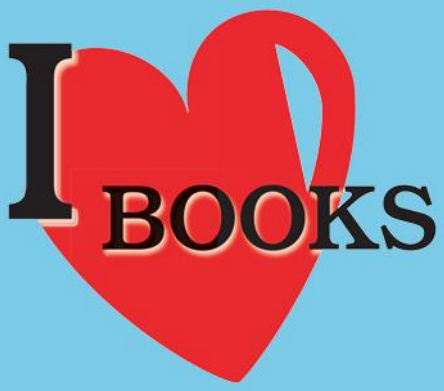


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Opening extract from

Journey to Dragon Island

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-THE-
ACCIDENTAL PIRATES



CLAIRE FAYERS

ILLUSTRATED BY BECKA MOOR

MACMILLAN CHILDREN'S BOOKS

To Gemma, for making this possible



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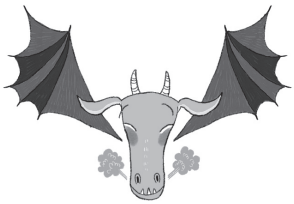
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Prologue



Laws of Energy, Number One

Energy cannot be created or destroyed; it can only be changed from one form to another.

Laws of Energy, Number Two

Whenever energy is changed from one form to another, the world will grow more chaotic.

Aldebran Boswell's Book of Scientific Knowledge



Orion's Keep hung in the sky, as still as the stars overhead. The guardgoyles on the corner turrets leaned out, their spellstone eyes searching for intruders, but, as always, there were none. Even the pterodons which nested far below on Marfak's Peak had learned to avoid it, and when a giant, flying dinosaur is afraid of a place, it's a good idea to stay far, far away.

But then, as the wind gusted and amber smoke billowed around the castle turrets, a shadow, almost the same black as the night sky, rose unsteadily. The guardgoyles were all staring straight out and missed it completely. Even when the shadow hung directly

below the castle, none of them reacted.

A metal spike arched upward with an almost silent *whoosh* and chinked into a gap between the stones. Then a rope unfurled and a figure began to climb.

Ten seconds later, a guard on the castle walkway found out he was not alone. A *thump*, a muffled *yelp*, and a sword was snatched out of the air before it could make a sound.

The intruder stood cautiously, leaving the sword where it lay, and ran to the nearest tower. He'd made it: he was here and he was still alive. The impossible part was behind him and the rest was going to be merely formidable.

He slipped inside the tower. As the door swung shut, it cut off the last pale glimmer of moonlight, and he almost shouted in panic. No wonder the magi were insane. Anyone would go mad, shut up inside these stones. He fumbled in his pocket for a lightstone and held it up. The glow barely penetrated the thick darkness, but gradually he was able to make out the walls on either side of him and a set of steps tumbling away into black invisibility. Keeping his free hand on the wall, he forced himself down them, his head swimming.

The steps opened into a passageway, dark except for one torch burning outside a barred door. The intruder's hands shook as he worked back the bolts.

Six beds stood in two rows, each one humped with

the figure of a sleeping child. Two boys, two girls, two more boys. He ought to take them all with him but there'd be no chance of getting out of here if he did. He'd come back, he promised silently.

He stopped by the last bed and bent close to the boy sleeping there. 'Wake up,' he murmured. 'We're going home.'

The boy opened his eyes. The intruder crouched so their faces were level, and smiled. 'It's me.'

The boy stared at him for a second. Then he opened his mouth and let out a scream that woke all the other children, and their cries brought guards running.

'You've broken Orion's Law,' said the magus. 'You know the penalty.'

They were back on the castle battlements. The intruder stared defiantly at the guards and the three castle magi.

'You stole my son,' he said. 'Is it a crime to take him back?'

The magus limped forward, gripping his spellstaff with swollen fingers. 'He belongs to the castle now. That was the agreement.' Amber light snaked around his staff. 'According to Orion's Law,' he said, 'you may choose where you die. What will it be? The Boiling Sands? The Lizard Swamp?'

The intruder tried not to stare at the light that crawled out of the spellstaff. He felt like he was

standing on the edge of a deep, dark hole, plunging to almost certain death.

And, oddly, he found that he didn't care. He dragged his gaze up to meet the magus's dark eyes. 'Neither,' he said. 'I choose the sky.'

He spun round, shoved the guards aside and ran. One of them shouted, but they were too late to stop him. All they could do was stand in shock as he vaulted over the castle battlements and disappeared into the night sky.

