

NEW LANDS



BUGGING

I hung my head over the side of the *Thrush* and watched the prow carve the seawater into a hissing spray. Viewed up close, the Blue Sea wasn't all that blue, and I wondered—for the umpteenth time in the past few days—who had named it that, and why they hadn't bothered to get it right.

They should have called it the Greenish Blue Sea. Or the Almost Blue Sea. Or the It Only Looks Blue From A Distance Sea.

It was stupid, I know. But it kept my mind off the other stuff.

Like the man who wanted to kill me.

And his daughter, Millicent, who I was in love with.

And the map in my head, which was the cause of all the trouble, and which I wasn't even sure I was remembering right. Especially the tricky part in the middle.

Three squiggles down left, four dashes up . . .

Or was it four squiggles and three dashes?

It turns out it's a bad idea to try and memorize something

written in a language you don't even speak. I'd been practicing the map twenty times a day, tracing it with my finger on the deck of the *Thrush*, so you'd think by now I would've had it hammered into my head pretty good.

But it was getting harder, not easier.

Still hanging over the gunwale, I shut my eyes and tried to imagine the original, its crooked lines of Okalu hieroglyphs painted on the gloomy wall of the Fire King's tomb.

Dash dot feather, cup, two dash dot firebird . . .

"Done yet?"

It was Guts. He was standing behind me on the deck.

"Almost," I said. "Just let me throw up again."

He snorted. "Wot's yer problem? Food ain't *that* bad."

"It's not the food," I said, although the food was awful. The crew were all bone-skinny, and after three days of eating their smelly turtle meat and wormy biscuits, it was no mystery why.

"Seasick?"

"Not that, either."

"Then wot?"

I'm scared out of my mind and I think we should just forget about finding this stupid treasure and run away.

But I couldn't actually tell Guts that.

I couldn't admit that I was terrified we were doomed—that if we set foot in the New Lands, we'd be killed long before we could find an Okalu Native to translate the map, and that the only sane thing to do was to bug out and flee down to the Barkers, or maybe even farther, someplace where nobody was gunning to kill me for an ancient treasure I barely understood and wasn't even sure existed.

I couldn't admit any of that.

Or could I?

I retched over the side one last time to make sure I was done. Then I straightened up and turned to face my partner.

Guts was bobbing on the balls of his feet, eyes twitching under his tangled thicket of white-blond hair. He raised his arms in a fighting stance. The steel hook on the stump of his left hand glistened in the morning sun.

"C'mon," he said. "Let's tussle!"

I sighed. "Again?"

"Need to practice!"

He'd bought the hook from a field pirate just before we left Deadweather Island. He was getting pretty handy at fighting with it, which I guess was helpful. Except that I was his only sparring partner, so the fact that he was getting better meant my shirt was ripped in three places, and there were a dozen puncture marks and several deep scratches on my forearms. He kept promising he wouldn't make contact, but he couldn't seem to help himself.

"Not now," I said. "We need to talk."

"'Bout wot?"

"I think we . . . it's . . . I forgot the map."

"Nah, ye didn't."

"I did!"

"Said that yesterday. Then ye remembered it."

"I thought I did. Then I forgot again. And this time it's worse."

"Said *that* yesterday, too. C'mon, ye *porsamora!* Fight me!"

One of the crew had taught him how to swear in Cartager. He was as excited about that as he was about his new hook.

"C'mon! Lucy needs a workout!"

He'd named the hook "Lucy." I kept telling him it was ridiculous, but he didn't care.

"I'm serious! We need to talk!" I insisted.

Guts lowered his arms and frowned. His eyes twitched one more time and then went still. When we first met—when Ripper Jones and his pirate crew had made us fight almost to the death, and had done who knows what else to Guts before that—he twitched constantly. Eyes, shoulders, head . . . sometimes the whole upper half of his body would shudder.

Now it was mostly just his eyes, and sometimes he'd go a good two minutes without a twitch.

Sometimes, he almost seemed normal.

Not me. Not lately. I was a wreck. And the closer we got to Pella Nonna, the worse I got.

I'm scared out of my mind and I think we should just run away.

Guts was still staring at me.

"So talk," he said.

I took another deep breath.

I HADN'T STARTED the trip scared out of my mind. In fact, when we first boarded the *Thrush* three days earlier, I'd been feeling pretty cocky. Mostly because right before we left Deadweather, Guts and I had managed to stand down Roger Pembroke and a hundred Rovian soldiers.

How we got to that point is kind of a long story. Pembroke had killed my whole family—sent them off to their deaths somewhere out in the Blue Sea, in a runaway hot air balloon that he'd rigged so it looked like an accident—and when I didn't die with them, he'd gone to an awful lot of trouble to finish me off.

