon the shores of the island? And if so... why? Why was Pan Gu so vehemently opposed to their arrival?

Despite the ferocity of the storm that had faced them, Lefty's crew had apparently managed to reach Smuttynose Island... but at what cost, Neil wondered? Where were his friends? And for that matter, where was the boat?

Neil looked at the sun above him, which was producing warming rays, already beginning to dry him out. Seagulls circled, gently gliding upon currents and calling to one another in the language of feathered creatures. The ocean was now calm, and the sound of the water breaking against the shore was peaceful and soothing - a strange contrast to the chaos of the storm that had raged not long ago.

"How long have I been out?" Neil wondered aloud. "And where is everybody?"

He stretched his arms and shoulders, continuing to scan the beach. Searching this way and that, he sought to catch sight of his friends, but he didn't see anybody. There was no sign of Lefty, Noodles, Murphy, Jack, or Nibbler. The entire strange group was missing.

"Hello?" Neil called. "Where are you guys?"

As he blinked away the last of the sand that had clumped at his eyelids, his vision finally adjusted to the sudden brightness he had found himself in. Some distance off, he could see the boat, shipwrecked upon a large outcrop of jagged rocks.

Filled with concern, he launched to his feet, wobbling as he attempted to get his bearings and shake away the effects of his recent experience. It seemed that the boat must have been involved in a vicious collision, though Neil couldn't actually remember when they had impacted the island.

He recalled the giant wave that was coming at them, and the amazing sight of Pan Gu slowly rising from the depths of the ocean, its giant, emerald body illuminated by the flashes of lightning.

But he couldn't recall what had happened between that moment and when he had awoken on the beach... the trauma of the event must have wiped those moments from his memory.

Neil ran to the Quantum Conundrum as quickly as he could, hobbling somewhat because he had lost one of his sneakers. When he arrived, he grabbed the edge of the boat and pulled himself aboard.

"Guys?" Neil called, desperately searching the wrecked remains of the vessel. "Hello? Anybody?"

The boat was in terrible condition. A large hole had been inflicted upon the hull, and six inches of water sloshed about the deck. The console was smashed up beyond repair, and the steering wheel dangled loosely.

It was clear that the boat would be of no use for any prospective return voyage. But Neil had more pressing matters. If this was all that remained of the boat... then where were his friends?

After thoroughly searching the boat - which didn't take long, due to its small size - Neil clambered out. Unclipping the life jacket from his torso, he let it fall to the sand. He gently poked and prodded at his body, performing a rudimentary inspection for injury.

"I'm no expert, but everything seems to be in order, as far as I can tell," he concluded.

Though he rarely gave the resiliency of his youth much thought, this was one occasion on which he found himself grateful for what his father had oftentimes described as "an ability to bounce off of the ground like a rubber ball, without any ill effect whatsoever."

Neil removed his T-shirt and wrung it between his hands, squeezing the excess water from it so that it would dry a little quicker. He repeated this process with his pants and socks, and then brushed the sand from his shoulders, arms, legs, and chest.

Wiggling around, he removed as much sand as he could manage, and then put his clothes back on. They were already beginning to dry out, thanks to the hot sun and the light breeze.

"Now... where to begin searching..." Neil pondered aloud. He scanned the beach, trying to determine his best course of action. Though he was aware that he was talking to himself quite a bit, he realized that he was somewhat unnerved by the absence of all his friends, and he found that the sound of his own voice brought him some comfort on the lonely island. "Ah! My missing sneaker!"

The shoe was sitting amid a pile of seaweed and driftwood. Neil quickly hobbled over, retrieved it, and put it on. However, this was a process he came to wish that he had approached with a little more care.

"Gobstoppers!" he exclaimed.

Neil tore the shoe from his foot and threw it to the ground. Something was in there, and it had bitten him! Neil cautiously picked the sneaker up, turned it upside down, and gave it a good shaking. A bluish crab fell to the sand, along with a decent quantity of seawater. The creature snapped its pincers indignantly at Neil before scuttling away, heading for the ocean.

"Well, good day to you, as well, my crustacean friend," Neil said. "This place is overrun with crabs! Everywhere I turn, there are crabs sashaying around," he murmured to himself, glancing about, as if suspicious that there might be others lurking nearby, waiting to ensnare him in their pincers. "Okay, now that I've got that squared away..."

He put his sneaker on, turned on his heel, and was preparing to begin walking along the coast until he found his friends. But before he could get started, he heard the most welcoming of sounds - a noise that filled his heart with joy and relief.

"Woof!"

Neil turned toward the bark. "Nibbler! Nibbler, where are you, boy?"

Bounding over the mass of boulders that the boat had crashed upon, Nibbler appeared. His fur was wet and covered with sand, but he appeared to be completely unharmed. He ran full speed for Neil, tongue lolling, the lips of his doggy mouth pulled back into the smile that was perpetually plastered upon his furry face.

Above all things, Nibbler was a happy dog - enchanted with life, loyal to his friends, and always ready for adventure, no matter the scenario.

Neil dropped to one knee as the Labradoodle reached him, embracing the dog in a heartfelt hug. Nibbler bounded forward, colliding with Neil so hard that the two of them were knocked to the sand and seaweed in a tangled mass of limb and paw, boy and dog.

Laughing, Neil clambered back to his knees, patting Nibbler's wet fur and scratching him behind the ears. "Hey, boy, you're okay!"

"Woof!" Nibbler replied enthusiastically. The feeling of relief was clearly mutual, for his tail was wagging so fiercely that it made his rump shake from side to side with fantastic force.

"Do you know where the others are?" Neil asked. "Have you seen them?"

Nibbler turned in a quick circle and then sprinted away, barking as he did so. He looked back over his shoulder periodically to utter a woof to Neil.

"I'm right behind you, boy!" Neil assured his furry friend.

He optimistically interpreted Nibbler's behavior as an affirmative response to his inquiry about the whereabouts of their friends. He was quick to give chase, running as fast as he could, his wet sneakers kicking up great clods of sand as he went.

## Chapter Five

### A Rude Awakening

Sprinting behind Nibbler as quickly as he could manage, Neil arrived at the large outcrop of bedrock and boulders that the boat had been smashed upon. Woofing as he went, Nibbler began scrambling up the rocky surface, while the claws of his paws clicked and scraped, searching for purchase.

Using his hands for assistance, Neil hunkered down low in order to climb like a monkey - something with which he had a great deal of experience, due to his many years of tree climbing, adventuring, and exploration. As he reached the apex of the outcrop, he could see what lay beyond, the place where Nibbler was eagerly leading him.

There, Jack lay upon the beach; a limp form amid a pile of beached driftwood.

He was a bedraggled sight if ever there was one - smeared with sand and mud, covered in seaweed, and generally speaking, filthy to the utmost. As far as cleanliness went, there was not a whole lot of difference between him and the scattered pieces of driftwood among which he lay.

Nibbler descended the rocks and trotted over to Jack, looking down at the boy, his furry brow creasing with concern. He woofed once, and then began applying his slobbery tongue to Jack's face, administering rejuvenating kisses that he hoped might awaken him.

"Jack!" Neil exclaimed. But to his surprise, the name was released from his throat as a dusty whisper, and he felt his heart racing in alarm.

As Neil ran over to his friend, he could see that Jack was not alone. Murphy was there as well, standing beside the boy's head. The flying squirrel was administering gentle slaps to Jack's cheek with his little palm, attempting to revive him. He uttered squeaky noises of squirrely encouragement, urging him to awaken.

"Chimmy-wonk-stonk!" Murphy declared in rodent gibberish, rearing back to slap the comatose Jack. As his palm met cheek, he added, "Jerboa-toonock-wock!"

Thus far, his squirrely slapping applications had yielded no results... but it was not for lack of effort. In fact, Neil couldn't help but be infected with the suspicion that Murphy was enjoying himself a bit too much - but then again, he was the King of the Squirrel Folk. And as far as anybody had been able to ascertain, the primary currency of the Squirrel Folk was mischief.

Neil raced forward, stumbling on the sand in his haste. When he reached his friend, he knelt beside him and placed his hands on his chest. Jack was a dirty and disheveled sight indeed (as Neil imagined he must look himself), having just been the victim of a shipwreck.

But he was breathing! Neil could feel and see his friend's chest slowly rising and falling beneath the red life jacket, and he sighed with relief.

With one hand, he gently brushed aside some medium-sized crabs that had been scaling Jack's torso as if it were an interesting, colorful mountain that had spontaneously appeared in their seaside world. At Neil's prompting, they sashayed away in the sideways

manner that was singular to crab folk, leaving the humans behind, clicking their pincers in the air with what could potentially be interpreted as mild indignation.

Neil cast aside the substantial mounds of seaweed that enshrouded Jack. He unbuckled his friend's lifejacket so there would be less restriction on his breathing, and began to gently shake him. With the combined contributions of Nibbler's kisses, Murphy's slaps, and Neil's shaking, Jack was receiving a whole lot of incentive to wake up.

"Uhhh..." he moaned sleepily. "Just a few more minutes..."

"Up and at 'em, Jack!" Neil said with a chuckle. "We've got some exploring to do. You can't be lazing about on the beach all day, soaking up the sunshine - snap to it, boy!"

"Huh...?" Jack blinked his eyes slowly, without comprehension of where he was or what was going on.

Murphy wound back and delivered a slap that was surprisingly powerful, given his small size. As his little palm connected with Jack's cheek, he uttered a squirrely squeak that sounded apologetic in nature. It was as if he was conveying: Sorry about that, but it's for your own good!

To compliment this rousing action, Nibbler loosed a terrific bark precisely two inches from Jack's face, a distance that his rudimentary canine calculations had deemed to be most effective for instilling alertness.

"Gah!" Jack exclaimed, his eyes popping wide, spitting a bit of seaweed from his mouth. "Okay, okay, I'm up! Geez, I'm grateful for all the attention, but this is one heck of a rude awakening, I gotta tell you! You guys couldn't just give me a gentle shaking? I mean... come on!"

In answer to his friend's question, Nibbler loosed another rousing bark at the same previously calculated distance of two inches from Jack's face.

"Woo, that's loud!" Jack exclaimed, wiping dog slobber from his face. "Enough already, I'm telling you guys that I'm awake!"

Neil grinned down at him. "Welcome back, buddy. When the storm was closing in, and you were getting so nervous, I told you there was nothing to worry about, right? I bet you feel pretty silly right now, don't you? Seeing how as you were all green in the face and worried about our imminent doom and whatnot? Oh yeah, I could see that thought plastered across your face like a neon sign."

Jack looked at his friend as if he had gone bananas, and was in need of a thorough examination of his noggin.

"It's like I promised," Neil went on. "It was a close one, but we had nothing to worry about, am I right? Mission accomplished: We've arrived at Smuttynose Island!"

## Chapter Six

### A Theory Confirmed

Jack stared at the squirrel, dog, and human who surrounded him for a few moments, trying to grasp his current situation. He slowly blinked, attempting to adjust to the bright sunlight that poured over him. It was clear that he had not yet come to terms with his current situation.

“Uh... I’m not exactly sure what just happened. But based on my current horizontal position and, uh... you know, the complete lack of a boat beneath me... I’m speculating that everything did not go according to plan?”

“That’s right!” Neil answered. His voice bubbled with excitement. “We were shipwrecked, Jack! Shipwrecked! Can you believe it?”

Jack tried to grasp this new information, blearily blinking his eyes and swiping sand from his face. “Uh... shipwrecked? Shipwrecked?” he repeated, as if in disbelief. “Is that a good thing? You seemed pretty jazzed about it.”

“Sure it’s a good thing!” Neil answered with enthusiasm. “What have you, gone off your rocker, buddy?” His face adopted a countenance of concern, and he began poking at Jack’s head with his index finger. “Oh, shoot... maybe you bruised your coconut in the impact. Let me give you the ol’ ‘once over’...”

“Gah!” Jack shouted, brushing Neil’s probing finger aside. “My melon is just fine, thank you very much! All I’m saying... look, all I’m saying is that I’m missing the upside of getting shipwrecked.”

“Are you sure you’re feeling okay?” Neil asked, reluctantly withdrawing his finger, wiggling it around in the air in the event that future endeavors of amateur medicine proved necessary. “I thought I might have been upon a soft spot there...”

“Yes, I’m quite sure, Neil!” Jack said, protectively covering his noggin with both arms. “I’m still adjusting, but in my defense, I did just wake up on the beach in a pile of seaweed. With a squirrel slapping me across the face, I might add!”

Murphy released a squirrely sound that sounded suspiciously like laughter. In a gesture that fooled nobody, he covered his face with his paws, once Jack shot him an accusatory glance.

“Very well,” Neil declared. “But if you act erratically in the future, I reserve my right to take a closer look at that coconut!”

“Duly noted,” Jack answered. “But like I said, I just woke up, and I don’t even remember what happened. I do remember that huge wave approaching us... the rogue, I think you called it. And that amazing sea serpent rose from the waters... its eyes turned stormy, pulsing with the lightning... and... uh, is it safe to assume that our plans have been altered?”

Neil was nothing but smiles as he answered. “I mean, yeah, we did lose the boat... and, uh... our way home, too, I suppose. But think about all those adventure stories and pirate books we’ve read. There are always shipwrecks in those! Do you realize how lucky we are, to get to experience it firsthand?”

Jack thought about this for a moment, then shrugged in agreement. “Yeah, I guess that makes sense, in a weird sort of way. Good point, buddy. Where are Uncle Lefty and Noodles?”

“They’re right over here,” Neil said, pointing down the shoreline from where Jack lay. “I saw them when Nibbler began leading me toward you. I guess our boat really got walloped, because it scattered us all over the beach when it crashed. We’re pretty lucky, don’t you think?”

“Uh, yeah,” Jack admitted. He was finally beginning to reach a state of full alertness, and he was grateful for his current condition, as opposed to how it had looked things were turning just a short time ago. “I think you’re right. We could just as easily be at the bottom of the ocean right now... or in the belly of that serpent.”

Grabbing Jack’s hand, Neil helped his friend to his feet. Jack shrugged out of his unsnapped life vest and let it fall to the beach. He tossed his rain slicker beside it and then gave himself a brief pat down to check for injuries.

“How do you feel?” Neil asked.

“Everything seems to be intact!” Jack reported, which came as no surprise. Like Neil, he benefited from the remarkable resilience of ten-year-olds, and he oftentimes seemed to be absolutely impervious to injury.

“Great! Let’s go check on Lefty.”

Having succeeded in reviving Jack, Murphy and Nibbler had already raced farther down the beach to apply their attentions to the shipwrecked scientist. They were alternately slapping him and delivering slobbery kisses, which they had recently proven to be an effective means of rousing comatose human beings.

The combination of squirrel slaps and Labradoodle kisses caused Lefty’s head to turn from side to side upon the sand. By the time Neil and Jack arrived, he was coming around, groaning as he awoke.

Lefty was reaching down toward his knee with both hands, grimacing as he did so. But as he saw the boys approaching, the pain he was in seemed to vanish, and he smiled from ear to ear.

“By the spectacles of Ben Franklin! You boys are okay!” Lefty placed an affectionate hand on Nibbler’s head. “And I see our beasts have weathered the storm in tiptop shape.”

Jack knelt beside him. “How about you, Uncle Lefty? We saw you clutching at your leg there.”

“I’m afraid I’m not quite as resilient as the rest of you,” Lefty said with a chuckle. “I fear I may have twisted my knee in the impact. Oh, and I’m dreadfully sorry for the poor driving, by the way. I was the captain of the Quantum Conundrum, and though there was no way I could have anticipated that freak storm, I still feel responsible for leading us into harm’s way.”

“Nothing to worry about there, sir,” Neil assured him with a bright smile. “I assure you, we’re just tickled to have been able to take part in a genuine shipwreck.”

“Well, now, that’s the spirit!” Lefty commended him. “You boys are always up for adventure, and the glass is never half empty for you, is it?”

While Nibbler and Murphy watched, Neil and Jack attempted to help Lefty to his feet, taking great care to be as gentle as they could. As soon as he was in an upright position, however, Lefty gasped with pain and sank back to the sand.

“It’s no use,” Lefty lamented. “My knee is either twisted or blown out, and I’m afraid I won’t be able to support my own weight or walk on it.”

Neil and Jack assisted Lefty in removing his life vest and rain jacket, and they then propped those articles beneath his head to serve as an improvised pillow. They made him as comfortable as they could, and Lefty was grateful for their efforts.

“Thank you, boys! By the beard of Archimedes, we had quite the voyage making our way to this island, didn’t we? I certainly didn’t anticipate so much trouble for such a short journey. The bad news is that we lost a fine boat - ah, the Quantum Conundrum, she served me well before her demise. But the good news is that nobody was hurt - and we also confirmed our theory.”

Neil and Jack nodded in understanding.

“I saw it, right before we wrecked...” Jack said, his voice trailing off as he recalled the awesome spectacle.

“I remember it, too,” Neil said. “It was really something else!”

“Woof,” Nibbler quietly chuffed, as if in similar reflection.

Murphy adamantly nodded his head up and down.

“That’s right, boys,” Lefty said. “The source of the recent signatures in my data pool were indeed the result of Pan Gu’s presence... the monster is here.”

## **Chapter Seven**

### **Bringer of Lightning**

As Lefty, Neil, and Jack had gathered from their friends, Maria and Sara, Pan Gu was an ancient creature of immeasurable power. Several days previous, former colleagues of Lefty had managed to waken the monster from its centuries-long hibernation.

To accomplish this, they had used technology that had been stolen from Lefty's laboratory.

When Pan Gu had been roused from its long slumber, the resulting rampage had destroyed the Portsmouth Museum of Historical Artifacts, as it sought to escape the confines of the building's basement. Immediately after it fled the building, the creature disappeared into the waters of the adjacent harbor.

Lefty had taken a great interest in this matter. When it had occurred, he had been in the process of attempting to track down his felonious former associate, Ebenezer Widget-Bocker, who had been the primary culprit in the case of Lefty's stolen technology.

Much to Lefty's disappointment, he had been bested by Ebenezer, who had successfully misled his pursuer and ditched him, returning to Portsmouth in order to launch his master plan.

This plan, of course, had blown up in Ebenezer's face, and the mad scientist had been buried beneath a massive pile of rubble, following the rampage of Pan Gu. He had not yet been uncovered by the clean up crews, and his current condition remained unknown.

Though his adversaries had been thwarted in the end - primarily by their own hare-brained scheming - Lefty still felt a tremendous responsibility for what had occurred. He believed he could have prevented the awakening of Pan Gu and the destruction of the museum, had he only been better prepared to protect his revolutionary technology from those who wished to steal it for their own nefarious purposes.

Determined to make a difference for the better, Lefty had invested his energies into determining what had become of the destructive beast, following its escape into the Portsmouth harbor. He did not wish for it to cause additional damage, could such a thing be prevented.

Furthermore, he had a most inquisitive mind, and the opportunity to study this - the rarest of creatures - was something he simply could not pass up.

Utilizing the formidable technologies available to him in his customized, cutting edge laboratory, Lefty had conducted a thorough analysis of possible locations the beast may have fled to.

By assessing disruptions in the patterns of local wildlife within a fifty mile radius, he had come to the conclusion that Pan Gu had not gone far, following its departure from the museum.

Lefty had produced the theory that the monster had created a lair on Smuttynose Island... and to his great excitement, that theory had now been verified.

