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Opening extract from

The Shark-Headed Bear-Thing

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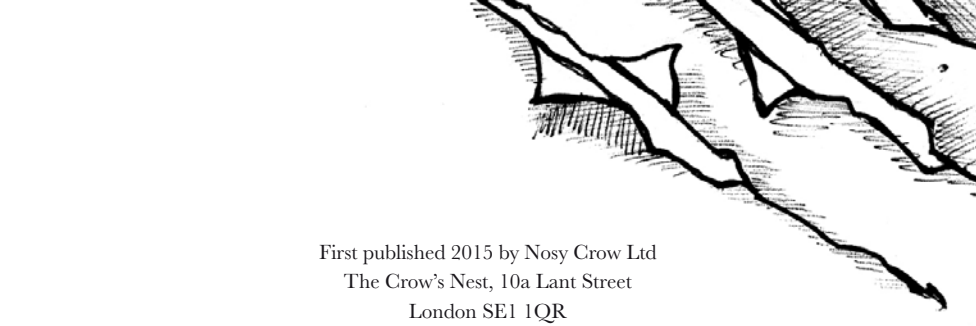
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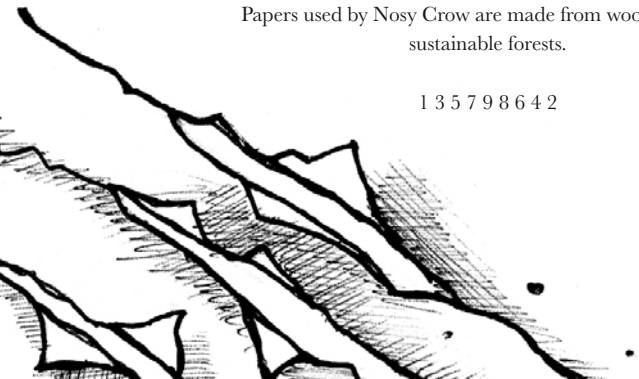
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chapter One

Benjamin Blank was having a brilliant dream about kicking a giant up the bum when the world began to tremble. His eyes peeled open and he sat up on his horsehair mattress. The floorboards beneath him were rumbling and shaking.

"Earthquake," he whispered, then he yelled,





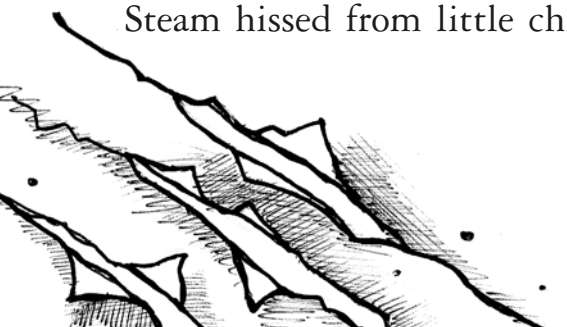
"Yes!" and punched the air. He'd never been in an earthquake before.

The rumbling stopped as suddenly as it had started, and he realised it probably wasn't an earthquake after all. There was silence for a moment, followed by a loud *boing*. Something shot into his bedroom through the wooden floor, then punched a hole in the thatched roof on its way back out again.

"Sorry!" called a voice from below. "My fault. Breakfast's ready!"

Ben clambered free of his knot of blankets, stretched, then slid down the spiral metal staircase that led into the room below.

A huge contraption filled one half of the circular room. Cogs clanked on the front of it. Steam hissed from little chimneys and water



bubbled along narrow pipes. Somewhere, hidden in the inner workings, a chicken clucked impatiently. Ben hung back and eyed the machine warily.

"I built it while you were asleep. I call it the Automated Breakfast Producing Device," said Uncle Tavish, who'd never had a knack for catchy names. He stepped out from behind the thing and waved the mechanical arm he'd made for himself after he lost one of his own ones. It was twice as big as his other arm, and the movement almost made him fall over. "Watch this," he said, and he cranked a handle on the machine's side.

