BETTY STEADY AND THE TOAD WITCH

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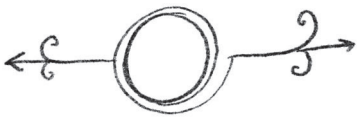
NICKY SMITH-DALE

ILLUSTRATED BY SARAH HORNE

BETTY STEADY AND THE TOAD WITCH



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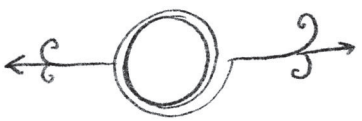

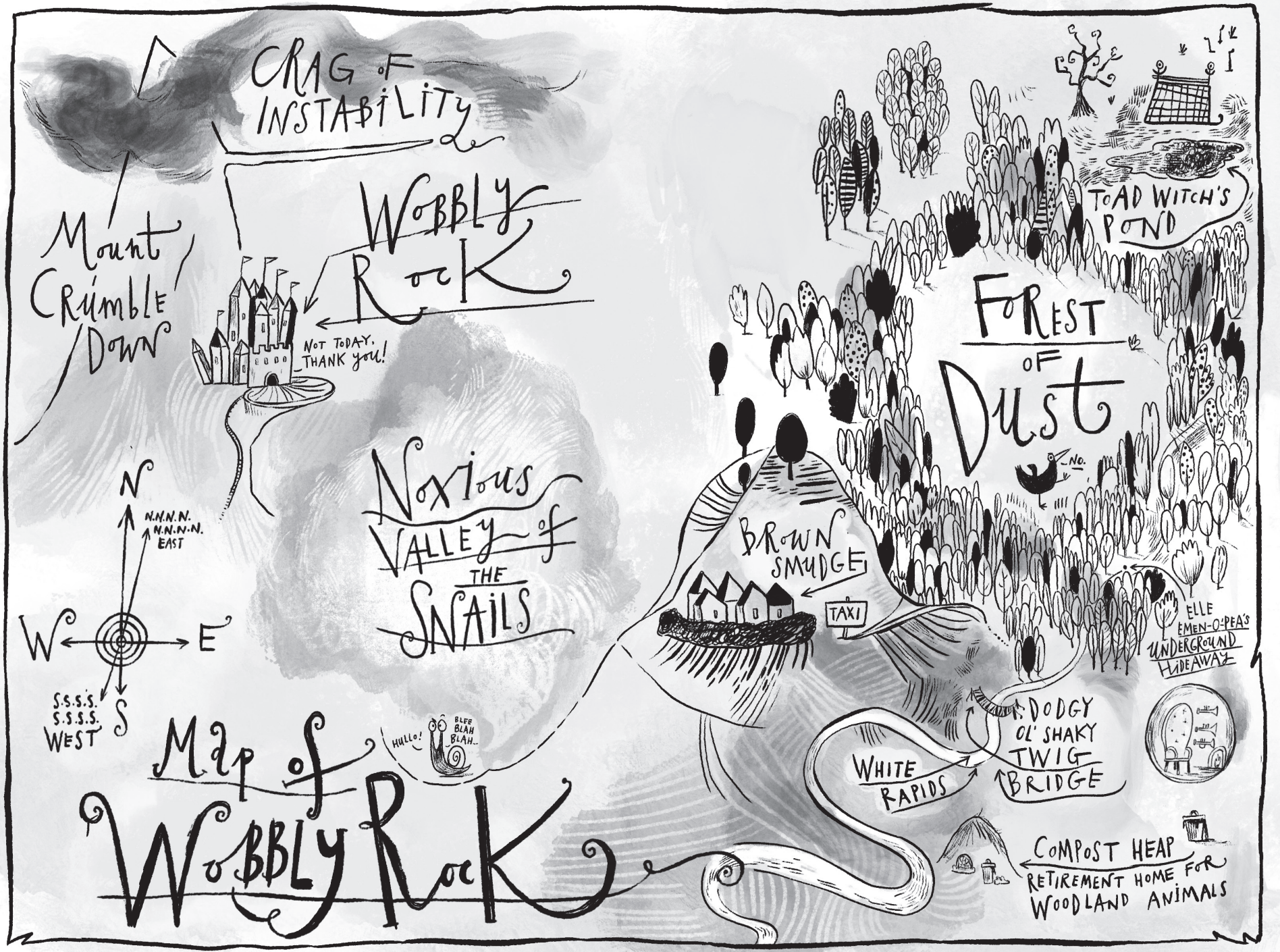
CRAG OF INSTABILITY
Mount Crumble Down
Wobbly Rock
NOT TODAY, THANK YOU!
Noxious Valley of the Snails
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HULLO!
BLEB BLAH BLAH...
Map of Wobbly Rock
TOAD WITCH'S POND
FOREST OF Dust
NO.
BROWN SMUDGE
TAXI
ELLE EMEN-O-PEA'S UNDERGROUND HIDEAWAY
DODGY OL' SHAKY TWIG BRIDGE
WHITE RAPIDS
COMPOST HEAP
RETIREMENT HOME FOR WOODLAND ANIMALS

