



## *A Contest of Hopes*

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

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

He would eat the shark instead.

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

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

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

‘*Muh?*’ said Seth, his eyes wide.

‘You’re *biting* me!’

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

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

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

Ellie pulled her feet from the water.

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

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

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

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

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

‘What shark?’

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

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

‘You go first,’ she said.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘No, it’s that shoal of fish.’

‘What shoal of fish?’

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

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

‘With what, my hands?’

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

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

‘Fine. Stay hungry.’

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

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

‘Seth?’ Ellie said, inching towards him.

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

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

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

‘You’re disgusting,’ Ellie said.

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

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

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

‘Not eating can make you dead.’

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

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

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

Seth looked at her through half-shut eyes.

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

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

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

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

'Because they make me tired.'

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

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

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

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

Ellie winced, her chest tightening.

‘Sorry,’ said Seth.

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

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

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

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

‘What?’ Ellie said flatly.

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

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



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

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

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

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

‘That doesn’t sound very likely.’

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

‘I really don’t care, Ellie.’

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

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

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

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

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

A figure. Something in the shape of a human.

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘Saw what?’

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

‘But you didn’t hope for anything?’

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

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

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

A new island.