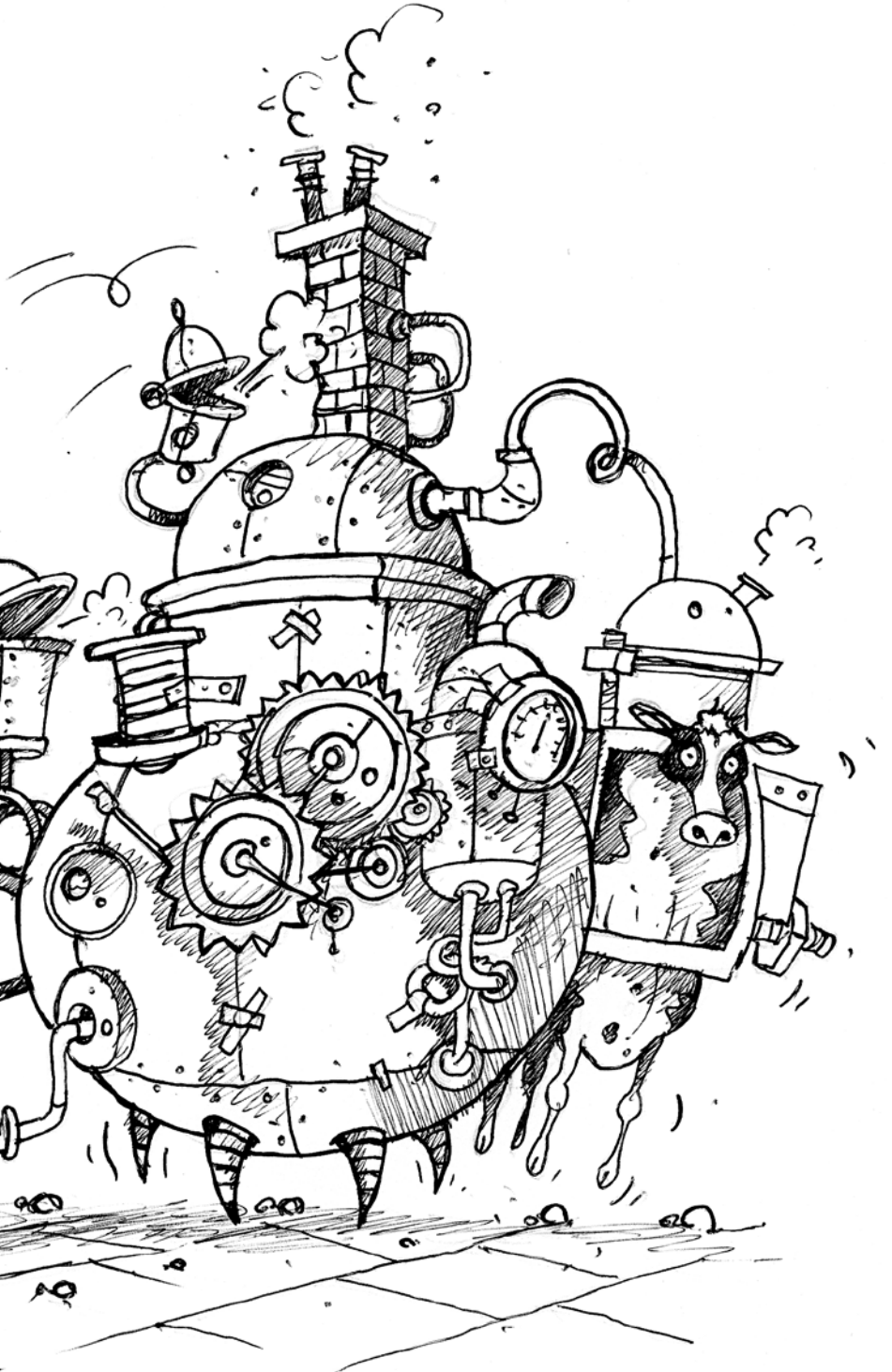
The cogs turned, the steam hissed and the chicken *quacked* in a very un-chicken like way. A small brown oval fired out from somewhere



inside the machine and rocketed straight for Benjamin's head. Quick as a flash, he snatched it from the air just before it exploded against his face.

"An egg," Ben said, then he felt his fingers start to burn. He tossed the egg up and began to juggle with it. "Ouch, ouch. Hot, hot!"







"Well of course it's hot. Who'd want to eat cold eggs?" Tavish thought about this. "Unless at a picnic, perhaps. Or pickled eggs, obviously, mustn't forget them." His eyes lit up. "Ooh, an Automated Egg Pickling Device. I must write that down."

