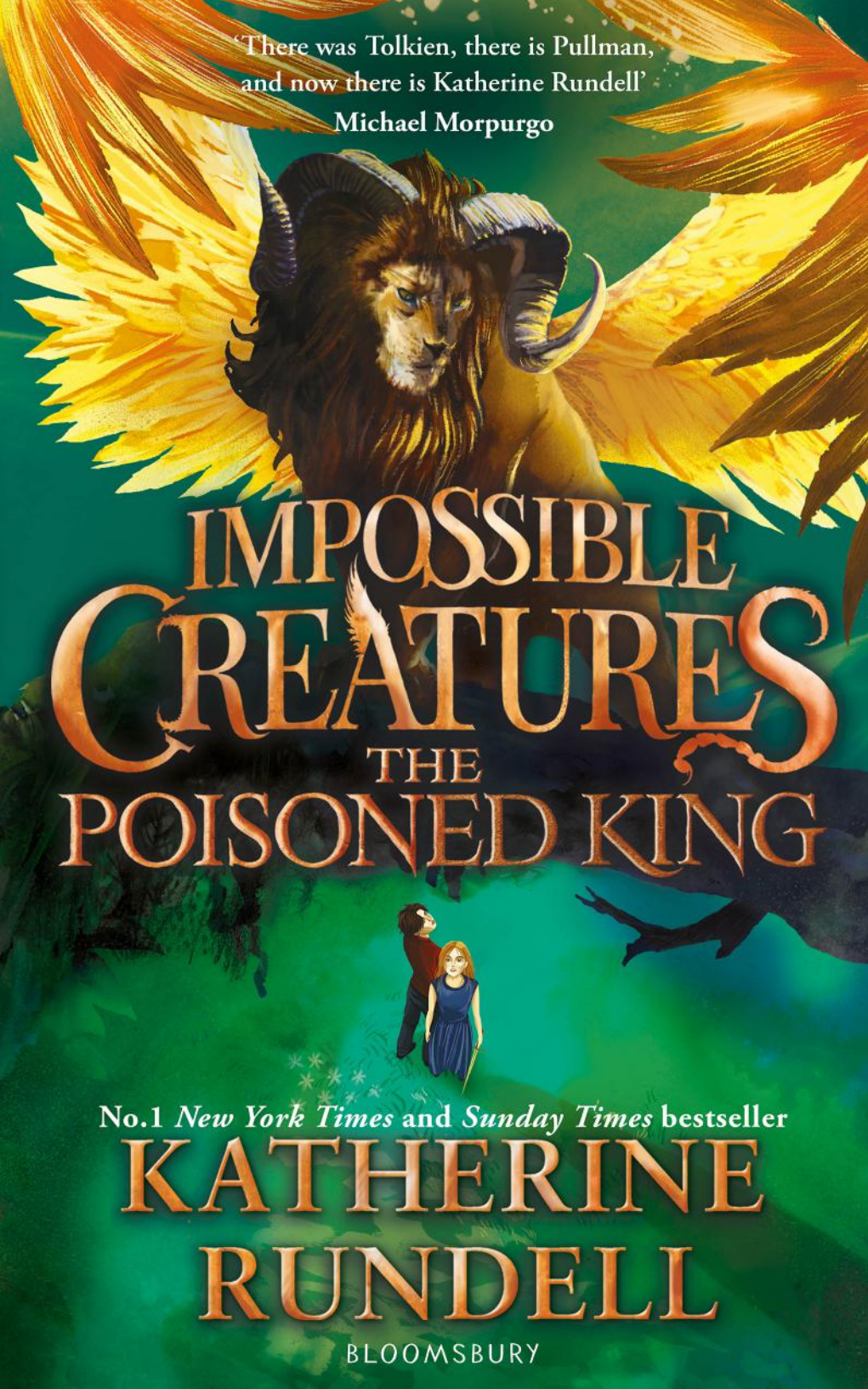
'There was Tolkien, there is Pullman, and now there is Katherine Rundell'
Michael Morpurgo



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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS
LONDON OXFORD NEW YORK NEW DELHI SYDNEY

BLOOMSBURY CHILDREN'S BOOKS
Bloomsbury Publishing Plc
50 Bedford Square, London WC1B 3DP, UK
Bloomsbury Publishing Ireland Limited
29 Earlsfort Terrace, Dublin 2, D02 AY28, Ireland

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First published in Great Britain in 2025 by Bloomsbury Publishing Plc

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A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

ISBN: HB: 978-1-4088-9744-7; TPB: 978-1-5266-8097-6; Export PB: 978-1-4088-9745-4; Waterstones Exclusive HB: 978-1-5266-8545-2; Waterstones Signed Exclusive HB: 978-1-5266-9485-0; eBook: 978-1-4088-9746-1; ePDF: 978-1-5266-8624-4

2 4 6 8 10 9 7 5 3 1

Typeset by RefineCatch Limited, Bungay, Suffolk

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For Theodore and Phoebe Rundell:
two impossibly wonderful creatures

'The croaking raven doth bellow for revenge.'

