

SKY PIRATES

THE DRAGON'S GOLD



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THE DRAGON'S GOLD



ALEX ENGLISH

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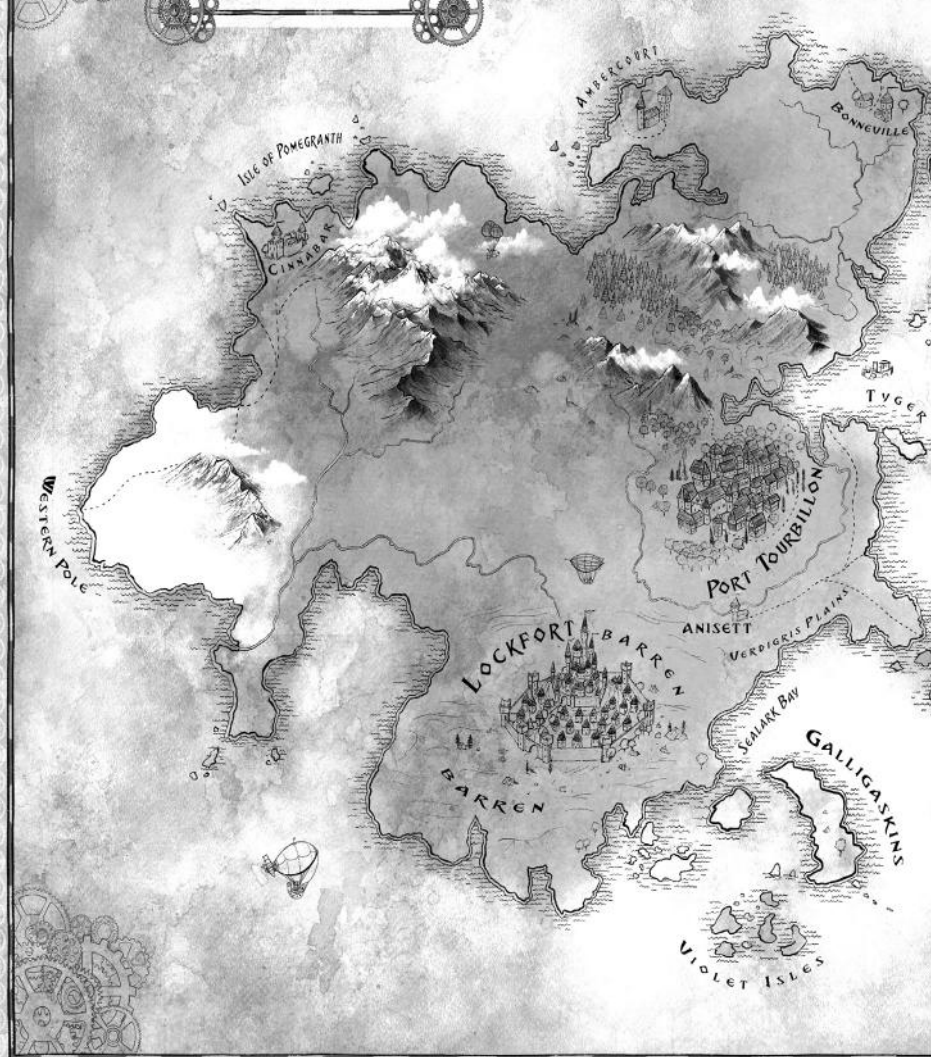
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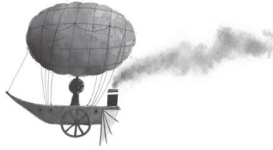


For Ellie, Hannah and Jane

THE GREAT BEYOND







CHAPTER ONE

‘I think I’ve found something!’ Echo jabbed at the white sand with her shovel.

It felt like she’d been digging all morning in the blazing sun with nothing to show for it. Could this finally be the treasure they were searching for? Echo pushed her sweaty curls out of her eyes and crouched down to get a closer look. She had definitely hit something hard, but not solid like a stone. She turned her shovel over and scraped the sand away from the buried object to reveal the corner of something angular and brown.

‘What do you think, Gilbert?’ She stuck her head out of the hole to ask her little lizard, who was sunning himself on a nearby rock. He cocked a conical eye and then gave a tiny shrug of his golden-scaled shoulders before going back to sleep.

Echo glanced across the beach to where her mother, Lil, was digging. Lil’s dark curls were wrapped in a spotted kerchief



and she wore the high buckled boots of a sky pirate, although she'd taken off her plumed captain's hat and had left it lying on the sand.

