

ALEX NEPTUNE

← MONSTER AVENGER →

THE LONGER ALEX WATCHED,
THE MORE MONSTERS HE SAW.
“THAT’S PROBABLY NOT
NORMAL?” HE SAID.

(HE WAS RIGHT. AND NOTHING WAS
NORMAL AFTER THAT...)

*For Darran,
who has definitely already seen the octopus video
you just sent him.*



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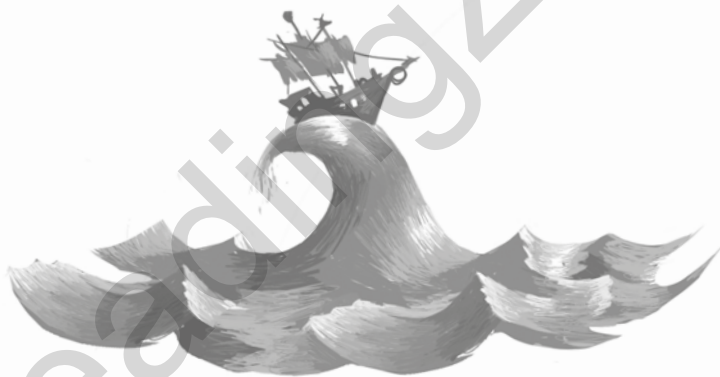
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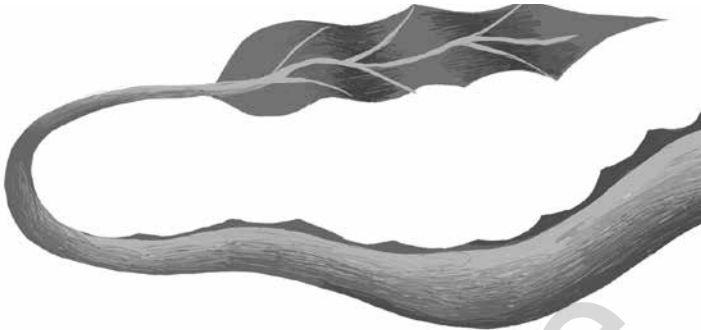


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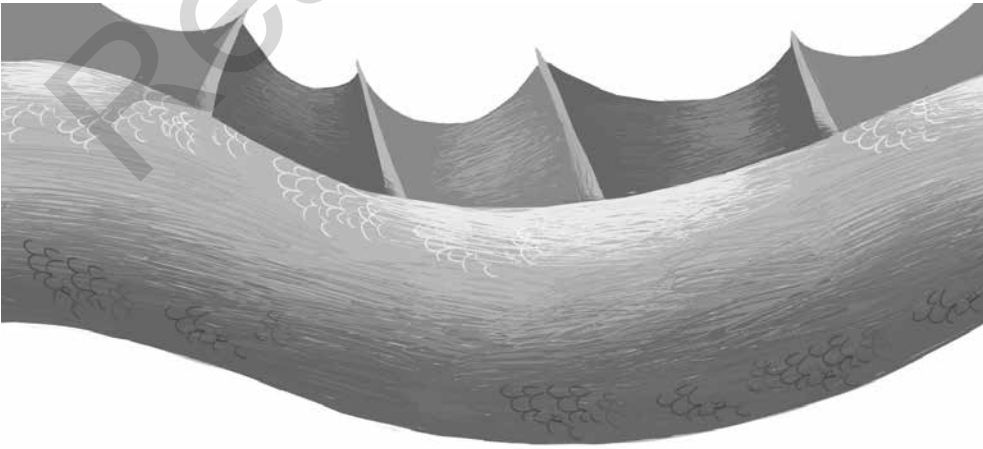