William Shakespeare, H*amlet* (1601)

'None of the animals is so wise as the dragon. His blessing power is not a false one. He can be smaller than small, bigger than big, higher than high, and lower than low.'

Lu Dian (1042–1102 CE)

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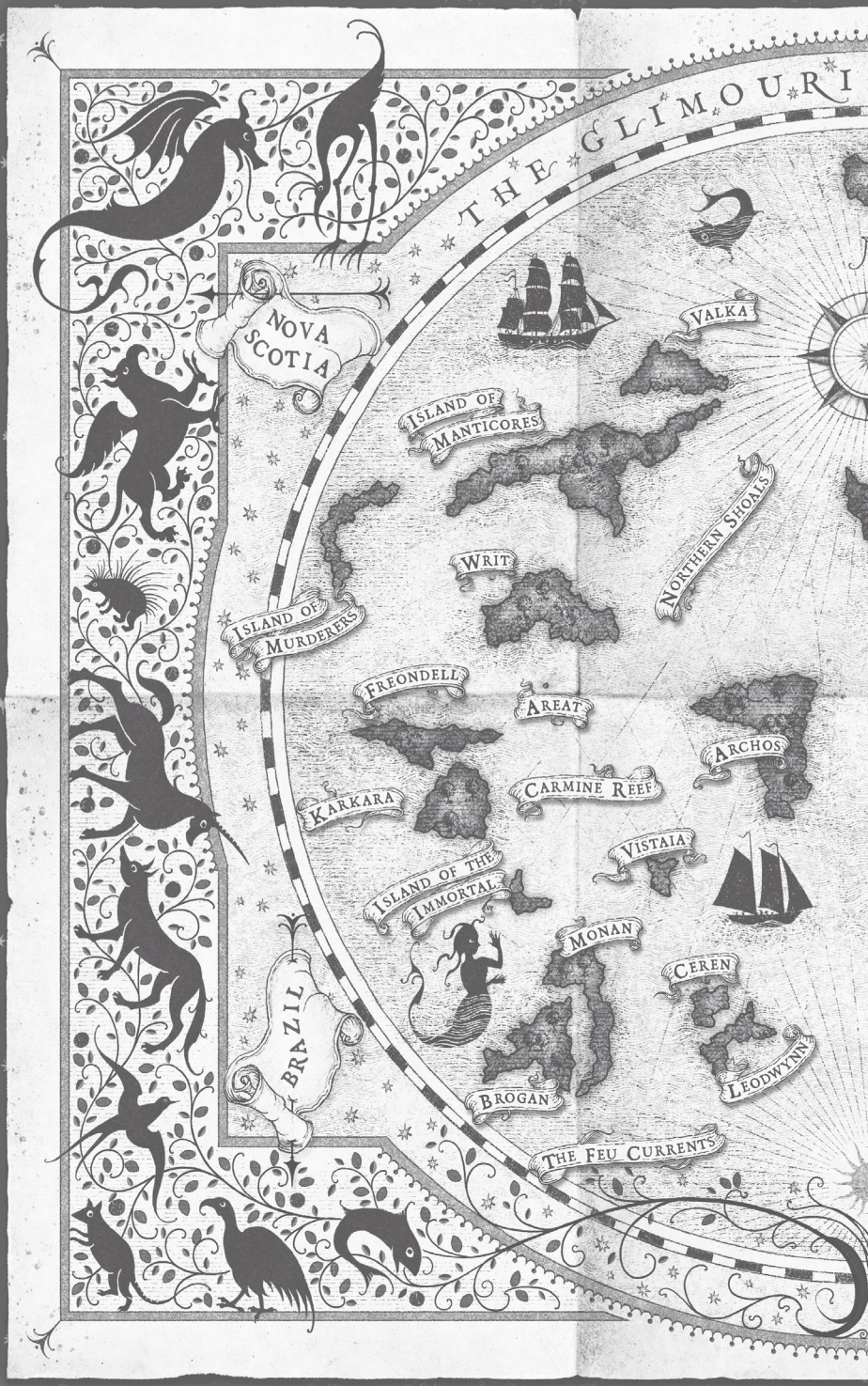
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KARKARA