I don't think it was anything personal. He just wanted the Fire King's treasure. And he figured the map to it was somewhere on my family's ugly fruit plantation, which was why he wound up sailing to Deadweather with a hundred soldiers and marching them up to our front porch.

But somehow, Guts and I escaped, with the only surviving version of the map lodged between my ears.

The "somehow" was mostly Millicent's doing. She was Pembroke's daughter, and the person I loved more than anything else in the world. I think that must have been true for Pembroke, too, because he let her talk him into slinking off empty-handed, packing his whole company of soldiers onto a boat back to Sunrise.

The truth was, if it weren't for Millicent, Guts and I would have been dead as rocks.

But I wasn't thinking that when the *Thrush* showed up to take the ugly fruit harvest to Pella Nonna in the New Lands, and we hitched a ride on it. And I wasn't thinking it was just blind luck that a ship had appeared at exactly the moment we needed to get off Deadweather, headed for exactly the place we wanted to go.

I wasn't thinking we'd only gotten this far because of blind luck and Millicent. Not yet. Instead, I was patting myself on the back for how clever Guts and I were to have pulled it off.

And considering what we'd just gotten away with, I figured the rest of it—finding an Okalu Native, translating the map, tracking down the treasure—would be no trick at all.

So I spent most of that first day at sea sunning myself on the deck like a lazy turtle, daydreaming about what I'd do once the treasure had made us fabulously wealthy.

I'd marry Millicent, that was obvious. I didn't bother to stew

over minor obstacles like our being thirteen and her father wanting to kill me, let alone whether she'd say yes in the first place.

To my mind, the real challenge was figuring out where to build our mansion.

Deadweather was out of the question. Too many pirates, not enough food, the weather was lousy, and until I'd left for a while and come back again, I'd never realized just how much the smoldering volcano made the whole island stink like rotten eggs.

Sunrise wasn't an option, either. It was beautiful and all, but the people were terrible snobs. And since Roger Pembroke had plastered WANTED FOR MURDER posters with my face on them all over the island, it was likely to be awkward for me at dinner parties and such.

There were the Fish Islands, up north. But the name made me think they probably didn't smell too good, and I didn't know anything else about them. I knew even less about the Barkers, down south . . . Pella Nonna was full of Cartagers . . . and the rest of the New Lands were nothing but Native tribes and wilderness.

So that just left the Continent. We'd have to sail forty days across the Great Maw to get there, but once we did, we could live in Rovia itself—the setting for almost every novel I'd ever read, a rich and fabled land with glamorous cities and a countryside of gently rolling hills (I wasn't sure what “gently rolling” meant, but it sounded awfully nice) supposedly chock-full of ancient castles. If any of those were for sale, we wouldn't even have to build a mansion first. We could just move right in.

I figured I'd get a place like Timberfield, the mountaintop fortress where Billicks the Brave wound up at the end of *Throne of the Ancients*. I'd pass the days with a lot of hunting and falconry, and

at night, Millicent and I would curl up in our massive library and read books to our hearts' content, surrounded by our six children.

The kids would read books, too, even the little ones.

I was just getting around to naming our firstborn when the quartermaster banged on the dinner plate. Starving, Guts and I quickly gathered under the mainmast with the eight haggard-looking crewmen for our first night's meal.

And that's when things started to go sideways.

FIRST, CAPTAIN RACKER demanded fifteen silver from us for the right to eat while we were on board. We forked it over, but when we saw what we'd paid for—the biscuits were so maggotty that if you set one down, it'd slither off under its own power—Guts just about buried his hook in Racker's head.

I managed to keep Guts from drawing blood, but then the jokes about my name started.

“Egg, eh? Was mummy a chicken?”

“Nah! She was an omelet! Haw, haw!”

Just the mention of my mother, who I'd never known except as a story Dad told over her grave, made me angry.

“It's short for Egbert,” I said, trying to sound polite.

“That's even worse! Haw, haw!”

“Why stick ye with a name like that? Didn't they love ye none?”

It was a fair enough question as far as my dad was concerned. But that just made me madder. I had to bite my lip to keep quiet.

Then the conversation turned really unsettling.

“Why you headed for Pella?” asked Racker. “Got an itch to die young?”

“What do you mean?”

“Short-Ears’ll kill ye ’fore ye get off the dock,” snorted a snaggletoothed crew member.

Pella Nonna was a Cartager port, the same way Sunrise Island was Rovian. And Cartagers all had freakishly small ears, which was why everybody called them that.

“Wot they want to kill us fer?” Guts asked.