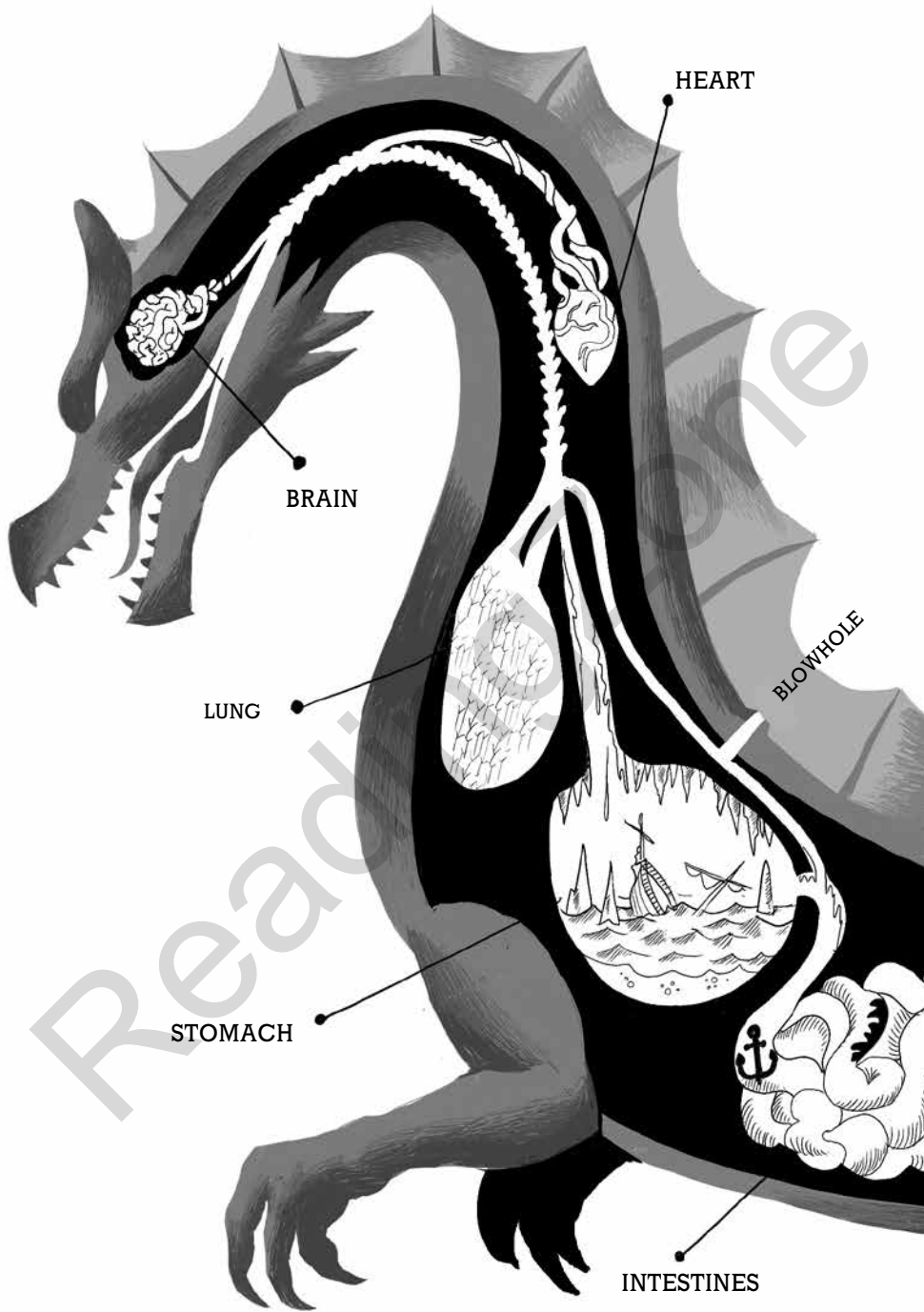
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