“The creature is a true marvel,” Lefty said. “Though we could only see it for a moment, it was a sight that would be impossible to forget. The size of it! By the beard of Archimedes, it’s really something... But it’s odd... there seems to be a blank spot in my memory. Clearly, I remember the sight of the creature, for it was one of the most amazing things I’ve ever seen in my life. But then... then, I recall its eyes began to transform. They were a piercing, brilliant green in color, but they started to swirl, almost like the dark skies of a hurricane... and then I began to feel very light headed.”

“Yeah, you basically took a nap at the wheel, Lefty,” Neil chuckled. “Your eyes were open, but it’s like you were asleep on your feet, and Noodles had to support you.”

“Hmm...” Lefty said, rubbing at his bearded chin in thought. “Most peculiar... it’s as if I fell into a trance, I suppose.”

“I have an idea,” Jack said. “Do you guys remember what Maria and Sara told us happened in the basement of the museum, once Pan Gu had been awakened?”

“You mean, besides him smashing the place up?” Neil asked.

“They said something similar happened, where Pan Gu’s eyes had changed, and then the adults had essentially become... stupefied, wandering around in a daze, unable to help themselves.”

“Ah, that’s right,” Neil said. “It’s too bad the girls aren’t around. We could pick their brains about that, if they were here.”

Maria and Sara had stayed behind in Hollow Oak, the town where the Beans lived. The small size of Lefty’s boat meant that not everybody could come along on the expedition, and the group had reasoned that the sisters could use a few days of rest, after what they had been through in the museum.

“Fascinating,” Lefty murmured. “I should say that this is one of many aspects of the creature that warrants investigation. It seems that children have some sort of invulnerability to this defense mechanism of Pan Gu... perhaps because their brains have not yet completed their development, resulting in a fundamentally different structure that can’t be affected by this phenomenon.”

“Uh, I think my brain’s just fine, thank you very much,” Neil said as he rubbed at his noggin.

“Yes, of course your brain is fine, m’boy! What I’m saying is that the human brain continues growing and developing, becoming increasingly complex until the final stages are reached in adulthood.”

“Adulthood,” Jack muttered, releasing an involuntary shudder at the very notion.

“If this stupefying effect is in fact a defense mechanism of Pan Gu, then it may target a part of the brain that doesn’t develop until the latter stages of adolescence or beyond,” Lefty theorized. His voice was becoming animated as his mind engaged the conundrum at hand. “Perhaps this would account for the resiliency that the two of you have shown, plus that of the Fresco Sisters. I also have an idea about how it seems to conduct these lightning storms.”

“It’s got some sort of, I don’t know... ‘wizard-like powers’, wouldn’t you say?” Neil asked.

Lefty chuckled. “Not at all! What we are witnessing isn’t the result of sorcery. There is always a scientific explanation, though things may at first appear mystical. This

creature is quite unique, and I believe that it is simply endowed with properties that are very similar to that of an electric eel. The electric eel, which is by all means a fascinating animal in its own right, has organs that are constructed of ions.

“Whenever it wishes, the eel can reverse the polarity of these ions, creating an electric current that can stun its enemies. I theorize that Pan Gu must have some sort of similar anatomy, but at an infinitely more powerful level, resulting in an ability to drastically disrupt the electrical makeup of the surrounding atmosphere... in other words, it’s so powerful, it can bring thunder and lightning simply by flexing some muscle.”

The boys stared in drop-jawed amazement as Lefty explained his theories. They might have suspected that his hypotheses were the workings of a lunatic mind... but Lefty was pretty darned brilliant when it came to science, so they had no reason to doubt his concepts, as extraordinary as they might be.

“This animal,” Lefty whispered with awe, “is an electromagnetic phenomenon.”

## Chapter Eight

### A Dire Warning

“That’s bananas!” Neil declared.

“Indeed,” Lefty agreed. “It is bananas. But on a scientific level, I think these theories are fairly sound. If I get the opportunity to study the creature further - er, without getting stupefied, that is - perhaps I can gather some evidence to support my ideas!”

“This is all pretty incredible stuff, Uncle Lefty. But what do you think we should do now?” asked Jack.

Lefty reached into the sandy pockets of his lab coat in a brief, futile search. “It should come as no surprise that I lost my tablet in the wreck. Not that it would be in working condition, after being submerged in salt water. I would love to consult my data and make some amendments, but I’m afraid that won’t be possible, for the time being.”

“And I suppose your phone is gone, as well?” asked Jack.

“Yep, I’m afraid so.”

“Hmm...” Neil murmured, as he rubbed his chin and studied the distant shore of New Hampshire. “It would be an awfully long swim.”

“You best not attempt any such thing!” Lefty said. “A five mile swim would be most trying for anybody, and these currents are far too strong to contest, even with life jackets. What’s more, we can’t predict if Pan Gu will cause another weather phenomenon when you’re in the water. It would be disaster, certain disaster!”

Jack looked around their remote surroundings, including the smashed remains of the Quantum Conundrum. “Uh... so how are we going to get off of this island?”

“Not to worry - I’m way ahead of you. Noodles is more than capable of transmitting all kinds of signals and calls. We’ll simply have him contact the Coast Guard and request a rescue,” Lefty assured the boys.

“You don’t suppose the big guy was injured do you?” Neil asked, pointing down the shoreline to where the lanky robot lay prone, his feet facing the humans. “He’s still face down in the sand... he hasn’t gotten up yet. Can robots get knocked out?”

“It’s unlikely,” Lefty responded. “He’s constructed from the strongest of titanium alloys, so it would be highly improbable that squishy mammals like us could survive the crash, and he wouldn’t. Furthermore, the seals at his joints are completely waterproof, so the salt water shouldn’t have had any effect on him, even if he was completely submerged at some point.”

“So what’s he doing? Taking a nap?” asked Jack.

“Well...” Lefty craned his neck to look down toward Noodles. “It’s possible that he simply needs to engage in a system reboot, which shouldn’t be any trouble at all. I’ll just have to access his power panel and initiate the process. I’m sure he’ll be fine, in any event. Noodles was built to last, let me tell you!”

“That’s for sure,” Jack said, thinking of the time they had seen Noodles combat a giant, mechanized machine that was over three times his size at Cragglemeister Farm.

“Don’t worry, Lefty, we’ll go check on him,” Neil told Lefty.

“Thank you, boys, I very much appreciate that. I’m afraid it’s going to be quite challenging for me to get around for a while, thanks to this twisted knee. Please do check on him for me.”

Despite his conviction that Noodles would have been unharmed in the shipwreck, Neil and Jack could detect the concern in the scientist’s voice. In a way, Noodles was like the son of Lefty, and the two shared a strong emotional bond. Lefty’s creation of the gangly, good-natured robot had been a labor of love, and he had poured his heart and soul into the endeavor.

Furthermore, Noodles benefited from a revolutionary artificial intelligence that made him very much like a living, thinking, feeling being. It was very easy to become attached to him, thanks to his wonderful personality. Lefty was craning his neck to look down the beach to the place where Noodles lay, his face tense with worry.

Jack patted his uncle on the shoulder as he rose to his feet. “We’ll go check on him right now. Don’t worry, I’m sure he’s fine. It’s like you said - Noodles was built to last!”

But before the boys could begin their task, they were startled by a strange voice that called to them. It bellowed from the place where the dunes of the beach ended and the forest began, carrying across the distance with ease. It was a man’s voice, booming and gravelly, as if filled with the shells and stones of the Smuttynose shore.

“You, there! You trespass upon forbidden ground - and you do so at great and terrible peril!”

Everybody looked in the direction of the voice, stunned and taken aback by the presence of another person. They had all assumed that the island was uninhabited, but that clearly was not the case.

At the edge of the forest, they saw a figure of average height and build. He was dressed in a tattered, dark brown robe, cinched at the waist with a brined and barnacle-encrusted belt of rope. The hood of the robe was in place, concealing the man’s face. All that could be made out was the hint of shadowy features.

“Impossible...” Lefty whispered in awe. “Nobody has lived on this island for over one hundred and fifty years...”

## Chapter Nine

### Keeper of the Island

Nibbler tilted his head inquisitively at the mysterious figure who had appeared, lingering near the woods. “Ah-roo?” the Labradoodle gently queried, as if uncertain as to the nature of this hooded stranger, but curious to learn more.

“You must leave this place, at once! Heed my words, oh foolish travelers, lest you be enveloped within the toothy maw of doom,” the robed figure boomed.

He wore a thick-linked chain that was draped over his shoulders, resting against his chest, and there were similar chains wrapped around both of his wrists. They were largely covered with rust and moss, granting him a weird and ominous character. Near the tattered hem of his robe, a burlap sack rested on the ground.

“Oh, hello there!” Neil called cheerfully, raising his hand and waving. “I’m glad you’re here! Maybe you can help us. You see, we were on a boat - it was called the Quantum Conundrum, by the way - but anyhow, we were headed out for a grand adventure, and all of a sudden, this crazy storm came out of nowhere-”

“Silence!” the robed man bellowed, pointing a gnarled, sea-weathered finger at Neil and his friends.

“What?” Neil asked, confused by this rather rude interruption. “I was just getting to the good part, if you’ll bear with me for a moment, sir. You’re not even going to believe what happened next-”

“I said, be silent! Is there fault within your ears, boy?”

Prompted by this inquiry, Neil probed at his ears with the fingers of both hands. “Now that you mention it, there is quite a bit of sand and this weird stuff... I call it sea gunk; it’s like a combination of seaweed and salt water, and maybe even a little crab paste, seeing how as this place is crawling with those things. There’s quite a bit of that stuff still in my ears, if you must know. I believe I could benefit from a good old fashioned bubble bath, once we get back home.”

“Silence!” the robed man bellowed once more. “It was more of a... a rhetorical question. I don’t need to know about the gunk in your ears!”

“Our ears work just fine, but your manners could use a little work, if you don’t mind my saying so,” Jack pointed out. “Always with the ‘silence’ this, and ‘silence’ that! You’re like a shabbily dressed librarian on a rampage.”

The posture of the robed figure changed, his shoulders tilting back, as if he had been greatly offended. “A... a shabbily dressed librarian, did you say?”

“Woof!” Nibbler confirmed, wagging his tail for emphasis.

“Oh, my,” Lefty whispered from where he lay on the sand. “We seem to have stumbled upon quite the odd duck here. There’s no telling how long he’s been stranded on this island by himself. He might be playing with less than a full deck of cards, if you catch my meaning... tread lightly, boys!”

“What’s that fellow on the ground whispering about?” the mystery man demanded.

“Uh, he was agreeing that your manners need some work,” Neil improvised. “There seems to be a universal consensus on the matter.”

“I have no need of society’s formalities,” the man retorted, chuckling darkly. “I answer only to the island... for I am its keeper.”

“You’re the keeper of the island?” asked Jack.

“Yes, that’s what I just said! Has a plague of deafness infected the whole lot of you? Will I be forced to repeat everything I say?” the keeper asked. To himself he muttered, “These encounters used to be so brief... I haven’t been forced to speak this much in years.”

“Well, in our defense, sir, we did just survive a shipwreck of a most bodacious magnitude,” Neil told him. “I was trying to explain that to you, but you kept interrupting and telling me to pipe down, as you might recall.”

The keeper shook his head in exasperation. “Enough! I care not for your problems! You’re supposed to just stand there and listen to what I have to say, not tell me your life story. What is it with you people?”

“Well, we’ve been told that we’re full of gumption, sir,” Neil pointed out.

“Several times,” Jack added. “If that’s any consolation.”

“Full of gumption, indeed,” the keeper muttered. “I should say so.”

“So you’re the keeper of this island?” Neil asked, swiveling his head to examine the copious amounts of brambles and whatnot that grew at the edge of the dunes and forest. “You’ve fallen a bit behind on your landscaping, wouldn’t you say? Need to bust out the ol’ rake and hedge trimmers, don’t you think? This place has grown wild!”

The keeper released a noise of exasperation, his shoulders slumping. “Never mind about the landscaping! I have matters of far greater importance to tend!”

“Fascinating! Tell us more. This is getting interesting...” Neil said, rubbing his hands together with anticipation. “Now we’re getting somewhere.”

“Uh... nope, I can’t do that,” the keeper said, shaking his head and causing the links of his chains to clink together.

“Why not?” asked Jack, genuinely disappointed. “Does this island have some really intriguing secrets that you’re reluctant to share. That’s it, isn’t it?”

“Oooh, secrets,” Neil said, as he continued to rub his hands together.

“You shall hear no such thing. Your fragile minds would explode, were I to impart such formidable knowledge,” the keeper explained. He raised both hands and wiggled his fingers for emphasis, causing the chains at his wrists to jangle. “It is not suitable for the minds of normal men, much less so for those of mere children like yourselves. To share my knowledge would result in nothing short of your very undoing.”

## Chapter Ten

### A Curious Exchange

“Look, sir, I’m no expert on exploding minds, and my very undoing, and whatnot,” Neil said. “But it seems kind of improbable that knowledge would, uh... destroy us... don’t you think?”

“Are you worried we might burst into a ball of flames or something?” asked Jack, managing to suppress his grin (but just barely).

“It’s a metaphor, boy! A metaphor!” the keeper bellowed, clenching his fists and jangling his chains. “By the stars and sun, you’re a thick headed bunch!”

“This secret knowledge that you’ve eluded to does sound pretty interesting. I rather think that I’d like to hear about this, too,” Lefty called out from where he lay on the sand, jabbing his index finger skyward for emphasis.

The keeper sighed with exasperation, muttering, “You are a most difficult and troublesome group of interlopers.”

“Well, then, if you insist on hoarding all your precious, mind blowing, brain busting secrets, go on with whatever it was you were planning on telling us in the first place,” Jack said. “Just stick with that, and we’ll go from there.”

“I... you, uh...” the keeper stammered. He straightened his posture and expanded his chest. “Uh...”

“Yes?” Neil asked. “What is it?”

“You cursed whelps! You made me forget where I was going with this!” the keeper exclaimed.

“You had mentioned something about knowledge that would make our noggins detonate, and before that, you strongly inferred we should leave the island,” Neil answered. “And, uh, something else about doom enveloping us within its ‘toothy maw’... I believe that’s what it was.”

“That’s right! You must flee this place, at once. Flee, I say. Fleeeee...” the keeper said, rattling his chains and waving his hands around, as if he were attempting to chase off a band of stray cats.

Neil’s face adopted a bewildered expression, and he pointed at the busted up boat, which lay smashed upon the rocks. “Does it look like this thing’s going anywhere? How exactly do you suggest we do all this fleeing that you’re carrying on about?”

“Not my problem!” the keeper promptly replied.

“Well, do you have a phone or a radio or something?” asked Jack. “We have a robot on hand, but he might need to be rebooted.”

“I have no assistance for the deaf lot of you! And stop looking at me!” The keeper shook his chains about in a spooky manner, as if trying to imitate a ghost.

“Huh?” Neil and Jack asked in tandem.

“Do not look upon me,” the robed figure said, in the scariest voice that he could muster - which wasn’t a particularly terrifying effect, especially with the bright sunlight and singing birds.

Neil and Jack only continued to stare at the mysterious figure, their jaws dropped in astonishment, their brows furrowed with confusion.

“Are you simple in mind? I said, do not look upon me!” the keeper bellowed.

“Oh, we heard you, sir,” Neil said.

“Well, then? Why do you continue to pepper me with your foolish stares? You have the slack-jawed countenance of barnyard creatures, and I find it most unsettling, I feel inclined to inform you.”

“Well, that’s just rude,” Jack muttered to Neil. “He’s the one wearing a robe that looks like it might have been fashioned from a potato sack.”

“I heard that!” the keeper barked. “And this isn’t a potato sack, impudent child!”

“But... why? Why do you demand that we, uh... look away?” Neil asked. “We’ve been looking at you all this time already. And rest assured, we can’t see your face - it’s hidden by your hood.”

“Why, uh, because I am the keeper of the island, and I am imbued with great, somewhat mystical properties that are not fit for the eyes of mortals,” the keeper answered, shaking his chains for flourish.

“For real?” asked Neil.

“Yes!” answered the keeper. “You must cast your eyes away!”

“Seriously?” asked Jack.

“At once! Look away, look away, I tell you!” ordered the keeper, with grand shaking and clanking of chain links. “Stop asking me the same questions again and again, you irreverent trespassers!”

The boys sighed and exchanged a bemused, confused glance with one another. However, they were very much accustomed to dealing with eccentric, unhinged adults. As odd as it might seem, this was far from the weirdest thing they had seen in their time adventuring.

“Best to humor him,” Lefty whispered to the boys. “Seems he might still be searching for a few lost marbles, if you know what I mean.”

“Quit whispering over there!” barked the keeper, as he suspiciously eyeballed their group.

“Ah-roo?” asked Nibbler. His furry face was now almost completely horizontal, he had tilted it so far to the side in bewilderment.

“Uh, as you wish, oh great keeper,” Jack said, his voice filled with a measure of inflated respect and awe that he hoped might be suitable. “Where shall we direct our unworthy gazes, oh wise warden of these mysterious lands?”

“Is that sarcasm?” the keeper demanded. “I know sarcasm when I hear it, you impertinent child!”

“Nope,” Jack answered without missing a beat, while Neil stifled a giggle beside him. “I believe it’s reverence, oh great keeper.”

“Very well, then. Uh... just, uh... look down at the ground, I suppose,” ordered the keeper.

“At once!” Jack answered.

The boys cast their eyes upon their soaked and sandy sneakers. Nibbler seemed to intuit the gist of the scenario, for he respectfully began chewing upon one of his own ankles, thus averting his gaze from the strange, robed figure. Murphy, meanwhile, had

taken an interest in studying the clouds, squeaking thoughtfully as he observed their shapes.

“How’s that?” Neil asked.

“Very good, you hearing-impaired, slow witted miscreants. Your ability to follow an instruction, however simple it might be, is nothing short of a marvel,” the keeper commended.

“Thank you, sir!” Neil said with an enthusiastic salute. Unfortunately, in his zeal, he forgot to look at the ground, and he lifted his gaze to the keeper.

“Hey, you’re looking upon me again!”

“Sorry, sir!” Neil apologized, quickly returning his eyes to the ground. “Please proceed!”

The robed man’s shoulders slumped with exasperation. “Work with me here!” To himself, he muttered, “This right here... this is exactly why I don’t have children. Rambunctious and impossible, they are.”

“He seems to have fallen from his rocker, eh?” Lefty whispered to the boys. “Blown a gasket or two, I’d wager.”

“We are ready to receive your wisdom, oh benevolent warden of Smuttynose,” Neil said.

With a grand clearing of his throat, the keeper bellowed, “Heed my words, you wandering fools, for you trespass at a great and terrible peril! Be gone from this place! Be gone from this place at once... or embrace your doom. Doom, I say! Dooooooooom...”

The boys heard the last word trail off, becoming quieter, and they risked glancing up. As they had suspected, the keeper was traveling farther into the forest, putting distance between himself and the group on the beach.

They noticed that he heavily favored one leg when he walked, making him move with a very distinct hobble. Over one shoulder, he carried the burlap sack that had rested at his feet earlier. It was impossible to tell what was in it, but it looked sort of like he was hauling a bowling ball, which would be a rather bizarre choice of luggage for an island.

As the keeper hobbled away, making his way through the dense forest, several spry tree branches thwacked him in the face, thoroughly dispelling his intended imagery as an omnipotent figure.

“Well,” Neil said slowly. “There’s something you definitely don’t see every day.”

## Chapter Eleven

### Noodles Loses His Head

“That was an interesting encounter,” Lefty proclaimed.

