

CARNEGIE MEDAL WINNER
KATYA BALEN



THE
THAMES
AND
TIDE
CLUB

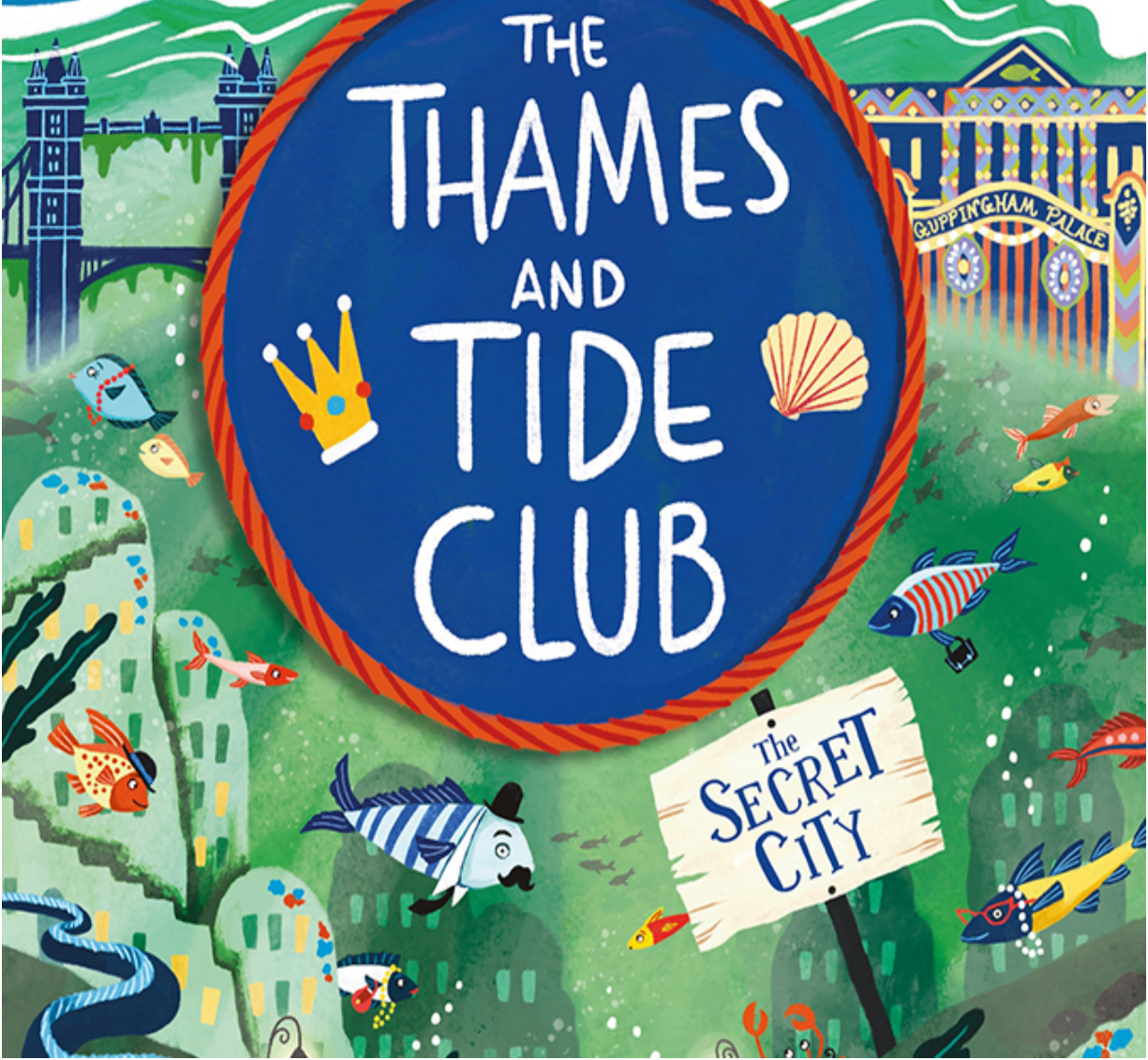


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BLOOMSBURY

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BLOOMSBURY
CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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Books by Katya Balen

The Thames and Tide Club: The Secret City

The Space We're In

October, October

The Light in Everything

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For Mia and Meirav, who are so bright and brilliant

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*It was midnight and everything was exactly as you'd expect it to be
in London on a chilly April night.*

Except for one thing.

In the middle of the river.

Right there. In the water.

A swirl of what looked like a bright pink ballgown.

A screech. A wail. A cry that sounded a lot like

I want it back noooooooooooooow!

A very, very big splash.

And then the drains all around the river exploded.



CHAPTER 1

The day that everything went completely wrong and really quite weird started off like every other Saturday.

