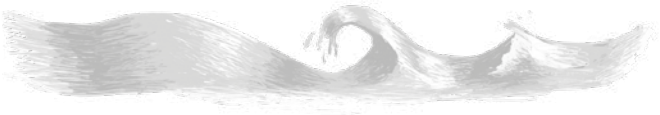
Mort the Meek

and the Monstrous Quest



This book is dedicated to all the amazing children out there who did their best to stay kind and keep going, even when the world seemed a bit dark. You absolutely rock, every single one of you.
R. D.

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MORT The MEEK AND THE MONSTROUS QUEST



RACHEL DELAHAYE
ILLUSTRATED BY GEORGE ERMOS

LITTLE TIGER
LONDON

DEAR UNFORTUNATE READERS – A WARNING

This is not your average tale. This is not a jolly page-turner before bedtime. Oh no – it's definitely not that. This is a story that swims through a world of weirdness without armbands, and not everyone has the stomach, eyes and teeth for such a thing. If you don't have the stomach, eyes and teeth for such a thing, then leave now.

Are you still here?

All right, let's try again...

DEAR UNFORTUNATE READERS WHO HAVE THE STOMACH, EYES AND TEETH FOR SUCH A THING...

This tale contains no fewer than **FOUR** trips to sea, a barrage of ***SLIMY*** insults and some seriously **TORMENTED** characters. If you get seasick, or if you're nice, or if you'd rather not discover the dark side of human nature, I advise you to leave now.

Are you *still* here?

Then you're mad. Mad as a kipper's slippers. And you'll probably enjoy this horrible story. Read on, but let's start at the real Chapter I.



THE REAL CHAPTER ONE

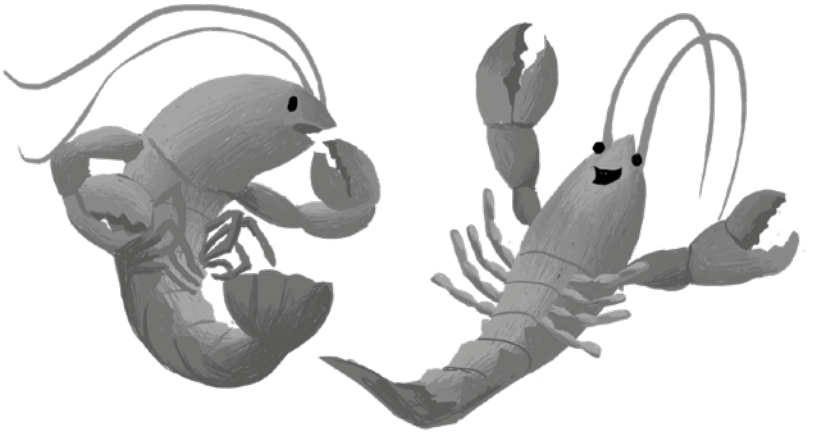
THERE WERE SIGNS

"What's beautiful?"

"A sunken treasure ship."

"Why is a sunken treasure ship beautiful?"

"Oh, I thought you said booty-full."



There were signs. Signs were there. Were there signs...?

(This chapter is called **THERE WERE SIGNS**, so what do you think?)

In fact, there were **LOADS** of signs. They were on every wall, pillar and roof. On every raven that stood still long enough for someone to stick a piece of paper to it (and there were quite a few). Brutalia was covered in the things and they all said:

Citizens of Beautiful Brutalia,
Gather in the square tonight for some news.
Your Divine Queen

Well! The citizens of Beautiful Brutalia fell backwards in shock for two reasons:

1. The signs were scented – they wafted sweet smells as they flapped in the wind (or on ravens) and people had never sniffed 'sweet' before. The island reeked of rot. And the only perfume available was **Eau de Errr**, sold by perfumer Olfa Smelch in

buckets (although he called them boutiques) called *Olfa Smelch Smells* (and he really did).

2. The Queen's orders were normally belched door to door by one of the Queen's guards, not written down. But weirder than that was the word **BEAUTIFUL**. People rolled the strange word round in their mouths until it got all spitty, and they were as baffled as bath plugs on the moon.

You see, it's hard to explain beautiful to those who have only ever known grime, grunge and grot, and lots of other horrid things beginning with 'g'. Because life on Brutalia could never be beautiful. Have you been there? If you have, I'm surprised you're not missing three toes and an earlobe. If you haven't been there before, then hold on to your churning guts because

~~WELCOME TO~~ BAD LUCK, YOU'RE IN BRUTALIA.