“That’s for sure,” Jack agreed. “He’s certainly an odd duck, as you called him.”

“Yep. Do you suppose he’s been stranded on this island for a really long time, and he just gradually lost his marbles? You mentioned that this place was uninhabited for over one hundred and fifty years, didn’t you, Lefty?” Neil asked, as he began jogging down the beach toward the place where Noodles lay.

“As far as I know,” Lefty said, stroking his chin as he pondered the implications. “That’s what my research of Smuttynose Island had indicated, anyhow. That man - the keeper, he called himself - his appearance was startling, to say the least. His behavior, his attire... it was all quite bizarre and fascinating. I would have loved to have interviewed him at length, to gain an anthropologist’s perspective as to his story, but he was clearly in no mood to entertain questions.”

“Yeah, he was fairly, uh... abrupt,” Jack chuckled. “He was not a fan of questions.”

“Jack!” Neil cried. “Get over here, right now!”

Jack and Lefty looked toward Neil, and they saw that his face had become stricken with horror. He was looking down at Noodles, and his mouth was agape in disbelief, his eyes bulging from his head.

“What is it?” Lefty cried with alarm. “What’s wrong with Noodles?”

“It’s terrible,” Neil said, his voice little more than a whisper, so taken aback was he by what he had witnessed.

Jack sprinted down the beach, racing to reach his friend. Nibbler trotted by his side, and Murphy rode upon the dog’s back, centered between his shoulder blades.

“What’s wrong?” Jack gasped as he caught up to Neil. “What’s going on with-”

As he saw what had startled Neil, Jack stopped speaking. The problem at hand was immediately obvious.

The head of Noodles was gone. It was just gone.

Though the lanky robot otherwise appeared to be perfectly intact, the space above his shoulders was empty. He lay on his stomach, sprawled across an outcrop of slate-colored stone.

“Egads,” Jack muttered, as he looked down at the headless robot. He blinked repeatedly, as if trying to make the horrible sight disappear through sheer will. “This is not good.”

“Boys! Boys, what is it?” Lefty called from down the beach. “Don’t leave me hanging!”

“Noodles has lost his head, Uncle Lefty!” Jack cried. “Literally!”

“What?”

“We’d best show you, sir,” Neil said, his voice filled with a somber tone that was completely out of character for him. His high spirits, perpetually intact, had been dashed by the poor turn of events.

With heavy hearts, Neil and Jack returned to where Lefty lay on the beach. Stooping over, they lifted him with their combined strength and proceeded to carry him to Noodles. They wobbled as they walked through the sand, sharing their odd cargo, slowly making their way.

Lefty was craning his neck forward, desperate to see what had become of his beloved Noodles. Neil and Jack could sense Lefty’s concern, and they felt deep empathy for him. They proceeded in silence. The only sounds were the ocean water breaking upon the beach, the seagulls calling to one another, and the sand shifting beneath their feet.

Nibbler sat calmly beside Noodles, watching over his fallen robotic friend. Murphy also sat near at hand, resting one paw on Noodles’ arm and shaking his tiny head remorsefully.

“Okay, let me take a look, boys,” Lefty said.

Neil and Jack lowered the scientist to the ground, directly beside Noodles. Lefty gasped as his twisted knee bent slightly in the process, but he ignored the pain, directing his attention to the robot.

The boys knelt in the sand, holding their breath as they awaited the diagnosis. Nibbler looked on, softly whimpering. Lefty brushed aside a bunch of small crabs that had gathered on the torso of Noodles, and they scuttled away.

“Those things are everywhere on this island,” Neil muttered.

“Oh, poor Noodles,” Lefty said quietly, as he began his examination, running his hands over the robot’s neck and shoulders. But after a grim moment in which his face seemed very dark indeed, he broke into a smile. To the astonishment of the others, his voice had lightened and was free of worry when next he spoke. “Oh, well, boys. Not to worry - this isn’t very bad at all! We’ve gotten all worked up, for nothing.”

“Uh... we have?” Neil asked. Fearing that Lefty might be in denial or shock, he felt it necessary to point out the obvious: “His head is gone, Lefty! Gone, I tell you! Gone!”

“Indeed it is, but I’m sure Noodles will be just fine, once we reattach it. You see this?” Lefty asked, pointing toward a threaded seal at the neck of Noodles. “Nothing is broken; his head must have simply been bonked so hard that this seal loosened and came undone. His head should screw right back on, no problem... robots have it much easier than humans in many regards, this being one of them. We must have landed awfully hard, for this to happen!”

“He’s not dead, then?” asked Jack, his voice rich with relief.

“Dead? Of course not!” Lefty exclaimed. “Though Noodles is gifted with a marvelous personality, thanks to his revolutionary artificial intelligence, it’s actually impossible for him to die. He’s a robot, after all, so he can always be repaired, no matter how drastic the damage. When you get down to the nuts and bolts of it, Noodles is a machine - a marvelous machine, mind you, but a machine nonetheless. And as I’m sure you boys know, I’m awfully good at fixing machines!”

“Well, this is a huge relief. When I saw his head missing, I... well, I thought he was a goner, to tell you the truth. I would have missed all his beeping and booping. Not to mention the break dancing, which is probably one of the greatest things I’ve ever

seen,” Neil chuckled. “We haven’t known him all that long, but we’ve grown really attached to the big guy.”

“Don’t worry about Noodles, boys. He’s much tougher than any of us,” Lefty laughed.

“We still have a big problem,” Jack said, scanning the beach with his eyes. “You may be able to get Noodles up and running once you reattach his head, Uncle Lefty. But we don’t actually have his head... and I don’t see it lying anywhere around here. So the obvious question here is: Where’s Noodles’ noggin?”

## Chapter Twelve

### Prime Suspect

“Uh, yes... well, that is problematic,” Lefty admitted. “But it must be somewhere around here, don’t you think? It couldn’t have flown that far off when he crashed onto these rocks.”

Neil, Nibbler, and Murphy joined the search, scanning the beach for Noodles’ detached cranium. The Labradoodle pressed his snout to the earth, sniffing this way and that for clues. Within short order, his magnificently reliable nose once more came through for the task at hand. He began woofing, drawing the attention of the boys and the squirrel.

They all hustled over to where Nibbler stood, wagging his tail, barking, and pointing with his snout. He danced in excitement, drawing their attention to what was clearly a series of footprints, outlined in the sand. The footprints began very near the spot where Noodles lay, and then proceeded inland, toward the forest at the center of the island.

Neil hunkered down on one knee and rubbed at his chin in thought. “A classic clue, eh? But these are some awfully weird looking footprints... They seem to be staggered in a strange formation, and then there’s this circular indentation, which keeps repeating in the sand. The plot thickens...”

“Good work, boy!” Jack told Nibbler, scratching him behind the ears.

“Hmmm... looks like somebody was down here earlier, and then they went off that way...” Neil said, pointing toward the woods. “You don’t suppose...”

“That crazy guy!” Jack exclaimed. “The guy who calls himself the keeper! Remember, he had that sack he was hauling over one shoulder?”

“Yeah, and it looked like there was a big bowling ball inside of it,” Neil said. “But that wasn’t a bowling ball, was it? It was Noodles’ noggin!”

Jack sputtered in exasperation. “What kind of lunatic runs off with somebody’s head?”

“That’s a very good question,” Lefty said.

“I should have known something was up. Remember when I mentioned that we might be able to call for help with our robot?” asked Jack.

“Yeah, I remember. Most people would have been taken aback by that kind of declaration... I mean, who the heck sails the seas with a robot on deck? Pretty much nobody, I’d bet. But the keeper didn’t seem startled in the slightest. Because he already knew we had a robot,” Neil said. “He had already been down to the beach, seen that Noodles’ head had come flying off on impact, and scooped it up.”

“Like it was some kind of deranged treasure... What kind of lunatic runs off with somebody’s head?” Jack asked again in bewilderment. “This guy must be completely bonkers. Just our luck. One of these days, I would love to run into a reasonably sane adult.”

“He must have been driven mad by too many days - check that, too many years - on this empty island,” Neil said, sadly shaking his head. “He went out of his gourd, you might say.”

“Don’t forget, boys, that potentially makes this keeper very dangerous, as well,” Lefty pointed out. “We have no idea what’s going on inside that mind of his, nor do we have any notion of what he’s truly capable of. But one thing is for sure - we must retrieve Noodles’ head!”

“Don’t worry, we’ll get his noggin back,” Jack assured his uncle.

“Without it, there’s no way I can restore Noodles, and though he won’t exactly be dead, he will be lost to us, for all intents and purposes... and I couldn’t bear the thought of being without my break-dancing friend. What’s more, we’ll have no way to call for a rescue - and we’ll be just as stranded on this island as that deranged keeper is.”

“Ahh....” Neil said, rubbing his hands together. He was utterly undaunted by the task at hand. On the contrary, he was quite looking forward to it. “An adventure is underfoot! Boy, this is great, isn’t it? Shipwrecked, beset by danger and obstacle, sent on a quest... except for Noodles losing his noggin, of course. I mean, that part’s no good. But we’ll get it back, and then Lefty can fix him right up!”

Nibbler stood on his hind legs, infected by Neil’s excitement, loosing an enthusiastic woof as he did so.

“That’s right, Nibbler, you’re coming with us,” Neil said, catching his forepaws and commencing a brief jig. “We’ll surely need the stupendous abilities of your snout, not to mention your unrivaled bravery!”

Murphy squeaked in excitement, jumping about the sand. He clearly did not want to miss out on the action. With astounding agility, he scrambled up Jack’s pant leg, climbed his torso, ran across his shoulders, and then leaped into the air.

Gauging his leap just right, he landed atop Nibbler’s back, where he grabbed fistfuls of curly fur for purchase. Nibbler glanced back, giving the flying squirrel an affectionate, slobbery kiss, which nearly sent the rodent flying.

“Would you like for one of us to stay with you, Uncle Lefty?” asked Jack.

“Not at all, m’boy. I’ll be fine, and I’ll stay here to keep an eye on Noodles. Somebody needs to watch over him, in case that crazy keeper comes back and decides he might want to steal some more parts.”

“Okay... if you’re sure you’ll be fine,” Neil said.

“Of course!” Lefty exclaimed. “You know, I was about due for a day off, anyway. What better way to spend it than relaxing on the beach, cut off from all the technology that surrounds me day and night?”

The boys lifted Lefty and arranged him so that he was lying in a comfortable position, with his head propped up on Noodles’ torso, using his life jacket for a pillow. He was facing the ocean so that he could look out toward the water and watch the soothing, rhythmic action of the waves.

Neil found a piece of an old ship’s hull, and he propped it in the sand so that it provided Lefty with ample shade. Jack, meanwhile, had spotted their cooler some distance down the beach, and he ran to retrieve it.

Miraculously, it had survived the crash intact, even as it had been flung across the rocks and sand. Within, there were several bottles of water and snacks. Jack left plenty of

water with his uncle to ensure his continued hydration, since it was impossible to predict how long they would be gone for.

Meanwhile, Neil gratefully guzzled down the water, quenching his thirst and soothing his sandy throat. He carefully poured some into the mouths of Nibbler and Murphy, and the critters eagerly drank. Granola bars, mixed nuts, and apples were also distributed among the group, along with some Southpaw Snickerdoodle cookies (which were Murphy's personal favorite, and a treasured recipe of the O'Houlihan family).

"Okay, boys, that's enough pampering. I'll be fine, I tell you," Lefty said. "Now, your mission begins. I'm no good with this injured knee, so it's up to you... There's no time to waste, for that thieving maniac has a good head start on you. Noodles has stood by all of us in the past, and now it's time for you to return the favor... you have to save his noggin!"

## Chapter Thirteen

### Into the Forest

As Neil and Jack reached the edge of the dunes, they detected a dramatic shift in the atmosphere of the island. Previously, the boys had been lit by brilliant sunlight, where the warm sand was beneath their feet and the sound of seagulls was near at hand. The sky was blue, the shadows were sparse, and the island had seemed to be anything but threatening.

As they neared the forest, however, they could tell that something had... changed. Most significantly, it felt as if something in the air itself had transformed. They exchanged a nervous glance with one another, each of them wondering if perhaps it was simply their imaginations (which were admittedly quite vivid) that were running away with them.

But as each of them searched the face of their friend, they could see they were experiencing the same gut reaction - and they had learned to trust such intuitions.

Most telling, however, was Nibbler's change in behavior. As he neared the forest, the Labradoodle's posture underwent a subtle adjustment. He went from his happy, tail-wagging gallivant into a more cautious gait, slowly going forth.

Nibbler carefully placed each paw upon the ground, and his ears folded back against his head with concentration. Furry shoulder blades slowly switched back and forth as he proceeded, furiously sniffing at his surroundings. His head stretched forward, and his snout quivered about, ingesting the scents that lay upon the air.

Perched between Nibbler's shoulders, Murphy sat, clutching the Labradoodle's curly fur in order to retain a firm grasp upon his unconventional steed. He had also adopted an expression of great interest as they approached the forest, eyeing it speculatively. His squirrely head swiveled about, studying the trees and brush. With one tiny paw, he reassuringly patted Nibbler's back, offering comfort to his canine friend.

The Labradoodle chuffed softly with an appreciative sound, acknowledging Murphy's gesture. However, Nibbler was hardly in need of having his courage bolstered, for he was the bravest of beasts, a dog who would happily charge into the most daunting of dangers for the benefit of his friends.

His face stretched into a doggy smile, and his tail began wagging. Having conducted his initial inspection of the strange forest, Nibbler was ready to barrel into its waiting mysteries. He pushed through brambles and bushes, while Murphy ducked low to keep his head from getting thwacked by branches.

Neil and Jack followed close behind, having absolute trust in Nibbler's nose, which had proven to be quite extraordinary many times in the past. They could not, of course, fit through the narrow spaces as easily as the Labradoodle and the squirrel, but they managed to squeeze their wiry frames between the obstacles.

It was not easy going, but if Nibbler was sure that he had discovered the way, the boys shared that confidence. After a few moments of struggling against the densely packed vegetation, they were grateful to see that things opened up.

“Well, would you look at that,” Neil said, pointing ahead. “A path!”

“So it is,” Jack acknowledged, while he pulled his pant leg free from some thorns that had ensnared him, gratefully stepping onto the trail.

Nibbler was excitedly circling, his nose pressed to the ground. He was inhaling and exhaling rapidly, his tail wagging with the pleasure of having found something of significance.

Murphy leaped from his perch upon Nibbler’s back and landed softly on the ground. He seemed equally excited by the discovery, for he was poking at the earth with his forepaws and chirping excitedly.

Jack took a knee beside Nibbler, scratching the dog behind the ear. “There’s a good boy! And what do we have here?” he asked, as he took a closer look at the ground where the Labradoodle and squirrel were so focused.

Neil knelt next to his friends and took a gander for himself, rubbing at his chin as he examined the earth. “Hmm... it appears this trail is very well traveled, indeed. Do you see all these footprints?”

“Yep,” Jack said. “But there’s so many of them, layered one atop the other, it’s hard to make out what we’re looking at here.”

As Neil had pointed out, the trail was very well traveled, and there was a multitude of footprints that had been left behind in the dirt of the pathway, which was also sprinkled with rocks, moss, and the occasional leaping toad - not to mention the scuttling crabs, which were so numerous on the island, even this far from the shore.

None of the footprints were particularly clear, and most of them had been trampled into a messy oblivion by the frequent comings and goings of whomever was utilizing the path.

“Ah-hah!” Neil exclaimed. “Do you see this?”

Jack looked at the place on the ground where Neil was pointing. “It’s that circular indentation you noticed on the beach. Do you remember how the keeper limped quite a bit when he was leaving? I wonder... is it possible that he has a peg leg, and this is the mark that it leaves?”

“Gears and sprockets! I think you’re right, Jack!”

“A peg leg...” Jack murmured thoughtfully. “The shabby clothing... the isolation... are we dealing with a pirate here?”

“Oooh, I sure hope so!” Neil said, his eyes filled with delight.

Jack, recalling that pirates were particularly fond of defending their hideouts with things like swords and cannonballs, was not quite as excited. “Well, he seems fairly harmless, as far as pirates go, I suppose. And we certainly can’t give up on Noodles. We’ve no choice but to continue pursuing him.”

“Woof!” Nibbler agreed.

“Come on,” Neil said, hurrying down the path. “We’re bound to catch up to him soon! How fast can a guy with a peg leg possibly move?”

## Chapter Fourteen

### The Final Warning

Nibbler was tearing down the trail, barking for the boys to keep up. Murphy held on for dear life, riding the Labradoodle as if he were a bucking bronco, issuing squirrely squeaks of encouragement for his canine friend to maintain speed and the utmost haste.

After discovering the well traveled trail, the boys had jogged down it as quickly as they had dared, hurrying to catch up to their quarry. They had been doing so for only a handful of minutes when Nibbler indicated that the keeper was near, and the dog had accelerated his chase, following the clues that his reliable nose had detected.

Now, Neil and Jack raced behind their animal companions as quickly as they could, taking care not to trip over the rocks and roots that littered the path. After several frantic moments of sprinting, they saw Nibbler abruptly come to a halt, using his paws like brakes, digging them into the earth to bring his body to a stop.

Murphy let loose with a short, alarmed squeak, as he was almost thrown from his place atop the dog's back. He held fast with both hands, and he managed to retain his place. Nibbler had ceased barking, but his entire body was rigid, and he peered straight ahead with rapt attention.

The boys caught up, their chests heaving with breath, and they immediately saw what had brought Nibbler to such a sudden stop. Just a few feet in front of the dog, the trail abruptly ended in a steep cliff. Neil and Jack came to a screeching halt, waving their arms for balance.

"Whew," Neil muttered, as he comprehended the terrible fall they had come very near to taking.

"It looks like there are a few surprises hidden on this island," Jack said. "I guess we had better watch our step!"

Peering over the edge of the cliff, they could see that the drop was about thirty feet, and a fast moving river flowed below them. The river was about one hundred feet wide. Spanning across the water, there was an ancient bridge that had been constructed of old wood and rope, stretching from one side of the ravine to the other.

The condition of the bridge did not exactly inspire confidence, for the rope was old and moldy, and many parts of it were frayed and thinning. The wooden boards were in a similar state of decay, looking green and worn with the effects of time.

As their chests heaved and they strove to regain their breath, Neil and Jack carefully edged closer to the edge of the cliff and the old bridge. They stood to either side of Nibbler and followed his gaze, intent to see what he had discovered.

There, not too far in the distance, stood the keeper. He was about halfway across the bridge, and he had turned around to look at them. He stared back at the group of pursuers, and though the hood of his raggedy robe still concealed his features, it was clear from his posture that he had been taken by surprise.

"I don't believe this! What do you pack of half-deaf, disobedient children think you're doing?" he demanded.

“We’ve come to reclaim Noodles’ noggin!” Jack declared.

“Woof!” Nibbler added.

“Noodles’ noggin...? What is this gibberish that you’re spouting, boy?” the keeper demanded.

“Our robot’s head,” Neil explained. “He’s a friend of ours, and we aim to reclaim his cranium.”

“I, uh, don’t know anything about all that,” stammered the keeper. But the boys noticed that he shifted his stance as he spoke, positioning the burlap sack behind his back. “I’m afraid I can’t help you. Now, be gone! Go back from whence you came! Leave this island, at once!”

“I’m afraid we can’t do that, sir. Please, be reasonable... we need Noodles’ head!” Neil declared.