'Mother . . . I mean Captain!' Echo yelled. 'I think I've found something!'

'What is it?' Lil stuck the blade of her shovel into the sand and strode over.

'Look.' Echo pointed at the dark brown corner that stuck up out of the gritty sand. 'Do you think it could be the treasure?'

Lil squinted into the hole. 'Let me see.' She extended a tanned hand to Echo and helped her out, then hopped down lightly. She scraped at the corner with the toe of her boot, then squatted and brushed the sand away with her hand.

'Is it a treasure chest?' Echo was breathless with excitement. Had she really been the one to find it? The crew had been digging for hours and had almost given up hope, but Lil had insisted that they try one more time. And Echo's mother, Lil – Indigo Lil to most – had to be obeyed because she was the leader of the Black Sky Wolves, a crew of fearsome sky pirates, and captain of their airship, the *Scarlet Margaret*. Echo had grown up as a ward of the king of Lockfort, believing her parents had abandoned her on the castle steps. She had never stopped dreaming of discovering what happened to her mother though. And, when she finally did find her, she'd discovered that not only was Lil alive, but she was a famous sky-pirate captain. Echo still couldn't quite believe it was true.



Now that they were together, and Echo was the newest member of the Black Sky Wolves, she was determined to prove herself as a brilliant sky pirate too. It hadn't been easy so far though.

She held her breath in anticipation as Lil squatted down to examine whatever it was that Echo had found.

'I do think it might be,' Lil said, excitement rising in her voice. 'Fetch me my shovel, please.'

'Right away, Captain!' Echo flushed with pride. She jogged across to the hole that Lil had been digging beneath the star-palms and heaved on the wooden handle until the blade slipped free of the damp sand. She ran back, with some trouble as the shovel was so heavy, and passed it down to Lil.

Lil began scraping sand away with the edge of her spade and Echo leaned in to get a closer look.

Her mother stood upright and stuck her head out of the hole. 'Go and get the others. We'll need their help.'

Echo raced off, the sand hot beneath her bare feet and her whole body tingling with excitement. Please say she'd found the treasure! Ever since she'd seen the map that Lil had won in a grog-fuelled game of flip-the-frog at the tavern in Sleepy Palms, Echo had been determined to be the one to find it. It had been three whole months since she'd joined the Black Sky Wolves and, despite their many hunts for booty, she still hadn't seen a single real treasure chest. The haul of gold coins that was rumoured to be hidden in the salt caves of Tyger Island had proved to be a hoax. The legend of the Lake Lonesome diamond



turned out to be just that. And even the Bonneville Hoard had slipped from their grasp when a rival clan of sky pirates, the Darkhearts, had beaten them to it, leaving only their signature heart-shaped token of black glass behind in the crypt.

In fact, from the strained conversations she'd overheard between her mother and Bulkhead recently, things were getting desperate. The *Scarlet Margaret's* coffers were running low. But not for long! Not once she'd saved the day.

Echo pushed herself to run faster towards the other figures on the beach. Amberjack Bay was a skinny crescent of sand fringed with silvery star-palms. Their airship, the *Scarlet Margaret*, swayed gently in the air, tethered above the clear turquoise waters, its sails furled for the moment.

Up ahead, Echo saw the familiar profiles of the other Black Sky Wolves. Bulkhead, the *Scarlet Margaret's* hulking first mate and chief navigator, was digging furiously. Slingshot, ship's lookout, was sipping water from a pigskin, his shock of white hair standing on end as usual. Beti, the gap-toothed ship's doctor, and Flora, the ship's boy, despite being a girl, dug in tandem, flinging sand rhythmically in opposite directions as they sang a bawdy sky shanty.

'Bulkhead, Slingshot!' Echo yelled, as she got closer. 'Flora! Beti! Come quick!'

The other sky pirates stopped digging and turned their heads.

'What's up?' Bulkhead looked up, his great bald head glistening with sweat.



‘I’ve found ... something ...’ Echo put her hands on her knees to get her breath back. ‘Something large. I think it’s a chest. Mother ... I mean Lil, I mean the captain is taking a look.’

The other four sky pirates downed tools and Bulkhead wiped his head with a purple handkerchief.

‘At last!’ Flora gave a huge grin as she hopped out of the hole she was digging and dusted the sand from her peg leg. ‘I hope it *is* treasure this time and not another old boot.’