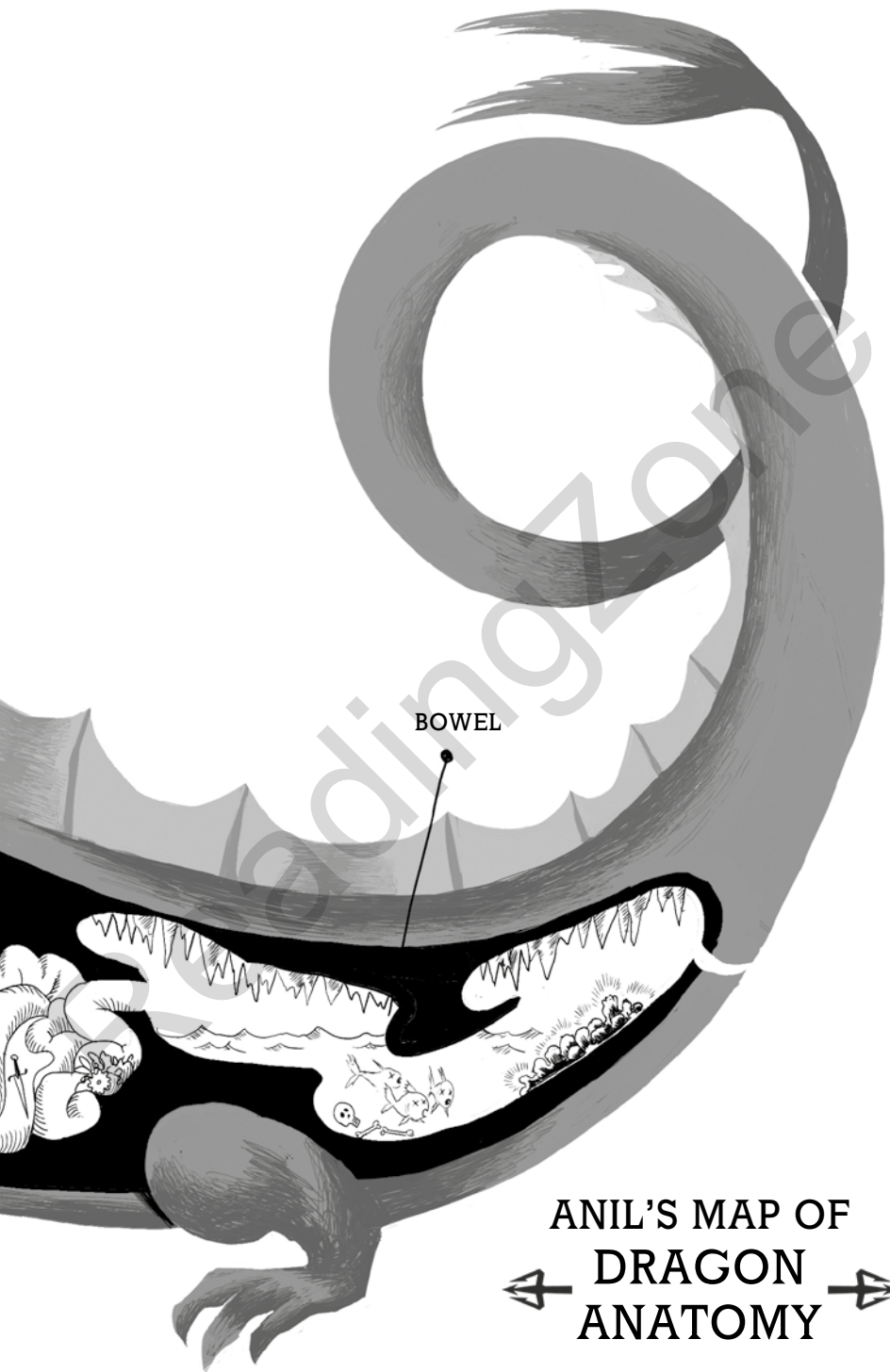
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BOWEL