“Oh, you think so, do you?” the keeper asked. “You think that you trespassers are in any position to bargain with me, the keeper of Smuttynose Island? Such marvelous insolence you possess!”

“So you admit that you have Noodles’ head?” asked Jack.

The keeper became belligerent. “Yes, if that’s what you happen to call that shiny trinket - I do have it, as a matter of fact!” He no longer attempted to conceal the burlap sack, instead brandishing it in front of him, clutching it with a fist of gnarled knuckles. “Everything on this island belongs to me. You might think this is your property, but you’re mistaken. The moment you set foot on my shores, all your possessions became mine for the taking - it is the way of the sea, and the law of my island!”

Jack sighed, partially with relief that they had located Noodles’ head, and partially from the frustration of dealing with the eccentric keeper. “Think about it, buddy. We’ll never be able to get off your precious island without Noodles’ head. So whether you like it or not, you’ve got to return it to us. We need Noodles to be operational, so we can signal for a rescue boat.”

“Well, that just isn’t going to happen, so I guess you had best start swimming!” the keeper hollered, waving his prized sack about and jangling his chains.

Murphy stood as tall as he could from atop his place on Nibbler’s back, shaking one fist and squeaking at the keeper.

“Yeah, what he said!” Neil added, intuiting the gist of Murphy’s squirrely language. “Hand over the head, you goon!”

“Goon?” the keeper repeated in disbelief. “How dare you! This is your final warning. And... what is that, a squirrel? Is that a squirrel shaking its fist at me?”

Jack chuckled. “That’s Murphy. You should probably listen to him.”

The keeper muttered in confusion at the sight of the rowdy rodent, before gathering himself and turning surly once more. “Turn back - at once - or peril of the most heinous and undesirable variety will befall you!”

“Nope,” Jack said, as he and his friends began advancing. “Not without our friend’s head.”

The keeper squared his shoulders, and he was visibly shuddering with outrage. “Very well. Let it be known that you were given ample warning, and you chose to spurn my generosity. You have willingly thrust yourselves into the toothy maw of doom, despite my guidance!”

“Yeah, yeah, duly noted,” Neil assured him. “The toothy maw of doom, got it.”

“You’ll soon regret your careless decisions!” the keeper promised.

And with that, he turned his back upon them and continued crossing the ancient rope bridge. He hobbled and wobbled, impeded by both the swaying nature of the bridge and the limitations of his peg leg. However, his progress was surprisingly quick, undoubtedly because he had used the bridge so many times in the past, and it had become second nature to him.

“Come on, you wretches,” the keeper taunted. As he continued shimmying across the deteriorating bridge, he glanced back over his shoulder. As he did so, the boys were able to catch the faintest impression of a hard face beneath, and a burly beard that protruded from the shadows of the hood. “You want to reclaim this shiny trinket you’ve lost? Go ahead and catch me, then - catch me, if you can!”

## **Chapter Fifteen**

### **A Pursuit Most Wobbly**

Nibbler immediately began to give chase to the roguish, plotting keeper. Despite his enthusiasm for the task at hand, however, he quickly realized he was ill suited for such a pursuit. On this occasion, his four furry limbs became a disadvantage, causing him to wobble precariously on the dilapidated bridge.

Without the benefit of arms and hands, there was no way for Nibbler to use the crude rope railings to assist his impeded balance. Murphy squeaked in alarm as his Labradoodle steed wobbled from side to side.

Despite the imminent peril he found himself in, Nibbler bravely tried to continue forth. He was determined to help his friend, Noodles, and he did not want to see the hooded bandit make off with the stolen robotic noggin. He gingerly took another step, cautiously placing his weight onto his paw. But this only caused the bridge to rock from side to side in distressing fashion.

“Nibbler!” Jack shouted, his voice filled with fear for his dog. “Get back here, right now!”

Nibbler looked over his shoulder at Jack, and the worry was clear in his expressive eyes. He knew it was foolish to proceed, but he couldn’t come to terms with the notion of giving up.

“Don’t worry, Nibbler,” Neil told him. “We’ll get that crazy bandit! You stay on this side of the bridge, and we’ll go flush him out from the other.”

“Yeah, come on, boy,” Jack said. “If you stay on this side, you’ll be ready for that maniac, in case he doubles back.”

Though Nibbler was exceptionally smart for a dog, it was unreasonable to believe he could understand everything the boys were telling him. Yet, it seemed that their words were soothing to him, and he delicately backed off of the bridge, once more setting all four paws onto solid ground.

“That’s a good boy,” Jack told him, ruffling his ears and scratching at his neck, making the tags on his collar jingle.

“Don’t worry, Nibbler, we’ll be back before you know it,” Neil assured him, patting his head.

“Woof!” Nibbler responded, wagging his tail in the affirmative.

Neil and Jack approached the bridge as their dog stepped to the side. They set foot upon the rickety structure and slowly set forth, muttering in unease as the ancient contraption wobbled beneath their feet. They had greater success than Nibbler, for they had hands to help them maintain their balance, but it was slow going, nonetheless. They proceeded in a single file, with Neil in the lead and Jack following a few steps behind him.

“Gobstoppers!” Neil exclaimed. “Who designed this bridge? It’s downright terrible! I’d like to pick the brain of the guy who built it and ask him what exactly he was thinking.”

“It’s awfully old. I think it must have been built very long ago by somebody who didn’t intend to use it much... or perhaps by somebody who wanted to ensure they weren’t followed,” Jack theorized.

“Ah, you could be onto something there,” Neil said. “Like if somebody had built this thing with the intent of keeping others from following him to his secret lair.”

“I suppose most people would take this as a sign that they should probably turn back,” Jack chuckled.

“Yeah,” Neil agreed, grinning. He was starting to get a hang of the way the bridge moved beneath his feet, and he was slowly increasing his pace. “Most people.”

When the boys were about halfway across the bridge, the keeper of the island reached the other side of the ravine. He stepped from the final, rotting plank and set foot onto the solid ground that waited on the other side. Now safe, he turned to face his pursuers.

“I see your tradition of not listening has continued, you half deaf simpletons!” he boomed.

“You might say that. But we can’t very well listen to you when you’re running off with what’s in that sack, as we’ve explained. We need Noodles’ noggin!” Jack shouted.

The keeper threw back his head and laughed. Clearly, he did not consider the boys to be any kind of threat whatsoever. He held up the burlap sack and waved it from side to side, taunting them.

“Oh, you mean this, do you? I’m afraid it belongs to me now, as I’ve already explained, though words seem to have the hardest task, when it comes to penetrating those thick skulls of yours. You truly have no comprehension of who I am and what you’re dealing with. You simply cannot understand the heritage that flows within my blood; the ancestor from whom I descended. Mine is a bloodline that is unrivaled throughout the history of the world. If you did comprehend, I wager you wouldn’t be nearly as rude in your dealings with me.”

“We’d be happy to attempt such comprehension, if you’d clue us in a bit,” Jack offered.

“Go ahead, lay it on us, oh wise keeper!” Neil added. “We are but ignorant whippersnappers, wandering about without the foggiest notion of what we’re doing, more often than not. Er... at least, that’s what we’ve been told by our elders on several occasions.”

As the conversation continued, the boys were inching farther and farther along the bridge. They couldn’t understand why the keeper didn’t realize he was playing right into their hands by entertaining their questions. If they could only keep him talking for a few more minutes, they would be across the bridge and be able to reclaim Noodles’ stolen head.

“Well, I suppose it wouldn’t hurt to show you my face,” the keeper said. His voice had adopted a hint of pride. “After all, you’ll be leaving my island soon enough, whether you realize it or not. And then... you won’t be giving me any trouble at all, will you?”

“As you say,” Neil granted. “I suppose you might as well reveal yourself to our unworthy eyes and enfeebled minds, eh?”

The keeper snorted with contempt, but it appeared he was going to play along. He raised one hand toward his hood. His skin was leathery and weather beaten, and his

knuckles were gnarled from years of hard life spent in the outdoors. As his dirty fingers clutched at the fabric of his robe, he threw back the hood with a quick, clean motion.

Upon doing so, the face that had thus far remained hidden was bathed in sunlight and revealed in full.

## Chapter Sixteen

### The Face of Savagery

The keeper was a savage man, unkempt beyond words. As Neil and Jack gazed upon his wild face, they wondered how they would ever accurately describe what they had seen to their friends, should they manage to escape from Smuttynose Island and make it back home.

Thick, black hair sprung from his head in a knotty mess. A matching beard of black covered his face, spilling toward his chest and protruding from his cheeks like a dark, wiry cloud. It appeared that not the faintest effort had been made to tame that wild head of hair, nor to style that unruly beard.

The skin of his face was deeply tanned, and smudged with dirt that made him darker still. An abundance of wrinkles populated his forehead and the areas around his eyes. He had clearly led a most difficult life, and the years of sun and saltwater had taken a terrible toll upon his complexion, making it impossible to guess his age, though he was almost certainly bound to be younger than he looked.

“Whoa,” Neil muttered, turning his head to speak in a low voice to Jack, who stood behind him on the bridge. “Talk about your rough customers, huh? It’s been a while since this fellow has seen a bottle of shampoo! A stop in the ol’ barber’s chair might do him some good.”

The keeper sighed with exasperation. “I can still hear you, you know! Mind your tongue, boy, and show some respect for your elders!”

“Uh, I was just saying to my friend here that we might be able to offer you a treasure beyond your wildest dreams,” Neil said. “It’s called shampoo, and I assure you, it would be much more valuable to you than our robot’s head!”

“Perhaps a nice bar of soap, as well?” Jack suggested.

“Silence, you impudent whelps!” the keeper barked. “I won’t be swindled by such paltry offers!”

The boys had been taken aback by the revelation of the keeper’s savage face, and they stared in wonder and curiosity. As they took in more detail, they noticed small cylinders were buried among the mass of the keeper’s hair and beard, sticking out this way and that. The cylinders had long wicks, making them appear to be rudimentary candles.

After a moment’s study, however, it became clear they weren’t candlewicks, after all... they were fuses.

“Is that... is that dynamite in your beard?” Neil asked, his eyes growing wide with amazement. “I don’t know why anybody would stroll around with dynamite stuck in their beard, but I have to admit... that is a pretty awesome fashion statement.”

“Bah! You wouldn’t understand!” the keeper said, waving his hand dismissively.

“Be that as it may, we’d love to hear your story. I’m sure we could learn so much from you,” Jack said, trying to keep him talking.

“I’m the spitting image of my legendary ancestor, though I wouldn’t expect an uneducated pair of louts such as the two of you to recognize me! And I wouldn’t waste my efforts on teaching you - I believe it’s nigh impossible to get past the defenses of your hard heads and impaired ears.”

“Thank you, sir!” Neil responded enthusiastically.

“That wasn’t a compliment, boy!”

“Who can say for sure?” Neil argued.

The keeper sighed once more, rolling his eyes in exasperation. “This...” he muttered to himself. “This, right here, is exactly why I never had children. They’re impossible.”

“Nah, we can be trained, just like any other unruly creature!” Neil said, winking at Jack.

The keeper shook his head and fixed his eyes on the boys. They were dark like his beard, those eyes, yet they sparkled with something that contrasted his old, weather-beaten appearance. They twinkled with an intangible quality that was something like... passion for adventure, if the boys had to call it by a name.

It was a passion that Neil and Jack had no trouble recognizing, for it burned bright within their own hearts. Perhaps, they thought, they had something in common with this crazed keeper of the island, after all. Maybe it would be possible to reach an understanding, should they be able to continue the dialogue.

“Enough!” the keeper bellowed in his gravelly voice. “I’ve entertained you fools for too long as it is.”

“Um... is that up for debate?” Neil inquired. “I think you might be able to entertain us for quite a bit longer, if you really applied yourself.”

The keeper produced a fine looking weapon from within the confines of his robe, brandishing it with a flourish. It was an elegant sword, featuring a highly polished blade with a slight curve. The sword had an ornate, jewel-encrusted pommel that wrapped around the hand of its owner, forming a protective shield over his knuckles.

“Uh... if I may be so bold as to inquire... what exactly were you intending to do with that thing?” asked Jack.

“Did you think I was going to stand here and let you talk until you had made it all the way across this bridge?” asked the keeper.

“Um, yes, actually. We did think that,” Neil admitted. “Say, you might be a tad sharper than we initially gave you credit for, you know that? How about if we all sit down and play a few rounds of checkers or something? That’s always a good workout for the ol’ noggin. What do you say?”

The keeper grinned, and when he did so, he revealed a mouth that was fit to haunt even the bravest of dentists. There were several gaps where teeth had gone missing, but of those that remained, many were crooked or artificially constructed from gold. Morsels of food were wedged between the remaining teeth, awaiting floss that would most likely never be administered, and the gums were blackened from neglect.

Neil, having been imbued with a powerful sense of responsibility when it came to the care of one’s chompers, was very disappointed by this. “Gears and sprockets! Remember what I said about him needing to get to a barber for a shave and a haircut?” he asked Jack. “I actually think he needs to get to the dentist as a first priority.”

The keeper sneered at the boys, apparently unconcerned with their judgment of his dental hygiene. He waved the sword in lazy arcs through the air as he spoke, and the blade made a sharp whish with each stroke.

“One way or the other, I mean to see to it that you leave my island. If this is the only way to accomplish that goal, then so be it. Your time upon Smuttynose has expired, boys.”

To the dismay and disbelief of Neil and Jack, the keeper raised the sword high. He held it above the ropes that secured the ancient bridge to its anchors on safe ground. The ropes were already rotting and frayed, and it would not take much effort to cut through them. The sword in the keeper’s hand looked more than capable of accomplishing the task.

“Whoa, now, let’s not do anything rash!” Jack said, his voice rising in alarm. He looked down at the fast moving water that waited below, should the bridge be destroyed.

Nibbler had begun barking wildly, and pacing back and forth on his side of the ravine. Murphy was jumping up and down, shaking his tiny fists at the keeper and squeaking in protest.

“Don’t do this, man!” Neil begged. “We can bring you toothpaste! Toothpaste, I tell you!”

## Chapter Seventeen

### A Diabolical Deed

As Neil and Jack had feared, the blade of the keeper's sword was more than sharp enough to slice through the ropes of the moldering bridge. With a single, clean stroke, he severed the fraying knots, cackling madly as he did so, his bushy black beard trembling with the vibrations of his laughter.

The boys cried out in alarm, but there was nothing they could do from their position, halfway across the ancient contraption. They were too far from either end of the bridge to jump to safety. Unfortunately, the only thing they could do was watch, as the wobbly bridge they stood upon was reduced to a state of utter uselessness.

As the ropes were severed, Neil and Jack each felt a momentary sensation of weightlessness. The boards beneath their feet fell away, leaving nothing for them to stand upon. Briefly, it felt as though they were hovering in midair, and they wildly flailed their arms about. Of course, there was nothing stable for them to grasp, and this proved to be a futile gesture, but it was an involuntary reaction that could not be averted.

Following the split-second of weightlessness they had experienced, there came a much less pleasant feeling: the force of gravity, pulling them down... down... down.

As they began plummeting, they were gripped with a sensation of incredulity. They could barely believe what was happening, and time seemed to slow as they fell. They saw pieces of the bridge flying all around them - rotting planks and pieces of rope going every which way, as the old bridge, which had served for untold years, was finally put out of its misery. Their stomachs felt as though they were rising in their bodies, like balls of pins and needles climbing into their chests.

As they fell, Neil and Jack locked eyes with one another. They were too preoccupied with the unpleasant process of plummeting to exchange words, but they felt their expressions of alarm adequately conveyed their concern over the current situation. Their mouths were similarly agape, and their eyes bulged like saucers, their arms wind-milling wildly through the air.

During this unplanned freefall, the abilities of their ears seemed to have been heightened. They could hear the crazed laughter of the keeper, and the air rushing past them, and - most alarmingly - the roaring river beneath them, the sound of which was rapidly growing louder as they fell toward it.

Of course, the boys would much rather fall into water than onto a pile of rocks or thorny bushes, so this was some consolation. However, they had no idea what the water beneath them would be like, once they met its wet embrace.

Was it deep enough to safely absorb the impact of their falling bodies? Or was it a shallow river, beneath the surface of which they would find only sharp stones awaiting them? Were there hostile creatures living within it? And where, exactly, would the fast moving water take them, once they landed in it?

As they struck the surface of the river, it was with a great sense of relief that Neil and Jack realized that the water was deep enough to absorb their impact. They plunged deep within, shocked by the icy coldness of it, which spiked their heart rates even further.

Hitting the water with a great deal of force from their fall, they went quite a ways down. A vigorous multitude of bubbles surrounded them, and the world went topsy-turvy as they temporarily lost their bearings.

As soon as they regained their orientation, they began kicking their legs and stroking with their arms, striving to make their way above water. They could spot the blurry outline of the sun above, peeking through the turbulent surface of the river.

They struggled as hard as they could, and they were making progress, but it was still quite a challenge, due to the strong current.

Unfortunately, the remains of the destroyed bridge further slowed them. Messes of rope and planks swirled in the water, thrown about by the current, tangling with the arms and legs of Neil and Jack.

Refusing to surrender, they pushed and pulled the debris, breaking free of it and swimming onward. As they continued struggling toward the surface, the blurry outline of the sun grew larger and brighter, and they knew they were getting closer to their goal.

After what seemed like minutes, but what was surely only seconds, they finally broke through the surface of the river. As one, their heads popped above the water line, and they gratefully gasped for air. They heaved and sputtered as the turbulent river splashed into their mouths while they were trying to regain their breath.

The immediate danger of drowning had been resolved, but they could already feel the strong current propelling them downstream. They were but tiny things against the force of the river, and it seemed they would not be able to swim to shore without a great deal of difficulty.

“Bon voyage!” cried the keeper from high above. He stood safely at the edge of the ravine, laughing madly as the current proceeded to carry the boys away. He even went so far as to hold up the sack with Noodles’ head, once more taunting them with it. “You should have never challenged me, you insolent landlubbers. Now... get off my island!”

“Your hospitality is on par with your dental hygiene!” Neil hollered up at the keeper.

“Enjoy Noodle’s noggin while you have it,” Jack called, struggling to keep his chin above the turbulent water. “Because I promise you - we’ll be coming back for it!”

## Chapter Eighteen

### Wild Ride

The keeper only threw back his head and laughed harder than ever, completely unfazed by Jack's promise, confident that he would never see the boys again. That was the end of their conversation, for Neil and Jack were quickly swept around a bend, and the keeper disappeared from view.

Now, their attention shifted solely toward staying afloat in the angry river. They were being propelled downstream at an impressive speed, to destinations unknown. The force of the river was substantial, and it was all they could do to keep their heads above the water. They gasped and sputtered as the cold water periodically found its way into their mouths and down their throats.

"Hang in there, buddy!" Neil hollered.

"Where do you think we're going?" asked Jack.

"I suppose this river will just deposit us into the ocean eventually, and then we can just swim back to shore," said Neil. "Right? I mean, really, what's the-"

"Don't say it!" Jack interrupted.

"I was just going to say-"

"I know what you were going to say!" Jack assured him.

"But, really, Jack - what's the worst that could happen?" Neil asked with a good-natured giggle.

"You just had to say it, didn't you? You're really tempting fate, Neil!"

"Aw, come on, dude, this could have been soooo much worse! This water's sort of invigorating, isn't it? There's nothing quite like an ice cold dunking to pep you up!"

"That's for sure," Jack agreed. "And it's not as if we haven't already gotten soaked once today!"