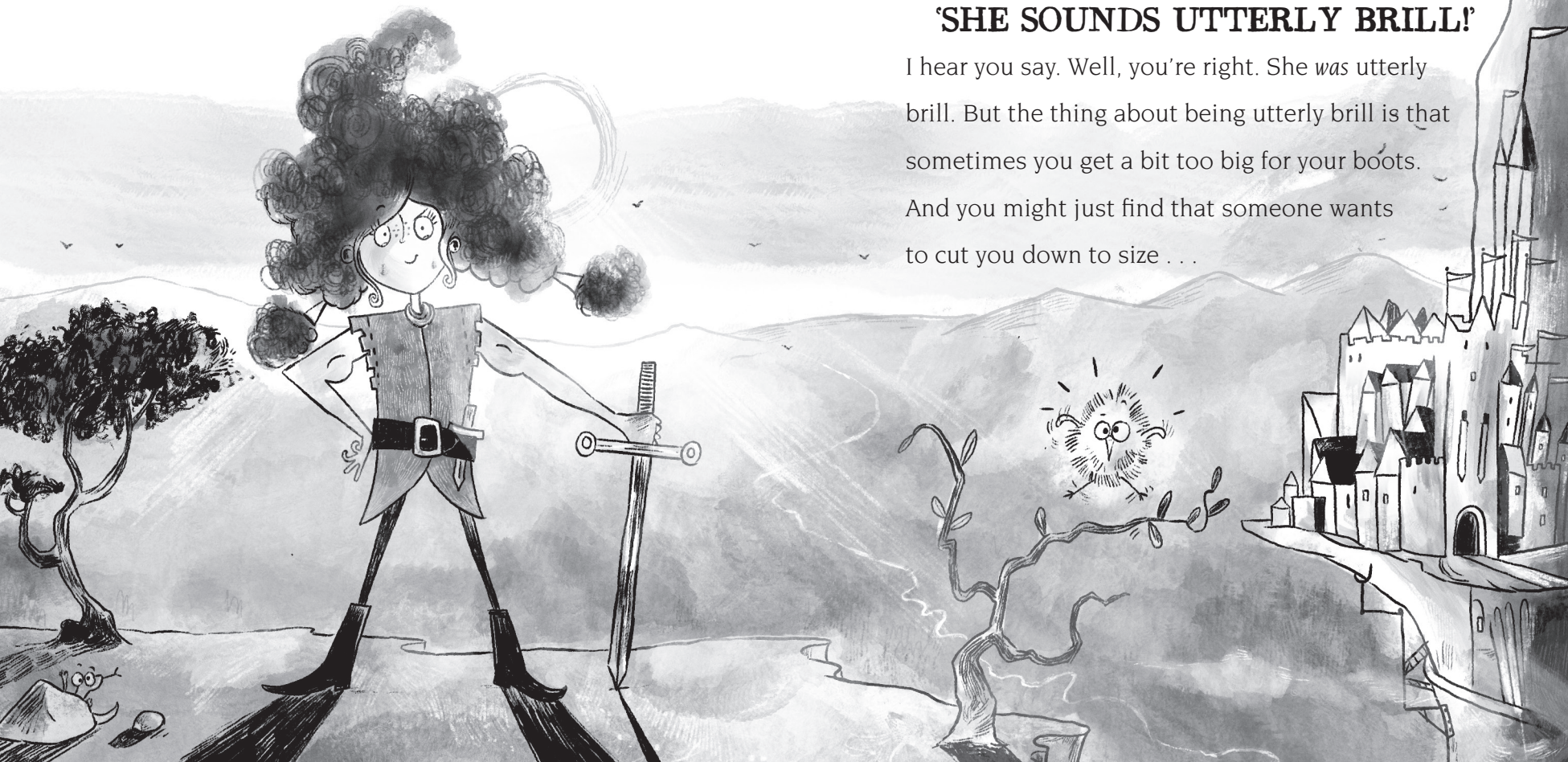
Long ago and far away – between the invention of the laundry basket and the first panda in space – there lived a girl. Actually, there lived lots of girls, but I'm not going to tell you about them all because we'd be here forever, and I've got to make my bed before my mum gets home. (Authors have chores too, you know.)