ANIL'S MAP OF
DRAGON
ANATOMY

ReadingZone



CHAPTER ONE

SHIPWRECK SEASON

It was probably a bad idea to try and capture an angry seal in the middle of a storm.

A gust of wind swirled off the tempestuous sea and lashed Alex Neptune with stinging rain. He crouched on the slick rocks of the breakwater that cleaved through the beach, stiff fingers pressing binoculars to his eyes.

Through their shaky view, Alex watched Loaf, a hefty harbour seal who lived in the usually calm waters of Haven Bay, growling at seagulls around the far curve of the bay. The blustery weather didn't seem to bother him at all.

"There's rain in my armpits!"

The storm certainly *did* bother Zoey Wu, huddling at the foot of the breakwater to put the finishing touches to

a contraption set into a shallow dip in the sodden sand. Tired of enduring wet underwear every time they visited the beach, Alex's best friend now wore slick green fishing waders over an oil-stained T-shirt. Unfortunately, these did little to protect her upper half from the elements.

"Almost ready," Zoey called, hands moving deftly over the complicated kit.

Alex opened his mouth to respond but a squall of wind blew salty brine down his throat.

The rain had tipped down all week, the sky bruised permanently black. Torrents of water flooded the cobbled streets of the town. Vicious gales blew ashore without warning, ripping trees from their roots and even the stoutest locals off their feet.

Most troubling of all was that two fishing boats had been caught by surprise and wrecked. The lifeboat brought home the broken vessels but none of their crew. The missing fishermen had not been found, either drowned or alive, search parties forced back empty-handed by the storms. The fishing crews seemed to have simply...disappeared.

That wasn't even the strangest thing that had happened recently.

Below, Zoey scraped sand over her contraption and climbed the rocks to join Alex.

"The trap is set," she said, rain dripping from her black

fringe and beading on the streaks of oil across her cheeks.

“Where’s Anil?”

“Here!”

Anil Chatterjee hurried along the beach; a newspaper-wrapped bundle held over his head did nothing to stop the sideways-driving rain. He climbed up and set the soggy package on a flat rock.

“I’ve got the bait.”

Zoey frowned. “Are we *sure* battered sausages are the best thing to feed a seal?”

“They’re his favourite,” said Alex. “We need to lure him this way without putting ourselves in danger.”

“Any chance you can just *ask* Loaf to stop being so aggro?” said Anil.

A few months ago, Alex and his friends had discovered that the Water Dragon, mythical main character of countless stories passed through generations of their sleepy seaside town, was actually *real*. Together they had rescued the dragon from the clutches of predatory poacher Raze Callis and then stopped him from stealing its only egg.

A bond with the Water Dragon had awakened ancient sea magic in Alex. As well as giving him the power to control the ocean, he could also connect with sea animals and work alongside them as an ally in their ongoing fight to protect the sea.

Loaf had quickly become a particular friend, hanging around them like an overexcited, clumsy dog. The seal had proved particularly adept at knocking over quarrelsome pirates.

“Ever since Loaf started acting strangely, I’ve not been able to get through to him,” Alex said, keeping the binoculars fixed on the seal.

Around a week ago, Loaf had climbed up onto Haven Bay’s high street and raided the Chipping Forecast chip shop, drinking a vat of liquid batter and gulping down all the fish, sausages and pickled onions. When Mr Yardarm, the chip shop owner, had tried to chase Loaf away, the seal almost attacked him. Nobody – not even Alex – had been able to go near Loaf since without him growling and threatening to charge.

More sea animals who called Haven Bay their home had started behaving aggressively too. Dolphins deliberately capsized kayakers; jellyfish swarmed to sting swimmers seeking a cold dip; lobsters skittered to pinch unsuspecting toes.

Whenever Alex used his power to reach out to them, he found he was cut off. It was like a thread between them had been severed. It was a peculiarly lonely feeling, as if pieces of himself were missing.

A push from inside Alex’s jacket was too insistent

to ignore. Reluctantly, he opened the zip. Octopus arms squirmed out and a splotchy blue body heaved onto his shoulder. Kraken lifted her orb-like eyes to relish the patter of cold rain.

“Don’t go anywhere near the water,” Alex told her, for probably the millionth time that week. “It isn’t safe.”

It was still only a gut feeling, but Alex was increasingly sure that something rotten had contaminated the ocean. This time it wasn’t litter or chemicals clogging the waves of Haven Bay. It was something that only affected the animals. Any creatures who hadn’t recently gone into the water – like Kraken, who lived in a special tank in Alex’s bedroom – were still behaving normally.

