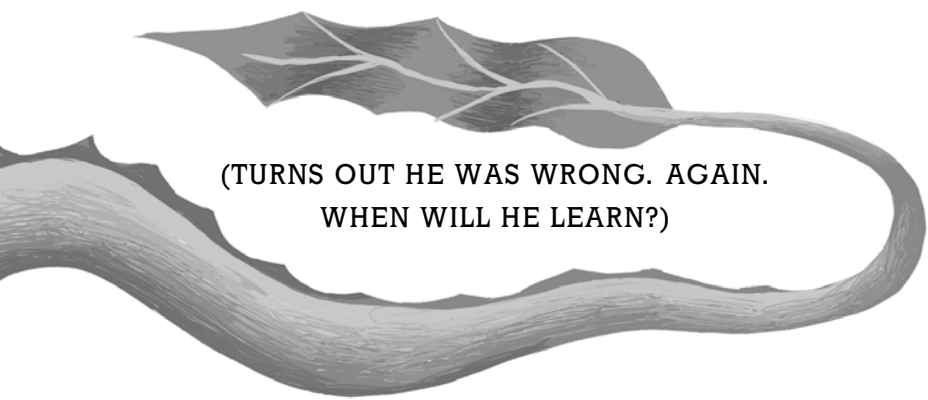
ALEX NEPTUNE
PIRATE HUNTER

ALEX SHOOK HIS HEAD.
"IT CAN'T BE PIRATES.
THAT'S RIDICULOUS."



(TURNS OUT HE WAS WRONG. AGAIN.
WHEN WILL HE LEARN?)

For Piggy and Barb

My animal companions



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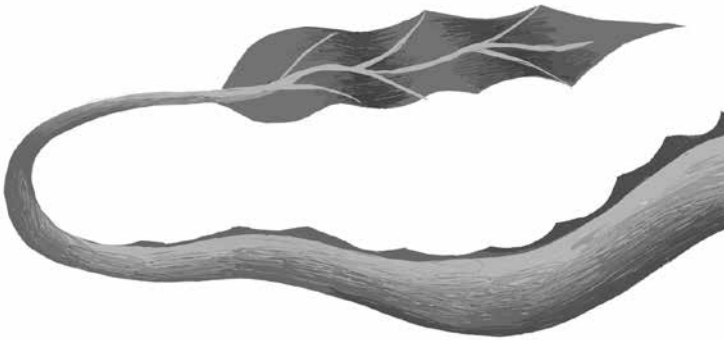