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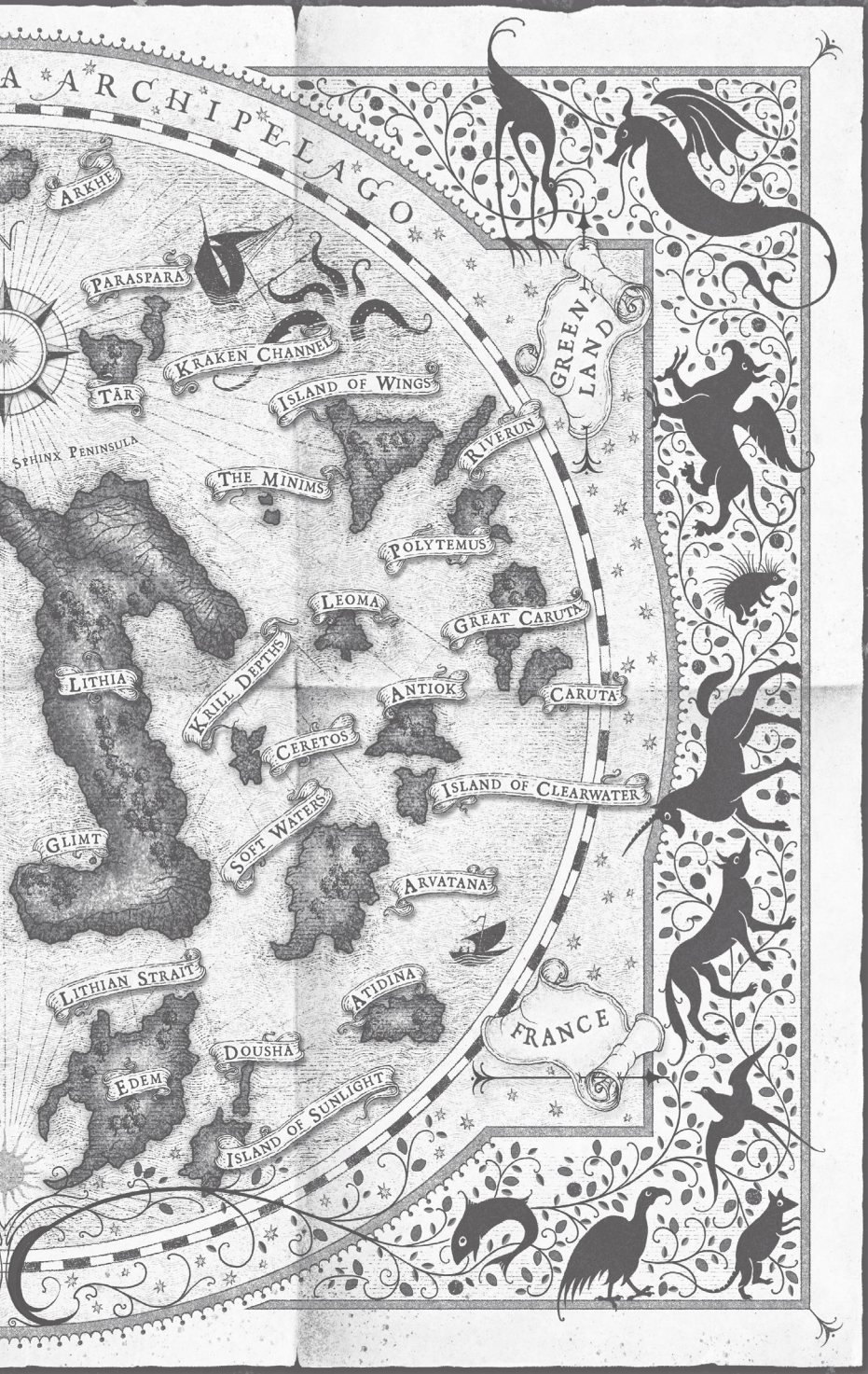
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POLYTEMUS
LEOMA
GREAT CARUTA
LITHIA
KRILL DEPTHS
ANTIOK
CARUTA
CERETOS
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SOFT WATERS
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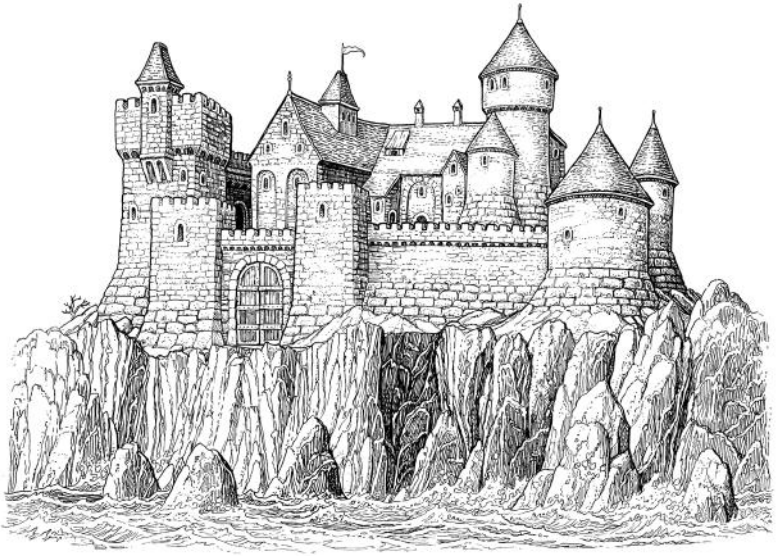
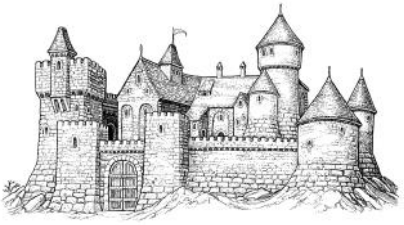
DOUSHA
EDEM
ISLAND OF SUNLIGHT

