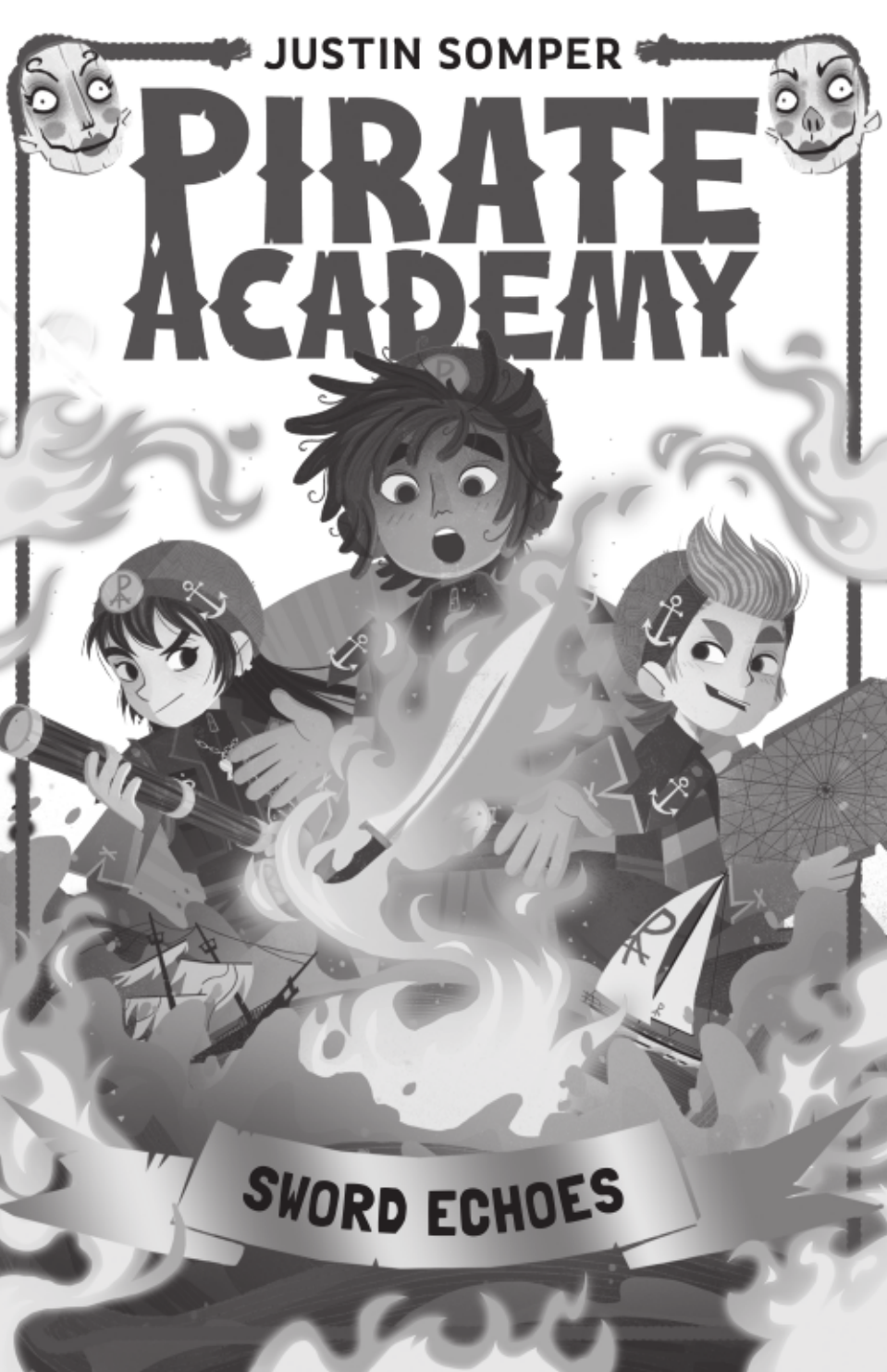
JUSTIN SOMPER

PIRATE ACADEMY

BOOK THREE: SWORD ECHOES

with illustrations
by Teo Skaffa

uclanpublishing


JUSTIN SOMPER
PIRATE ACADEMY
SWORD ECHOES

for Anne McNeil,
thank you for EVERYTHING –
you were worth waiting for!