"Woof!" came the bark of Nibbler, much closer than the boys would have expected.

They turned their heads toward the barking, and saw that Nibbler had managed to find a way down the steep slopes of the ravine. He now ran beside them along the riverbank, woofing frantically, anxious and upset that there was nothing he could do to help.

Murphy had also worked his way down the ravine, and he scampered along on all fours, keeping pace with the floating boys as they were swept downriver.

"Hey, guys!" Jack called. "Don't worry about us; just stay over there on dry land. I'm sure we'll be carried into a slow spot soon enough, and then we can swim to shore."

"Uh... I'm afraid I have some bad news about that," Neil said.

"What?" asked Jack. "It's got to slow down before we get to the ocean... right?"

Neil was suspiciously avoiding eye contact with Jack, and his attention was riveted at some point ahead. "Uh..." he sputtered, spitting out water as a wave hit him in the face.

"Right?"

“Well, you might want to take a look-see at what’s coming up here, buddy,” Neil advised.

Jack pivoted forward. “Egads!”

“I know, I know,” Neil told him.

“Neil, that’s a…”

“Yep, it sure is, isn’t it?”

“This is bad, this is really bad!”

“I’m sure something will occur to us…” Neil said in a manner that was rather vague.

“I sure hope it occurs to us quickly, because it looks like we don’t have much time!”

Nibbler woofed in agreement, anxiously trying to hurry the boys toward a solution.

Above the sound of the noisy, rushing river, something else could be heard, and it was growing louder - a monotonous, powerful roar. The source of the noise (judging from the awesome spray that was flying every which way) was a most bodacious waterfall.

The boys were sure the waterfall would have been plenty cool to observe from afar. But they were less than optimistic regarding the notion of riding down it, without so much as a life preserver to protect them.

They had no idea how tall the waterfall was, nor did they have any idea of how rough the landing would be. Would they be deposited onto an assorted pile of sharp rocks? Would they be able to fight their way back to the surface? Or would the force of the landing render them dazed, futilely struggling against a powerful tide?

“Not good!” Jack declared, in a most passionate embrace of the obvious.

“We seem to be coming up on the edge of that waterfall pretty quickly,” Neil noted. “The river’s just sweeping us right into it, don’t you think?”

“I know, I know!” Jack assured him.

The two of them were desperately swimming with all their strength, trying to angle their way toward the edge of the river so they could pull themselves onto land. But the current was too strong, and it propelled them along with increasing speed.

Nibbler and Murphy could also detect the impending danger, and they grew increasingly anxious as they ran along the riverbank. Murphy was surprisingly quick on his feet, and he raced ahead, scouting out the area where the edge of the river disappeared and the waterfall began. After a quick examination of the drop that the waterfall consisted of, he scrambled onto a dead tree that lay by the side of the river.

Apparently, the tree had fallen quite some time ago, and some of the branches had dried out to the point where they had broken free from the trunk. It was upon one of these dead branches that Murphy now scampered, and once atop it, he began squeaking as loudly as he could.

He jumped up and down, and with his squirrelly paws, he pointed at the branch in desperation. It was a curious display, but he did manage to grab the attention of Nibbler.

The Labradoodle immediately intuited the meaning of Murphy’s gestures. Though it seemed completely implausible that these two animals would have any hope of rescuing the boys as they were speedily swept toward the looming waterfall, one must take into consideration that these were not ordinary creatures.

Murphy was the beneficiary of scientifically enhanced intelligence, bestowed by Lefty's scientist sister in what had been known as Project Acorn. This process had transformed him into what was almost certainly the brightest rodent on the face of the planet.

Murphy was a master of mischief, pranks, and booby traps, but he could also use his noggin for more useful purposes, when he felt inclined to do so. And Nibbler was simply a freak of nature when it came to the department of brains, as he had proven time and time again.

With Murphy squeaking his encouragement, Nibbler bit into the dry, dead branch. He began pulling at it, and the few remaining plant fibers that were attached to the tree trunk were wrenched free with a splintering crack. Dragging it to the very edge of the river, he lodged it in place between two large stones, while Murphy assisted as best he could. The squirrel lacked the dog's strength, but he had the benefit of wonderful dexterity with his paws.

The boys were picking up speed, quickly coming up on the place where Nibbler and Murphy were doing their work. The roaring of the waterfall was loud in their ears, and spray was filling the air.

"That's it, Nibbler! Keep it up!" Neil encouraged.

"I can't believe they have the presence of mind to do this - these two are constantly surprising me!" Jack exclaimed with wonder.

"Just be grateful they've got more sense than most people," Neil said. "Now, get ready to grab on!"

They would just barely be able to grab the branch as they flew by, they realized. Reaching as far as he could, Neil strained and stretched, and his hand wrapped around the end of the branch.

He felt his hand start to slip, but then he tightened his grip on the rough surface of the bark, squeezing for all he was worth, just as if he were trying to secure a fly ball in the webbing of his glove while patrolling centerfield.

The branch began to give, flexing and bending from the force that had been put upon it. But the animals held on; Nibbler with his teeth, and Murphy with his paws. Together, they kept the end of the branch wedged between the rocks that were anchoring it.

Jack was slightly closer to the riverbank, but he struck the branch with so much force, he was pushed away from it after he hit it. He bounced roughly down the length of the branch, clutching for a secure grip as the current propelled him along. He desperately reached and grabbed, and it was upon Neil's shirt that he finally found a secure hold.

"I got ya, you slippery tomato!" Neil assured his friend, grabbing his upper arm.

The two held onto one another for dear life, and as Nibbler and Murphy helped hold the branch in place, they clumsily made their way onto dry land. After finally clambering ashore, they collapsed in exhaustion.

For some time, they could do nothing but heave with heavy breath, staring at the sun above them as they lay on their backs.

Nibbler was exceedingly happy to see that the boys were safe, and he expressed this by licking their faces. Murphy took turns bouncing atop each of their chests, snickering in his squirrely way.

"Good work, guys," Jack wheezed in gratitude.

“Ditto,” Neil gasped.

## Chapter Nineteen

### A Deceptive Distance

After they were able to regain their breath, Neil and Jack got to their feet and inched toward the edge of the waterfall. They could see that there was a significant drop, and had they landed below, it didn't look as if the experience would have been too comfortable.

"I can't believe that jerk was going to let us go flying down there!" Jack said in amazement.

"I know. What a doorknob," Neil agreed. Then he pointed to the distance. "Speaking of which... look over there!"

Jack looked where Neil was pointing, and there he saw the keeper, hobbling along on his peg leg, brandishing his burlap sack. He was a long distance off, and his position was at a significantly lower elevation than that of the Beans. The keeper had emerged from a trail in the woods, and he was now approaching the shore of the island.

The location was instantly recognizable to Neil and Jack, for it was there they had witnessed the remarkable presence of Pan Gu. It was the part of Smuttynose Island that formed the rocky cove, the place where the emerald dragon had last been seen, before their ship had been wrecked.

Within that cove, nestled among the many rocky outcroppings, there was a huge cavern. It loomed large, with a gargantuan opening that looked like the yawn of a prehistoric beast. The Beans wondered if perhaps that cavern served as a lair for Pan Gu.

"Check it out," Jack murmured.

The group watched as the keeper hobbled ahead, making his way into the cavern. Seawater flowed into the entrance, but there was also a strip of dry land, and it was upon this area that the keeper walked. Before long, he disappeared within the darkness of the cavern.

"The trail we were on must have continued on the other side of the bridge, going straight to that cove. It must be the keeper's hideout," Neil theorized.

"Hmm... do you think that's the place Pan Gu is hiding, too?" Jack wondered.

"I guess we'll find out soon enough. Unfortunately, there's no path down there, from where we are now. Looks like we've got some hard hiking ahead of us," Neil said, stretching out his back and legs in order to loosen up the muscles he had banged up today.

After a brief moment of preparation, the Beans began the next leg of their journey. Engaging in some extremely difficult hiking, the unique quartet of Neil, Jack, Nibbler, and Murphy set out for their goal: the cavern in the cove, the place where the keeper had last been seen.

To reach it, they were forced to plod through dense wilderness, pushing their way through the crowding embrace of vines and branches and brambles. Furthermore, there were steep rock inclines that required navigation, the contents of which shifted beneath their hands and feet as they scrambled over their surfaces.

The easy way to reach the cove was clearly on the other side of the bridge - the bridge that had been destroyed by the keeper. On that side of the river, the path through the woods continued, just as Neil had speculated.

The keeper had been able to reach his hideout with ease, even hobbled with his peg leg as he was. What the Beans were left with, on their side of the river, was a dense, hostile wilderness that resisted their every step.

Neil and Jack found themselves panting from their exertions. The bright sun beat down from above, warming them, quickly drying out the soggiess they had accrued from their trip down the river. As they struggled through the wilderness, they were amazed by how long it was taking them to cover a distance that was so relatively small in size.

The keeper's cave could not have been more than a half of a mile from the waterfall, yet the Beans were forced to move forward at an agonizingly slow pace. When one stepped off the path at Smuttynose Island, they discovered, the terrain could become incredibly difficult to traverse. At times, it almost felt as if the island might be in league with the keeper, conspiring to keep his pursuers from reaching him.

Nibbler was able to proceed with greater ease than the boys, for his low profile and impressive agility allowed him to navigate the woods without too much trouble. He slinked low to the ground when necessary, and bounded happily ahead when he could. Regardless of whether he was moving quickly or slowly, however, his wagging tail remained a constant, as did the sniffing of his snout.

There were only a couple of spots where Nibbler required help. When the group encountered particularly steep sections consisting of rock, Neil and Jack would work together to pass the Labradoodle over the obstacle, hefting his furry weight between the two of them. As always, the Beans made for an outstanding team that would do whatever was necessary for all of them to succeed.

Of the four of them, Murphy experienced the least amount of difficulty. He had remarkable agility, and he darted this way and that, sprinting through the densest pieces of vegetation as if they were no more than thin air. When vertical surfaces presented a challenge to the others, Murphy climbed them without issue, utilizing the unfailing grip of his claws.

He raced far in the lead of the group, scouting the way ahead. Then he would pause, waiting for the others. Turning toward them, he waved his squirrely paws about, squeaking indecipherable noises of encouragement.

"We're going as fast as we can, Murphy!" Neil assured his tiny friend. He was squeezing his way through densely packed foliage, pushing branches away from his face. "We can't squeeze through these tight spaces as easily as you can. Do you see anything up ahead?"

Murphy squeaked in response, but the exact meaning of his articulations remained a mystery to all those present, seeing how as none of them were fluent in the language of squirrels.

"Don't worry," Jack said, offering further words of encouragement to the group. "We'll reach the cave soon enough. And when we do, we'll be the ones with the element of surprise. That crazy keeper will never be expecting to see us again. He thought he got rid of us for good, but he'll be sorely disappointed to learn that we can't be dispatched of so easily!"

“Woof!” Nibbler added in agreement.

“You know, I thought this guy was just a tad dastardly when we first met him. But I’m coming to think that he just might be a first-rate scoundrel,” Neil opined.

“A goon! A lout! A rapsallion!” Jack added.

“I can’t believe he destroyed that bridge and tried to send us over the waterfall. And let’s not forget about the theft of poor Noodles’ head!”

“How could we forget?” asked Jack. “This guy is right up there with the likes of Jasper, as far as nefarious evildoings are concerned.”

The land was brutal, and the going was tough. But the four of them pressed on without complaint, urging each other on. They were determined to reach the keeper and reclaim Noodles’ noggin, and this strange quartet of adventurers was perseverant to the utmost. They would not be stopped, no matter the obstacles and obstructions.

Each of them was possessed of a strong will, and in the company of each other, they only grew stronger, bolstered by their fantastic friendship. Knowing they had one another to rely upon was like drawing from a powerful elixir, filling them with confidence and optimism.

As they proceeded through the rough terrain, Neil and Jack had long ago lost track of time. They only knew that every step through this hostile wilderness was a struggle, and every foot of distance gained was a small triumph.

Finally, after time untold, they pushed through a particularly dense section of brambles and strange shrubberies. They emerged into a clearing that existed at the top of a short cliff, overlooking the ocean and the rocky beach upon which its waves collided.

The four of them looked down at the semi-circular shape of the cove, and they could clearly see the cavern that the keeper must have been using as a hideout.

“Whew,” Neil exclaimed, wiping a hand across his forehead. “By the beard of Archimedes, I’m sure glad that’s over with.”

They estimated they had traveled only a half mile or so from the waterfall, but it was undoubtedly the hardest half mile they had ever faced. In that regard, it had been a distance of deception - in reality it was short, yet it felt like miles on end when they had been forced to traverse it. It had been a difficult distance to conquer, but the determination of the Beans had paid off.

They were scratched, scuffed, and bruised from their efforts, but they had at last reached the place where they had seen the keeper disappear from afar, as he had ducked into the cavern by the cove. From where they currently stood, it would be a short, relatively easy walk to the cave’s entrance.

They were ready - ready to face the keeper and get what they had come for.

“Okay,” Jack said, his voice firm with resolve. “Let’s go save Noodles from this lunatic.”

## Chapter Twenty

### The Cavern in the Cove

The Beans worked their way down the slope, passing through an area of dunes as they approached the cavern. Crabs scuttled from between the long, thick blades of beach grass, disturbed as they were by the odd passage of two humans, a Labradoodle, and a flying squirrel.

“More of these crabs, eh? These things were everywhere on the beach where our ship was wrecked. In fact, I found one of them in my shoe!” Neil commented.

“They certainly are abundant,” Jack agreed.

Nibbler chuffed quietly, and Murphy eyed the scuttling crustaceans with something that might have been weary suspicion. The creatures were nearly as big as him, after all, and they outnumbered him by a vast magnitude.

“Scutta-squeak-squeak,” Murphy solemnly chirped, on the subject of the island’s inordinate crab quantities.

Neil and Jack had hunkered down somewhat, taking advantage of the cover that the tall, green-yellow beach grass provided. They doubted the keeper would be on the lookout for them, but they were taking no chances.

Nibbler had hunkered down, recognizing the current emphasis on stealth, and his shoulder blades shifted from side to side as he slinked along. Murphy had once again regained his perch in the center of Nibbler’s back (quite possibly to stay out of the reach of the great multitude of crab pincers in the area).

“There’s no sign of him... let’s keep moving,” Jack said to the others in a low voice.

They were all eager to confront the keeper and reclaim Noodles’ noggin. And so they pushed forward, passing through the dunes, over the dry hills of sand, and onto the muddy area of beach, which was littered with stones and tidal pools.

There was a great assortment of huge, charcoal-colored boulders that followed the perimeter of the cove, and as each line of incoming waves crashed against them, they created a noise that endlessly repeated, keeping a hypnotic rhythm. As the waves broke against the rocks, clouds of sea spray exploded at each impact, filling the air with moisture and the smell of salt.

The sun was in the center of the sky, and it beat down in full force. The wet boulders glistened, and the sea shone with a dazzling reflection.

The quartet kept moving, stealthily darting among the boulders. Seaweed and broken shells and driftwood were spewed every which way, having been deposited upon the shore by the ocean’s timeless rhythm.

Interestingly, there were also pieces of broken cargo and various manmade items, which had apparently found their way ashore and been smashed upon the boulders. There were shattered crates and pieces of boats, most of which were marked by the passage of much time, yellowed with age and peeling varnish.

The Beans continued their advance, until they came to stand just before the entrance of the cavern. At this close distance, they could see that it was fairly enormous, looking even larger than it had from afar.

It looked a shade ominous, as well. A lone seagull was perched at the apex of the cavern's entrance, and a dozen or so crabs milled about, scrambling over rocks and sand.

"Gah!" Neil whooped, as he spotted something inside the cavern that seemed to have completely beggared his mind.

"What is it?" asked Jack, but his friend was already running ahead.

In his excitement, Neil abandoned caution and sprinted into the cavern, the soles of his sneakers splashing in shallow pools of seawater as he went.

"Come on!" he called to the others, who trailed behind him. "We have to check this out!"

Jack hurried to catch up, trying to keep sight of Neil as the cavern became increasingly dark. "What is it? And keep your voice down, Neil, or we'll lose the element of surprise," Jack whispered, his voice tense with urgency.

"Oh yeah, sorry," Neil said, reducing his own voice to a matching whisper. "I just got so excited - you have to - you just have to come and see this!"

Jack's eyes had not adjusted to the darkness of the cavern as quickly as Neil's had. But as he continued forward, becoming enveloped in the blackness, it was not long before he was able to see his surroundings much better. The cavern was, if anything, even larger than it had appeared from the outside.

Much of it was filled with seawater, and a makeshift dock had been assembled with assorted pieces of driftwood, mismatched lumber, and old rope. The style of construction looked remarkably similar to that of the ancient bridge that had been destroyed earlier.

It appeared that the dock and the bridge had both been built by the same person, a person who improvised and used whatever was available. The dock and the bridge were almost certainly the handiwork of the keeper, the crazed recluse who had claimed this island for his own.

Tethered to the makeshift dock was the thing that had gotten Neil so excited: a remarkable ship the likes of which was seldom seen. It was a finely built vessel, elegant and sleek of profile.

There were no modern materials, such as fiberglass, which was the synthetic material most frequently used to build boats over the past century. This ship was strictly wood, indicating that it was very old. Despite its age, it was in excellent condition, and it looked as if its owner did a fantastic job taking care of it.

The cavern provided a superior shelter for the ship. Here, it would be protected from the fury of violent storms... as well as from the prying eyes of would-be-interlopers. It was clear that the keeper valued his solitude upon the island above all else.

Peering over the edge of the hull, the Beans could see many ropes that were tied to the mast, as well as coiled on the deck. The sails were currently rolled tight, but they appeared to be fabricated from a weathered, faded black cloth. A large, old-fashioned steering wheel stood waiting upon the deck, and behind it there was a closed door that led to the ship's cabin.

"Ah-roo," Nibbler said in appreciation of the fine vessel, while Murphy quietly squeaked upon the Labradoodle's back.

At the stern of the ship, a number of words were printed in bold, black letters. It looked like they had been painted by hand, for the edges of the letters displayed the minor imperfections that were the result of human touch, as opposed to something machine-made. The Beans stared up at the curious phrase, pondering its meaning.

## **Chapter Twenty-One**

### **Queen Anne's Mild Rebuttal**

“Queen Anne's Mild Rebuttal?” asked Jack. “Is that this ship's name?”

“It must be,” Neil said. He found his voice rising with his growing excitement, and he had to remind himself to keep it down. “It's all coming together now... remember when I said there was something oddly familiar about the way the keeper put sticks of dynamite in his beard? Now I remember why... in the pirate books I've read, that was something the most famous pirate of all would do before entering battle, in order to frighten his enemies.”

“The most famous pirate of all? Do you seriously mean to tell me...” Jack trailed off.

Neil nodded in answer, his eyes bright with excitement. “That's right, Jack. Black Beard.”

“Black Beard? Here? Now? What on earth are you talking about? Did you bonk your gourd on the way down the river?” asked Jack, examining his friend with renewed concern. “Have you gone off your rocker, Neil?”

“Not the Black Beard, of course. He would have to be hundreds of years old now, if he were still alive, and that's just impossible. But remember how the keeper was going on about his famous ancestor? That must be who he was talking about. He's right, too! He is the spitting image of him, from the pictures I've seen... Although I believe Black Beard only used the fuses in his hair and beard, not the actual dynamite,” Neil pointed out. “That seems a bit, uh... reckless. Even by my standards.”

