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opening extract from

Snowbone

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PART ONE

The galleon sailed through the afternoon, alone on the butterfly-blue ocean. Only she wasn't alone. Not any more. Because the strange ship that had been following her for days, lying low on the horizon like a great, grey wolf, was coming closer.

'PIRATES!' The lookout shouted so loudly, his teeth rattled. 'PIRATES! PORTSIDE! GAINING FAST!'

The First Mate stormed to the quarterdeck, knocking sailors down like bowling pins. 'Cap'n?' he said breathlessly. 'What'll it be?'

Captain Kempe, gazing through his telescope, seemed unconcerned by the turn of events. While his crew crumbled around him, he stood firm. Calm, unruffled, handsome as ever. But cold, cold fear had gripped him. He could feel it turning in his belly like a living thing.

'*Cap'n?*' The First Mate watched a tiny muscle, tick-tick-ticking on the captain's neck.

Captain Kempe gazed on. The pirate ship was a

brig. They couldn't outrace her. But they could try.

He snapped the telescope shut. 'Let's show them what we're made of,' he said. 'All the speed we can muster, Flynn, straight away.'

'Aye aye, Cap'n.'

'And, Flynn – prepare the cannon. Just in case.'

'Aye, sir,' said Flynn, with the ghost of a smile. Both men knew the *Hope* was doomed.

Captain Kempe turned back to the ocean. The pirate ship was speeding towards them, riding the waves like a storm demon. With a sigh, he stroked the sword that hung, cold and deadly, from his belt.

He reopened his telescope. The ship was nearly upon them. So close, he could see the pirate flag, black silk fluttering in the ocean breeze, and the pirates, calmly going about their business. How different from his own men, with their wide eyes and praying mouths, running backwards and forwards, pale with panic, pulling, heaving, positioning the cannon, trying to believe that firepower alone would save them.

BOOOOM! The pirate ship opened fire. The *Hope* lurched violently as the first cannonball struck her.

'RETURN FIRE!' yelled the Captain.

BOOOOM! The *Hope* replied with a thunderous volley. The pirate ship reeled under its impact and Captain Kempe punched the air triumphantly. Down below, in a fug of smoke and sweat and powder, his men raced to prepare a second round.

But the crew of the pirate ship, the *Mermaid*, was doing exactly the same. And there, in the dark and the dust, they heaved a massive cannonball into place and – *tsss!* – torched the powder and – *BOOOOM!* – the cannonball was spat from the gunport. It tore through the air, racing its own shadow across the waves, faster, faster, faster. A death-bringing, wood-smashing, hope-crushing globe of destruction. Faster, faster, faster. CRAOWOOPOOOM!

The mighty cannonball smashed through the *Hope*'s hull planks and careered into the hold. Here there were crates, dozens of them, full of wooden eggs. *Crrooom!* Half were smashed to smithereens; the eggs tumbled out on to the floor. A flickering lantern, swinging from a roof beam, fell from its hook and – *vooomf!* – the flame ignited the spilt oil and a fire began.

It spat and clawed like a flaming tomcat. It pounced on the shattered crates. Mauled the decking. Snapped the bones of the ship. It hissed and growled. Whipped an angry, fiery tail till the hold fizzed with sparks. Then it crept forward on its belly and started licking at the remaining crates.

Inside those crates, a strange thing happened. As the temperature rose, the wooden eggs started to move. They twisted and turned, this way and that, and suddenly – *BANG!* – one of the crates exploded. The eggs were thrown high into the air, and fell back down like apples in a windstorm. And one pale egg,

whiter than all the others, rolled away into a quiet corner and lay there, quite still.

But deep inside that egg, things were beginning to change. Cells were dividing, multiplying, replicating. Limbs were forming, straining, pushing. The egg was swelling, bigger, bigger. The wooden shell became leathery, taut. It bulged as a foot pressed here, a nose poked there. Whatever was inside wanted to get out and nothing was going to stop it.

Oof! Out came a leg. A pale wooden leg, with tiny toes. *Oof!* Another, kicking hard. *Ug!* An arm. *Ug!* Another. Fine wooden fingers, feeling, feeling. The baby rocked from side to side, trying to right herself. *BOOM!* Another cannonball screamed into the hold and toppled a tower of crates. They fell so hard, the baby was bounced into the air – *wheeeeeeee!* – and landed on all fours like a headless cat. Her hands reached for the empty space between her shoulders. She took hold of her hair and pulled – but her head wouldn't come out. She pulled again, harder now, and – *pop!* – out it came. It wobbled on her neck like a loose button. And there she sat, bare-bottom naked, goose-grey eyes blinking. A strange, pale wooden baby with just one thing on her mind.

FOOD! The desire for it knotted the baby's belly. Sharpened her senses. Kicked her into moving. And she wasn't alone. All around, babies just like her were crawling, searching, screaming for food. But the pale baby was silent, concentrating. She considered the light: the sparkling, leaping light across the way. She turned and peered into the shadows behind her. She frowned. Blinked. Chose the dark and started crawling. Soon she found a piece of rope. She picked it up and sniffed it. Bit into it with her sharp wooden teeth and chewed steadily. *Na!* She spat it out and moved on, sniffing, sniffing. *Uh?* A rusty nail. She licked it. *Na!* A broken lantern. A ball of string. An iron bar. *Na! Na! Na!* She crawled on.