Pirate Academy: Sword Echoes is a uclanpublishing book

First published in Great Britain in 2025 by uclanpublishing
University of Central Lancashire
Preston, PR1 2HE, UK

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Cover artwork © Teo Skaffa 2025

978-1-916747-57-9

1 3 5 7 9 10 8 6 4 2

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Set in 11.5/17pt Kingfisher by Amy Cooper

A CIP catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library.

Printed and bound in Great Britain by Clays Ltd, Elcograf S.p.A.

THE STORY SO FAR . . .

It is the year 2507. Sea levels have risen and there is a new golden age of piracy. The world's oceans are under the tight control of the Pirate Federation. The Federation also runs nine special schools, located all over the world, for pirate apprentices.

Jasmine Peacock and Jacoby Blunt are two of the students in Barracuda Class at Pirate Academy, Coral Sea Province. Here, the children of the oceans' leading pirate families are being trained by legendary pirate captains. On Captains' Evening, Jacoby gets a terrible report and is warned he must do better. Worse, Jasmine's parents fail to show up entirely and are declared 'missing at sea'. That night, mysterious Neo Splice arrives at Pirate Academy and joins Barracuda Class.

The Barracudas are a tight-knit unit and, at first, are suspicious of new kid Neo. But his classmates rally round Neo when he shares a massive secret. 'Neo Splice' is a fake name. He was born Ned Darkwater, only son of legendary pirate Captain Doll Darkwater. Neo reveals that Doll was killed on her ship – by a dangerous new

organisation called the League of True Pirates ('LOT P') who plan to take control of the oceans.

The ruthless members of LOT P have unfinished business with Neo and follow him to Pirate Academy. During Sailing Class, they kidnap Neo and his classmate, Priya Swift. The headcaptain launches a bold rescue mission. Neo is saved but, shockingly, Priya reveals she is a member of LOT P and plans to stay with them. Jasmine is stunned to discover her uncle, Noah Ripley, is one of the ringleaders of the League of True Pirates. She begs him for news of her parents. He tries to recruit her but then falls silent, before being taken off to prison.

Back at Pirate Academy, Neo reveals to Jacoby they are half-brothers. Jacoby is thrilled at this news, but they agree to keep it their secret for now. Meanwhile, Jasmine receives a music box belonging to her mother. The box has a coded message from Parker Ripley Peacock, telling Jasmine that she and Jasmine's dad are safe and will be in touch soon.

During 'Oceans Bound' weekend, the students of Barracuda Class head out to sea for forty-eight hours to complete a series of challenges without any teaching captains. Jasmine, Jacoby and Neo form one crew.

They soon face all kinds of danger – involving snakes, spiders, sharks and skulls. Jacoby receives a poisonous spider's bite. It becomes clear that Uncle Noah – newly escaped from prison – and his fellow LOT P agents are interfering in Oceans Bound.

Uncle Noah finds Jasmine and again tries to recruit her to the League. He takes Jasmine to a shipyard, where she is thrilled to be reunited with her mother – but deeply shocked to learn that Parker Ripley Peacock is, in fact, one of the commanders of the League of True Pirates. Priya Swift tells Jasmine she is working as a spy for the Pirate Federation. Jasmine briefly considers becoming a spy too but Priya persuades her to return to Pirate Academy and helps her escape. She gives Jasmine a map, which could help Jasmine to find her father.

Meanwhile, Neo is reunited with maverick pirate, Captain December Wilde. She agrees to help him follow the set of co-ordinates his mother left for him, hidden inside a bracelet. Neo slips away from his new friends to sail off with Captain Wilde and her pet boar Pickle, aboard her ship, *Brave as the Waves*.

We now pick up the story immediately . . .

