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opening extract from

The Mapmaker's Monster

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Prologue

'What on—?'

Pedro was confused and scared. What was happening to him? He had been feeling powerful, moving swiftly across the terrain, but suddenly he could barely stand. When he looked down he understood.

His pockets had filled with jewels, which were spilling on to the ground and piling up around his feet. A Roman centurion's helmet had appeared on his head and an ornate breastplate was clamped firmly round his body. An endless gold chain was coiling itself so tightly round his neck he could hardly breathe. If he didn't do something soon, he would be buried alive.

'Typical. I finally obtain my heart's desire and it tries to kill me.'

Pedro prised off the helmet and armour, unwound the chain and emptied his pockets. He found the small object he was looking for, dug a hole in the ground, pushed it in – along with the treasure – and covered the whole lot with earth. Glancing at the surrounding landscape, he scratched some markings on a small piece of wood and slipped it into his tunic. He would return with an army of men to reclaim what was his.

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'What was that?!'

Twenty minutes later, Pedro was running for his life. He crashed through the forest, branches clawing at him, scratching his face and hands. Something was following him, and he wasn't waiting to find out what.

Now he could hear snorting. The ground thundered with the rhythm of galloping hoofs. Every now and then there was a terrifying screech that made Pedro shudder. It was getting closer.

Pedro burst out of the forest and sprinted across the uneven, stony ground towards the top of the cliff. The moon lit up his breath as it poured from his mouth and billowed into the sky.

Muscles aching, he reached the clifftop and glanced back. A shadowy shape emerged from the woods. It was an animal of some sort – charging towards him on all fours. The beast had thick, powerful shoulders. Its head hung low as it galloped. Four more animals came from within the trees, then another six. They were hunting as a pack and moving fast.

'Wonderful. That's just brilliant,' Pedro muttered angrily. He ran to an egg-shaped boulder and grabbed the rope that was coiled beneath it. He tossed it over the cliff and watched it unwind as it dropped silently to the beach below.

Holding the rope firmly in his hands, he walked

backwards over the cliff edge. Now only his toes were touching solid ground and there was nothing but sea air beneath his heels. He leaned as far back as he could, taking his weight on his arms. Feeding the rope hand over hand, he bounced steadily downwards.

When he glanced up he saw a trio of silhouettes watching him from the clifftop, about ten yards away. The moon, a bright semicircle, lit them from behind with an eerie halo. Each beast had three savage horns twisting from its skull and a wide, flat face. On their snouts, a single round nostril pumped steam into the air. Pedro had never seen anything so hideous, and his terror made him descend faster . . . until he felt the rope jerk violently.

He looked up and saw that one of the monsters had the rope in its mouth. It was thrashing its head angrily from side to side like a dog wrestling a bone. He felt a sudden tug on the rope, then another. Now the beast was hauling him up on the rope like a fish on the end of a line!

'Oww!' he shouted as his toes scraped up the cliff. He had only one option. Closing his eyes, he let go of the rope. His arms windmilled at his sides as he dropped. He hit the ground and grunted, crumpling into a heap on the soft purple sand.

If he could make it to his rowing boat, just a few yards away, he would be back on his ship within the

hour. He stood up slowly. His ankle was twisted, but he didn't think he'd broken any bones. Surely he was safe now. But a sudden noise prompted him to look up – and his relief turned to pure panic.

The thick-shouldered, heavy-footed, cumbersome monsters were coming after him down the craggy cliff, moving on all fours as easily as a spider might scuttle down a wall. Pedro watched, frozen in horror, as they scurried down to the beach, their thick tails seeming to steady them on the sheer rock. Within seconds they had surrounded him.

'There, there,' he coaxed. 'Ni-i-i-ce monsters.'

One of them thrashed its tail against the small rowing boat on the beach. The boat crashed into the rocks as if it was a balsa-wood model, splintering into a pile of driftwood. The monsters screeched. Pedro retched at the awful stench of rotten eggs suddenly in his nostrils. One beast raised itself up on to two legs and walked towards him. Now its shape was more human than animal: a terrifying, grotesque ogre beating its clawed fists against its horned head.

Pedro knew he was doomed, but when he looked to the sky to whisper a final prayer he saw something that gave him a sliver of hope. Standing at the top of the cliff was a bulky figure whose fur coat shimmered in the moonlight.