Brutalia was a spiky island in the Salty Sea that attracted precisely no one. Its reputation was cruel, its jagged coastline skewered sailors quicker than a kebab and there was a **rotten stink** that clung to it like mist on a bog. The rotten stink was actually

a ***cloud of despair*** (a key ingredient of **Eau de Errr**). And despair was always there – in the air, in your hair, under there, *everywhere*. No sailor with a brain or a nose would stop for the night. Not unless they wanted a visit to hell.

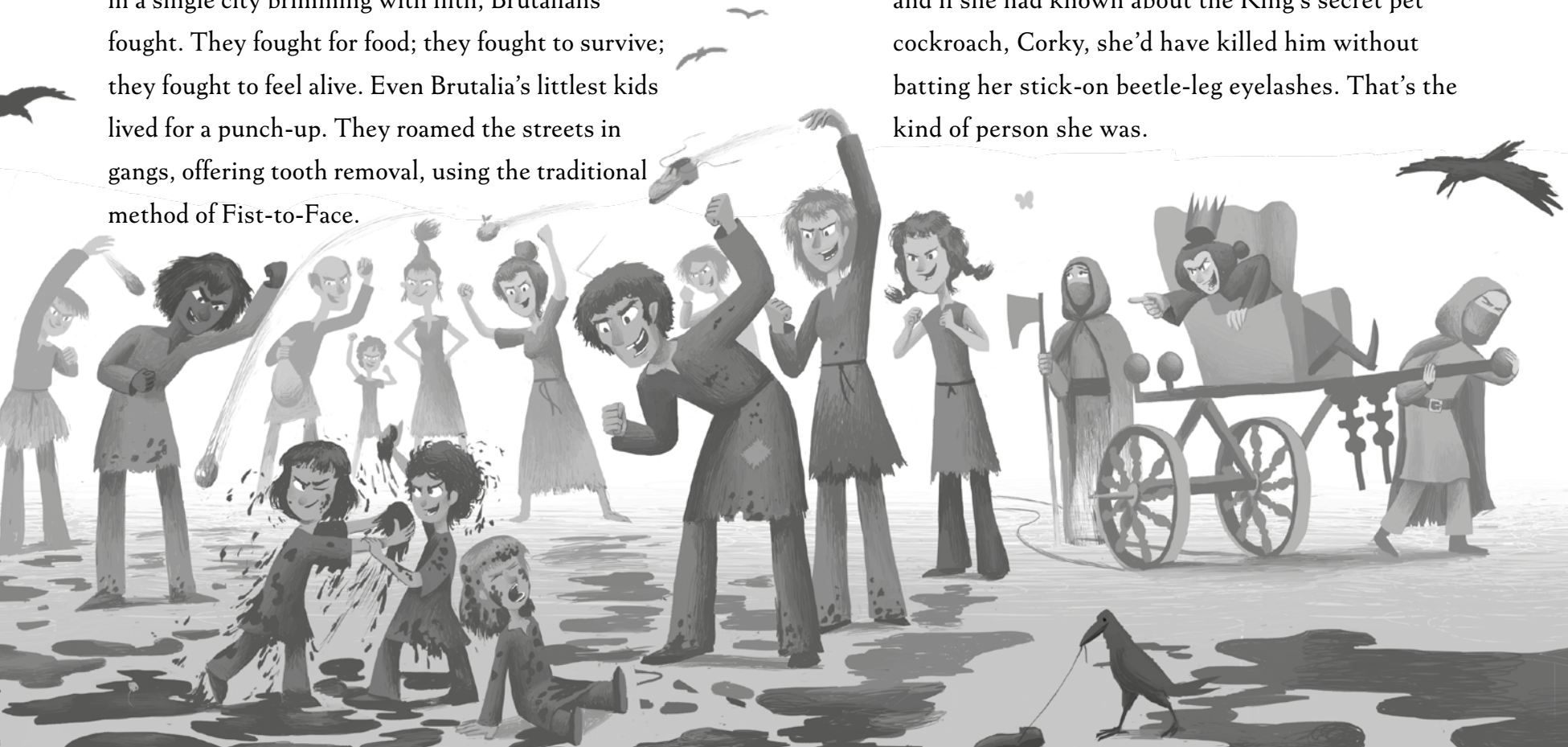
Because that's what Brutalia was: **hellish.**

Beneath the island's raven-infested watchtowers, in a single city brimming with filth, Brutalians fought. They fought for food; they fought to survive; they fought to feel alive. Even Brutalia's littlest kids lived for a punch-up. They roamed the streets in gangs, offering tooth removal, using the traditional method of Fist-to-Face.