PART ONE

CASTLE

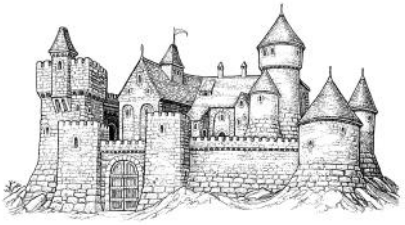




A WARNING BEFORE WE BEGIN

They would have said it wasn't possible: the chaos and the mayhem she caused. They would have said she didn't have it in her.

It was in her, but deep. What's under your house, if you were to dig? Mud and worms. Buried treasure. Skeletons. You don't know. The girl dug into the depths of her heart and there she found a hunger for justice, and a thirst for revenge.



THE JACULUS DRAGON

Christopher Forrester woke up to find a dragon chewing on his face.

The dragon was the size of a sparrow, small enough to fit on the top joint of his thumb, and a thing of ravishing silver-green beauty. His expression was haughty enough to burn a hole through a steel door.

The dragon spoke. 'Christopher!' he said. 'You have not been easy to find.'

Christopher sat up. 'Jacques?' he said. His whole body began to shake: with shock, and with joy.

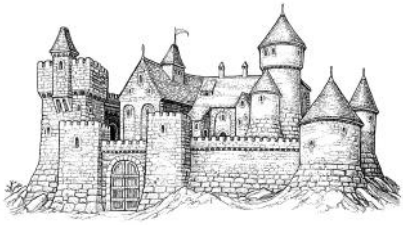
He pushed back his covers, looking around his bedroom. His jeans were on the floor; the window looked out over a London street. Everything was as before, and nothing was as before, because a tiny dragon was perched on his bedside table.

'Jacques!' he said again. He was real, and he was here, and he was biting experimentally at the light bulb in Christopher's lamp. 'What's going on?'

'I have come to bring you back with me,' said Jacques. He shook broken glass off his back. 'Now, immediately.'

'Back? To the Archipelago?'

'Obviously. I command it!' Beneath the hauteur, there was a vibration to his voice; it was fear. The dragon flew on to Christopher's hand, and bit down hard on his thumb. It drew blood. 'I have urgent need of you.'



I HAVE URGENT NEED OF YOU

Christopher could feel his heart leaping, upwards and upwards. But he tried to keep the excitement out of his face, tried to breathe steadily, until he understood. He began to dress, fast, in yesterday's jeans.

'If you could *not* treat me as a buffet, that would be nice,' he said to Jacques. 'Tell me what's happened. How did you get here?'

'With immense ingenuity and effort. I went to Atidina, through the waybetween that runs in the river there. It was very damp, and I despise water. I did not enjoy it. That was unpleasant enough, but then I thought I would find you in Scotland, where the waybetween emerges,' said Jacques. 'But you weren't there. I dodged your grandfather to come south, following your scent. I was attacked by a flock of pigeons and an upstart crow. I couldn't make fire – I mean, I didn't want to,

lest I alert humans to my presence – so I ate what I found in those big baskets of rotting food you have inexplicably installed on your grey streets. It was disgusting. Except for the little plastic squares of red liquid. Those were toothsome.'

Looking closer, Christopher saw the dragon had ketchup on the scales under his chin.

'But why? W*hy* are you here? You're not safe, Jacques.'