“For the shape of your ears,” said Racker. “Haven’t you heard of the Banishment Law? Ever since the Barker War, Rovians are banned from the New Lands on pain of death.”

“Nuts to that!” spat Guts. “Islander, I am. Never even been across the Maw.”

“It’s not where you’re from, boy—it’s how you look. And talk. You got Rovian ears, Rovian skin, and a Rovian tongue.”

“But that makes all of you Rovian, too,” I said. “And you’re going to Pella.”

Reggie the quartermaster shook his head. “Nah. Droppin’ anchor offshore. Cartagers run boats out, load the ugly fruit. Then off we go. Try to put in, Short-Ears’d hang us dead.”

A heavy lump of dread settled in my gut. “So if we go to Pella . . . they’ll hang us dead, too?”

The crewmen all nodded eagerly.

“Might even torture ye first,” said the snaggletooth, with a wide-eyed grin that told us he found the idea pretty exciting.

“Could you . . . maybe drop us on the coast? Farther north?” I was thinking we might be able to avoid Pella completely. After all, we didn’t need a Cartager to translate the map. We needed an Okalu.

“What? And get eaten by Natives?”

“They’d actually *eat* us? The Okalu?”

“Okalu, Fingu, Flut—any of them tribes. Bunch of cannibals.”

“Now, hang on, cap,” the quartermaster chimed in. “They don’t eat the whole of ye. Just yer heart.”

“Reggie’s right,” agreed the snaggletooth. “Cut it out yer chest, munch it down while it’s still beatin’. That’s how they do it.”

“Tell the other one!” Guts snorted.

“True enough, boy. They’re not called savages for nothing.” Racker shook his head. “If you’re dead set on going to the New Lands, you’re best off in Pella. Might stand a chance there if you keep your ears covered. And you speak the language.”

He leaned forward and looked down his thin nose at us. “You *do* speak Cartager, don’t you?”

We didn’t.

GUTS REFUSED TO WORRY that we were sailing to our deaths.

“Gonna be fine,” I heard him say as we lay awake that first night in the hammocks we’d strung up in a corner of the cargo hold. It was pitch-black down there—I couldn’t see my hand in front of my face, let alone Guts in the next hammock.

“How can you say that? What’s going to stop the Short-Ears from stringing us up?”

“Lucy, fer one.”

“Will you stop calling it that? It’s a *hook*.”

“Yeh—hook named Lucy.”

“But it’s stupid! Might as well name your pants.”

“Pants ain’t gonna get me out o’ no scrapes.”

“And a hook’s not going to kill a city full of Cartagers.”

“Don’t need to—that’s wot her brothers an’ sisters are fer.”

“What brothers and sisters?”

“Ones in the sack.”

We had four pistols and a pair of knives in the rucksack we’d brought with us, but I didn’t see how it changed the odds much.

“You’re out of your mind,” I said. “And how are we even going to feed ourselves? Only got fifteen silver left.”

“Got the necklace. Want money, just sell off a stone.”

Guts had taken a necklace from the Fire King’s skeleton back on Deadweather. It was a long string of gems, crowned by a three-inch firebird pendant made of rubies, diamonds, and the like. After a hundred years in the tomb, the gems were crusted with dirt, and rotted feathers hung from it like clumps of dried seaweed. But it was obvious, filthy as it was, that it was valuable.

“Don’t be stupid! We need that for the Okalu. It belonged to their king—it’s got to be precious to them. If we hack off parts of it to buy food, think how mad they’ll be.”

Guts didn’t say anything.

“And that’s if they don’t cut our hearts out at the sight of us. Or is Lucy going to get you out of that fix, too?”

He still didn’t say anything.

“Are you even listening to me?”

I waited for an answer to come through the darkness.

Then I heard him snore. Unbelievable.

I didn’t sleep that whole night. But not because of the snoring.

What the crew had said about the Cartagers in Pella sounded true enough. In all my favorite books, from *Basingstroke* to *Red Runs the Blood*, Short-Ears were villains—every one of them vicious, black-hearted, and cowardly. Killing us for being Rovian seemed like just the kind of thing they’d do.

I hadn’t read any books about Natives, or even laid eyes on

one, unless you counted the distant glimpses I'd gotten of the silver mine workers slogging away up on Mount Majestic, above Sunrise Island. But there was no reason to doubt what the crew said about them, either.

I started to wonder if we shouldn't scrap the whole plan and go back to Deadweather. But I knew if I did, Roger Pembroke would find me.

Then again . . . what was going to stop him from hunting me down in Pella Nonna? Or anywhere else?