Everyone rushed to the edge and looked down. The sky was empty. There may have been a faint *thump* far below, but they'd probably imagined it. A body wouldn't hit the ground with enough force for it to be heard all the way up here. They waited a while, just in case, but nothing moved and the night was cold so they made their way back inside.

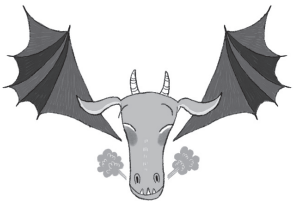
Everyone knows the stories about the *Onion*. The most famous pirate ship on the eight oceans, captained by the unforgettable Cassie O'Pia and crewed by the fearsomest group of warriors ever to have left land. The *Onion* slew the Dreaded Great Sea Beast of the South, the *Onion* triumphed on the Isle of Rats, the *Onion* stole all the treasure from the King of Camelopardalis and gave it to the people of Sadalbari.

More recently, however, the stories are all about how the *Onion* sailed to Magical North and came back

full of magic, just in time to defeat the evil magician Marfak West; saving the libraries of Barnard's Reach where *all* stories have their home; and how, after they'd done all that, the crew sailed west in search of a long-forgotten island where dragons might live.

They must have fallen over the edge of the world by now because they haven't been seen since . . .

Chapter One



Dragon eggs absorb magic. We know this – for centuries, magicians have collected the discarded shards, not knowing what they are. They call them 'starshell' and use them for spellcasting. This uses up some of the magic in the world, but stories suggest that dragons themselves use much, much more. Yet dragons, with one exception, are extinct. So, what happens to all the spare magic?

Thomas Girling's Secret Book of Pirating Adventures



Brine Seaborne was bored. She shouldn't be – she was sunbathing on the deck of a pirate ship with a dragon in her lap. But after two months of sailing with a good wind, calm seas and nobody attacking them, she was beginning to wish something would happen.

'Are you still keeping notes about our journey?' she asked Tom.

Tom looked up from his notebook. 'Of course I am. Mum said it was important to keep accurate records so we can separate out the truth from the stories.'

He'd grown taller in the past months, and the constant sunshine had tanned his skin an even brown.

He still kept his dark brown hair long, and he wore his knee-length librarian's robe belted over his trousers. He said he needed it because of all the pockets, but Brine suspected he wore it because it reminded him of home in the underground libraries of Barnard's Reach.

'How much longer do you think it'll take us to find Dragon Island?' asked Brine. They'd passed the island of Auriga the previous week, which was the furthest west anyone had ever sailed before, so they must be getting close. Unless the people of Auriga were right, and if you carried on you'd sail off the edge of the world – which was nonsense of course. Nowadays, everyone knew the world wasn't a bowl full of the sea, but a ball which had no edge or end.

'It'll take about an hour less than the last time you asked,' said Peter, his shadow falling across her. The young magician sat down between Brine and Tom.

While Tom's skin had tanned in the sun, Peter's had developed pink patches, and his hair, which used to be dust-beige, had become the dirty yellow of dried sea-cabbage. He reached out to stroke Boswell's warm scales. The dragon let out a contented puff of flame and rolled over to let Peter scratch his belly where his scales were still pure silver. Over the past month, he'd been shedding, and the scales which grew back were the green of a stormy sea.

'Do you think we'll really find dragons on the

Western Isle?' asked Peter.

The rest of the crew didn't think so. Maybe there were dragons in the west once, but they were probably all extinct now – that's what pirate captain Cassie O'Pia and first mate Ewan Hughes said. And Tim Burre, who came from Auriga, was sure they'd fall off the edge of the world long before they found anything.

As far as most of the crew were concerned, they were sailing west in search of adventure and Brine's home – a home she still couldn't remember. Just because some of the books from Barnard's Reach talked about dragons, it didn't mean they'd find any. Brine knew that stories were usually made up out of a pinch of fact and several buckets of exaggeration, but even so, she couldn't help hoping.

'We *better* find dragons,' said Tom. 'My calculations show . . .'

'Yes, we know about your calculations.' Peter grinned. 'I'm telling you, the absence of dragons is not making the world fill up with magic. Excess magic burns off into the sky – it's how we get storms and the Stella Borealis. *Everyone* knows that.'

'Then *everyone* is wrong,' said Tom. '*Some* magic burns off, but not *all* of it. Dragons were supposedly the biggest consumer of magic in all of the eight oceans, but dragons have been extinct for so long that most people think they're just stories. Also, we've just

lost Marfak West, and he used a lot of magic. So we've got a whole load of magical energy just hanging about the world, and increased magic means increased strangeness.'

Brine started as Boswell gave a fiery snort, singeing her trousers. 'I haven't noticed anything strange,' she said, rubbing at the burned fabric.