Who could possibly let them live like this! I hear you cry.

I'll tell you who – the Queen and King of Brutalia. And they were royally revolting.

The King was a bit smelly, but it was the Queen who was the real stinker. She had the compassion of a brick. She loved no one and cared for nothing – and if she had known about the King's secret pet cockroach, Corky, she'd have killed him without batting her stick-on beetle-leg eyelashes. That's the kind of person she was.



So you see, explaining the word *beautiful* to a Brutalian was like trying to describe a new colour or a new taste. But there it was, on all those signs:

Beautiful.

Sweet smells, pretty signs, strange words... Something fishy was going on in Brutalia. Was it good fishy or bad fishy? The people would have to go to the square to find out. And they would also have to go to the square because that's what the Queen had ordered. If they didn't, they'd end up getting the **Punishment of the Day**.

But we're getting sidetracked now, and you don't want to get sidetracked in Brutalia or you might end up down a dark alley getting your teeth knocked out by a bunch of rascals.

(Told you there was nothing nice about this place.)

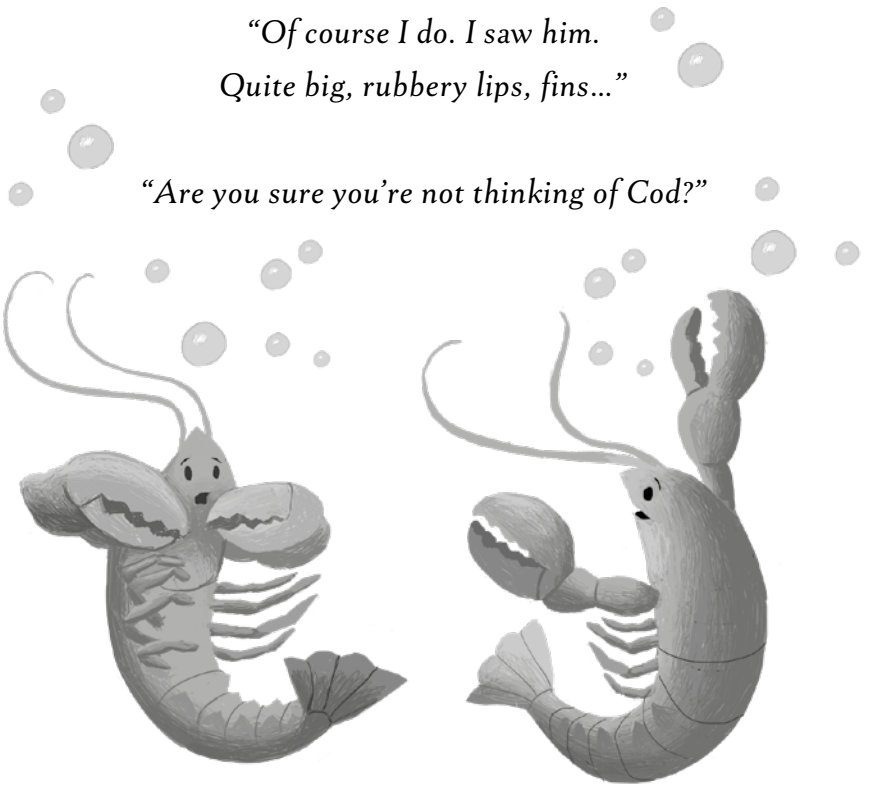
CHAPTER TWO

GOD, REALLY?

"Do you believe in God, Larry?"

"Of course I do. I saw him.
Quite big, rubbery lips, fins..."

"Are you sure you're not thinking of Cod?"



The square was packed and the royal procession out in full, complete with cooks, servants and royal pets. These were *official* pets, such as manky-breath tigers and giant lizards on leads (and definitely not Corky, the King's secret cockroach). The Queen had even brought out her Grot Bears. They were grotesque, bear-like creatures with small brains and big paws and they were present for one reason: to make the crowd behave. If these beasts were let loose, there'd be all sorts of trouble.

Depending on what sort of Grot Bear got hold of you – a loving one or a fighting one – you'd either be bear-hugged and crushed to death or ripped apart. Also to death.