I'm going to tell you about a *particular* girl. A special girl, called Betty Steady.

At twelve years old, she was expert in swordplay and combat. Daughter of two great knights – long since passed – she stood tall and dazzling, blessed with unmatched strength, speed and stylish hair. Faster than an angry goose, more powerful than an ogre in yoga pants, she protected the people of Wobbly Rock fearlessly.

Ruled over by King Nutmeg, Wobbly Rock rested high on the side of Mount Crumbledown. Over the years, the usual rotters – like the three-eyed dribble dragons, the legion of battle-pigs, and the terrifying army of the Toad Witch – had attempted to storm the castle walls. But they'd always been trounced by Betty Steady, the Guardian of Wobbly Rock.

'SHE SOUNDS UTTERLY BRILL!' I hear you say. Well, you're right. She *was* utterly brill. But the thing about being utterly brill is that sometimes you get a bit too big for your boots. And you might just find that someone wants to cut you down to size . . .



A quick note about me

Before we continue with the story, I must introduce myself properly. I am respected author, Salvador Catflap. There aren't many writers in Wobbly Rock (in fact, it's just me and a farmer called Clammy Pete, who makes up poems about bees) but storytelling is a noble tradition that I take very seriously. And it's just as well, because apparently, some people in your world don't

believe Wobbly Rock exists. The cheek! Our lands might be wild and remote but Wobbly Rock is as real as pork pie. It lies within the nostrils of time and space itself, where historical accuracy turns upside down and does somersaults.

Contained within these pages is the full and glorious history of this great land and its remarkable heroine. Unless of course my pen starts to run out, in which case I might just write the silly bits.

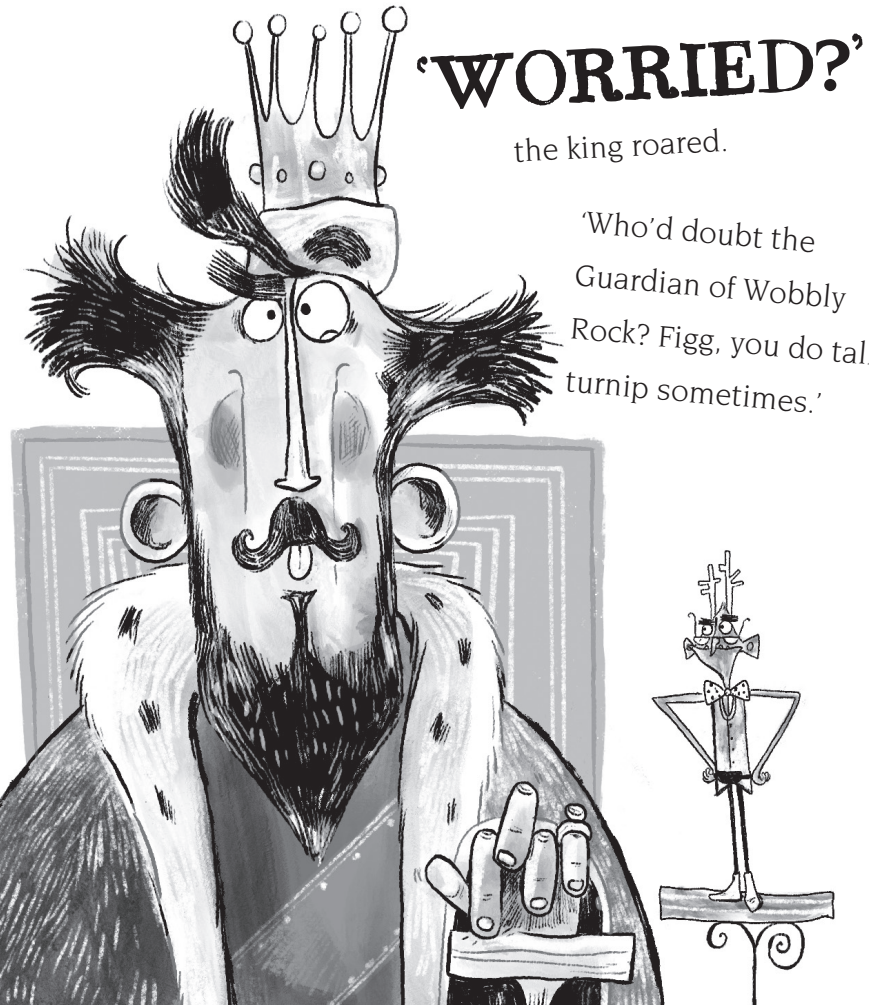
'Where is she?' King Nutmeg drummed his fingers along the arm of his throne and blew a wet raspberry. He was a long man, whose face looked like someone who'd yawned and got stuck.