‘Hey, Erebus!’ called Pedro frantically. ‘Help me. Please.’

‘You betrayed me,’ the figure growled. ‘Why should I help you now?’

‘Because I’ll tell you where it is,’ said Pedro. ‘I hid it on the island, but I have written down its location. If you save me I’ll take you there.’ He pulled the narrow piece of wood from his tunic and waved it at Prince Erebus. ‘It’s all on here, I promise.’

The beasts edged closer to Pedro as he cowered on the sand and, for a moment, the prince did nothing. Then he let out an almighty screech – the same noise the monsters had made earlier. In that moment the beasts stopped, and two of them loped angrily away and scaled the rock face as quickly as they had descended. They reached the top in seconds and circled the prince, their bellies flat on the ground like hunting lions. Erebus drew his sword. Its long steel blade flashed in the moonlight.

Both monsters leaped at the prince, who stepped back, then twisted and thrust his sword into the belly of one of them. There was a hideous squeal and the beast dropped to the ground. In one fluid motion the prince withdrew the blade and spun back, pirouetting towards the other creature. He swung the sword above his head and swiped it in a wide horizontal arc. This time there was no squeal.

The animal's body collapsed into a heap next to the prince. Its head, which had been sliced clean from its shoulders, tumbled down the cliff face, speeding up like a ball bouncing down some stairs. It landed on the beach with a thud, its single nostril still twitching sickeningly.

All together the animals on the beach let out a hideous cry. Pedro felt every hair on his body prickle with fear.

'Great, now I'm definitely going to be tonight's special,' he muttered.

But they weren't interested in Pedro any more. Every single monster had turned away and started climbing the cliff face, driven by some animal instinct to attack the one who had threatened their pack.

Pedro saw his chance to escape. His rowing boat was useless, but he was a strong swimmer. As he waded into the water he could hear the death squeals as another monster was slain. He knew the prince had no chance of killing all the creatures single-handedly, but he didn't care. All he was worried about was getting off the island alive. He was just about to plunge head first into the safety of the still, black water when something grabbed his shoulders.

'I can't bear it!' groaned Pedro. 'What now?'

He felt himself being yanked out of the water and up, up, up into the sky. He was flying! He was in the grip of

some kind of huge bird with wings as big as the sails of a small boat. As he struggled, the small piece of wood fell from inside his tunic and tumbled silently away from his grasping hands.

Swiftly, Pedro was carried up over the cliff. He could see the prince below, surrounded by the monsters. For a moment he felt strangely secure, flying high above the deadly battle . . . then he realized that the bird was taking him down. Pedro kicked his legs defiantly as the bird swooped low over the pack of monsters. Just when he could make out the thick wiry hair on the beasts' backs he felt the bird release him, right into the middle of the pack.

The prince was swinging his steel blade just yards away. Pedro tried to scramble to his feet, but one of the monsters was now standing over him on its stocky hind legs. Its breath was putrid and its eyes were milky pink. It opened its mouth to reveal teeth as sharp as broken glass. A dollop of gooey saliva dripped on to Pedro, coating him in slime. The beast's mouth opened wider and wider.

'I must warn you I'm not very tasty,' simpered Pedro. 'I've hardly got any meat on my bones.'

The beast snorted and lunged. Its jaws snapped closed.



Chapter 1

Rupert Lilywhite handed his cloak to the young servant girl. He took off his hat and tossed back his long hair. The girl bobbed once and bustled away. Rupert strode to the drawing room, where his mother was embroidering a lace handkerchief.

'Pleasant walk, Rupert?' asked Lady Lilywhite.

'It's absolute bedlam in town,' said Rupert. 'There are commoners *everywhere*.'

'I suppose that's why they're called commoners.' Lady Lilywhite smiled. 'If they weren't everywhere they'd be un-commoners, wouldn't they?'

Rupert dabbed at his face with a powder puff. 'There was quite a commotion down at the docks,' he said wearily. 'Everyone was talking about some fellow called Columbus.'

'I know.' Lady Lilywhite beamed. 'Isn't it exciting?'

'Isn't what exciting? Who on earth *is* this Columbus chap?'