Heat rose to Echo’s cheeks as she flushed, feeling silly for a moment. ‘It’s not a boot. Come and see!’

Bulkhead ruffled Echo’s hair. ‘Come on, mateys – let’s see what Echo’s got.’

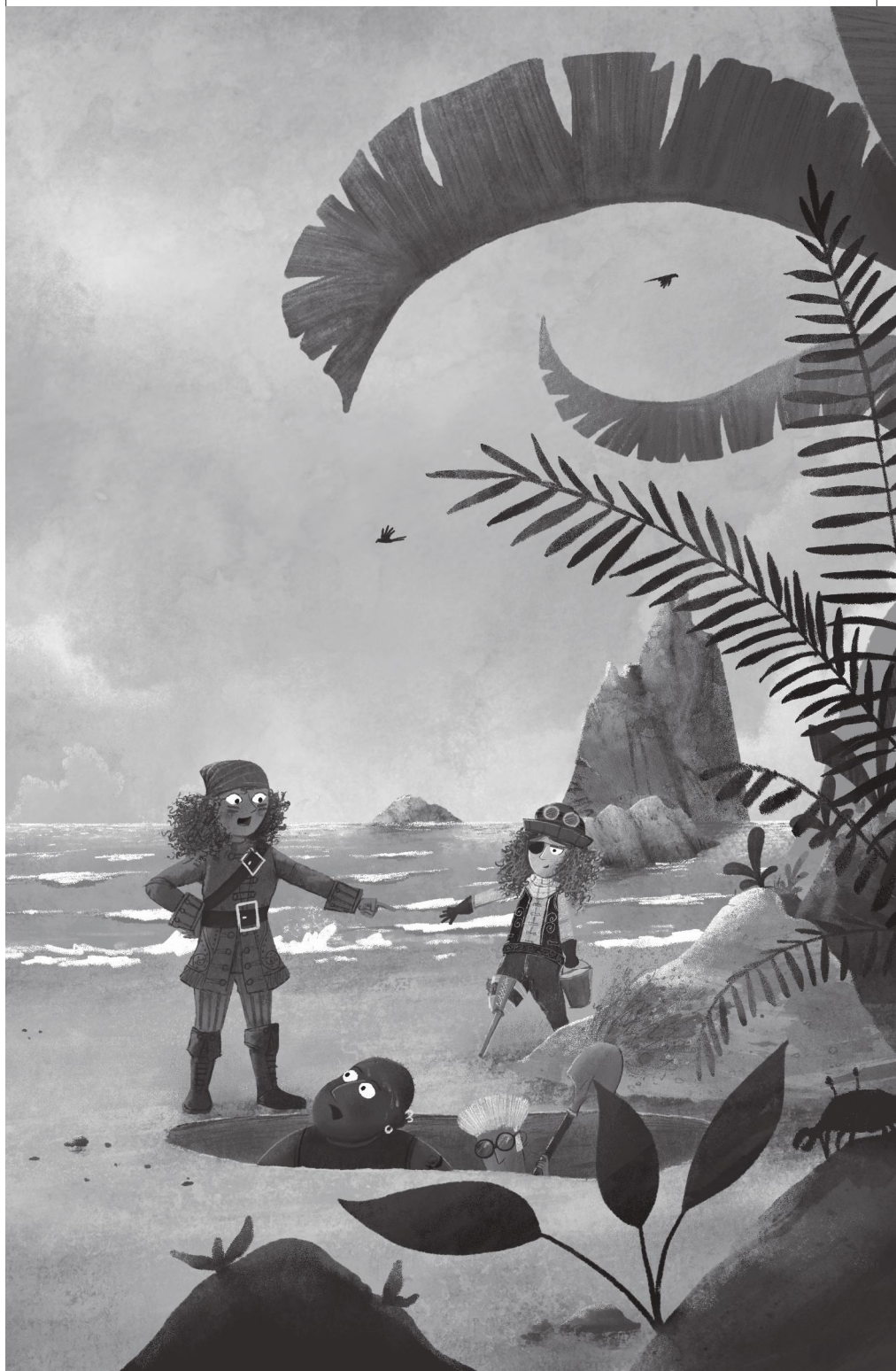


It was all hands on deck when they got back to Lil. She scrambled out of the hole and swiftly set about issuing orders. Bulkhead and Slingshot were in charge of digging round the brown shape in the sand. Echo, Beti and Flora ferried buckets of water back and forth from the surf to soften the hard-packed grains. Lil stood and watched, a stern expression on her tanned face, her long, dark curls billowing in the breeze where they’d escaped from her kerchief.