Guards held up *QUIET NOW* signs, although at the sight of the Grot Bears an uneasy silence had already fallen over the square. The only noise was the revolting slurp of Grot Bears trying to lick their own eyeballs, and the occasional growl of a manky-breath tiger.

On a high stage in the middle of the square, the

Queen was helped up on to her long-legged chair, the seat of which was up a ladder and padded with ten cushions.

"Behold your God!" she said.

Being so high up, her voice was faint and no one heard a thing. Not even the guards below, who were too far away to kick. She plucked a megaphone from her skirts and tried again.

"Behold your God!" she shouted and raised her arms to the sky.

Confused, everyone looked up, spotted a seagull and guessed they should play along. "We worship you, oh seagull," they mumbled.

"**ME**, you imbeciles. **ME!**" the Queen shrieked. The seagull plopped something sticky on her shoulder and the air was thick with awkwardness.

The guards quickly held up signs that said *CHEER NOW*. The people did as they were told and hurrahed enthusiastically. Everyone apart from Mort Canal, the plumber's son. With his father, brother and sister missing at sea, he couldn't have produced a hooray even if he'd wanted to. Not even a little one.



"Try!" urged Weed Millet, the baker's son, who was Mort's best friend.

"*Hu-urgh...*"

"That's not a cheer – that's a ticket straight to the dungeons. Quick, get behind me."

The Queen no longer carried out executions, but she was still hugely keen on locking people in small dark spaces infested with rats, and she always sent spies into the crowd to root out disobedient subjects. Weed stood in front of Mort to hide him and cheered extra loudly for both of them.

Despite the huge chorus of forced cheers, the Queen began waving her arms and shouting, "**Come on! Praise me, you despicable worms!**"

"*She's totally off her rocker!*" Mort whispered.

Weed turned and nodded. "*Totally barking,*" he mouthed back, before Weed's mother shoved dough balls in their mouths. Whispering, mouthing, sometimes even breathing – the Queen could make anything punishable by the **Punishment of the Day** if she felt like it. And the punishment was clearly written on a chalkboard in the square.

PUNISHMENT OF THE DAY

HORNET PANTS

Scream in agony as you are lowered into underwear lined with the Queen's royal hornets

**please note: screaming is punishable by…*

JELLYFISH PANTS

Scream in agony as you are lowered into underwear lined with the Queen's royal jellyfish

**please note: screaming is punishable by…*

CACTUS PANTS

Scream in agony as you are lowered into underwear lined with the Queen's royal cactus…

(You get the picture.)

"Yes, my loyal subjects, it's true. An old document found in the palace vaults has revealed that I am not mortal, like the rest of you snivelling losers. I am, in fact, descended from **GODS**. Actual **GODS**!"

The guards raised *CLAP NOW* signs and everyone obeyed, of course. The Queen smiled languidly, waiting for the clapping to die down. It took a while – no one wanted to be the first to

stop; no one wanted to try on those hornet pants for size. When she'd had enough glory and was certain that every citizen's hands were red raw with effort, she beckoned to the guards to lower the signs.

"And SO…" she started. But the clapping continued. "Oi, you! Punished!"

One guard had fallen asleep, still holding up his *CLAP NOW* sign, and Enot Stone, the Chief Guard, marched him off to have his hornet pants fitted.

Annoyed that her big moment had been spoiled, the Queen's face flushed plum-purple and she yelled:

"LISTEN TO ME, YOU SNOT-WEASELS!"

The crowd fell deadly silent, as if wasps had landed on their lips (which gave the Queen a good idea for the next **Punishment of the Day**).

"You may wish to know why there is fancy writing and sweet smells all over our island. It's because everything about me from now on will be DIVINE. And you will all worship me as a God AND a Queen."

"We worship you, God AND Queen," the crowd mumbled.

"Excellent. Louder next time or I'll have you all barbecued. But there's another matter I must address. You, my *darling*, must go."

She spat out *darling* like you'd spit out a dead fly, and her bony finger pointed to the King, who was seated at the bottom of her high chair. He pulled himself to his feet with a groan, a belch and a small sob.

"Sorry, *darling*," she continued snippily, not sounding sorry at all. "Another document was discovered in the vaults, and it proves YOU are descended from a **Dank Empire**. Scribe Pockle, tell us all what **DANK** means."

The Royal Keeper of Birth Certificates and Legal Documents stepped forward with his dictionary. "Dank means disagreeable, dark and damp."

"YUK!" shouted the crowd.