'Told you I should have gone with her,' said Figg.

'Can't we start the feast anyway?' complained

King Nutmeg. 'My tummy's growling like a bad-tempered badger.'

'Best to wait, Your Majesty.' Figg – who was an imp no taller than a large carrot, with wonky antlers – studied the crowd of courtiers staring anxiously at the castle door. 'This rabble might get worried.'



'WORRIED?'

the king roared.

'Who'd doubt the Guardian of Wobbly Rock? Figg, you do talk turnip sometimes.'

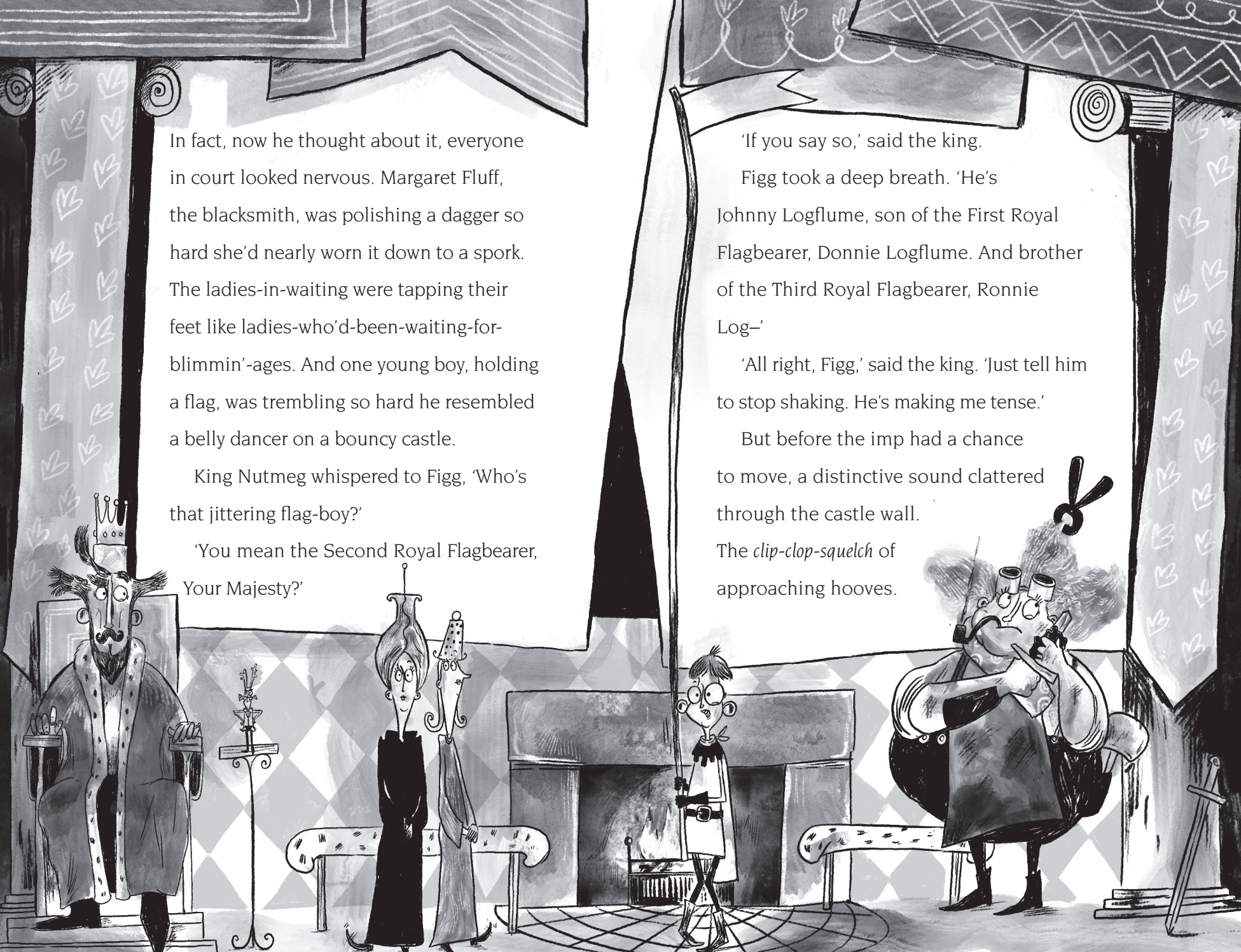
'Oh, come on,' said Figg. 'Betty always goes charging in without thinking. She doesn't even stop to look at my BUM.'