Echo was grateful for the cool water on her bare feet and calves as she dunked her bucket into the foaming surf for the third time. She hurried back to the others.







‘Watch out,’ she said, and sloshed out the water as Bulkhead and Slingshot stood back. The sandy layer dissolved to reveal a dark brown oblong covered in rusted metal studs. A chest! Echo felt almost dizzy with pride.

‘Will yer take a look at that,’ said Slingshot.

‘Aye,’ said Bulkhead. ‘She’s only gone and found it.’

Flora crowded in next to Echo. ‘She ’as as well.’

Real treasure! Echo couldn’t stop the grin from spreading over her face as she took in the lid of the battered old chest. She’d saved their skins!

‘We’ll ’ave a feast tonight!’ Flora turned to Echo and gave her a high five with one grubby hand, while Gilbert did a jubilant victory wiggle on Echo’s shoulder.

‘Stop that, you lot.’ Lil’s expression grew stern. ‘There’s no time for celebrating now. We’re vulnerable until we’ve got this haul on to the ship.’ She scanned the beach. ‘Bulkhead, go and fetch the ropes. Slingshot, you two, back to the *Scarlet Margaret* and bring her closer.’ She drew her cutlass. ‘Bring Spud and Skillet down too. I’ll stand guard.’

There was a murmur from the crew as they arranged themselves one behind the other along each rope. Echo positioned Gilbert securely across her shoulders and stood behind Bulkhead.

‘Ready, Black Sky Wolves?’ asked Lil.

Everyone grabbed the rope in both hands. ‘Ready!’ they all cheered.

‘HEAVE!’ yelled Bulkhead.



Echo braced her feet in the sand and pulled backwards with all her strength. In front of her, Bulkhead's broad back strained as, hand over hand, slowly but surely, they pulled.

'HEAVE!'

The rough rope burned Echo's hands. She almost stumbled backwards, but managed to stay upright.

'HEAVE!'

Echo could feel the coarse fibres tearing her skin. Her feet skidded and she landed on her bottom in the sand, but she kept hold of the rope, staggered back to her feet and gritted her teeth as she kept pulling.

'Nearly there!' yelled Lil. 'Beti – now!'

As the brown lid of the chest emerged from the hole, Beti leaped forward, the many bottles in her long skirts clinking, and grabbed its handles with both hands. The crew gave one final heave and, with a thud, the chest tumbled out of the hole and tipped on to the sand.

Everyone dropped the ropes, which rippled out on to the shoreline with a slap. Echo held her breath as Lil crouched down to brush sand away from the lock. What treasures would there be inside? Silver? Gold? Diamonds? Echo's mind spun with the possibilities.

'How're we gonna open it?' Flora's shrill voice cut through Echo's daydream.

Echo jumped up, putting her hand to the hairpin she always wore. 'I could pick the lock.'



‘No need for that,’ said Lil, brushing her aside. ‘Stand clear, everyone.’ She took a pace back and drew her musket from its holster, aimed and pulled the trigger. *BANG!* There was a crack of splintering wood as the chest disappeared in a cloud of gunpowder and smoke. When the air cleared, Echo saw that the lock had been blown clean off into the sand.

Lil wafted the last wisps of smoke away and strode forward. ‘Bulkhead, a hand.’

Bulkhead positioned himself before the chest and turned to Echo. ‘Come on – you too. It was you what found it after all.’

Echo grinned and raced forward to take her place between them.

‘On my count,’ said Lil. ‘One, two, three, HEAVE!’

The wood was warped and so swollen with salt water that the lid was tightly wedged shut, but as they jiggled it Echo finally felt it loosening. With a *pop*, the hasps unfastened and the chest sprang open.

‘Ready to see what you’ve found?’ Bulkhead looked at Echo with a grin.

She nodded.

Gilbert’s claws tightened on Echo’s shoulder as she squinted into the musty darkness inside the chest. But she couldn’t see anything. Where was the shining treasure?

Echo tipped the chest over and jumped back in alarm as a rather cross-looking octopus plopped out on to the sand.

It . . . it couldn’t be. The chest was empty.



There were disappointed cries from the rest of the crew, as everyone shuffled forward to see for themselves.

Echo stood apart, her arms folded across her chest. As she fought back the tears of disappointment that were threatening to spill, the octopus slip-slopped its way past them all and slid away into the water.