DAVID OWEN

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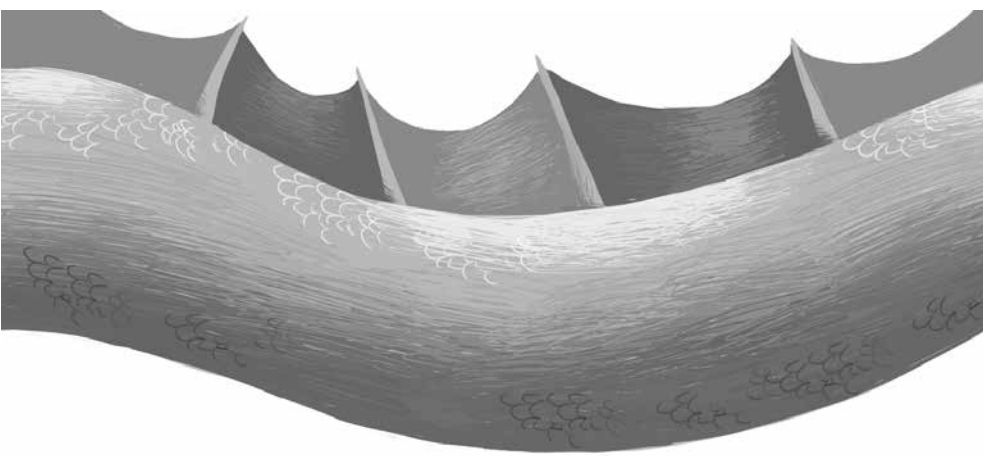
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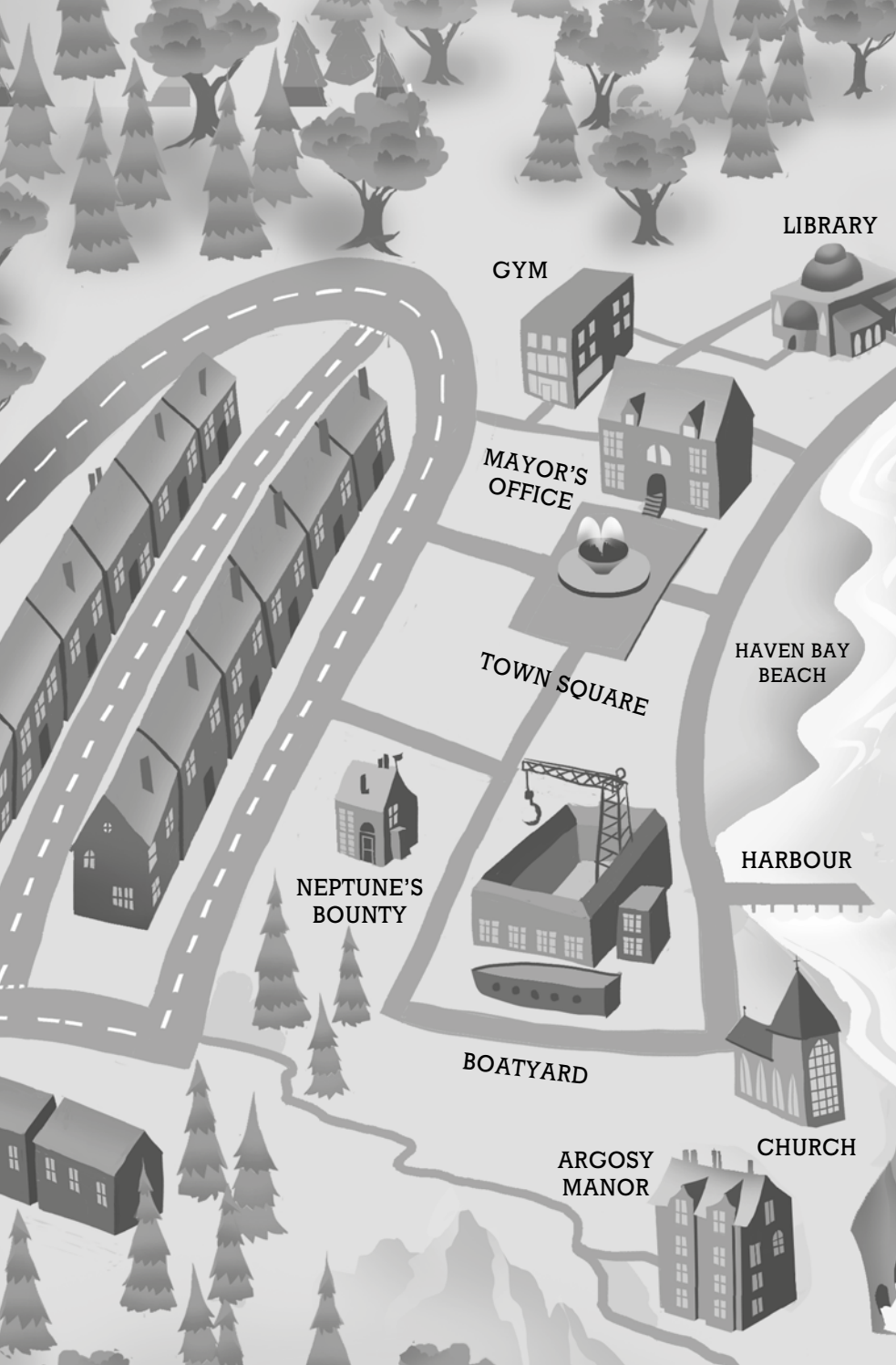
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LIFEBOAT STATION
LIGHTHOUSE
HAVEN BAY
TO THE RIG AND BEYOND
WELCOME TO HAVEN BAY
CAVE



CHAPTER ONE

THE WASHED-UP GIRL

Wielding the infinite power of the world's oceans turned out to be a lot more difficult than Alex Neptune had hoped.