The Queen seemed pleased. "Oh, King... When we married, I thought you were a noble posho. But it turns out you're closer to Corky than you are to me. Yes, I do know about your pet and I've squished him."

The King tried so hard to hold back his tears that he let go of something else.

FWARP!

"Don't start with your revolting noises," the Queen snapped. "It won't do any good. At the end of the day, I am a God and you are a Slob."

She snapped her fingers and Enot Stone led him away. Where the King was being taken nobody knew, not even Enot, who just dumped him round the back of the palace and told him not go anywhere.

The Queen cast her eyes over the crowd, which made them feel very uncomfortable. But not as uncomfortable as the three pairs of children she had stacked beneath the chair legs to raise her even higher.

"What am I?" she yelled.

"The Queen," replied the crowd. And then, brains clicking into gear, they shouted a confusion of alternatives: "A God? No, a Queeny God? A Queenish God? A Godly Queen thing? A Quod?"

"Oh, shut it, will you! It's God Queen. **GOD QUEEN**. And giving me your rancid adoration isn't going to be enough. So, what can you give me...?"

"I've got a carrot in the shape of an onion you can 'ave!" shouted Sally McRoot, soup maker and big fan of vegetables. "And I've got an onion in the shape

of a potato. And I've got a couple of potatoes in the shape of bums."

The crowd hooted and hollered.

"I've got a bum in the shape of a bum!" shouted someone naughty in the throng and the square erupted in snorts.

Usually hilarity would be punished, but it gave the Queen a really handy segue* to her next point.

*Pronounced seg-way, this is something that offers an easy link to the next idea.

"If I wanted something from Brutalia, I'd take it and I wouldn't even have to ask," she sneered. "I own it all. Your homes, your children, even your backsides are mine. No, I want something from distant shores and forgotten lands. A trophy from a perilous adventure. And you're going to get it for me."

"Who, me?" said Sally McRoot.

"No, not you, cabbage brain," the Queen tutted. "By YOU, I mean anyone bold enough to take one of my fleet into the Salty Sea and bring back the finest of trophies. You will set out in teams of two and there will be a prize for the best trophy. A magnificent prize..."

She raised her arms and paused, making sure that

every ear was on high alert. As it happened, plenty of ears were on alert, including our hero's. Mort didn't care for God Queens or prizes, but the Queen had said, "take one of my fleet into the Salty Sea" and an idea was forming.

"The prize is this: I shall make the winners ... Demi-Gods!"

"What? Out of carrots?" said Sally McRoot.

"Out of papier mâché?" asked Fibris Peel, paper maker.

"Out of dough?" added Weed Millet.

Mort nudged his friend with a sharp elbow. "Shh. Any moment now, she's going to snap, you can be sure of it."

"Can you make a Demi-God out of pigeon poo?"

The Queen craned her head towards the giggling pigeon-keeper, Stubber Peckitall.

The square was so silent, you could hear a carrot drop.

"JELLYFISH PANTS!" she thundered. "Followed by **CACTUS PANTS**, followed by three rounds in the boxing ring with Warren, my

least favourite tiger."

Stubber Peckitall was led away, wishing that he'd kept his pigeon-poo joke to himself.

"Next person to speak, I'll have their earlobes for earrings!" the Queen screamed. "Those of you who wish to sail, meet at the docks first thing tomorrow morning."

"Ha ha, you just spoke," giggled a very silly guard.

He was dragged away, obviously, and then the royal procession prepared to leave the square, which required everyone to bow very low.

Unfortunately Looby Larkspit (Brutalia's only comedian) bowed so low she startled a lizard, which set off the tigers, which set off the Grot Bears and made everyone very nervous. But after that hiccup they were gone, and the people left in the square breathed a big sigh of relief.

Then the chatting started, and the gossip began about the Queen's godly expedition. The Queen – a God! Who'd have thought it? Who among them would seek trophies and claim glory? Who would

stay to keep Brutalia running? Who didn't care and just wanted to get down to the market in time for the good carrots?

"Are you going?" Mort asked Weed.

Weed grinned and bounced on his feet. "You bet. Anything to get out of another day of baking!"

"Then I'll be your team-mate," Mort said. "I'm going too."

"But … but it's not like you to chase fame and status, Mort!" Weed said, surprised. "Not like you at all!"

"I'm not chasing fame and status, Weed. I'm going to look for treasure."

"But it's not like you to chase gold and riches, Mort. Not like you at all!"

"It's not that kind of treasure, Weed. I'm going to find my family."