“Hmm... I see,” Jack said. His eyes had grown bright with excitement as Neil had proposed his theory, and he began pacing alongside the dock. “And why did seeing this ship make you put all this together just now?”

“It's the name that did it... Black Beard had several ships, but his most famous one, which was sunk, was called Queen Anne's Revenge. This one is called Queen Anne's Mild Rebuttal. There's no way that's a coincidence!”

“It doesn't seem to have the same ring to it as Queen Anne's Revenge,” Jack said thoughtfully, rubbing at his chin as he examined the docked vessel.

“Black Beard's ship was massive, and it required a big crew to operate at sea. This thing is tiny by comparison. I'd imagine it must be some kind of tribute to the original ship. If this guy really is a descendent of Black Beard, perhaps he's trying to honor his famous ancestor by keeping the pirating tradition alive... duplicating the way he looked, and sailing a ship with a similar name.”

“Not to mention stealing loot from other seafarers - like us!” Jack hissed, frowning at the thought, his fists becoming clenched in aggravation.

“Yeah, that's right. Noodles' noggin is a curious plunder by any measure, but we've got to recover it, no matter what. Even if this guy really is a relative of Black Beard, we've got to face him,” Neil said.

Jack nodded in agreement, while Nibbler chuffed and Murphy softly squeaked. The Beans were both fascinated and anxious about the prospect of facing the keeper, now that they suspected he might actually be a descendent of the infamous, fearsome Black Beard - a legendary pirate who had once ruled the seas under a flag that had inspired fear among all those who laid eyes upon it.

They continued walking alongside the dock until they stood beside the front of the ship. There, they saw that a curious wooden figurehead had been fastened to the bow. It was carved in the likeness of a giant crab, and its oversized pincers were raised in the air, as if braced for battle against similarly gargantuan crustaceans.

Neil stared at the figurehead thoughtfully. "Hmm... that is indeed a weird choice for a ship's mascot. But it does look pretty cool, and it's certainly fitting, considering the crab population of this island!"

As they walked beyond the ship's bow, they saw that the cavern was becoming brighter. Spiky rock formations protruded from the floor, as well as from the ceiling high above. Iridescent mushrooms clung to these rocks, and they cast a strange, bluish light that was enough to see by as the Beans proceeded deeper into the cavern.

By the light of these fantastic mushrooms, they saw what must have been the central point of the keeper's hideout, for it was filled with various objects that made it something like a pirate's paradise.

There were assorted wooden chests of all shapes and sizes, fitted with metal bands and rivets. Piled about in a haphazard manner, there were sacks of supplies and swords and curved sabers. Hung upon makeshift wardrobes, there were fanciful feathered hats and brown britches and billowy white blouses.

An old piano had been propped to one side, and upon it rested stacks of sheet music, which was surely a collection of classic pirate shanties. A dusty chandelier, covered with spider webs, had been rigged to an old gallows. It held a dozen lit candles, the white wax of which dripped upon the tarnished brass.

The candles further illuminated this section of the cavern, adding to the light cast by the strange, glowing mushrooms. Half a dozen crabs crawled among the assorted goods, scrambling over chests and sashaying across nets and swords.

The boys were instantly captivated by the amazing sight before them. To behold such a lair was the stuff of dreams. And to further consider that some of the collected loot might have even belonged to Black Beard long ago... well, that was enough to sufficiently blow their minds.

"Holy macaroni," Neil whispered. "Do you see all this awesome stuff?"

"Yes, I certainly do. But we had best not touch anything. Knowing this guy, he could very well have it booby trapped!" Jack whispered back.

Their eyes were glued to the pirate's horde of collected goods, their backs to the ship, but they quickly realized they should not have allowed themselves to become so thoroughly distracted. The sound of Nibbler growling (something he rarely did) startled them, causing them to sharply turn around.

As they came about to face the ship, they saw that the keeper had emerged from the confines of the cabin. He stood upon the deck of the Queen Anne's Mild Rebuttal, his fists planted upon his hips with an imperious demeanor. His gravelly voice, sounding as though it were filled with sand and broken seashells, boomed down at them.

“What are you blasted, half deaf landlubbers doing in my cove? How dare you trespass in my home!” His face twisted with outrage, and spittle flew from his lips as he spoke. His black beard trembled, and the sticks of dynamite within shook about. “By the eyes of my ancestor, I will not stand for this!”

## Chapter Twenty-Two Something Brewing Below

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t our old friend - the keeper of the island, as he likes to call himself,” Neil said, crossing his arms against his chest. “Your manners need a whole lot of work, do you know that, mister? And I see you’re still in dire need of a bar of soap and a bottle of shampoo, aren’t you?”

“Wha-?” the keeper sputtered, his fury growing by the moment. His chains jangled about his body, and he hobbled to the edge of the deck, his peg leg thumping upon the wood as he went. He leaned over the edge of the ship, placing his hands on the railing and staring down, his eyes burning like the hot embers of a well-stoked fire. “You impudent child, you’ll pay for that! How dare you trespass upon my island, and then set foot within the sanctity of my home, and then... and then, insult me, on top of it all!”

Jack stood beside his friend, his own arms crossed, and the two boys stared up at the pirate. They were not afraid or intimidated, regardless of the fact that they regarded the keeper with a weary respect. They had stood up to bigger, meaner bad guys before, and they weren’t about to back down. Certainly not when the stakes were nothing less than Noodles’ very head!

Nibbler was beside the boys, bolstering their confidence. He stood stiffly, trying his best to make his perpetually happy face look at least a little bit serious. He had mixed results - after all, it was next to impossible for a Labradoodle to look upset.

Murphy, however, was more successful in his attempts to appear stern. He twisted his squirrely face into a visage of curious rodent fury and squeaked up at the Queen Anne’s Mild Rebuttal. When the keeper spotted the pair of creatures, he gave them a suspicious glower, to which Murphy shook his fist and Nibbler loosed a woof.

The Beans were an odd bunch to look at, but there was no questioning their bravery, their daring, and their loyalty to one another.

“It’s like we told you before. Hand over our friend’s head, and we’ll be on our way and off of your precious island before you know it,” Jack said.

“Mind your tongue, boy! I don’t take orders from any grown man, and I’m certainly not about to take them from a lad! Besides... I couldn’t give you that shiny trinket, even if I wanted to. I’ve got plans for it, you see. It’s already been spoken for, if you will.”

“What are you talking about?” asked Jack, his voice growing with alarm. “What do you mean, ‘it’s been spoken for’? We need it!”

The cavern was largely filled with ocean water, which permitted the keeper’s ship to safely harbor within. The dimensions of the cavern created an oblong body of water that spread far beyond the dock, and there was dry land to either side.

It was within this stretching body of water that there now arose a... disturbance.

The keeper momentarily removed his fiery gaze from the Beans, glancing over his shoulder at the water behind him. When he turned back to face them, his eyes were alive

with mischief, and he smiled broadly, revealing the gaps and gold teeth that filled his mouth.

“Not to worry, you hearing-impaired cretins. It looks as though you’ll be finding out for yourself in just a moment. Don’t say I didn’t warn you, for I did warn you - I warned you plenty.”

There was a terrible commotion in the water. It looked as if it was beginning to boil, for it was bubbling and swirling with agitation. Jack and Neil raised their eyebrows as they observed this phenomenon, and Nibbler cautiously chuffed. It was clear that something was under the surface of the water, causing the strange reaction. And it was undoubtedly something big.

“Uh-oh. Is it Pan Gu, mister? Is that what’s in the water?” Neil asked. “I really don’t think you should be messing around with a monster like that. It turned out quite badly for the last two fellows who tried that. Their names are Jasper and Ebenezer and, oh, man - I’m telling you, they really brought a lot of trouble down on top of their heads - literally!”

The keeper’s eyebrows scrunched in confusion, and he snarled down at the Beans. “Pan Gu? What gibberish are you spouting off about, boy?”

“Pan Gu! The great serpent! The dragon!” Jack exclaimed. “Don’t you know?”

“A serpent, you say? A dragon? Nonsense!” the keeper declared. He turned his eyes back to the disturbance in the water, where the emergence of some unfathomable creature was imminent. “No. This is no serpent, you confused wretches. I told you to flee this island, didn’t I? Time and time again, I warned you, but you refused to heed my words. I warned you that to remain here would result in your certain doom. And now... it’s too late for you.”

## Chapter Twenty-Three

### Hail to the King

The water continued to bubble and swirl, like the bizarre contents of some gigantic witch's cauldron. What could it be, the Beans wondered? What was down there, beneath the surface, that had the ability to cause such a tremendous commotion? What lay below, stirring the inky depths and preparing to emerge?

Neil and Jack had felt sure that it must be Pan Gu, for only a creature of colossal size could create such a disturbance within the water. Furthermore, they remembered that during the storm, they had seen the emerald dragon retreat to this very cove.

But the keeper had seemed genuinely confused when they had suggested such a thing. So if it wasn't Pan Gu down there... what was it?

Though it would have been logical for Neil and Jack to back away from the water, thereby putting more distance between themselves and the unknown source of the disturbance, they found themselves inching closer to it.

Their curiosity was engaged, and despite what seemed to be impending danger, they were compelled to edge toward the place where sand and shell met water. They wanted to get as near as possible, so they could better view whatever this strange occurrence might be.

Nibbler and Murphy loyally remained by the side of the boys, advancing slowly toward the water until they stood at its edge. The Labradoodle's ears perked up with interest, and his head tilted inquisitively. Murphy's eyes grew wide, his cheeks puffing in a squirrely manner that conveyed curiosity.

Within a handful of seconds, the source of the commotion was revealed. Erupting from the ocean came a creature the likes of which the Beans could have never anticipated.

They had seen many like it before, for its appearance was familiar to them. However, they had never seen one of such a size... a size that defied the imagination. It was, quite simply, colossal.

It was a gigantic crab... a crab so huge, it was nearly the same size as the keeper's ship.

As it emerged in a great tumult of bursting bubbles and rollicking waves, the cold water ran down its hard, knobby, bluish shell. Its many legs moved like those of a spider, rearing back and then splashing down in the water with great impact.

It raised its enormous pincers into the air, high above its head, snapping them together. The noise those monstrous pincers made was like giant firecrackers exploding in the cavern, echoing against the rocky surfaces. Clack! Clack! Clack!

"I was not expecting that to happen!" Jack exclaimed.

"Great Pythagorean Theorem!" Neil gasped. "That is one amazing crustacean!"

At the sight of the unbelievable creature, the Beans were all compelled to take an involuntary step backward. It was an amazing spectacle, simultaneously filling them with

wonder and alarm. They certainly wouldn't want the giant to turn those formidable pincers in their direction.

"Behold - the Crab King!" the keeper bellowed from the deck of his ship. He cackled with glee, rubbing his filthy, grime-encrusted hands together. "He is the ruler of this island... and he must be appeased!"

Nibbler had turned his attention from the Crab King, and he was woofing at the ground, spinning around in quick circles. Neil and Jack felt something stirring at their ankles, and they looked down. To their amazement, they saw that an army of crabs had gathered at the shore.

The crabs faced the water and were excitedly clicking their pincers together in the air. It seemed as if they were saluting the Crab King, paying homage to their ruler.

Fortunately, Neil and Jack had an inordinate abundance of experience, when it came to dealing with things that fell within the realm of weirdness. Therefore, their minds were not completely blown by what they were witnessing, though they were appropriately impressed. They were taken aback and alarmed, but they were not overwhelmed, and they quickly tried to make sense of what they were seeing.

"Wow, that's really something, isn't it?" Neil asked his friend.

"Yep, it certainly is," Jack agreed. "Hopefully, it's an herbivore. What do crabs eat, exactly?"

"Uh... seaweed, let's hope," Neil said, though he was anything but certain of his answer. "Yeah. Let's just go with seaweed."

Jack cast him a suspicious glance that conveyed his doubts. "You're guessing, aren't you?"

Neil shrugged, smiling sheepishly. "Call it an optimistic wager, my friend!"

"Okay, let's go with seaweed. Seaweed it is!" Jack declared, in an equally optimistic demeanor (although he had a hard time imagining how the Crab King had managed to grow to such a size, if it had been eating nothing but seaweed).

"The Crab King must be appeased!" the keeper repeated from his place aboard the ship.

He reached down to the deck and lifted up a burlap sack, which the Beans instantly recognized. They watched as the keeper reached within the bag and withdrew Noodles' head, raising it to the height of his chest so that it was clearly visible.

Though the Beans were exuberant to see that Noodles' head was intact, suffering from nothing greater than a few scuffs and scrapes, they were distressed to see the keeper handling it in such a menacing manner. They realized there was far too much distance between themselves and the keeper for them to make any kind of attempt to snatch it away from him. For the time being, he had a clear advantage.

"Uh... what are you planning on doing there, buddy?" asked Jack wearily.

"It's like I've already told you twice now, you deafened dolt!" the keeper belted. "The Crab King must be appeased. Though this is my island, it's the true ruler of this place, and we've learned to live in harmony. I have to keep this big critter happy, or it gets a bit, er... crabby, if you will. I've found that it has a great fondness for trinkets. The shinier, the better! There's a whole horde of odd treasures in its underwater lair. And I think this little doodad you trespassers brought will please the Crab King greatly... oh, yes, it will be a fine addition to its collection."

“What? You’re going to give Noodles’ head to a crab? You’ve really flipped your wig, haven’t you?” Neil asked.

“We’re dealing with a genuine lunatic here,” Jack whispered to his friend. “And we can’t let him toss Noodles’ noggin into the water!”

“I heard that, you disrespectful landlubber!” the keeper retorted. “And you wouldn’t know the first thing about dealing with giant, cranky crustaceans!”

“Well, that’s probably true, but still - you’ve got to return what you have there. Noodles needs his head!” Jack begged.

“I’ll do no such thing! Why, I’ll do just the opposite, in fact!” the keeper taunted from his safe perch upon the ship.

He turned away from the Beans, coming to face the Crab King. With an air of pride, he held Noodle’s shiny, spherical head aloft, presenting it to the giant creature.

As its eyes fell upon the offering, the Crab King became agitated with anticipation, clicking its pincers together at an accelerated rate. The strange eyeballs that were protected within its armor-like shell seemed to bulge with desire at the sight of the strange treasure.

And then, to the horror of the Beans, the keeper threw Noodles’ noggin, launching it through the air toward the Crab King.

## Chapter Twenty-Four

### Bananas Inbound

“You doorknob!” Jack shouted at the keeper. “How could you?”

The Beans watched as Noodles’ spherical noggin soared through the air, arcing like a basketball that had been launched for a long pass. Time seemed to slow as they held their breath and watched this dastardly development unfold.

As far as they could tell, it seemed that Noodles’ head would now be lost for good. Their friend would be gone - and so would their only chance of escaping from Smuttynose Island.

The Crab King snapped its pincers in anticipation of the thrown offering, uttering a strange sound that was a bit dinosaur-like, echoing about the interior of the cavern. The keeper chortled with mirth, delighted with how well his gift was being received by his crustacean overlord.

But before the tossed head could meet its target, it was intercepted. Bursting from beneath the surface of the water with an elegant, quick motion came the creature that the Beans had tracked to the cove, but which had thus far remained hidden... it was Pan Gu.

The green dragon moved with an otherworldly grace, its lithe muscles twisting and contracting beneath the scaly flesh of its long body. Claws flashed, water splashed, and streams of smoke erupted from the beast’s nostrils.

It was an ancient creature that operated on instincts that had been honed over thousands of years. Therefore, perhaps it was out of nothing more than reflex that Pan Gu spotted Noodles’ soaring head, opened its jaws, and caught the flying object in its mouth. As it ingested the unconventional projectile, Pan Gu went: Ooomph!

“No!” Neil cried out, fearing retrieval of the robot’s head would be all but impossible, were the formidable Pan Gu to swallow it.

The keeper squawked in a most undignified (and un-pirate-like) manner at the sight of the green monster. His eyes bulged from his head and he held his arms before himself in a defensive gesture that was undoubtedly useless, considering the sheer size of Pan Gu.

“Blow me down and shiver me timbers! What have we got here? What have you miserable whelps brought upon my island?” he demanded.

“That’s Pan Gu! And we didn’t bring it to the island, we followed it here. It’s an ancient monster that can stimulate storms, like the one that caused us to shipwreck. It uses electromagnetic something or other to make - well, you’re probably not up to date on your scientific studies, anyway, so I’ll skip all that,” Neil summarized.

“A genuine serpent! Why, I’ve never seen one, in all my days of sailing the seven seas. It’s like... it’s like a...” the keeper trailed off, his eyes becoming unfocused and watery, his body swaying as he staggered on legs that had become uncertain.

“He’s losing it! Pan Gu’s presence is scrambling his mind, just like what happened to Lefty!” Jack exclaimed.

“We can’t worry about that right now - we’ve got bigger problems,” Neil reminded his friend. “Much bigger, as a matter of fact.”

They didn’t have just one oversized monster to contend with, but two. Just one or the other would have been more than enough, but the duo of giant crab and jade dragon made for a mountain of problems. The Beans would have been happy to run for the hills, if not for the fact that they were still intent on retrieving their friend’s missing head, as improbable as that goal seemed.

Pan Gu’s jaws were slowly working, as it moved Noodles’ noggin about in its mouth. It was as if the beast was trying to determine if what it had caught was something that was tasty and worth eating. While it did so, the color of its eyes transformed.

Originally, they had been of a startling emerald-green clarity, but they were now becoming black in color, swirling hypnotically. As this transformation occurred, the cavern began rumbling with the sound of thunder, and heavy rainfall could be heard as it struck the beach outside. Pan Gu was exercising its strange storm-bringing abilities once again.

The Crab King, meanwhile, had become most agitated with this interruption. The gargantuan crustacean bellowed with rage as its shiny prize was stolen at the moment before delivery. Not willing to let the insult stand, particularly within the cove that served as its home, the creature lumbered forward.

“I think things are about to get crazy in here!” Jack warned.

“Wait a second - do you mean to tell me that things weren’t already completely bananas in here, with a giant crab, a pirate’s lair, and the descendent of Black Beard hijacking Noodles’ cranium?” Neil asked.

“Things are about to get even more bananas!” Jack said, pointing at the pair of half-submerged monsters.

The Crab King closed the distance to Pan Gu, who was still distracted with the process of sampling the flavor of the shiny, metallic object it had caught in its mouth. When Pan Gu had erupted from the depths of the cavern’s water, it had turned toward the ship, in order to catch the thrown head. Therefore, its back was currently turned toward the Crab King, which blindsided the dragon with a blow from one massive pincer.

As the giant claw struck Pan Gu, the force of the impact caused the monster to stumble forward. The serpent’s mouth came open, and Noodles’ head went flying across the cavern, trailing giant globs of drool behind it.

“There it goes!” Jack exclaimed, pointing in the air.

Neil’s eyes grew even wider as he tracked the noggin’s trajectory. “Keep an eye on it and see where it lands!”

The Beans were exhilarated that Noodles’ head was actually receiving a second lease on life. They had thought it was gone for sure, once Pan Gu had caught it within its monstrous jaws.

The noggin went flying into a wall of the cavern. It bounced off of some spiky rocks, struck the pirate’s piano with a clang of off-key chords, and finally rolled to a stop in the sand.

“There!” Jack gasped, pointing.

The boys were elated that they would finally be able to retrieve Noodles’ head. There was only one further problem they had to overcome, as far as they could tell: it

seemed that the cavern in the cove had become a wrestling ring for giant monsters, and it was beginning to fall down around their ears.