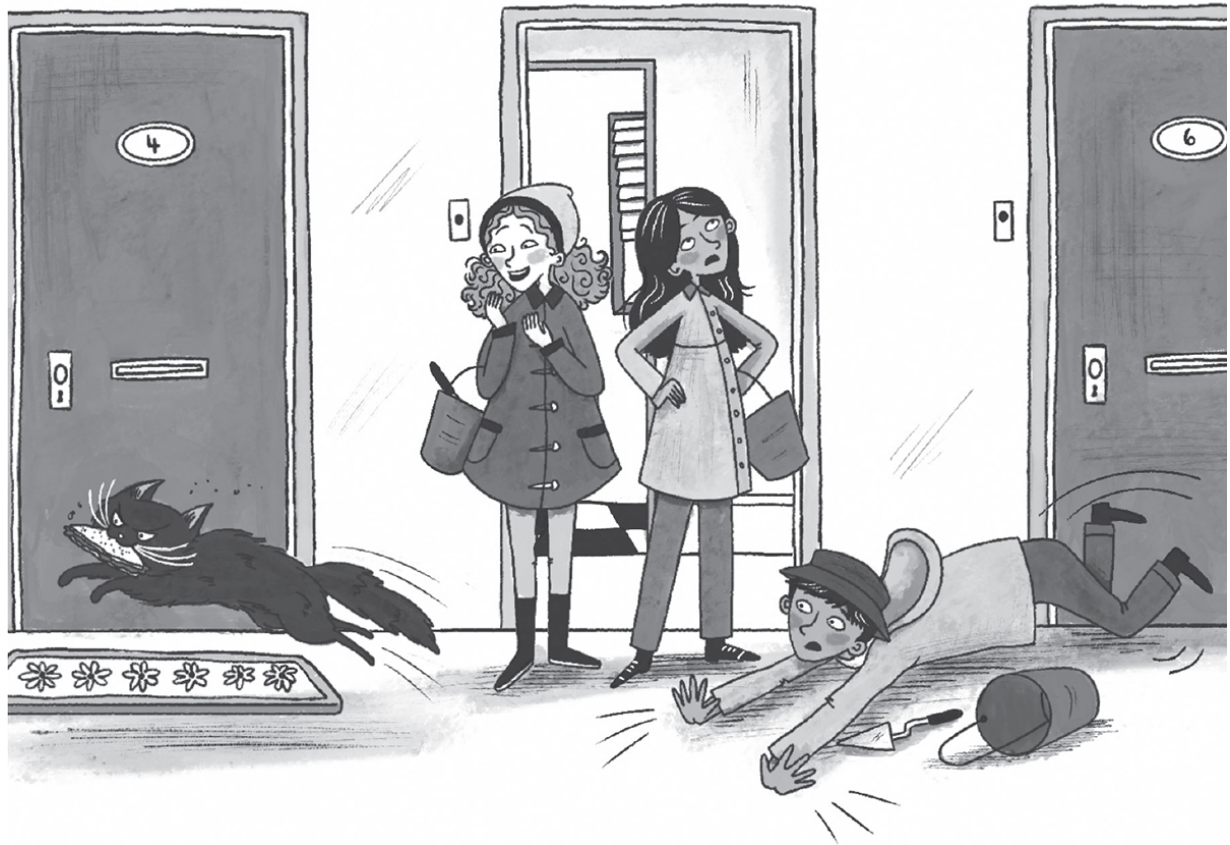
Clem Carden put on her green raincoat, red wellies and her knitted yellow hat, just like she always did. She looked a bit like a Christmas tree.

She checked her pockets for her emergency Oyster travel card in case she needed to get an emergency bus, and for her emergency money in case she needed to buy emergency cake. Then Clem picked up her bucket and her trowel from beside the front door and ran down the stairs of her building, just like she always did. She tripped over Raj's toy teddy bear on the next landing, just like she always did. She got up, brushed off her knees and darted down the next flight of stairs. She took extra special care to avoid Mrs Henderson's evil ginger cat, Floofer, on floor 3, just like she always did. Floofer yowled at her menacingly. He was a thug with whiskers and a love of cod.

Floofer neatly avoided, Clem jumped down three steps in one go in a whirl of flapping green raincoat. She knocked her special secret knock on Ash and Zara's door. There was the usual

scuffling and the unmistakable sound of someone being shoved into an umbrella stand, and then the door was flung open.

‘Let’s go!’ shouted Ash, because he always shouted. He was stuffing his pockets with cheese and pickle sandwiches and trying to pull on his muddy boots at the same time. He fell over, and Floofer darted in and took a sandwich.



‘Talk quieter, dingus,’ said Zara, because she hated Ash’s shouting. In fairness, Ash’s voice was easily as loud as a jumbo jet. Zara was completely ready, and her boots were perfectly clean. Ash and Zara were about as different as two people could be, which was why they both suspected the other one had been discovered by their parents in a bin as a baby.

‘Have you got your buckets?’ asked Clem, because Ash always forgot. Like clockwork, he bounced back into the flat and returned holding his red finds bucket.

They carried on down the stairs, knocking on Raj's door and Mrs Drummonds's door. Outside their block of flats, they knocked at Mr Zafar's house right in the middle of Elm Estate, and then finally Sol's house just by the community centre. It was time to head off to the river in a rowdy group.

They were going mudlarking.

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CHAPTER 2

‘Mudlarking is the best thing in the world,’ said Ash as they bounded along the road. ‘Except for maybe laser sharks.’