CHAPTER 1
THE WRITING ON THE WALL

Neo Splice stood by the main mast of the pirate junk named *Brave as the Waves*, as it skimmed through the inky ocean waters. It had been another long day at sea. Neo could feel every bit of effort in his arms and legs, but it was a pleasing kind of ache.

As the sun began to dip, Captain December Wilde sent him over to the foredeck to relax. Neo sat down, cross-legged, feeling the soft warmth of the setting sun tickle his face. Pickle, the captain's faithful travelling companion, trotted over to join him. The little boar curled his body into Neo's lap and, almost instantly, began dozing peacefully. In the week-and-a-half since they had become shipmates, boy and boar had developed a close bond. Now, Neo gently stroked the tufty hair on Pickle's head and watched the sleeping boar wriggle in delight. After a short time, Neo's hand became still as he too drifted off into deep sleep.

He was woken by the captain's powerful voice, calling out across the deck. He wasn't sure how long he'd been dozing for, but he was now instantly on alert.

"Land ahead! We've arrived in Smokebush Bay!"

Feeling a surge of excitement sweep through him, Neo's eyes scanned the shoreline. They hadn't arrived here in order to fish for their supper or moor for the night. They had travelled to Smokebush Bay for a far more important reason – perhaps the *most* important reason in the world. Neo's mother was legendary pirate queen, Doll Darkwater. Shortly before Doll's death, she had given her only son a bracelet made of Tiger's Eye – the stone of protection and good luck. In the clasp of this bracelet, Doll had hidden a set of co-ordinates, which Neo had memorised just before the bracelet was stolen by ruthless agents from the League of True Pirates. Neo had shared the co-ordinates with Captain Wilde – herself a pirate legend and an old friend of Doll's – and she had agreed to sail him wherever they led.

Neo rose to his feet and jogged back across the deck to help the captain. Eager not to miss out on any of the action, Pickle followed close at his heels.

"How are you feeling?" Captain Wilde asked Neo, as she watched

him lower the anchor into the waters of Smokebush Bay.

Neo grinned up at her from where he was crouched on deck. "Excited. Nervous. Hungry."

December's eyes glittered like the sun on the water. "Always hungry!" she said. "We'll deal with that later. As for the excitement and nerves . . . that's only to be expected. We had best get over to shore and find out what dear Doll has left here for you."

There was a small boat – a tender – attached to the back of the sailing junk. They were a well-practised team. Captain Wilde lifted Pickle into her arms and sat down inside the tender. Neo began winching the boat down into the water. Once the rowboat and his crewmates were safely lowered, Neo climbed down the side-ladder of the junk to join them. Captain Wilde unfastened the lines connecting the tender to the larger vessel. Neo reached for the oars. The sun was setting fast now and he didn't want to lose the last of the light.

"You're growing strong," Captain Wilde said, as Neo plunged the oars through the ocean water, speeding them towards shore. The captain was right. It didn't take him long to row to the beach. Neo brought in the oars and jumped out into the shallow water to secure

the boat. Inside the tender, Pickle squealed excitedly and began spinning around in circles.

"Don't worry! We're not going anywhere without you, little fella," Neo said, scooping the happy boar up in his arms. "One for all . . . and all for one."

The captain already had her sextant in her hand, and was checking the time on her fob watch against the current position of the fast-falling sun. As always, Neo was impressed by her expertise. December pointed directly ahead. "Your mother is leading us to that cave."

Neo felt suddenly queasy. His most recent experience in a cave, some ten days earlier, hadn't exactly been fun. He had been searching for his good friend Jasmine, but she had already gone off with her rebel Uncle Noah. As if that wasn't enough, in the very same cave, Neo's secret brother Jacoby had almost died from a poisonous spider's bite!

"What's up?" Captain Wilde asked, walking close beside him. "You look sick as a parrot."

Neo knew there was no keeping the truth from her. "I don't have a great history with caves," he admitted.

Captain Wilde nodded, then smiled reassuringly. "The thing you need to remember about history, my friend, is that it's always being rewritten."