'He's the finest sailor the world has ever known,' said Lady Lilywhite. 'He's just returned from his great voyage.'

'But why is everyone making such a fuss over one dreary sailor?' Rupert sighed.

'Oh, he's not just any old sailor,' said Lady Lilywhite. 'He is admiral of the Spanish fleet, and he's an explorer. They say he sailed west across the Ocean Sea and discovered new land.'

'Whoopee,' said Rupert sarcastically.

'Apparently he's been granted an audience with Queen Isabella of Spain. He's going to present her with a fortune in treasure from his latest adventure.'

'Treasure?' said Rupert, suddenly perking up.

'In return the queen is going to make him a don.'

'A what?'

'I think it's like a Spanish nobleman,' said Lady Lilywhite. 'They say he'll soon be famous all over the world.'

'Just for sailing a boat across some water?'

'I know,' said Lady Lilywhite. 'In my day kings and queens were happy with invading their neighbours. These days they all want to take over a brand-new continent altogether. King Henry has offered a knighthood, and Cornwall, to any Englishman who can discover a new land.'

Rupert was in a trance. 'Sir Rupert Lilywhite of Cornwall,' he mumbled to himself. 'World-Famous Explorer and Friend of the King of England.'

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Minutes later, Rupert threw open the door of his father's office.

'Father, we must talk,' he announced grandly.

Lord Lilywhite looked up from his desk. 'Are you all right, Rupert? You look like you've seen a ghost.'

'Yes, I'm fine,' Rupert snapped. 'I've just powdered my face, that's all. It's the height of fashion in France.'

Lord Lilywhite raised his eyebrows but said nothing.

'I have come to a decision about my future,' said Rupert. 'I am to sail the high seas.'

'Oh, that's marvellous,' said Lord Lilywhite. He had begun to worry that his son would never settle down to a career. 'I have some good friends in the navy. They will ensure you progress well.'

'The navy?' spat Rupert. 'I'm not going to join the navy. Do you take me for some sort of peasant? I want to be a famous explorer. You will buy me a ship so I can go and discover somewhere new.'

'I see.' Lord Lilywhite rubbed his eyes.

'I shall need a title too,' said Rupert. 'Just until the king gives me my knighthood.'

'Well, if you command your own ship, then you are the captain, I suppose.'

'Captain?' Rupert thought about this for a moment. 'I was thinking of something a little grander. I rather like the idea of being an admiral.'

And so, because Lord Lilywhite was a very wealthy

businessman, and because he thought Rupert was the best thing since salted pork, he commissioned a ship to be built for him. Lord Lilywhite also had many contacts in Europe. One of them happened to be a friend of Christopher Columbus, who knew the famous explorer was soon to visit England to recruit for his next voyage. He arranged for Rupert to meet Columbus to learn about discovering new lands.

But when Rupert met Columbus he didn't ask for any advice about sailing or navigating. Instead Rupert talked a lot about how rich and famous he would be once he had discovered a new continent. He also bragged about the ship that was being built for him.

'It's being constructed from solid oak,' said Rupert. 'Its main mast will be taller than any other ship's in the history of, er . . . very tall ships. And my cabin will be the most luxurious ever. It is to be upholstered in the finest buckskin leather.'

'Naturally,' said Christopher Columbus. (Although he was Italian he spoke many languages fluently.) 'And who will be your crew?'

'Crew?' said Rupert. 'Oh, I shall hire any old crew down at the docks – Father has given me plenty of money. But my ship will have the most divine figure-head.'

'I see.' Christopher Columbus stifled a yawn. 'What name will you choose for this vessel of yours?'

'Oh, nothing too grand – one doesn't want to blow one's own bugle.' A smile of satisfaction tickled Rupert's lips. 'I shall probably call it something terribly understated like the *Magnificent and Intrepid Rupert Lilywhite*.'

'How very, er, modest,' said Columbus. 'May I make a suggestion?'

'If you must,' said Rupert.

'I think a foreign name would signify your immense knowledge of the world and your spirit of adventure.'

Rupert nodded thoughtfully.

'There is a Spanish phrase that describes you perfectly,' said Christopher Columbus. 'You should call your ship *El Tonto Perdido*.'

Rupert thought the name sounded very glamorous indeed.