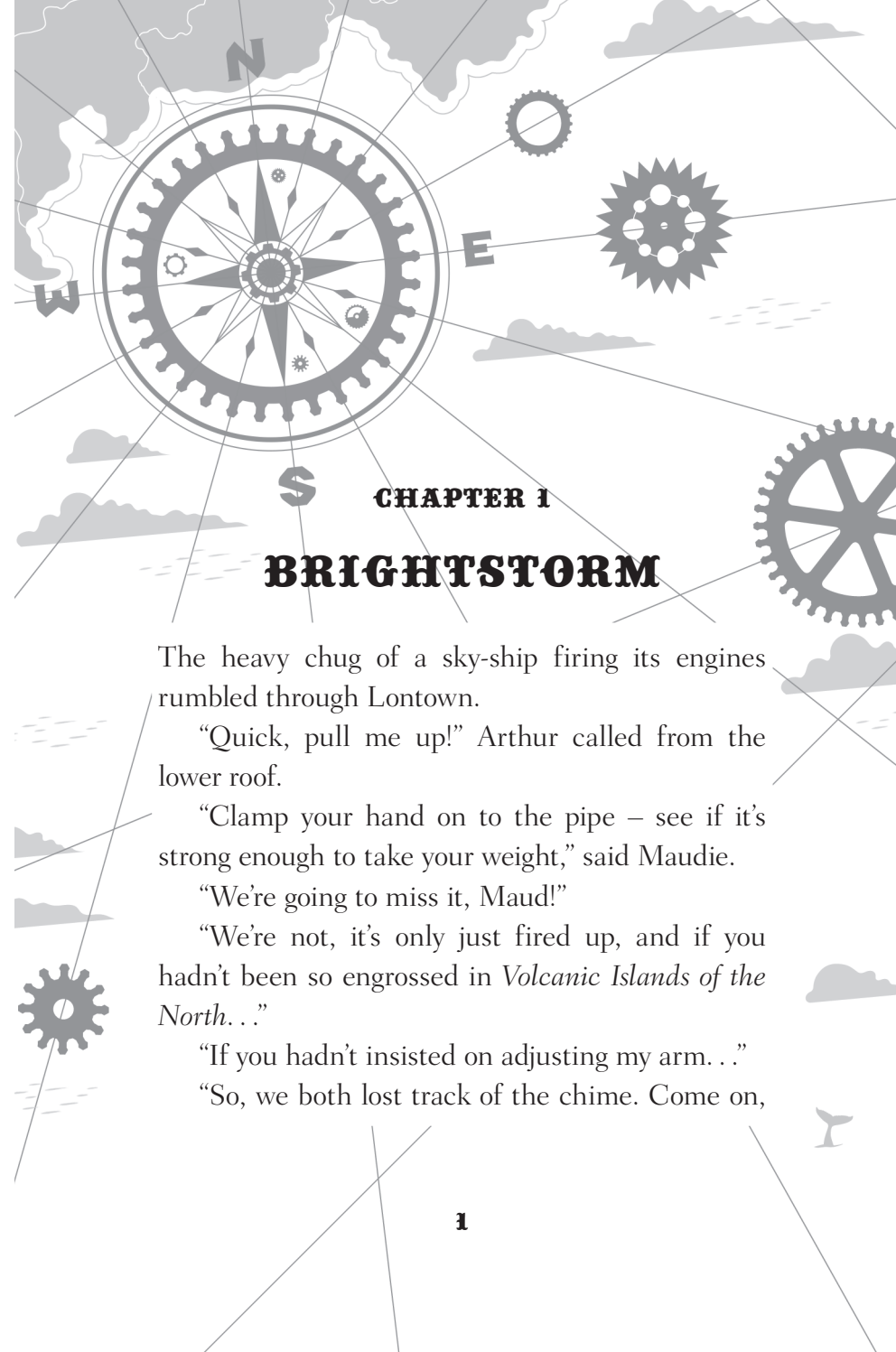




CHAPTER 1

BRIGHTSTORM

The heavy chug of a sky-ship firing its engines rumbled through Lontown.

“Quick, pull me up!” Arthur called from the lower roof.

“Clamp your hand on to the pipe – see if it’s strong enough to take your weight,” said Maudie.

“We’re going to miss it, Maud!”

“We’re not, it’s only just fired up, and if you hadn’t been so engrossed in *Volcanic Islands of the North*. . .”