'Excuse me?' said the king.

'My B*iweekly* U*nabridged* M*emo* of the most pressing matters in the kingdom, Your Majesty.' Figg scratched his beard, which lay patchy over his green skin. 'Betty doesn't like to trouble her brain when her biceps can do the thinking.'

'Oh, nonsense and nappies, Figg. She knows what she's doing.' The king tried to wave the thought away, but his adviser's words had indeed sent a surge of unease through his chest. Perhaps riding out unaccompanied to vanquish a GIANT THREE-HEADED VIPER was a stretch too far, even for Betty.

He glanced over at his twin daughters, Pam and Pamm, who were nibbling on each other's fingernails. He had to admit – they did seem a *little* concerned about the welfare of their dear friend.



In fact, now he thought about it, everyone in court looked nervous. Margaret Fluff, the blacksmith, was polishing a dagger so hard she'd nearly worn it down to a spork. The ladies-in-waiting were tapping their feet like ladies-who'd-been-waiting-for-blimmin'-ages. And one young boy, holding a flag, was trembling so hard he resembled a belly dancer on a bouncy castle.

King Nutmeg whispered to Figg, 'Who's that jittering flag-boy?'

'You mean the Second Royal Flagbearer, Your Majesty?'

'If you say so,' said the king.

Figg took a deep breath. 'He's Johnny Logflume, son of the First Royal Flagbearer, Donnie Logflume. And brother of the Third Royal Flagbearer, Ronnie Log–'

'All right, Figg,' said the king. 'Just tell him to stop shaking. He's making me tense.'

But before the imp had a chance to move, a distinctive sound clattered through the castle wall. The *clip-clop-squelch* of approaching hooves.

King Nutmeg let out a laugh like thunder. 'There! Hear that, Figg? Told you she was coming back, you big dolly-doubter!'

When the First Royal Guard pulled open the doors, a stunning white stallion was standing in the mud. It was Betty's faithful horse, Simon Anderson. Gorgeous Simon Anderson, with his glittering mane, his eyes of sapphire, his tiger-print cycling shorts. The courtiers gasped. Not because Simon Anderson was SO DREAMY – although he was – but because there was a cloaked figure slumped on his saddle, like a rag doll whose stuffing had been pulled out by a crazed toddler.

'Heaven's handkerchiefs!' cried Lady Mayfly, the most illustrious elder at court. 'Is that Betty?'

'Jolly hard to tell,' replied retired knight and all-round nice guy, Sir Loin of Beef.

As the mystery figure let out a muffled groan, the king stood up. 'First Royal Guard, what are you waiting for?' he cried.

The First Royal Guard wanted to tell the king that he was waiting for his birthday, because he was hoping to get a new train set. But he quickly realised that wasn't what the king meant at all, and hurried to lead Simon Anderson inside. After he helped the figure down, and pulled back the cloak, the room went silent.