'Anyway, magic corrodes,' said Peter. 'That's why dragons build their nests out of gold and jewels, because they're the only things that don't disintegrate. Too much magic would make things fall apart. I'm a magician – I should know.'

'You're a magician with a splinter of starshell in your hand,' said Tom, raising his eyebrows. 'But your hand hasn't fallen off yet.'

'That's because the splinter is too small to make any difference.' Peter sighed.

'What about this ship, then?' said Tom, patting the scuffed wooden deck of the *Onion*. 'It's full of magic and it hasn't fallen apart. And these . . .' He took his glasses off. 'They belonged to Boswell the explorer, so how come they're exactly right for me?'

'Coincidence?' suggested Brine.

'Or maybe, the huge levels of magical energy concentrated at Magical North reshaped them to be what I needed,' Tom argued. 'Magic *changes* the world.'

'Well, magic or not, right now I'd like the world to

change to be a little more exciting,' said Brine, shading her eyes as she peered at the featureless ocean. 'In a good way, please – not with evil magicians trying to kill us.'

Neither Tom or Peter answered. Good – she'd finally got them off the subject of magic. Then she noticed how still they'd become.

'Umm . . .' said Peter.

Something skittered on the deck behind them.

And then Cassie O'Pia shouted, 'Giant spiders! Why is my ship full of giant spiders?'

Boswell fell off Brine's lap. Brine sat up in a hurry and put her hand back, straight through something that was warm and squished horribly. She shrieked.

'Don't just sit there screaming,' shouted Cassie. 'All hands on spiders!'

Brine jumped up, scrubbing her hand on her trousers. The rest of the grey-green spider lay behind her with a handprint through its crumpled body.

'That's gross,' said Peter, his face matching the green of Boswell's scales.

'I know it's gross.' Brine shook congealed spider off her hand. 'Do something!'

Everywhere, pirates scrambled for weapons. More spiders came crawling over the deck rail. Brine counted at least twenty in a single glance. They were exactly the worst size imaginable. Big enough that you could count their eyes and see the slime hanging from

their jaws. But small enough that they could scuttle straight up your body and cling to your face. Brine jumped back as a spider dropped from the rigging in front of Boswell. The little dragon toasted it with an enthusiastic belch of flame.

'They look like sea-spiders,' said Tom with fascination, 'though I've never seen a sea-spider that big before. Peter, did you magic them?'

'Of course I didn't!' Peter put a hand over his mouth. His eyes bulged as if he was going to be sick. 'Why would I make giant spiders? I haven't done any magic since . . .'

Since Marfak West had captured him and made him do all sorts of terrible things, Brine thought. She shuddered.

Cassie rushed past, her long hair flying and her emerald pendant flashing against her bronze skin. Ewan Hughes was right behind her, as usual. Meanwhile, Trudi, the ship's cook, was trying to squash spiders with a frying pan.

'Remind me to scrub that before she uses it for cooking again,' muttered Peter.

Never mind scrubbing it, Brine thought: she was going to throw it overboard. An arrow hit the deck at her feet and she looked up and saw Tim Burre in the crow's nest waving a bow.

'Sorry!' he called cheerfully.

'They're only sea-spiders,' Tom called back.

‘They’re not dangerous!’ He lifted his feet out of the way of one of them. ‘Just a million times bigger than they should be,’ he added uncertainly.

Cassie hacked down a sheet of green web from the mast. ‘Tom, you’re supposed to be killing them, not studying them. Squash them with a book or something.’

Brine winced at the thought of Tom using a book as a weapon. She drew her sword and thrust it through a spider. The creature made a noise like wet leaves squishing underfoot, waved six of its eight legs at her, and died.

‘Yuck,’ said Tom.

Boswell bounded across the deck on the heels on another spider. Did spiders have heels? Brine wondered. The dragon let off a burst of flame that missed the spider and set fire to a bucket.

‘Nice job, Boswell,’ said Peter, and ran to grab him.

There were hardly any spiders left now, anyway. And then, after a few more minutes, there was only one spider left, running in terrified circles. Cassie cut it in half and threw the pieces into the sea. ‘Well,’ the pirate captain said, wiping slime off her cutlass. ‘That could have been worse.’

Ewan Hughes clapped a hand on Peter’s shoulder. ‘Peter, no one’s blaming you for anything, but those creatures didn’t look quite natural. Are you sure—’

‘Yes, *I’m sure* I didn’t magic them here,’ Peter

snapped, adjusting his grip on Boswell and shrugging Ewan's hand aside. 'Why does everyone keep blaming me?'