When Alex called on his sea magic, it seemed to *snag* on whatever was out there. Just never long enough for him to identify it. And it couldn’t be a coincidence that this was happening at the same time as two boats of fishermen had mysteriously disappeared.

The Water Dragon and its newly hatched baby still hadn’t returned from their tour of the world’s oceans. That left it up to Alex and his friends to find out exactly what was going on.

“Right.” Zoey swiped rain from her face. “We lure Loaf closer with the battered sausages and *SNAP!* He springs the trap.”

The only sign of the trap now was a slight dip in the hard-packed sand.

“How does it work?” Alex asked.

“It’s based on weeverfish.” Zoey puffed up proudly. “They bury themselves in sand and sting anything that stumbles over them. As soon as Loaf puts pressure on the trap, a net will burst out and wrap him up tight.”

“My cousin was stung by a weeverfish once,” Anil said. “It made him vomit and faint at the same time.”

Alex winced. “You’re sure the trap won’t hurt Loaf?”

“I’ve never been more certain of anything in my life.”

“You say that about literally everything you do.”

Zoey grinned winningly. “Because everything I do is brilliant.”

A plume of steam was immediately extinguished by the rain as Anil unwrapped the newspaper to reveal five greasy battered sausages, like oversized fingers. Alex and Zoey eyed them hungrily, the delicious smell briefly banishing the chill of the wind. It fell to Anil – a lifelong vegetarian – to snap them out of it by lifting a thumb and forefinger to his lips and blowing a high-pitched whistle.

A seagull descended from the brooding sky, white wings beating against the wind. The bird aimed to land on Anil’s shoulder before a sharp gust blew him flapping into the side of the boy’s face.

“Graceful as ever, Pinch,” Anil said fondly as the seagull righted himself.

Zoey narrowed her eyes. “Are we *sure* we want to trust that bird with a mouthful of battered sausages?”

After Anil had lovingly nursed the injured seagull back to health, Pinch had repaid him in snacks pilfered from innocent tourists. Anil discouraged the habit and trained the bird to collect litter, which had only confused Pinch into stealing much more valuable belongings instead.

“He’s turned over a new leaf!” Anil insisted. “Now I’ve trained him to return people’s lost property to them.”

Although no doubt an admirable ambition, the seagull had a hard time distinguishing between what was lost and what was no longer wanted. An apple core properly disposed of into a bin had a good chance of landing on your head thirty seconds later.

Anil covered his hands with his sleeves and offered a pair of battered sausages to Pinch. The seagull tilted his head and clamped them firmly in his orange beak instead of immediately gulping them down whole.

“Good boy!” Anil scratched the bird’s head. “Now take them to Loaf!”

Pinch spread his wings and hauled himself into the air, a flurry of wind hurrying him along. Alex lifted the binoculars to watch the seagull glide above the beach.

As soon as he was above Loaf, he opened his beak and let a sausage fly.

The greasy finger tumbled from the sky and bonked the seal on the head.

“Direct hit!” Alex reported.

Loaf wasted no time in snaffling the sausage, thick whiskers twitching as he chewed and swallowed it in seconds. No sooner had he finished than the second sausage landed in the sand a short distance ahead of him. The seal lumbered towards the delicious morsel, bringing him closer to the breakwater and the waiting trap.

“It’s working!”

Alex offered the binoculars to Zoey, but Kraken wrapped them tightly in her suckered arms and tried to peer through them, even though her eyes were too far apart.

Pinch returned to be reloaded with sausages before flying out again.

“By the way,” Anil said, “Mr Argosy wants to be kept updated about what we find.”

Alex frowned. Erasmus Argosy lived in the crumbling manor house outside town and was a descendant of people once bonded to the Water Dragon. The old man knew all about Alex’s powers and, although he had helped them stop Raze Callis from seizing the dragon egg, Alex still wasn’t convinced he could be trusted.