In fact, as the tide lapped around Alex's waist while he summoned a curl of wave and tried to tease it taller, only to lose his grip and watch it splash to nothing, he couldn't help but wonder if he had already reached the limit of his ability.

"Keep trying! You got this!" shouted Zoey Wu, his best friend, from the beach close behind him.

The placid surface was gilded by the early October sun, unseasonably warm, sinking between the wide jaws of Haven Bay. Alex took a bracing breath of salty air and drew his hands through the cool water. Threads of the ocean,

tight bands of swirling sea, nibbled his fingertips like inquisitive fish.

Two months ago, Alex and his friends had discovered that the Water Dragon, mythical main character in countless stories passed down through generations of their sleepy seaside town, was actually *real*. Together they had rescued the dragon from the clutches of predatory poacher Raze Callis, who had plotted to seize its power to make himself stinking rich.

That, as Zoey would say, was already a *lot*. But on top of that, Alex had discovered his ancestors had once bonded with the Water Dragon to share its awesome power – an ancient magic that had now rekindled inside him, allowing him to control the ocean.

A thread tickled Alex's palm. Its delicate vortex weaved throughout the ocean, immensely long, connected to everything that relied on the water for life. He closed his fingers gently around the thread and pulled just enough to rouse a wave to roll over and over on the spot. Now he simply needed to make it bigger.

"Remember everything you did while rescuing the dragon," Zoey called encouragingly. "You ordered seaweed to shackle bad guys! Summoned an army of sea creatures to fight at your side! Making a big wave is *easy*."

Nerves sloshed in Alex's belly like a dog jumping into

a tide pool. He tugged harder at the thread, trying to force the wave higher. It obeyed, rearing up tall, but then the thread wriggled free of Alex's hand like a slimy eel. The wave collapsed, crashing over Alex's head. Water stung his nose and sand scuffed his skin as it dragged him high up the beach.

Zoey washed up beside him, coughing and spluttering. Despite the warm weather, she wore her usual grease-stained overalls, now thoroughly soaked.

"I need to start wearing waterproof underwear."

Anil Chatterjee had been far enough away from the waterline to stay dry. Now he stood over them. "You could just wear a swimming costume."

"Swimwear is hardly safe apparel for handling incredibly complex machinery."

Anil studied the probes that sat nearby on the sand. "They don't *look* particularly complicated."

Zoey brushed her straight black fringe aside and glared. "Trust me, they were a lot of hard work."

The probes looked like polished glass eggs inside inflatable nests. Each contained cameras and thermometers and other technology Alex pretended to understand that would monitor the surrounding coastline. Zoey had made them in her dad's boatyard, Mr Wu adding his artist's touch by painting the faces of sea animals onto the eggs.

Alex recognized a grinning orca, a snarling great white shark, and a penguin wearing waterproof goggles.

Four very real sea otters flanked Anil and poked the probes with their wet noses. Alex scratched their ears and under their bristly chins. The otters had been crucial in rescuing the Water Dragon and had stayed close by ever since (earning him a lot of funny looks as they trailed him around town like a troupe of bodyguards).

"We need to launch the probes further out." Zoey turned to Alex. "Do you think you can try again?"

With the dragon by his side, Alex had used his new-found power to save the world. But the Water Dragon had been injured in the final battle against Raze Callis and had gone out to sea to recover. Nobody had seen it since. Now, by himself, Alex could hardly rally a current strong enough to carry a tiny probe.