## Chapter Twenty-Five When Monsters Mash

Pan Gu, it seemed, did not enjoy being the recipient of a sneak attack from behind. When the great, green dragon had been struck, the force had been enough to make it lurch forward, coughing out Noodles' poor, spit-slobbered head.

The Beans speculated that in the long life of Pan Gu, it had seldom been hit so hard, for few creatures could stand on equal footing with the legendary beast.

It spun about immediately, in a blazing flash of serpentine muscle and flashing emerald scales, causing a tremendous splashing and spraying of sea water. Pan Gu loosed a bellow of rage, spewing black smoke and hot sparks from its nostrils. Its eyes churned with discontent, and the thunder seemed to intensify.

Opening its jaws wide, Pan Gu bit into the Crab King. The crustacean's shell was so hard, the dragon's teeth were unable to penetrate it. However, the Crab King was clearly in some discomfort, for it released another one of its dinosaur-like shrieks, and it moved violently from side to side, trying to shake free from the grip of Pan Gu.

It was unable to do so, and in defense, the Crab King utilized one of its giant pincers, clamping it down upon the body of its enemy. The dragon flinched, and there was no doubt that the pincer was exerting enormous pressure upon its body. The pair of monsters remained locked together for several seconds, thrashing around the cavern in a ballet of sheer destruction.

The very force of their movements shook the earth, and the Beans felt the ground trembling beneath their feet. As they continued to vigorously wrestle, creating great waves in the water, the monsters broke free from the grip they held on one another. Pan Gu came loose from the pincer, and the Crab King was released from the dragon's toothy embrace.

As they came apart, their momentum caused each of them to fly back into the cavern's walls. The tremendous impact shook the place, and great chunks of rock fell from the ceiling, cannon-balling into the water with huge splashes.

Other rocks fell upon the monsters, but they bounced off of their tough exteriors without notice. The giant creatures were focused only on one another, and they were oblivious to the destruction they were wreaking. More pieces of rock fell upon the shoreline where the Beans stood, avoiding them by margins that were far too close for comfort.

"Uh-oh," Neil said, as a chunk of the cavern's ceiling plopped into the sand a few feet in front of him. "Let's grab Noodles' head and get out of here, shall we?"

"At once!" Jack agreed, while Nibbler woofed his own assent.

Some distance had been created between the monsters when they had separated, but they wasted no time in closing it. The dragon streaked toward its rival like a blur of green lightning, splashing through the water and shrieking with rage. The Crab King stomped to meet its adversary, raising its pincers over its head like weapons of war.

They met like colliding storm fronts, and immediately began exchanging a torrent of furious blows. Pan Gu struck out with its teeth and claws and tail, and each time it landed a hit, sparks flew from the giant crustacean's shell, which was proving to be downright indestructible. The Crab King lashed out with its pincers and legs, and it found that the scaly hide of Pan Gu was similarly resistant to attack.

Each of them was enormously powerful. Pan Gu had a clear advantage in speed, but the Crab King's impressive armor made it seemingly impervious to damage, enabling it to withstand an unlimited number of attacks.

Despite their desire to leave the place, Neil and Jack couldn't help but be somewhat mesmerized by what they were witnessing. After all, it was the opportunity of a lifetime to watch two giant monsters duke it out with one another - and the Beans had front row seats!

"I know we've really got to get going, but this is truly awesome!" Neil shouted with glee, hopping from foot to foot with excitement.

"I know!" Jack agreed. "Who do you think will win?"

"It's anybody's game to take - just look at them go!"

As they glanced over their shoulders to continue observing the battle of titans, they hurriedly made their way to the place where Noodles' head lay on the sand. Once there, they picked it up and quickly did their best to wipe the sand and dragon's drool from its metallic surface.

"I think Noodles is going to be okay," Jack said with relief.

Though Noodles' noggin had suffered a few scuffs and scrapes, and it had been subjected to an amount of saliva that anybody would deem unreasonable, it seemed to otherwise be fine. Lefty had built Noodles to last, and the robot's head looked like it would be okay.

As the monsters continued their epic battle, the cavern deteriorated at ever increasing speeds. The chunks of rock that fell were larger than ever, and huge holes were appearing in the ceiling as it crumbled. The Beans looked up, and they could see a lightning storm raging outside, undoubtedly the result of Pan Gu's doing. Cold rain fell, and high winds blew about in shifting directions.

"Woof!" Nibbler said with growing alarm.

"We've got to get of here before the whole place collapses, or we'll be trapped!" Jack shouted over the fray.

As the Beans began their hasty retreat, Neil held Noodles' noggin tight within his arms. They had been through so much to retrieve it, there was no way he was going to risk losing it again. The cavern shook and the earth trembled, but there was no chance he was going to let go of his robotic friend's head.

Neil, Jack, Nibbler, and Murphy raced for the mouth of the cavern, leaping over obstacles and darting from the path of falling debris. As they passed by the dock, they glanced up at the Queen Anne's Mild Rebuttal.

The keeper's ship was rocked as the water was made into a turbulent mess by the monster mash. It remained tethered to the dock, but it rose and descended sharply, causing the keeper to stumble. In his dazed, disoriented condition, there was no chance of him retaining his balance.

With a subdued squawk, the stupefied pirate tumbled over the railing at the edge of the ship's deck. He fell upon the dock, bounced off of the old driftwood, and then landed on the sandy shore amid a pile of crabs and seashells.

At that moment, the Beans felt a tremendous wave of heat envelope the cavern. Squinting their eyes against the increased temperatures, they looked back at the rampaging monsters.

Pan Gu was releasing a wide stream of flame from its mouth, bellowing as it did so. The Crab King bore the brunt of this fiery expulsion, and its hard shell protected it well, though it did submerge itself beneath the water for a quick cool down.

Pan Gu's exhalation soon ended, but hot sparks filled the air like a swarm of mosquitoes. Several of the sparks descended upon the ship and the dock, but they quickly died off and disappeared before they could instigate a fire.

However, when sparks found the keeper's beard, there was a most troubling reaction. The long fuses that protruded from his facial hair were seasoned with age and sunshine, a combination that made them highly flammable. When the sparks landed among the frayed mess of a beard, a pair of those fuses burst into flame, slowly sizzling as they burned away the material.

The fuses, of course, were attached to sticks of dynamite.

"I suppose that should make things interesting - don't you think?" Neil asked his wide-eyed companions.

## Chapter Twenty-Six

### I'm No Scientist

At the sight of the ignited fuses of dynamite, the Beans were exceedingly tempted to sprint in the opposite direction, running as far and as fast as they could. There was, after all, nothing quite like a ticking time bomb to get you moving.

It would have been most prudent for them to create as wide of a distance between themselves and the lit sticks of dynamite as possible. Not to mention the collapsing cavern, the giant crab, and the angry dragon, all of which were excellent reasons to depart at the highest possible speed.

However, they did not run away. Though the keeper had been nothing but rude to them, and had caused them an enormous amount of trouble, they could not simply leave him as he was.

Neil and Jack had strong consciences, and they couldn't leave a helpless man to have his head blown off, even if that particular man had intentionally caused them so much grief. At great risk to their own safety, they stayed to help.

"Gah! I'm no scientist, but I believe if that dynamite blows, his melon will explode like a ripe cantaloupe!" Neil speculated.

"Quick, grab the dynamite and toss it!" Jack exclaimed.

Though reluctant to part with Noodles' noggin, Neil quickly set it down on the sand so he could free his hands. Then, he and Jack lurched forward, reaching for the keeper's beard. Each of them grabbed a stick of dynamite and tugged.

But try as they might, the red cylinders of packed explosive wouldn't come free. The keeper's beard was so long, so matted and furled and wild, it had thoroughly ensnared the dynamite that had been nestled within for so long.

"We don't have time for this. Help me drag him to the water!" Jack shouted.

The boys each grabbed an arm of the keeper and hauled. They didn't bother trying to pull him to his feet, but simply dragged him along the sand. The water was only a few feet away, but it seemed as if it was a distance of miles, due to the stress of the moment. As they hauled the stupefied pirate along, they could hear the fuses burning away, drawing ever closer to the dynamite.

"Man, this guy really needs that bar of soap I was mentioning earlier," Neil muttered, as he took in the keeper's powerful aroma, which emanated from his tattered robe.

"We've got to move faster!" Jack shouted.

The sound of the burning fuses sizzled in the ears of Neil and Jack, and they hauled the keeper for all they were worth. He murmured incoherent gibberish as he was dragged along, oblivious to the explosive state of his bedraggled beard.

Nibbler cleared a path for the boys, shooing away the gathered crabs, pushing them with his snout and loosing barks at them. Murphy sprinted through the crabs, further helping clear the area by dispersing the crustaceans while he wildly waved his arms and uttered squirrely sounds.

The boys reached the edge of the shore, and they wasted no time. A bit of shallow water was all they needed, and they put it to good use. Together, they dunked the keeper's head into the cold water, face first.

Neil and Jack heard the fuses hiss as their sparks were snuffed, and they sighed with relief. Nibbler slumped to the ground, and Murphy promptly joined him, both of them panting.

Unwilling to take any chances, they continued holding the keeper's head underwater for several seconds, to ensure the fuses were completely extinguished. After a moment of this, the pirate began to shake about, and a horde of bubbles rose from the water.

"It's for your own good, mister!" Neil chuckled.

After another few seconds of dunking, Jack said, "Okay, let's let him up."

They lifted the keeper's head, and the soaked pirate sputtered and gasped, gratefully taking in breaths of air. The fuses in his beard were now quite short, barely protruding from the sticks of dynamite, so it seemed they had been doused in the nick of time.

Invigorated by the dunking, the keeper snarled at the Beans, demanding an explanation. "What do you miserable wretches think you're doing? Show some proper respect, why don't you?"

"Hey, we just bailed you out, dude! Your dynamite ignited, and your coconut was about to detonate!" Neil explained.

"And in all fairness, you were long past due for a washing of that beard," Jack pointed out.

"How about a 'thank you'?" Neil asked.

"Woof!" Nibbler added, barking into the startled keeper's face.

The keeper rose to his knees in the sand and water, feeling at his face with both hands, his chains jangling at his wrists. As his fingers ran over the dynamite fuses, he murmured in astonishment.

"I don't know what happened... I was aboard my ship, and then... everything just sort of went... fuzzy."

"Yeah, that happens to people when they get too close to Pan Gu," Jack explained.

"What are you carrying on about, boy?" the keeper asked with squinted, suspicious eyes.

"Pan Gu, you doorknob! The giant lizard-thing! Don't you remember?" Neil asked.

"Ah, yes... now I recall... the emerald serpent..." the keeper murmured, slowly shaking his head as he tried to gather his wits and remember.

"Listen, mister, whether you like it or not, you owe us your life. It seems like a 'thank you' is out of the question, but the least you can do is answer a few questions," Jack reasoned.

The pirate lifted his eyes and gazed at the Beans, grumbling beneath his breath.

"What do you say, buddy?" Neil asked. "How about you give us some answers?"

## Chapter Twenty-Seven

### The Bloodline of Black Beard

“The least you can do is tell us your name,” Jack said.

“Very well,” the keeper grudgingly relented. “Hickory Stick Bill, that’s what they call me.”

“Wha-? Hickory Stick Bill?” asked Jack, exchanging a confused look with his companions. “What kind of a name is that for a pirate?”

“It’s on account of my peg leg, it is! Built from the finest hickory that can be found. It’s been sturdier and more reliable than my real leg, as a matter of fact,” Hickory Stick Bill explained.

The pirate curled one hand into a fist and rapped his weathered knuckles against his peg leg affectionately. Thwock, thwock! Meanwhile, Nibbler had edged forward and was cautiously sniffing at the wooden appendage, his ears twitching as he inspected it.

“Arr, this leg has served me well. I had it fashioned by an excellent craftsman in Jamaica who was in the business of building replacement limbs for injured seafarers, and I’ve relied upon it for many a year,” Hickory Stick Bill said.

“Well, your name doesn’t have the same ring to it as ‘Black Beard’, but I do like the sound of it,” Neil said.

“Black Beard, eh? Hah!” Hickory Stick Bill threw back his head and laughed. “Well, then, perhaps you rambunctious whelps aren’t as thick skulled and dim witted as your actions led me to believe. You recognize the resemblance, do you?”

“Of course! Not too many people go strolling around with dynamite in their beard. But are you really a descendent of Black Beard?” Neil asked.

“Or...” Jack said, “are you simply some maniac who’s flipped his wig, prancing around in costume and entertaining his delusions of grandeur on a deserted island?”

Hickory Stick Bill glowered at Jack, leveling his fiery eyes at the boy who had suggested he might be an impostor. Of course, it was a bit hard to take him seriously, in his current, drenched condition, with his hair and beard even more askew than usual. “How dare you? I’m the last in the bloodline of Black Beard himself, the most famed and feared pirate to ever raise sail!”

“Could you tell us more?” Neil asked. He could sense that the pirate actually wanted the opportunity to prove that he was descended from Black Beard, because his pride had been wounded. “You know, we did just save your gourd from an explosive meeting with some lit dynamite. You could try being a little bit gracious, and entertain our curiosity.”

The pirate muttered darkly, trying his best to look agitated and fearsome. “As if you troublesome children could possibly make demands of me. What I tell you now, I tell you only because I wish to do so, not because you asked...”

“My great ancestor, Black Beard, first laid claim to this island over two hundred years ago. He was sailing in these northern waters - which were a bit cold for his liking, after his time in the Caribbean - when he spotted this place. In his journal, he described

one end of the island as ‘resembling the smutty nose of some great creature’, thanks to the large amounts of seaweed that had accumulated there. This phrase caught on with the local fishermen, and thus-

“Smuttynose Island found its name!” Neil concluded with excitement.

“Hey! Who, exactly, is telling the story here? Is there another descendent of Black Beard lingering about? Perhaps some distant cousin that I overlooked? Or am I the only one?” Hickory Stick Bill inquired.

“Uh, right you are, sir! Sorry for the interruption, and please continue!” Neil encouraged.

“Arr...” Hickory Stick Bill grumbled. But after a moment of running a hand through his soaked, disheveled beard, he continued where he had left off. “As I was saying, you impudent landlubbers, Black Beard found Smuttynose Island to be to his liking, and it was especially agreeable in the summer months, when the weather was pleasant.

“He established a hideout in this very cove, and it was here that he had his honeymoon with his bride. Over the years, he would return here many times, as would his offspring. We’ve kept the hideout within our family, passing it down through the generations. Alas... I am the last of Black Beard’s bloodline, for I never had any children of my own. I find them to be far too much trouble for my liking, and meeting the unruly likes of you two has only reinforced that belief.”

Sensing that Hickory Stick Bill had concluded his tale, Neil couldn’t wait to fire his next question. “You think kids are trouble? But you’re a pirate! Isn’t trouble what you’re all about?”

“Bah!” Hickory Stick Bill grumbled, absently waving his hand to dismiss the notion.

“Aw, come on, admit it - you’re starting to like us, aren’t you?” asked Jack. “We’re growing on you!”

Hickory Stick Bill’s eyes grew wide, and he sputtered, “I most certainly am not starting to like you! By the eyes of my ancestor, just look what you fools have brought down upon my cove! This hideout has been in the family for hundreds of years, and now it’s being destroyed right before me!”

“Well, in fairness, that’s Pan Gu’s doing. That has nothing to do with us,” Neil pointed out.

“It’s got nothing to do with you?” the pirate asked in disbelief. “Do you mean to tell me it’s nothing more than coincidence that the lot of you all show up on my island at the same time?”

Jack spoke up. “No, see, what happened was we followed the monster here. We were on a scientific expedition, when we got shipwrecked. My Uncle Lefty was in charge, and he theorized that Pan Gu came here after he escaped from Portsmouth. We tracked it here in our boat, and then we saw it emerge from the water off the edge of the island, right in this very cove.”

“Lefty thinks Pan Gu has been here for a few days now. Have you noticed any strange weather lately?” Neil asked. “That’s a telltale sign of Pan Gu’s presence, what with its electromagnetic defense mechanisms.”

“Arr...” Hickory Stick Bill grumbled. Though loathe to admit the boys might have a legitimate point, he grudgingly conceded, “Things have been rather bumpy here at

Smuttynose the past few days, I'll grant you that. There's been thunder and lightning the likes of which I've never seen. The weather will be as fine as can be one moment, with clear skies and bright sun, and then... dark clouds will materialize, with cracks of thunder to deafen your ears, and bolts of lightning to blind your eyes. Moreover, the wind and rain is enough to knock you down or smash your ship. These storms vanish as quickly as they arrive... it is curious, I'll grant you that."

"That sounds like Pan Gu, all right," Neil said.

"A genuine sea serpent," Hickory Stick Bill muttered. "I never thought I'd live to see the day. I believed they were nothing more than myth... and it's got sorcery at its beck and call, too, does it?"

"No, it's actually science, Mr. Hickory Stick," Neil corrected. "It can disrupt electrical current with ions and electrons and, uh... well, I can't remember all the specifics, to be perfectly honest."

Hickory Stick Bill squinted his eyes suspiciously.

"I'm losing you, aren't I? Well, in any event, the end result is the same: Pan Gu can summon storms!" Neil exclaimed.

"Yes, I gathered that, boy," Hickory Stick Bill assured him, as he flinched from an exceedingly loud crack of thunder.

"Pretty cool, don't you think?" Neil asked.

"Nyar... it would be a sailor's worst nightmare," the pirate murmured. "To encounter this beast on the open seas would mean certain doom."

"Hey, we survived an encounter with it, right?" asked Jack.

"Luck smiles upon fools and half-wits," Hickory Stick Bill grumbled.

"You're a little rough around the edges, aren't you, Mr. Hickory Stick? Remember that whole saving your head from dynamite thing?" Neil asked the pirate.

Hickory Stick Bill ran a gnarled hand over his eyes and muttered beneath his breath, cursing his various misfortunes.

"Speaking of strange creatures, what is the deal with this giant crab?" asked Jack, as the cavern continued to shudder from the destructive battle of the beasts.

"The Crab King rules this place," Hickory Stick Bill said. "I like to think of Smuttynose as my island, but that creature is undoubtedly the most powerful force here, and I have no doubt that if it wanted me gone, it could get rid of me, one way or the other. When Black Beard married his bride, he received that crab as a wedding gift from a fellow captain of the seas... it was an exceptionally rare species, native to much warmer climates. It wasn't much bigger than any other crab at that time, but it quickly grew, flourishing in an environment where it was free from the threat of natural predators. Over the generations, it's continued to grow."

"You mean to tell me that this is the same crab that Black Beard brought here, back in the 1700s?" asked Jack.

"Oh, aye, it certainly is old. I'd wager that's how it got to be so big! Of course, the Crab King did experience a rapid growth spurt about five years ago..."

"How come?" asked Neil.

"I was away at sea for some time, and when I returned to Smuttynose, I discovered a group of madmen had taken up residence. They had all kinds of strange equipment, and a real peculiar way of going about their business. I guess they might have been doctors or something, but they weren't like any doctors I've ever seen before."

“That’s really interesting. Were they scientists?” asked Jack.

“I don’t know what they were, or what they were doing. They could have been men of science, I suppose. But shortly after I chased them from my island - using some clever tricks, I might add - some of the wildlife here started to act kind of funny... And that’s when the Crab King began growing really fast.”