"Still hot!" yelped Ben, flicking the egg from one hand to the other.

"Ah yes, sorry," said Tavish. His mechanical arm *whirred* and the metal hand clamped shut around the egg. The shell splintered and a gooey blob of yellow yolk hit the floor with a *plop*. "Whoops," Tavish said. He opened a hatch at his elbow and turned a brass key inside. "Not to worry. Needs a little adjusting, that's all."

Ben pointed up to the hole in the ceiling.



"Was that an egg, too?"

"Hmm? Oh, no. I thought you might fancy some toast. Haven't quite perfected the pop-up mechanism."

Benjamin stared at the ceiling and up through the hole in the roof beyond. He thought his uncle had perfected the pop-up mechanism a little *too* well.

"Milk?" offered Tavish, pulling down a lever. From inside the machine there came a *moo* of surprise.

"Uh, no," said Ben. "I'm fine."

"Oh. Right. Suit yourself," said Tavish, releasing the handle. Even over the bubbling of the water, Ben heard the cow sigh with relief.

Tavish turned and continued tinkering with

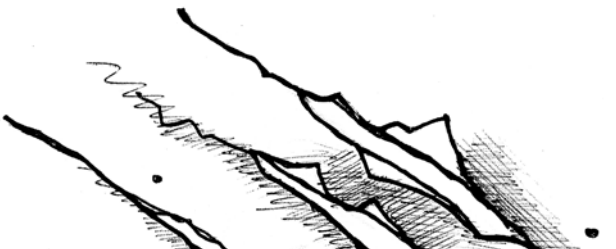




the machine. Ben sat at the little wooden table over near the furnace and watched his uncle at work. Tavish was the blacksmith for the village of Lump, but when he wasn't shoeing horses or making swords he was building… things. Some of the things worked. Most of them didn't. Tavish didn't seem to mind either way.

He was small and scrawny for a blacksmith, but his mechanical arm gave him more than enough strength to do the job. It made him so strong, in fact, that the first time he'd tried to shoe a horse while wearing it, he'd accidentally hurled the animal thirty metres into the air. Luckily, he had been able to catch it again. Or most of it, at least.

"I thought I might head out to Kincaid's



Cave today," Ben said.

"Hmm?"

"Yeah. There's been an ogre spotted."

"Has there? Has there indeed?" mumbled Tavish. He pulled a pipe from the machine and peered into it. A gurgle of dirty water splashed him in the face and he quickly put the pipe back.

"Just a little one," said Ben. "But it's a start."

"Everyone has to start somewhere," nodded Tavish. He slid open a panel in the contraption and a dozen feathers flew out and stuck in his scraggly beard.

"So can I go?" said Ben.

Tavish turned to him and blinked. "Hmm? Go where?"

"To Kincaid's Cave. To fight the ogre."





"Fight an ogre?" gasped Tavish. "At your age? That sounds very dangerous!"

Ben nodded. Of course it was dangerous.



That was the entire point.

"No, I'm afraid not," said Uncle Tavish. "Too risky. Maybe another time."

A knock at the door interrupted them before Ben could argue. "Not open yet," called Tavish. "Come back later."

The knocking came again, louder this time.

"No, later than that," Tavish shouted. "Come back in an hour."

This time the knocking seemed to shake the whole hut. Benjamin jumped up and pulled the door open. A girl stood there, her clenched fist poised to knock again. She was much shorter than Ben, and was dressed in a green robe with the hood pulled up.

"We're not ope—"

"I'm looking for the warrior," the girl told





him. She stood on her tiptoes and tried to peep over Ben's shoulder.

"The warrior?"

"Yes. Is he here?"

Ben straightened his back and puffed out his chest. "*I* am a warrior," he said.

The girl tutted and shoved him aside. "Yes, very funny." She marched past Ben and stopped in the middle of the room. Tavish couldn't work out whether to smile or frown, so he did both at the same time.

"Hello," he said. "Can I help you?"

The girl dropped to one knee and bowed her head. "Mighty warrior, Tavish the blacksmith, I have come seeking your help."

Tavish shuffled nervously. "Uh … mighty warrior? I think you may have me mixed up