Because everyone was waiting for him to do something magical again, Brine thought. Magic was part of him. Peter giving up magic would be like Tom giving up books or Cassie giving up the *Onion*. It simply couldn't be done. And it really didn't help that the pirates kept going on about magic when they knew Peter could be a bit touchy about the subject.

'He said he didn't do it,' Brine said angrily, as she kicked some dismembered spider legs into the ocean. 'Leave him alone.'

Peter turned on her. 'I'm not a baby and I don't need you looking after me.' He dumped Boswell into her arms and stamped away to the ladder that led below deck.

Brine watched him go, a ball of hurt forming inside her. Peter wasn't just touchy, he was downright thorny, she thought. Like a hedgehog wrapped up in spinewood – with extra brambles.

Cassie rubbed at a dark patch of spider-muck on her shirt. 'He didn't mean it.'

Deep down – very, very deep down – Brine knew that Cassie was right. She set Boswell back on the deck, trying to look as if she wasn't worried. In a way, it had been easier when she and Peter had hated each other. She'd known the rules then – they made each

other's lives as miserable as possible and they blamed each other for everything that went wrong. Now they were friends and she wanted to help him, but she didn't know how.

Ewan folded his arms. 'So if Peter didn't do this, who did?'

'Maybe the sea-spiders are bigger out west,' said Bill Lightning. He grinned and sheathed his sword. 'I'm glad they were *small* giant spiders. Last time we fought spiders, they were as big as camels and had eighteen legs each. Terrifying.'

'But we're pirates,' added Rob Grosse. 'We laugh in the face of terror.'

The crew immediately started comparing stories of all the giant spiders they'd fought. Brine stayed silent. She didn't believe Bill had fought spiders of any size before. She wanted to go after Peter, but she was afraid it would only make things worse. She picked up a broom from the side of the deck and started sweeping spider legs into the sea.

Tom came to help her. 'Good idea. Let's get rid of them before Trudi starts wondering how to make eight-legged casserole,' he whispered. Then he paused, frowning at the hairy remains scattered across the deck 'Sea-spiders eat wood, right? A hundred times their own weight in an hour.'

Bill Lightning paused halfway through a story about how he'd defeated a swarm of giant scorpions

single-handedly. ‘Right. They lay their eggs on rafts made of spiderweb, then the web attaches to the next ship that comes along and the eggs hatch. The spiders eat for a while then spin another raft and lay more eggs. They’re a nuisance, but generally nothing to worry about. Giant scorpions, on the other hand—’

‘But what if the sea-spiders weren’t eating just any old wood?’ interrupted Tom. ‘Think about it. The old *Onion* was an ordinary pirate ship . . .’

‘There was nothing ordinary about her,’ growled Cassie.

Tom flushed pink. ‘I know. I mean she was *made* of ordinary wood. But the new *Onion* was moored at Magical North for a hundred years. It changed her into something magical – and just because she’s settled down into a pirate ship now, it doesn’t mean the magic has gone. Her wood is full of it. What do you think would happen to a spider if it ate a hundred times its own weight in magic?’

Cassie twisted the emerald around her neck. ‘I suppose the spider might grow,’ she admitted. She walked to the side of the deck and stared down at the sea, as if wondering what else might emerge.

‘Is this what you meant?’ Brine asked Tom. ‘When you said there’s too much magic in the world – and increased magic means increased strangeness?’ She hadn’t really believed him before, but if this was what magic did to something as tiny as a sea-spider,

maybe Tom was right after all.

Tom tucked his hair behind his ears and nodded. 'The books I've read say dragons consume magic, so as there haven't been any sightings of dragons for hundreds of years . . . well, apart from Boswell –' he gestured at the dragon who was locked in a tug of war over a spider leg with the ship's cat, Zen – 'then the amount of excess magic must have been going up all this time. We could be reaching an unsustainable level.'

Ewan Hughes frowned. 'We're pirates, not scientists. Can you use smaller words?'

'He means giant spiders are the least of our worries,' said Brine. 'Unless we do something to reduce the level of magic in the world, this sort of thing is just going to happen more often.'

'More spiders,' said Tom. 'And strange weather, and magical creatures . . . remember the fish-birds and snow-bears from Magical North? Things like that, popping up all over the eight oceans.'

'Right,' said Cassie uncertainly. 'So either we find a load more magicians and get them casting spells, or we find more dragons.'

'Dragons,' said Ewan Hughes. 'Let's find dragons. I hate magicians.' He caught Brine's glare. 'All magicians except Peter, I mean.'