“If you hadn’t insisted on adjusting my arm. . .”

“So, we both lost track of the chime. Come on,

Arty, I want to see if the modification to the fingers helped.”

Arthur sighed. Using his left hand he raised the iron arm attached to his right shoulder, then folded the metal fingers around the pipe. But as he tried to pull himself up, it juddered and slipped down.

Maudie shook her head and looked away in thought. “They need more tension.”

“Just help me up, will you?”

“Perhaps if I use Harris screws,” she said.

Arthur found a small jut of brick about halfway up the wall between upper and lower roof, and used it to launch himself with his left foot. He narrowly grabbed the lip of the roof and swung his other leg so that his foot hooked the edge, then he heaved his body up. “Thanks for nothing, Maud.”

“You totally had it, Arty.”

Their eyes met. “Race you to the top!” they said together, then scrambled up the tiles like a pair of wild cats.

They reached the topmost part of the roof at the same time and straddled the ridge, out of breath and laughing.

“Poacher will freak if she catches us up here again,” Maudie said.

“It won’t be the first time.”

“Or the last.”

At that moment, the sky-ship rose from the distant docks above the domes and spires of the city skyline. Maudie took her uniscope from her tool belt. “Standard double engine. . . ooh, dipped haltway fans and a swivel blade propeller – good choice.”

“Let me see!” Arthur said, tugging the uniscope from her hands. “I bet Jemima Jones is at the helm. I read that her father was letting her captain the first flight.”

“Look at the balloon shape. Is that two montgolfieres?” Maudie snatched the uniscope back.

“And have they positioned the sail in between?”

“Yes, you’re right.”

“Strange. . .”

“Choice. And it’s smaller than I expected for a new sky-ship.”

“Well, they only need to get to Creal. The Joneses don’t care about the far reaches of the Wide, they only care about exploring caves to find gems.”

“Or maybe they’re just looking for a shortcut. They say the caves of Creal are so deep that they reach all the way to Tarn.”

They fell silent as the sky-ship flew towards them, over the great dome of the Geographical Society, as was tradition for the start of every expedition, before turning west and chugging into the distance.

Arthur glanced across at Maudie. The red ribbon holding back a lock of rusty brown hair had come loose and dangled across her forehead. Her freckles blushed bright in the sunlight and her eyes were set in a concentrated frown. Every feature of Maudie’s face mirrored Arthur’s almost perfectly, and he knew her thoughts at that moment were exactly the same as his.

He squeezed her shoulder. “He’ll be back soon.”

“It might be another moon-cycle, or more if they’ve hit bad weather.”

“I hope not. I’m not sure I can put up with Poacher for that long!”

Maudie pulled the ribbon from her hair and gave it to Arthur. He passed it under a strand of her hair and pulled it to the side. Maudie took the other end and between them they made a bow. They had

always tied it together from a young age. Dad said it would be a good way to help Arthur learn to be twice as skilled with one hand.

Something caught his eye below – a woman walked briskly across the square. “Who’s that?”

“I don’t know, but she seems to be heading towards our house.”

“Then let’s see if we can get there before Poacher!”

They skittered down the tiles and on to the flat section of roof outside Arthur’s room. As Arthur scrambled through the open window, two steely knocks echoed through Brightstorm House.

The footsteps of Mistress Poacher clonked along the corridor below. For someone so thin she made quite an impact.

They barged out of his room, down the stairway, and past the housekeeper, sending her into a full spin as they raced along the hallway.

“Well, really! I should hope it’s your father back to teach you some manners.”

Arthur could imagine her narrow-eyed glare behind them, her lips squeezed tight as though tasting something sour.

Maudie reached the door first and flung it

wide. There was a dumpy woman with grey curly hair melding into the great furry collar of her coat. She frowned and looked between them. "Is your guardian here?"

"We don't have one," Arthur said.

"Or need one," Maudie added, glancing over her shoulder at Mistress Poacher.

"We have a father. . ."

"But he's on an expedition."

The woman pushed her spectacles up the bridge of her nose. Her gaze rested for a moment on where Arthur's right arm would have been, if he'd had one.

"A snake attacked him in the Northern Marshes. Arthur killed him with a knife."

The woman's frown deepened. "How shocking."

Arthur shrugged. "I didn't have a choice; it was me or the snake."

The furry collar of her jacket moved. Arthur blinked and looked at Maudie to see if she'd seen it too.

Mistress Poacher put her arms between the twins and prised them apart. "This is the Brightstorm residence. Can I help you?"