Neo smiled back at the captain. December Wilde was as unique as her dress sense. Today, as usual, she wore a weather-beaten leather vest and hooped skirt over leggings. Scraps of old bandanas were twisted through the braids of her rainbow-coloured hair. Her muscled arms, sporting maritime tattoos, were a reminder of her strength – both physical and mental. What a wonderful woman she was. He felt so lucky to be travelling with her and even luckier to call her his friend.

Neo strode on towards the cave entrance with Captain Wilde at his side and Pickle wedged between them. Neo's nerves had been replaced by a bubbling excitement at discovering whatever his mother had left for him in the cave. He couldn't believe that, after ten days of sailing the ocean, they had finally reached the end of their voyage.

He heard the sound of rushing water and, looking down, watched sea foam cover his boots. The tide was coming in fast. It was a reminder that time wasn't on their side.

The cave's entrance looked like a mouth, curved upwards in a grin. The three travellers stepped across the threshold, the ocean licking at their ankles. The setting sun shot a beam of bright light into the small cave, illuminating a line of markings on the back wall.

"That's my mother's writing!" Neo cried out, rushing forwards to investigate.

The beam of sunlight had settled right on Doll's script. It was, to Neo's surprise, another row of numbers. It looked like a fresh set of co-ordinates. He was surprised and just a little disappointed. This wasn't the end of their journey. But, as quickly as it had arrived, his disappointment gave way to delight. This *wasn't* the end of the journey! His mum was continuing to lead him forwards on a trail. It was rather like a treasure hunt. Neo thought again of Jasmine and Jacoby and felt a flicker of sadness that they weren't here with him. They'd have loved all this.

Captain Wilde appeared at his side and pointed to the writing on the wall. "Think you can memorise those co-ordinates?" she enquired.

"Absolutely!" Neo told her, confidently.

"Very impressive," his companion said. "But just for back-up . . ." She produced a small cloth-bound notebook from her pocket and began writing the numbers down.

Just then, the sun dipped lower and a beam of light revealed two further lines of writing he had missed before. His heart racing all over again, he began to read out loud:

At the parting of the waves and the setting of
the sun, the world will rise up to meet you.
For ND from DD

Neo could not hide his delight at his mother's latest clue and seeing their initials so close together.

"I'd better copy that down too!" Captain Wilde's pen nib began scratching away again.

Neo knew he would easily remember his mother's instructions. Staring at them, he could hear her voice speaking the words to him and imagine her standing right there in front of him. He let the image of her linger for a moment. Then, a fresh wave rushed inside the cave, soaking their ankles. Pickle let out a nervous squeal and Neo swiftly reached down to lift his grateful friend back into his arms.

"We should set sail soon," Captain Wilde said, slipping the notebook into her pocket and the pen into her hair. "How about Pickle and I step outside and give you a moment to yourself?"

How clever of her to know just what he needed. But, once he was alone in the cave, Neo found himself trembling. He realised that seeing his mum's writing had unlocked emotions deep inside him. He felt a strange

mix of happiness, longing and fresh grief. As his body began to shake, he reached out a hand to the cave wall to steady himself. His palm pressed against the cool surface of the rock, right over Doll's message. It was as if he and his mum were touching hands once again.

"Cold hands, warm heart." He could hear his mum's voice in his ears.

"Thanks for your next clue," he told her now. "I will follow wherever it leads." He paused, knowing there was something else important he had to say to her. "I need to promise you something, Mum." He took another breath before continuing. "I *will* find out exactly who killed you, and why." His voice became ragged but he had not yet finished. "And, when I do find out, I promise I will take a terrible revenge. A revenge befitting a Darkwater."

He pressed his palm more firmly against the cave wall, feeling closer than ever to his mother now. When he finally drew back his hand, he saw he had nicked his skin on the rock's rough surface. Watching the bright red blood snake along the creases and folds of his hand, he smiled. They said you could read the whole story of your life in the lines of your palm. This fresh trail of blood felt like the sealing of the solemn promise he had made to his mum.