Aaah! A faint rotting smell tickled her nose. Somewhere in the smoke, in the fire, in the filth . . . *Ha!* She pounced on the upturned bucket, threw it aside and seized the rat. It was cold and old. Wet with maggots. But the baby quivered with excitement and stuffed it into her mouth. She crunched and

chewed, and down it went – fur, flesh, bones – until the tail was hanging from her lips like a question mark. With a final flick of her tongue, that disappeared too.

The baby sat there, looking puzzled. But not for long. She burped so violently, the force of it toppled her over backwards. But she picked herself up, smiled vacantly and crawled on.

Flames were dancing in every corner now. A grey octopus of smoke spread its deadly tentacles into every nook and cranny of the hold. And the baby felt a strong, primal instinct stirring deep within her. *Get out.*

Miraculously, the steps leading to the deck were still intact. She crawled over and began the long climb up, pushing on, claiming her space in a wedge of babies. Onwards, upwards, into the light – and into the battle.

The deck was a forest of legs: boots and shoes and blue tattoos, flat feet, bare feet, socks and sandals. Stomping, stamping, whirling, twirling, sword and cutlass, dagger hurling. Clash of silver, splash of blood; grunt and moan and fall and – *thud!* – a sailor hit the deck. His teeth shot out like ten white mice. The baby ignored him and crawled on.

She could smell . . . chickens! Three of them, dead in a crate. She smashed her fist through the wooden slats, dragged one out and ate it, feathers, feet and all. And she was just about to pull out the second when another baby reached over and grabbed it. She

whipped round. It was a boy, with an odd eye and a smile as big as a banana. He was stronger than her. Much stronger. She let him have the chicken. There was still one left. She pulled it out and ate it all.

Time went by. One hour, two hours. The battle was over, the pirates had won, and the pale baby was walking now, strong as a two-year-old human. On she went, sniffing, sniffing, eating anything she could find. A lump of liquorice. A leather shoe. A barrel of fish. A single finger. She was still hungry.

Then she saw it. A firm white leg, right in front of her. Hairy, with torn britches flapping at the knee. Lip-licking, mouth-dripping, fat, fine, juicy.

Aieeee! The pirate howled as her teeth sank into his flesh. He bent down and tried to force her head away. She growled and gripped harder. *Aaargh!* He took hold of her ears and pulled them savagely. *Oooh!* Her teeth sank in deeper. She wrapped herself around the pirate's leg, clinging like a monkey.

'Get her off!' cried the pirate. 'Somebody get her off!'

The baby felt strong hands tugging at her. But the leg was tender and she was hungry. She wouldn't let go.

Then a rich, meaty smell drifted past her nose. *Ah!* Out of the corner of her eye she saw a man. He had something in his hand. Something round and brown. He was offering it to her.

She sniffed at the food. *Oh!* She dropped from the pirate's leg, took the pork pie in her mouth and scuttled away, over the deck and into the rigging. And there she sat, happily munching her prize, while the pirates began their celebrations below.

Night fell. In the vastness of the ocean, the *Mermaid* and the *Hope* lay at anchor together, side by side like slippers. The pirates had covered the *Hope*'s rigging with lanterns. Now they sat beneath them, smoking tobacco and swigging rum. Both tasted sweeter tonight.

Scar Arm, the pirate who had been bitten earlier, emerged from the shadows and walked an unsteady line across the deck, zigzagging to avoid the countless wooden babies that still crawled free.

'These blasted tiddlins!' he said. 'They're getting under my feet something rotten. I reckon we should throw 'em overboard. They're no use to anyone now.'

'But they're so cute!' said another, Dog Ear, who was cradling one of the babies in his arms. 'Look at this one here. She is the sweetest thing! I'm gonna call her Mouse, 'cause her eyes are the softest brown – just like a little brown mouse.'

'Well, if you're gonna call her Mouse, I'm gonna call that one Blackeye,' said his mate, Squid. He pointed at the baby who had eaten the second

chicken. 'You can't see it from here, but he has the most incredible eye. You know the bit where it's blue or brown? On him, it's black. And if you look really close, there's a ring of silver around the edge. It's weird! I don't know if he can see through it, it's so dark.'

'You can't go giving 'em all names!' cried Scar Arm, throwing up his hands in despair. 'Not if we're going to toss 'em overboard!'

'Who says we're doin' that?' said Dog Ear. 'Not I!'

'Nor I,' said Squid. 'Oh, come on now, Scar Arm! You'll bust a gut the way you're goin' on.'

He offered the pirate a glass of rum. Scar Arm took it, grunted and settled himself on a nearby sack of beans.

'What about that one?' said Dog Ear, nodding at something in the rigging.

The others looked up. There was the pale baby, still clinging to the masthead.

'She's very skinny,' said Squid. 'How about . . . Boneybum?'

'Nah.'

'She should be Fang,' said Scar Arm grumpily. 'She's vicious, that one.'

'Nah,' said Dog Ear again. 'She's not vicious, just hungry. They all are. But she is a fighter, though.'

'You're not wrong there. In a scrap, she'd be the last one standing.'

'Aye. She'd be there, long after everyone else had gone.'

'*Wait*,' said Squid urgently. Inspiration had seized him. His eyes widened. His brain whirred . . . and a single word fell from his mouth: 'Snowbone.'

'*Eh!*' breathed Dog Ear. 'That's genius, is that!'

'I know!' said Squid. His grin was so wide, it tickled his ears.

High in the rigging, the baby heard the name. She didn't know why it was clever, but she liked it. She repeated it slowly, rolling it off her tongue: '*Snowbone*.' Sounded good to her. 'Want it,' she said to the night and stars. 'Mine.' She smiled. Now she had something no one could ever take away from her.