"Are you in charge?"

Mistress Poacher lifted her chin. "Yes."

"My name is Madame Gainsford."

It was vaguely familiar, but Arthur couldn't quite place it.

Madame Gainsford blinked several times and pursed her lips as though the whole business of standing on the doorstep made her feel unwell. "May I come inside and talk with you?" Her eyes briefly flicked down to the twins. "Alone?"

The fur collar moved again. This time it raised a head and winked. It wasn't a fur collar at all – she had an animal draped around her neck. Then Arthur remembered where he'd heard the name; Madame Gainsford was on the Council of the Lontown Geographical Society. "Is it about Dad?" he blurted out.

"Are they nearly home?" Maudie added.

But their questions hung unanswered as Mistress Poacher pushed them out of the way and ushered Madame Gainsford along the hallway to the library. They followed behind, but Mistress Poacher put a firm hand up. "You two can get back to. . ." she waved her hand, "whatever it is you spend your days doing." She turned to Madame Gainsford. "Any

sensible father would have sent them to boarding school for a proper education, but I suppose new explorer families don't hold the same values as the genuine bloodlines."

Then with a dull thud, the door shut.

"Did you hear that? Genuine bloodline, what nonsense," Arthur said.

"More to the point, did you see that thing?" Maudie said.

"Around her neck!"

"I know!"

"It actually moved."

"I think it was a stoat."

"And definitely a sapient."

There was the scrape of chairs being pulled out. Maudie put a finger to her lips, but no matter how closely they pressed their ears to the door, all they could hear was hushed talk.

"I wish we *had* been to the Northern Marshes," Arthur whispered.

"We will one day." Maudie smiled. She began drumming her fingers silently on the wall. "Maybe he's been delayed. It's probably a problem with the sky-ship – I told him he needed a better flexer

pump. He's likely stuck in the Second Continent somewhere, unable to find replacement parts."

Arthur nodded, but a strange fear rose inside him.

The door suddenly opened. Madame Gainsford hurried past without looking at either of them. The stoat scurried at her heels and jumped back up around her neck as she let herself out the front door.

"That didn't take long," Maudie whispered.

The fire had gone out in the library hearth and Mistress Poacher sat at the dark oak table, her hands clasped so tightly that the veins in her wrist stuck out. Mistress Poacher was a late replacement housekeeper hired just before Dad had left for the expedition, and they'd soon discovered the smiles of her initial interview were just a show she'd put on for Dad. Every sound they made seemed to irritate her – she, like many in Lontown, thought children should be invisible. Not like Dad, who always had time for them.

Her shoulders rose as she took a breath, and her gaze flickered between them. Arthur was sure her usual harshness had softened, and there was a rare glimpse of warmth, or was it a glimmer of pity? But she straightened up, and it disappeared.

"Your father's not coming back."

Her statement seemed to hang in the air without meaning.

Arthur and Maudie exchanged a glance.

"What did you say?" Maudie asked.

Mistress Poacher raised her eyebrows. "He's not coming back, so you'd better find a way to get used to it."

Arthur felt as though a great hole was opening beneath his feet, pulling him inside. "What do you mean?"

"He's perished in the Third Continent – that's all I know."

Her words were lead.

She stood up and brushed her hands on her pinafore as though ridding herself of what she'd just said. She walked stiffly to the door. The crinkle of her long black skirt stopped as she paused outside. "I always said you were too indulged, living in books about far-off lands, and messing about all day with tools. Now you'll have to face the real world." She sighed. "There's a hearing in the morning at nine chimes at the Geographical Society. We'll find out more then."

And then she left them.

That night they took the blankets from Dad's bed and curled up amongst the books and tools in the library. Dad's chair remained beside the fireplace, exactly where he'd left it. If they both thought really hard, they could imagine he was sitting there, his head resting in the indentation on the cushion, his sun-blushed, freckled face smiling down at them, and his large hands placed on the frayed arms, fingers picking at the loose threads as he told them a story about his early adventures.

Not a word passed between them for a long time. Arthur had always missed Dad terribly when he went away, but now he knew he was never coming back, it felt as though his heart had split inside him, and a great door had slammed on a future that had been so certain before – the trips the three of them were going to make, all the places in the Wide they would discover together, how he was going to teach them how to navigate and fly the *Violetta*.

"I miss him so much," Maudie whispered.

And all Arthur could do was swallow back the tears.