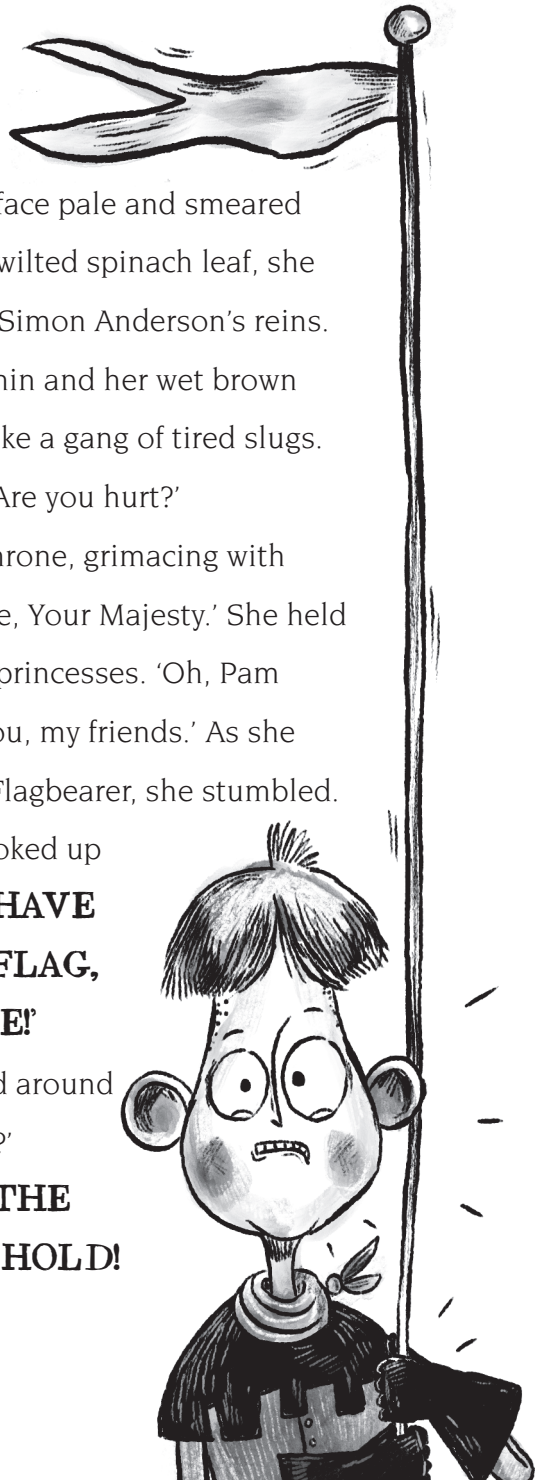
Indeed, it *was* Betty Steady, but she looked

PROPER ROUGH.

'That blasted viper got me,' Betty murmured, her face pale and smeared with mud. Hunched like a wilted spinach leaf, she steadied her tall frame on Simon Anderson's reins. Blood dripped down her chin and her wet brown curls clung to her cheeks like a gang of tired slugs.

'Betty?' cried the king. 'Are you hurt?'

Betty approached the throne, grimacing with each slow step. 'Forgive me, Your Majesty.' She held out a shaking hand to the princesses. 'Oh, Pam and Pamm, I have failed you, my friends.' As she passed the Second Royal Flagbearer, she stumbled. 'Johnny Logflume?' She looked up and clutched his tunic. **'I HAVE DISGRACED YOUR FLAG, JOHNNY LOGFLUME!'**



Johnny Logflume looked around awkwardly. 'Is she all right?'

Betty slid to the floor. **'THE VENOM IS TAKING HOLD! I CAN SEE SPOTS! I CAN SEE INTO NEXT PANCAKE DAY!'**

'My goodness!' cried Figg, rushing to her side. 'Where did it bite you?'

'Figg?' whispered Betty. Her voice wobbled like an uneven cafe table. 'Is that you? Come closer, dear imp.'

The imp clutched her hand. 'Don't give up, Betty. You can fight this.'

'There's something I've always wanted to ask you . . .' Betty leaned her head against Figg's. 'Something important.'

'Of course, Great Guardian. Ask me anything.' Figg's scrawny chest rattled wildly. 'Anything!'

As the crowd listened in flabbergasted disbelief, Betty let out a weak cough and looked the imp in the eyes. 'Would you . . .' Her words were punctuated with shallow gasps. 'Would you please . . . please take my sword?' She pulled the great weapon from her scabbard.

'Oh, Betty.' Figg's eyes brimmed with tears.

'It would be my honour.'

'Take it, little imp. Take it away.' Betty cracked a smile. 'Clean off the snake slime, then give it a polish for me, will you? While **I PARTY MY FACE OFF.'**

The imp screwed up his forehead. 'Huh?'

Betty leaped to her feet, did three cartwheels, and grabbed Johnny Logflume's flag. **'NO ONE CAN DEFEAT THE GUARDIAN OF WOBBLY ROCK!'** She waved the custard-yellow flag high in the air and wiggled her hips. 'That viper didn't stand a chance.'

The king beamed. 'Well, tickle my belly with a fluffy duster – she did it!'

As Pam jumped on Pamm's back and started a chant of 'BOOGLE-OOGLE-BLIM-BLAM!' Betty ran seven laps around the room, giving out a series of high fives. But Figg, the only sour face in a tidal wave of smiles, huffed to himself and marched away to his office to work on his BUM.