"I can take the probes!" Anil took advantage of Alex's hesitation to snatch up the nearest egg and splash into the water. "I need the practice. My dad says I have to get quicker to stand any chance of qualifying for the championship."

Anil had believed he was the greatest swimmer alive until he started competing in races and rarely managed to finish in the top three. The local championship was fast approaching and Anil's dad was coaching him to win.

Holding the probe made swimming awkward, but Anil

kicked stubbornly through the water, determined to carry the egg far enough to be claimed by the currents. A dolphin leaped from the water, chattering playfully as it cut a glittering arc over the boy's head and splashed down alongside him.

Not long ago, the water of the bay had been poisoned so that no animals could live there and tourists had stopped visiting the town. The Water Dragon had wielded every last drop of its power to dissolve the pollution. Many of the animals who had joined the rescue effort stayed behind and now called the bay home. Dolphins were frequently seen skipping through the waves, seals lounging on sun-baked rocks, schools of fish shimmering like treasure beneath the surface.

Tourists had returned in force too. The summer was over but the high street on top of the sea wall behind them still bustled during the day, the multicoloured guesthouses further up the hill still fully booked. At the peak of the hill, where they had sprung the Water Dragon from the old aquarium that had become its prison, wind turbines were being built to provide the town and beyond with plentiful green energy.

Haven Bay seemed more alive than it had for a long time.

Nobody could deny this was good for the town – Alex's

family owned the Neptune's Bounty tourist shop and business was so strong that Alex's dad had gone away to meet new suppliers. But it also meant that Alex, Zoey and Anil had to constantly patrol the beach to pick up litter and stop people bothering the animals so they could take a selfie. Last week, they had stopped a man from trying to ride one of the seals. The probes would allow them to keep a close eye on the bay and make it easier to keep everybody safe and happy.

The influx of tourists had led to other problems too. Random junk kept being stolen from Mr Wu's boatyard and last week the antique cannons arrayed decoratively along the sea wall had gone missing in the night. It was also difficult for Alex to practise his new-found powers without being observed. Although the locals knew about the Water Dragon and the magic it had given him, hardly any of them had actually *seen* him use it. Alex wanted to keep it that way so he could practise without any pressure.

He also remembered the last thing Callis told him before he was swallowed up by a raging waterspout summoned by the dragon: *Keep your powers hidden. There will be others who will try to take them.*

In the last few weeks, Alex kept sensing he was being watched. An old man with a thin white moustache and wire-framed glasses lingered in the corner of his eye,

sun-hat brim pulled low as he peeked around a corner or through a window. It made Alex feel constantly under threat.

The fears piled up inside him until the worst of them all spilled from his mouth.

"What if my powers aren't enough?"

Zoey looked up from where she was tinkering with a probe. "Enough for what?"

Alex swept a hand across the bay. "To protect this place." He wanted to say *to protect my friends* but worried she would find it too sappy. "Maybe I'm not strong enough."

"You've had superpowers for, like, five minutes," Zoey scoffed. She dropped a probe into his hand. Its shell was painted with a chubby-cheeked stingray. "Try again."

Alex held the probe tightly in both hands and waded back into the sea. This time Zoey went with him, despite being fully dressed. As the waves swished around their waists, Anil popped up beside them on his way back to shore.

"We're giving moral support," Zoey informed him.

"You can do it!" Anil immediately cheered. "Believe you're the best and you'll be the best!"

The threads of the ocean crowded around Alex, nipping at his skin as if daring him to play with them. He released the probe to float in front of him. This close to shore,

it would drift back to the beach within minutes. Alex needed to summon a wave big enough to drag the probe out of the bay.

Once again, he spread his hands in the water and closed his eyes. Hands clapped onto his shoulders, his friends lending their support. It wasn't quite the same as his link to the Water Dragon, but it was close. The dragon hadn't *given* him power. It gave him access to what was *already there*.

Alex pictured a deep well of power inside himself and reached for a thread. A thunderous splash made Alex grin and open his eyes. He expected to find a towering wave standing at his command. Instead, he saw a tremendously round seal barrelling towards him like a runaway boulder.