As I thought about it, lying there in the dark, my heart started to pound like a drum. Because I realized no matter where I went, he'd be coming for me. Pembroke wanted that map badly enough to kill for it, and as long as he was rich and powerful, and I had the only copy on earth, I was in danger.

Pretty soon, my heart was pounding so hard I could hear it in my ears. I tried to settle it down by telling myself I'd managed to outwit him so far.

But then I thought about everything that had happened over the past few weeks—*really* thought about it—and I realized I hadn't outwitted anybody.

I hadn't been clever. I'd just been lucky. And sooner or later, I was going to run out of luck.

Or maybe I already had. Something was going horribly wrong with my body—my heart was racing, I couldn't move, I couldn't think, I couldn't breathe . . . My chest felt like somebody was stacking cannonballs on top of it.

I needed air. I thrashed against the hammock until it dumped me out on my head. Guts mumbled groggy words at me, but I didn't answer. I flailed around, knocking against boxes and crates

and ceiling beams and who knows what else until I finally found the stairs and managed to stagger up to the main deck.

At that hour, the Blue Sea was black.

I thought about that as I puked under the moonlight.

I SPENT MOST OF that first night at sea retching over the side. I was still at it when Guts finally got up the next morning and joined me on deck.

It wasn't any easier to talk sense into him than it had been the night before.

"If they'll hang us just for being Rovian—"

"How they gonna know?"

"It's *obvious*! What are we going to do, cut off our ears?"

"Can't see our ears—too much hair. Problem solved."

"It's not just our ears. We don't speak a word of Cartager!"

That stumped him for a while, and he wandered off. Half an hour later, he came back with the snaggletooth, whose name was Mick, and who Guts had just hired—for ten silver, no less—to teach us Cartager.

Mick said he'd picked up the language in a Fish Islands prison, where he'd shared a cell with a pair of Cartager dock thieves. Pretty quickly, the limits of that became obvious.

"*Blun*."

"*Blun*," Guts and I repeated.

"Means dung," said Mick. "But ye can use it for anythin' ye don't like—food, weather, prison guards—"

"Right. What else?"

"*Balamunor*."

"*Balamunor*?"

“Means dog-brains. *Shroof*.”

“*Shroof*.”

“Means a coward. Man wit’ no honor. Big on honor, Cartagers are—want t’ get under someone’s skin, *shroofs* worse’n *balamunor*. Wot else . . . ? *Wanaluff*.”

“*Wanaluff*?”

“Means cow-ears. Prob’ly hear it a lot—on account o’ to a Cartager, two o’ you got cow ears. Man calls ye *wanaluff*, try callin’ him a *porsamora*.”

“*Porsamora*?”

“Yeh! Means he likes pigs. And not just fer eatin’, if ye know wot I mean. Now, if ye *really* wanna insult a man—”

“Do you know any words that aren’t insults?” I interrupted.

“Wot ye mean?”

“I mean, we’re trying not to get killed. So what we really need are useful words.”

“*Porsamora*’s dead useful! Good in all sorts o’ situations. Man don’t have to actually like pigs fer ye to call him that, ye know.”

Mick was looking at me like I was thick in the head. So was Guts.

“But insults aren’t going to help us get over with Cartagers,” I said.

“Wot is?” Guts asked me.

“Things like, ‘Can you help us?’ Or ‘We’re friendly.’”

Mick curled his lip in disgust. “Gonna say *that* to a Short-Ears?”

“*I’m* not,” declared Guts.

“Can you at least teach us to say, ‘Do you speak Rovian?’” I pleaded.

Mick scrunched his eyebrows together. I seemed to have stumped him.

“Why don’t we just forget the whole thing?” I suggested. “Give us back the silver, and—”

“A-a-a-a! Give it a chance, boyo!” Mick waved his hands at me like I’d just threatened to slug him. “Wot ye want to say? ‘D’ye speak Rovian?’”

“That’d be a start,” I said.

“Fine. ‘Kay. Here it is. It’s . . .” He paused, his eyes narrowing into slits. When he finally spoke, it was unusually slowly—like he was making it up as he went along. “*Dee . . . lo . . . spee . . . lo . . . Rova . . . neelo.*”

“*Deelo speelo Rovaneelo?*”

“That’s right,” he said, bobbing his head confidently. “Wot else ye want to know?”

“More curses!” said Guts. “How ye tell someone he’s ugly?”

“Lots o’ ways! Lessee . . . *Palomuno*, means horse-face . . .”

I quit the lesson a few minutes later, after Mick’s claim that “Where can we find an Okalu?” translated as “*Weerwo feerwo Okaleerwo?*” convinced me nothing he taught us was reliable, except maybe the curses. Guts stuck with it, and eventually picked up a few dozen of what Mick promised him were the foulest insults in the Cartager language.