“When did you even speak to him?”

“My parents invited him for dinner again.” Anil wiped a drop of rain off the tip of his nose. “They don’t like him being alone in that big house.”

“And you told him what we’re doing?” asked Zoey.

Anil looked sheepish. “He asked really nicely. Anyway, the Argosy family tracked sea magic for centuries. He has a massive archive of records and artefacts that might help us work out what’s going on. Mr Argosy even said I could help him organize it. It sounds like it’s messier than Zoey’s workshop.”

“I’d be offended but I somehow lost my shoes in there the other day,” Zoey conceded.

“Just be careful what you say to him,” said Alex. “I don’t want him to interfere.”

They watched Pinch drop the third and fourth battered sausages, luring Loaf closer and closer to the trap. The rocks provided enough cover that they wouldn’t be spotted.

“Who wants to throw the last sausage?” Alex asked.

“Oh, me! I’m the best...” Anil stopped himself snatching for it. In pursuit of discovering his unique talent, Anil used to claim he was the best at everything and hope it was true. Ever since realizing his genuine skill for storytelling, he had been trying to break the bragging habit. “I mean, I’d like to throw it, please.”

Loaf finished the fourth sausage, wiped a flipper across his mouth and belched loudly.

“Now!”

Anil launched the final battered sausage over the rocks. It landed perfectly in the dip of sand where the trap was concealed.

Loaf sniffed towards it hesitantly, as if growing suspicious about such an abundant battered bounty.

“Come on,” Alex urged him.

Slowly, the seal shuffled forwards until he was almost on top of the trap. It would spring at any second.

A raking flurry of wind lashed across the rock. It caught Anil, still upright from his throw, by surprise and sent him tumbling onto the sand below.

Straight onto the trap.

The wet sand opened like a ravenous jaw. A thickly woven rope net tangled around Anil’s body. Loaf reared up and snorted furiously, scraping his front flippers as if preparing to charge at the helpless boy.

“Oh, heck,” said Zoey.

Alex rose from the rocks. “Reinforcements!”

The beach burst open at the four corners of the trap. Four sea otters shook sand from their bristling coats and sprang to form a protective barrier between Anil and the seal.

Loaf charged at the otters, not recognizing his friends, bowling them aside to clear the path to Anil. From Alex's shoulder, Kraken fired bullets of water as a distraction, but it would only buy a few seconds.

"What do we do?" asked Zoey.

Alex pressed his hands to the rocks. They were slick enough with rain and salt water to connect him to the ocean. Sea magic swelled inside him, stronger than any storm. Whatever plagued the water may have cut him off from the animals, but it couldn't stop him using his other powers.

Tendrils of seaweed wriggled from crevices in the rocks. Knotted strands and knobbly ropes twined together as they snaked across the sand. Alex wielded them like arms to snatch at the seal's flippers, but Loaf snarled and bucked loose.

"He's too strong!" shouted Zoey.

"You know how our plans usually go horribly wrong?" Alex scrambled up to stand tall on the rocks. "But somehow we win anyway, despite doing something stupid that shouldn't work?"

Zoey nodded. "Classic us."

"Let's hope our luck holds."

Alex launched himself into the air, diving over Anil's tangled head to land on Loaf's back. The seal roared its

displeasure and tried to thrash him away. Alex wrapped his arms around Loaf's neck and held on as tight as he could.

It's me, he told the seal, reaching for the connection between them. *We're friends*.

The bond was still there. Alex felt the current of magic that bound them together. But it was blocked – something was interfering with the signal so his message couldn't get through.

"We're doing this to help!" Alex shouted aloud.

The otters bundled to join him on Loaf's back. Their combined weight was enough to restrain him. Alex wrapped the seaweed tightly around the seal's body. Finally, Loaf admitted defeat, slumping onto the sand with a greasy burp.

"Could somebody let me out, please?" Anil asked, hands tugging at the net.

Zoey hopped down from the rocks to help.

"This might not be the point," she said, "but I hope everybody noticed that my trap totally worked."