"No!" he shouted.

The seal knocked Alex off his feet, dunking him under the water. A wave washed them all to shore once again, Alex coughing and spluttering as the seal licked furiously at his face.

"Loaf!" shouted Anil. "Get down!"

The seal was one of the first animals to make Haven Bay its home after the water was safe again. A thickly spotted grey back faded to splodgy white over a colossal belly that made the animal almost as wide as he was long.

Anil had been trying to train the seal to respond to commands but hadn't had much luck. It didn't work now

either, so Zoey and the otters wrestled with Loaf until he used his stocky flippers to roll off Alex. Stumbling to his feet, Alex opened his mouth to scold the seal. Loaf peered up at him with wide, glistening eyes and twitched his whiskers. He was like an overexcited dog, always ready to play.

"I can't stay angry at that face," said Alex.

Loaf gave a yelping bark and coughed up a fish skeleton onto his feet.

The stingray probe had survived the encounter intact and this time they let Anil swim it out to deeper water.

"The power is there inside me. I can feel it," said Alex. "I just wish the dragon was here to show me how to use it."

Zoey drew a snarling dragon in the wet sand with her finger. "You just need to practise and believe in yourself. Just like the Water Dragon believed in you enough to awaken your powers in the first place."

It was almost dark by the time the final probe was dispatched, the sky growing an ever-inkier blue.

"Let's get these things working so I can make it home for dinner," said Anil.

Zoey produced a laptop from her waterproof bag and began tapping away at a series of complicated menus. "They've reached the natural currents now," she said. "Time to fire them the heck up!"

With a flourish, she lifted a single finger high before

bringing it down on the keyboard. A steady beeping fuzzed from the speakers.

"The probes check for changes in water quality and temperature. They'll also alert us to any unexpected arrivals. You know, like maniacal poachers leading a whole fleet of bad guys, that sort of thing."

"At least Callis is gone for good." Alex gazed out across the bay. Maybe the poacher's final devious act was to lie to him, make Alex believe there would be others after him so he would never feel safe. Maybe there was nothing bad out there at all.

The beeping from the laptop became more urgent. Zoey frowned at the screen. Alex felt a heavy anchor sink in the pit of his stomach.

"Is it going to explode?" asked Anil, backing away.

"My inventions don't do that any more! One of the probes is picking up a strange reading."

"Fun strange or bad strange?" asked Alex.

"It's more complicated than that." Zoey sighed in frustration and glared at the screen as if it was lying to her. "The probe says there's a big ship approaching the bay at speed. Apparently it's made from metal, wood and…crisp packets?"

Alex relaxed a little. "The probe must be broken."

"Maybe…" Zoey sagged before instantly perking up

again. "Wait, another probe is giving the same reading! Tins, plastic bags, glass bottles…this ship is made from more materials than I can count!"

Frenzied splashing from the waterline made them all look up from the laptop. A girl stumbled onto the beach, sodden clothes plastered to her skin, long strands of green hair sticking to her face.

Zoey gripped Alex's arm. "You see that, right?"

"Mermaids aren't supposed to have legs," Anil said, stepping closer to his friends.

The girl staggered across the sand towards them, weaving dizzily from side to side. Loaf and the otters moved in front of Alex to form a protective barrier.

"Are you okay?" he asked. She might have been a tourist who had swum out a little too far and struggled to make it back, except that she was fully dressed in mismatched shabby clothes, including tattered shoes that squelched as she walked.

"You're Alex Neptune," the girl said, short of breath, voice pinched by urgency. "You have to run."

A distant *boom* rolled across the water behind her. In the fading light, a ship was sailing into the mouth of the bay. Smoke drifted from its side. Snapping in the wind above its tall sails was a black flag, emblazoned with a white symbol Alex didn't know existed in real life.

The skull and crossbones.

Nobody realized the noise they had heard was a cannon firing until the first shot hit the town.