He was as thrilled with his new vocabulary as he was with his new hook. For the next three days, he practiced them both non-stop, usually at the same time.

I spent the days doing a few things over and over myself: practicing the map, puking over the gunwale, worrying over who among the Cartagers, Natives, and Pembroke was going to kill

me first . . . and eventually cooking up a plan for how I could quit the whole business.

The plan itself was simple. Once she'd dropped the ugly fruit cargo in Pella, the *Thrush* was headed south, way down to the Barker Islands. I'd never been, but I knew they were Rovian-held, so at least there wouldn't be any Cartagers or Natives around to slaughter us for no good reason. We'd be that much farther away from Pembroke. And from there, it'd be no trick to hop a ship across the Great Maw to the Continent, where even someone as rich and powerful as Pembroke would have a hard time tracking us down.

It was cowardly, I know. I'd be running away from the man who killed my family, when the truly noble thing would be to seek him out and avenge their deaths somehow.

But after a few days of stomach-clenching fear, I didn't want to be noble. I just wanted to not be dead. And I told myself that even if I bugged out now, I could always come back and avenge them some other time. Like in ten years, when I might be rich and powerful myself. Or at least slightly less terrified.

Bugging out would be easy. There was nothing to it. All we had to do was stay on the boat, and not get off when we reached Pella.

The hard part was figuring out how to sell the idea to Guts.

"SO TALK," HE SAID on the morning of the fourth day.

"We can't go to Pella," I said. "*Really* can't. We'll just get ourselves killed—if not by Cartagers or Natives, then . . . by the others."

"Quit bein' a *shroof*! Gonna be fine."

"It won't! And I don't care what you call me. We're not going."

He must have realized I was serious this time, because his eyes started to twitch.

“Wot about the treasure?!”

“Probably just a myth anyway.”

“*Blun* to that!”

“Whatever . . . I don’t care about the treasure.”

“Cause ye got a whole plantation? That it?”

“I gave the place away! To the field pirates. Remember? Anyway, it wasn’t worth much to begin with.”

“So ye need the treasure! Set ye up!”

“I don’t care about that.”

“*I do!*”

He was twitching badly now, worse than he had since we’d boarded the *Thrush*. And he must have really been getting hot, because he started swearing in Rovian again.

“Ye — —! Wot about yer family?”

“What about them?”

“He killed ’em! Gonna let him get away with it?”

“*You didn’t even know my family!*” It came out so loud I could see crewmen turning to stare from all the way down at the stern.

But once I got going, I couldn’t stop—everything I’d been trying to stuff down inside came up at once.

“I am *sick to death* of running, and fighting, and people trying to kill me—I don’t want treasures, or maps, or revenge—I just want them to leave me alone!”

My arms were shaking, and I had to cross them over my chest and stuff my hands under my armpits to get them to stop.

Guts twitched a few more times. Then he lowered his voice.

“Wot about yer girlie? Gonna let her down, too?”

He knew me pretty well by now. Other than avenging my family, Millicent was the one thing that made me think I shouldn't cut and run.

"She'd understand. Anyway, I'll get her back somehow. Just . . . not soon."

Guts cursed a few more times. Then he shook his head, like he was done with the whole thing.

"Fine. Gimme the map, then."

"What do you mean?"

"Gimme the map! You ain't gonna use it."

"You'd go alone?"

"Course!"

It hadn't crossed my mind that Guts might leave me behind. At the thought of it—just when all the other fear was finally starting to lift—a panicky feeling shot through my belly.

"Gimme the map!"

"You can't memorize it. There's no time."

"So get paper! From the cap'n. Write it down!"

"And . . . what? You'd go to Pella? I'd go to the Barkers? We'd split up?"

I could barely see his eyes as they glared at me from under his long tangles of hair.

"If yer gonna bug . . . then yeh. Go it alone."

The panicky feeling in my gut was spreading. As I stared back at him, I started to realize there might be something worse than just being scared.

And that was being all alone in the world.

The look in his eyes said Guts didn't like the idea any better than I did. He lowered his head, staring down at the deck.

“*Need* that treasure. Bad! Set me up. Ain’t got nothin’ else. No way to make it, neither.”

His voice was scratchy and thick. “You an’ me had a deal. Partners. Things got hot, I didn’t bug on you. Don’t you go buggin’ on me.”

He looked up and met my eyes again, and I knew he was right.

If Guts was dead set on going to the New Lands, I was going with him. Like it or not.

I was opening my mouth to tell him as much when a voice called out from up in the rigging.

“PIRATES! DEAD AHEAD!”