## **Chapter Twenty-Eight**

### **Like a Bird Without Wings**

Jack and Neil exchanged a curious look with one another. Who were these mysterious people that Hickory Stick Bill was talking about, and what manner of skullduggery had they been up to on Smuttynose Island? Could it have possibly been...?

“Do you think it was the work of the Black Hats?” Neil asked his friend, giving voice to their shared suspicions.

“Hmm... it’s certainly possible. They’re the only band of mad scientists that I know of. But what on earth could they have been doing? I mean, did you see the size of that crab?” Turning his attention to the pirate, Jack inquired, “I know it was an awfully long time ago, but did they leave any of their equipment behind? Could we take a look at it?”

Hickory Stick Bill snorted. “Not unless you can hold your breath like a porpoise, boy. Their former possessions now lie beneath the water, in the Crab King’s lair. Those shiny contraptions made fine gifts for the ruler of Smuttynose!”

Jack sighed, envisioning millions of dollars of high tech equipment rusting away beneath the water, all for the sake of appeasing the Crab King. “Considering what we’ve already learned about you, I suppose I shouldn’t be particularly surprised by that answer.”

The cavern shuddered and shook, trembling beneath the feet of the Beans. The air was electric with the force of Pan Gu’s workings, adding to the aura of instability.

“I, for one, think it might be time to abandon this cavern,” Neil said. “The weather outside isn’t very pleasant, but I think it’s going to be a whole lot safer than this cavern. These monsters are tearing the place apart!”

“My precious hideout,” Hickory Stick Bill murmured, shaking his head sadly. The Beans watched in amazement as the grizzled pirate wiped at a tear that escaped from the corner of his eye. “It’s served my bloodline well for so very many years. But I fear you’re right - it won’t survive much more of this abuse.”

Chunks of rock were falling at an increased pace, splashing into the water and colliding with the shore. A stalactite plummeted down and crashed into the pirate’s piano, smashing it to smithereens with a tremendous discord. Fragments of rock and busted wood scattered, taking out various goods.

Jolted by the impact, the chandelier spun wildly, before dropping to the ground amid the wispy streams of snuffed candles. Hickory Stick Bill recoiled as he watched this destruction of his collection of loot.

“As much as I hate to abandon this place...” the pirate said with deep contemplation, “I’ve got a feeling this isn’t my island anymore. It belongs to those giant creatures now. Is there enough space on Smuttynose for both of them? I don’t know, but I trust they’ll find out soon enough.”

The monstrous battle had continued, with both beasts exchanging tremendous blows. Now, their contest seemed to be reaching a crescendo, as each of them exhausted

their energies upon defeating the other. The Crab King screeched like a prehistoric creature, and Pan Gu bellowed in return, loosing flame from its mouth and black smoke from its snout.

Dragon claws scraped across crustacean shell, creating a shower of sparks that spread into the air. The Crab King was striking out with its pincers with everything it had, scuttling this way and that to keep up with the nimble serpent.

It was a fascinating spectacle, and the Beans watched it with great interest, peering around the edge of the Queen Anne's Mild Rebuttal. Hickory Stick Bill wisely kept his eyes averted, for fear of becoming once more stupefied.

"As awesome as this monster mash is, we've got to get out of here while we still can - we've got to make a bolt for it!" Jack shouted over the roaring of beasts and thunderbolts alike.

Nibbler was animatedly jumping up and down, woofing his agreement with the plan. Murphy was anxiously hopping from foot to foot and waving the humans into action with his paws. Neil once more lifted Noodles' noggin, this time handing it to Jack for safekeeping.

As the Beans began bolting for the entrance to the cavern, they could see the violent storm that awaited them, raging outside in full force. Though they knew it was still daytime, the world had turned dark. Frequent streaks of lightning brought illumination, forking across the sky in jagged patterns of brilliant white.

Rain pelted the earth and the ocean, while gale-force winds lashed the trees and vegetation. Huge waves were being created by the storm, and they crashed into the boulders that lined the cove. Blasts of thunder occurred so rapidly, it sounded like an exchange of cannon fire between battleships.

The storm that awaited the Beans was not exactly a welcome sight, but it was a marked improvement over the crumbling cavern and the dangerous giants that were bringing it down.

As the boys looked over their shoulders, they saw that Hickory Stick Bill was not following them, which came as quite a shock. Instead, he had his back turned to the Beans, and he was facing his ship.

"What's that maniac doing?" Neil asked.

"I can't believe this!" Jack exclaimed.

The Beans took a dozen steps back toward the pirate, and then shouted to get his attention.

"Hey! Mr. Hickory Stick, you've got to come with us," Neil called. "Forget about your ship, you've got to leave it behind!"

The pirate turned and regarded the Beans. His eyes were once more filled with fire and the passion for adventure that Neil and Jack recognized. He was already unlashng one of the ropes that held the ship to the dock, and he continued working as he spoke to them.

"Nay, I won't leave my ship! She's all I've got now... I may have lost my ancestor's hideout, and all of the loot my bloodline has acquired over the generations, but I won't lose my ship. A pirate without a ship is like a bird without wings! I wouldn't know how to live without her!"

“Dude, you’ve got to get with the times - pirating is no longer a viable career!” Neil argued. “Have you considered contributing to society? There’s a lot of other things you can do besides, uh... you know, plundering and whatnot. Come with us!”

Hickory Stick Bill threw back his head and laughed, all the while struggling to unleash the ship, which was violently rocking against the dock. “You landlubbers know not the way of the sea. You wouldn’t understand!”

“If you say so, mister. But we’re telling you, there’s some really great stuff you’re missing out on, back in civilization. Soap, shampoo, toothpaste... man, I bet you’ve never even had a pizza or played video games!” Jack added.

“Farewell, lads - and you know something... you’re not half bad, as far as children are concerned,” the pirate admitted, as he continued working to untie his ship.

Realizing there was no way they were going to persuade Hickory Stick Bill, the Beans decided to leave him be and hope for the best. There was precious little time to spare, and they sensed that any moment might be the cavern’s last.

“Take care of yourself, buddy!” Neil called.

“Good luck!” Jack shouted.

“Woof!” Nibbler added.

The Beans turned and raced for the exit. Jack clutched Noodles’ head to his stomach like a basketball as he ran, with Neil right beside him. Nibbler led the way, his ears flopping wildly as he sprinted ahead. Murphy scrambled on all fours, sidestepping some obstacles and scurrying over others.

At their backs, they could hear the roar of monsters and the collapsing of the cavern. It sounded, they thought, like nothing short of the end of the world.

## Chapter Twenty-Nine

### To Be and To Have

Exhausted by their adventures, the Beans trudged along the shore of the island. The storm had subsided some time ago, but they were still soaked from the monsoon-like rains, and the wet clothes of Neil and Jack clung to their skin like damp shrouds. Nibbler and Murphy were also drenched, and they periodically shook themselves to try to rid their fur coats of moisture.

Though the lightning, rain, and wind had vanished, the clouds remained. They had transformed from dark black to a much lighter gray color, but they still blocked the sun, and the Beans were chilly in their soaked condition.

When they had fled the crumbling cavern of Hickory Stick Bill, the Beans had found themselves in a terrifying, exhilarating display of nature's wrath. With no shelter available, they had no choice but to keep running, desperately seeking a place to hide from the lightning.

As they had sprinted along, they had searched for another cave, or even a low valley that would have offered some protection. But there was nothing to be found, and so they had continued running, putting as much distance between themselves and the battling monsters as possible.

They had run through the rocky cove, leaving the cavern behind, continuing down the beach. Behind them, they could still hear the clashing of the beasts and the crashing of boulders.

Within moments of their retreat, the storm had reached the apex of its powers. A rapid sequence of chain lightning filled the air, centered on the cavern in the cove. The air had become so bright, the Beans had no choice but to close their eyes against the intensity of it. Thunder had roared so loudly, it deafened them for a moment.

Following that final display of nature's awesome power, the storm had ceased. So sudden was the stoppage of rain and wind, it was as if somebody had thrown a switch. With the storm having subsided, the Beans had permitted themselves to slow to a walk, since there was no longer any immediate danger they could detect.

Once their ears had adjusted to the relative silence, they had realized they could hear nothing of the former chaos. There was no trace of Pan Gu's bellows, or the Crab King's shrieks, or the collapsing of massive amounts of rock.

Now, they continued forward, trudging through the sand. Since Lefty had stayed behind on the beach, the Beans knew they could return to him by simply following along the coastline. Eventually, they would circle back to the stranded scientist, no matter the distance that separated them.

The consequences of their unlikely adventure had finally caught up to them, and a great weariness had washed over them. Their limbs were heavy, and walking along the beach felt more like trying to make their way through quicksand. With the storm gone, the ocean was once more at peace, and the Beans found the rhythmic breaking of the waves to be nearly hypnotic, lulling them to sleep on their feet.

“I hope Uncle Lefty’s okay,” Jack said quietly.

“Woof,” Nibbler added, in an unusually somber manner.

“And I hope Noodles is okay, too. But Lefty should be able to restore him,” Neil said optimistically.

He looked down at the robot’s spherical head, which was currently clutched against his stomach. Since they had slowed to a walk, the two boys had taken turns carrying the robotic noggin. Though it was not particularly heavy, Neil and Jack were so exhausted, they found that their arms quickly grew tired.

As they did so often in their lives, they shared the burden between them. It was good to both be a friend, and to have friends.

To look at Noodles’ noggin, it was remarkable to think of just how much the robot had been through today. The Beans’ amazing journey had begun aboard the Quantum Conundrum. Since that time, Noodles had been shipwrecked, lost his head, been abducted by Hickory Stick Bill, sacrificed to the Crab King, and nearly swallowed by Pan Gu.

It was one heck of a day, by any measure.

The Beans were thrilled to have Noodles’ lost head back in their possession, but they were still sad to see it so devoid of activity. They were accustomed to seeing his blue eyes bright with synthetic life, his antennae ears swiveling about, and his smile-shaped speaker mouth uttering beeps and boops that were surprisingly effective at conveying his meaning.

At the moment, there was no such activity from Noodles. His eyes were dull, his antennae ears were unmoving, and his mouth was silent. Sand covered the surface of his head, as well as the many scrapes and scuffs that had accumulated over the course of the adventure.

Noodles’ current condition was a strange contrast to the way Neil and Jack had always seen him previously. They reflected upon the lively personality of Noodles - the way he had always been so cheerful and energetic, always ready to break into dance at the sound of some good old fashioned funk music.

“Do you remember the first time we came across Noodles, and we heard him thrashing around in Lefty’s basement?” Neil asked.

“Who could forget that? We thought my uncle was some sort of mad scientist, keeping a monster in his laboratory,” Jack chuckled. “But we were met with a pleasant surprise, when we finally learned the truth of the matter.”

Neil joined his friend in laughter, recalling the exciting events that had followed their first meeting with Noodles, as they had confronted Jasper, Ebenezer, and their diabolical Mecha-Machine. As they laughed and recounted their memories, the clouds finally broke apart, dissipating into the blue sky that was revealed. The sun struck them with its full force, instantly warming them, and they felt their spirits lift higher.

“Now that’s a welcome sight,” Jack sighed, turning his face to the sun and pausing to enjoy the moment.

Neil did likewise, closing his eyes and enjoying the heat. Nibbler lifted his snout to the sky, reveling in the sunshine. Murphy held his arms wide, embracing the warming rays of light, and he uttered a squirrelly sigh of contentment.

Keeping his eyes closed as he absorbed the sunlight, Neil asked, “Did you hear what Hickory Stick Bill said when we were leaving? He said we aren’t so bad, as far as

kids go. I think that's about the closest thing to a compliment you'll ever get out of that guy."

"I knew we were growing on him!" Jack laughed.

After several moments of blissfully standing in the warmth of the sun, they lowered their faces to look ahead again. Not too far in the distance, they saw something glittering. Squinting their eyes and peering ahead, they realized what they were seeing was the metallic body of Noodles, reflecting the rays of sunshine. Lefty leaned against the robot, wistfully looking out to sea.

"It's Lefty!" the two of them shouted at once.

The Beans began running down the beach, their exhaustion forgotten in their excitement. Nibbler was easily the fastest, and he led the way, woofing as he went, while Murphy held onto his back as best he could, bouncing and giggling like a squirrel gone mad with delight.

## Chapter Thirty

### The Things We've Seen

Hearing the Beans approach, Lefty sat up upon the beach, using his hands to prop himself into a mostly vertical position. He waved to them, exuberant in the safe return of his friends, and he whooped for joy at the top of his lungs.

Being swift of foot and determined in purpose, Nibbler was the first to reach Lefty. Without slowing in the slightest, the rambunctious dog maintained his top speed. Nibbler collided with Lefty like a furry cannonball, tumbling into what became an animated pile of scientist limbs and Labradoodle appendages.

At the impact, Murphy was thrown from his place atop Nibbler's back. The squirrel squeaked in surprise, but he quickly extended his arms and safely glided to the sand.

Nibbler immediately began kissing Lefty, poking him with his snout, and woofing into his face at close proximity. His tail became a blur of apricot-colored fur as it wagged with force from side to side, causing his entire body to sway.

Lefty laughed in reaction, delighted with this greeting, which left no doubt as to the dog's happiness. He ran his hands through Nibbler's furry coat, vigorously scratching him behind the ears and telling him that he was a good dog. Murphy joined the fray, jumping up and down and patting Lefty, delighted to be back with his old friend.

A moment later, the boys caught up, joining the joyful reunion. They dropped to their knees in the sand, embracing Lefty, and the group of them formed a great, big hug consisting of humans and animals alike.

"I'm so happy you're back! When that storm broke out on the other side of the island, I feared you might have been caught in it. I've never seen such lightning... but I knew if anybody could pull through, it was the four of you," Lefty said, his voice filled with relief.

"You were wise to rely on us, sir," Neil said. "I mean, sure, you really had no choice in the matter, but still, you had to know we wouldn't let you down, right?"

"Of course! But tell me..." Lefty leaned closer, his eyes intent behind the sandy lenses of his glasses. "Did you really manage to find Noodles' noggin?"

"There's no way we were going to come back here empty handed. But you aren't going to believe what we had to go through to get it back," Jack told his uncle.

Neil had placed the robotic head on the sand when he had dived into the group hug. Now, he turned around and retrieved it, gingerly handing it to Lefty, who received it with gratitude. Nibbler stood back, so as not to knock the head from Lefty's hands, panting to catch his breath. The Beans watched in silence and nervous anticipation, awaiting Lefty's analysis.

"Ah," Lefty murmured as he turned the metallic sphere about in his hands. "Uh-huh... I see... and this... yes, just as I thought..."

Though Noodles' noggin didn't look particularly bad, all things considered, the boys were terrified that Lefty would announce that some sort of critical damage had been

inflicted. These moments of examination, though surely only seconds in duration, seemed to be of an unendurable length to the boys. Time passed in a slow agony. They held their breath, wringing their hands in worry.

“I think...” Lefty said slowly, “he’s going to be okay!”

Neil sighed, Jack pumped his fist, Nibbler woofed, and Murphy squeaked. So great was their relief, they felt lightheaded with joy and dizzy with happiness.

“Now to get down to the business at hand,” Lefty said.

He turned to Noodles’ body, which was lying on the sand right beside him. With a surprisingly simple series of maneuvers, Lefty reattached the robot’s head to his neck, securing it with a few twists and latches.

“I suppose I’ll have to develop a more complicated process for keeping these parts attached,” Lefty said, glancing up at the boys. “Just in case we ever find ourselves in such peril again - which seems rather likely, given our aptitude for adventure. Now, if you two would be so kind, please assist me in rolling Noodles onto his stomach so that I can reach his access panel.”

Jack and Neil were eager to help, and they quickly turned the lanky robot over. There was a rectangular access panel set into Noodles’ back, and Lefty popped it open with a well practiced motion.

Inside, the Beans could see a small, rectangular power cell, which was glowing with a blinding intensity. Lefty squinted his eyes against the light and reached inside. Murmuring to himself, he pressed a few buttons, flipped a couple of switches, closed the panel, and pronounced himself done.

“That should do it!” he exclaimed with satisfaction, leaning away from Noodles.

The Beans watched, ready to embrace the robot and welcome him back. But nothing happened. The seconds stretched out, but Noodles remained still.

“What’s wrong?” asked Jack nervously.

Lefty’s face had fallen, and his brow furrowed in concentration. “I don’t understand... I performed a hard reset, resulting in a system reboot and hardware calibration. That should have done it!”

“Not to worry, I think I know what to do,” Neil declared. “This is how my parents say they used to fix televisions in the olden days.”

Reaching forward, he gave Noodles a light tap on the back with the palm of his hand. The others watched with hopeful expectation, but nothing happened. Undiscouraged, Neil repeated the action, this time with more force. When his palm struck Noodles’ back, it made a solid sound. Thwump!

The final jostle must have done the trick, for Noodles sprang to life in a flurry of activity. Leaping from the sand, he spun about in several tight circles, beeping and booping as he did so. His noodly arms and legs went this way and that in a wild display of slinky-like appendages. Following this powerful outburst, he fell to the sand, taking a seat.

The others were delighted with the return of their robotic friend, and they were leaping for joy. Only Lefty remained seated, due to his injured knee, but he clapped his hands and cheered victoriously.

“Welcome back, Noodles, my friend! I told them you were built to last, and so you are!” Lefty exclaimed.

Noodles rotated his head to look at his gathered friends, and he waved in greeting. His eyes were bright and blue, and his antennae ears were swiveling about. He reached his hands up and carefully felt his own head, as if sensing that something was a bit different with his noggin. Overall, however, he seemed to be none the worse for wear, despite his uncanny trials.

He formed the “okay” gesture with the thumb and index finger of one hand, signaling to the others that he was all right. Then, he gave a curious beep, sat up straight, and pointed out to sea.

The others followed the direction of Noodles’ finger, and they collectively gasped at what they saw. There, bobbing among the waves, was a beautiful wooden ship.

It was headed away from the island, cutting through the water and pointed toward the open sea. Its black sails were raised, and upon them there was a curious crest: The outline of a giant crab, embroidered in white for high contrast.

“I don’t believe it,” Jack whispered.

“He made it out of the cavern! I thought he was a goner for sure!” Neil exclaimed.

“Who?” Lefty asked.

“That’s the ship of Hickory Stick Bill - but you know him as the keeper of the island,” Jack explained.

“Hmm... Hickory Stick Bill, you say?” Lefty asked, tapping his chin. “I’d imagine I have a lot of catching up to do, don’t I?”

“Oh, that’s for sure. But I have to warn you, Uncle Lefty... some of the stuff we’re going to tell you is pretty unbelievable,” Jack said with a grin.

Lefty leaned forward, eager to hear more. Possessed of a most inquisitive mind, his curiosity was driving him crazy. “Now, then - while Noodles sends a distress signal in order to get us a rescue ship, why don’t you two fill me in on what you’ve been up to. What exactly did you encounter, out there in the wilderness of Smuttynose Island? What happened?”

“It’s like I said, Uncle Lefty.” Jack looked to Neil, and they shared a smile, reflecting upon their marvelous adventure, all of which had begun with the experience of their shipwreck. Since that time, they had been thrown into a raging river, narrowly avoiding a plummet from the edge of a waterfall. They had dodged the wrath of a dragon and a freakishly large crab as they had battled like warring titans. They had explored a pirate’s lair, and been forced to escape when it had been reduced to rubble. And most amazing of all, they had come face to face with a descendant of Black Beard... and even helped him keep his melon from detonating. “You are not gonna believe it.”

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-Gabriel Gadget