'Do you think I am unaware of that? I would not have come here, and flown past your repulsive foul-belching four-wheeled murder-tins without reason. I had no choice,' said Jacques. He clacked his teeth; there was misery in his small face. 'I was sent.'

'Sent by who?'

But Jacques was so tight-wound now he would not speak. He exhaled and – instead of fire – a vast cloud of scalding black smoke filled the room. Christopher darted to the window before the smoke could set off the alarm, swinging it back and forth on the hinges. 'Jacques! T*ell me!*'

Jacques's words came out in a rush. 'The great dragons are dying, in their dozens. Nobody knows why.'

Christopher felt a bolt of horror strike through him. He had known dragons. He had been close enough to feel their power, their raw, exacting intelligence: not the intelligence of mankind, but of something infinitely more vast and wild and ancient.

'How? Which species?' Not the red-winged dragons, he prayed.

'The ice dragons in the north: six dead. The yellow dragons in the south: ten, gone, discovered by the phoenixes. Two families of silver-tails: a dozen found dead. And more, nobody knows how many more, more all the time.'

'Is it a disease? Or … murder? But how could any creature kill a dozen dragons? Even a sphinx wouldn't be strong enough; even a manticore.'

'I do not know! But Sarkany, the great red-winged dragon on whose back you once flew, has sent me to summon you. She said I must bring you back to the Archipelago.'

'But why me?'

'It can only be you!' Smoke poured from his nose. 'Some say it might be a dragon pox, so the great dragons dare not move among each other. They are separated by fear of contagion. But most believe that it is murder, and so no dragon will trust any man or creature from the Archipelago. But you are from the Outerlands. Sarkany will trust you and only you.'

Christopher stood by the window, his hand on the latch. The dragons, murdered? He thought of Sarkany, of her terrifying splendour, and the thunder of her wings.

'But what could I do—?'

Jacques huffed again: more black, angry smoke. 'Dragons do not enjoy human questioning. Ask one more and I shall burn the room to the ground. You will come?'

Would he come? What danger awaited on the far side of the jaculus's summons? What could he possibly do that the dragons, with all their years of strength and pitiless know-

ledge, could not? But there was elation too, rising in Christopher. For a dragon to have need of him! To go back to the Archipelago! Back to the unicorns and dragons, the longmas and kankos, to the glimourie, to the land of Mal Arvorian!

'Yes.'

He pulled from under the bed a small box. In it was the tooth that the sphinx had given him, carefully wrapped in cotton wool. There was also a knife, and a metal flask for water, and some food: chocolate, cereal bars, things that would last. He had been ready. He had been waiting. It was what he had been, secretly, longing for; for someone to call his name, and summon him back.

Christopher shoved the tooth, knife and flask into his coat pocket, along with all his money and his phone. Then he took the phone out again, turned it off and left it by the bed; he didn't want to be found. He left a note for his father: it was still early – he wouldn't yet be awake.

'*Dad, I've gone back to the Archipelago. The dragons need my help.*' Just to write it sent a spark of electricity up his arm. '*I'm sorry I didn't ask you. Don't worry about me – I'll be completely safe.*' Then he went back and crossed out 'I'll be completely safe'. No point in lying. He added, '*I'll be careful,*' then crossed that out too. He wrote instead, '*I love you. Christopher.*'

'Hurry!' said Jacques.

Christopher emptied his school bag of a stupendously dull geography project on the Belgian motorway system, an

ancient unwashed sock from his sports kit and a suppurating banana – then offered the backpack to Jacques.

The look the dragon gave him would have withered roses. It would have punched a rainbow straight out of the sky.

'I shall not be transported in that … putrid-smelling, foot-fetid excrescence of a sack. I shall sit on your shoulder as I was wont to do, like a mighty emperor upon his steed.'

'You can't do that. People will see you.'

'Then I shall fly back among the clouds, as I came.'

'The train will be faster and easier.' The tiny dragon looked exhausted, though Christopher knew better than to say it out loud.

'Then find another option. The filth-pack is out of the question.'

Christopher's coat was long and thick, and the pockets were large. 'You can go in my spare pocket.'

Jacques sniffed. 'Better. Barely tolerable, but at least it doesn't have the scent of a minor apocalypse.'

Christopher held the pocket open, and the dragon flew in. His scales were hot and dry to the touch, and the pocket grew warm immediately.

'And now,' said the dragon, 'we go.' He huffed, and dragon smoke – white, this time, and light, and almost sweet – rose from his pocket in a cloud. It smelt, Christopher thought, of the Archipelago: of glimourie, of huge skies spotted with longmas and phoenixes; of the wild enchanted islands.