Clem definitely agreed, except for the laser shark bit. Mudlarking was treasure-hunting. It was story-finding. It was magic. The group visited the river every week to see what had washed up on the shore. Clem was a very good mudlark. She had eagle eyes – she could spot things no one else seemed to see.

‘Last week I found a glass eye, you know,’ said Mr Zafar. ‘I’ve stuck it on my front door so I can always see what’s going on.’ He winked at Clem as Ash squealed in horror. Which was a bit ridiculous, because last week Ash had found a *very* dead bird and been utterly delighted.

‘Look at that,’ said Mrs Drummonds. She was pointing at the river in the distance. There was no wind today, but the river was whirling and frothing and spitting. ‘It looks angry! I’ve never seen that before.’

‘Maybe the tide is very energetic today,’ said Zara. She loved science, facts and rational explanations.

‘Maybe it’s a shark!’ said Ash. He did not like any of those sensible things.

‘It’s very strange,’ said Mr Zafar. ‘And all the drains are bubbling! It’s not even rained and the ground is soaking.’

Clem was glad she was wearing wellies.

The group went past Mr Kostas’s bakery and Clem’s mouth watered at the smell of fresh bread. She used her emergency money to buy enough of his famous cherry cupcakes for the group for their tea break. Clem thought Mr Kostas looked a bit distracted as he put her cakes in a brown box and tied it with green string. But then he gave her a free chocolate coin with a big smile, and she was sure she’d just imagined it. She walked out, not noticing puddles of water gathering on the shop floor.

They reached the mudlarking museum, where they always left their bags. Oswald the museum owner was standing in the doorway, feeding some salad to his pet iguana, Gerald. Gerald was wearing a small sailor’s hat. To some people, this might have looked odd, but it was completely normal for the mudlarks, and for Gerald.

‘Hello, Thames and Tide Club,’ said Oswald as he gave Gerald a cherry tomato. ‘All set for today?’ Oswald was the one who had set up the mudlarking group. He never came with them because he said he couldn’t leave the museum unattended, but he always wanted to see what they’d found.

‘What do you think we’ll find today?’ asked Ash excitedly. ‘A shark? A laser shark? A laser shark with a million pounds attached to its fin?’

‘Cooooool,’ said Sol. ‘Yeah, I want to find that shark! Imagine bringing it to show-and-tell!’

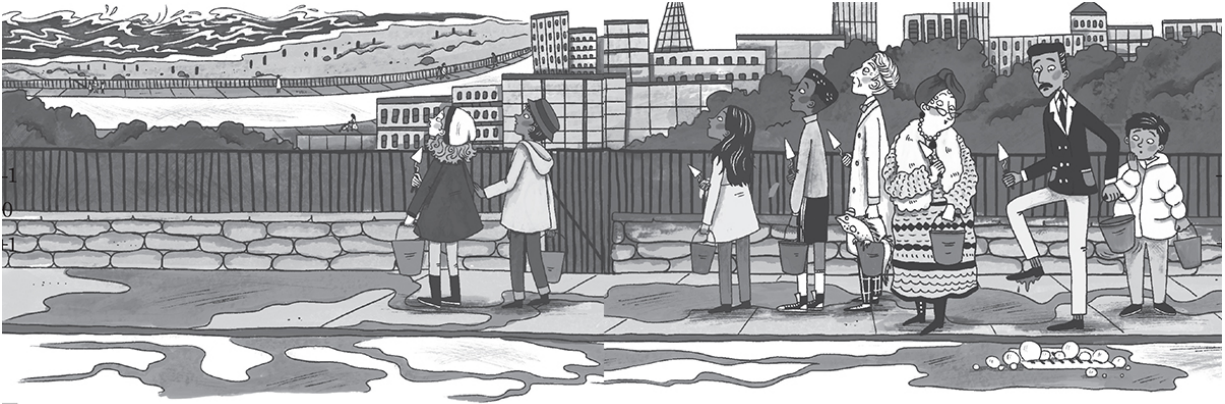
‘Mrs Bingham would *hate* it,’ said Raj happily, as Mr Zafar passed round pieces of his world-famous, or at least Elm Estate-famous, halva.

‘I want a fossil,’ said Zara firmly. ‘Something I can study under my microscope.’

Ash opened his mouth but Clem shoved him gently into a bush. She didn’t want another argument.

Oswald squinted at the spitting river and the drains that were bubbling strangely in the gutter.

‘I think today might just be the day for finding something quite extraordinary,’ he said quietly. So quietly that Clem thought she might have been the only person who heard him at all.





CHAPTER 3

The group climbed down the steps to the riverside. Clem stared at the churning water. It was definitely furious. It was like the sea during a storm, but the sky above was blue and beautiful. Or was it? Clem squinted up at the sun.

It disappeared almost instantly.

The sky was turning storm-cloud purple.

Clem felt very glad to have her raincoat. But she had better hurry up and get searching, because the clouds were gathering and it was hard to search through the rain.

Clem used her eagle eyes and began to look. She could see glints of wet stones and the outlines of plasticky rubbish. The bird calls and the river sounds and the traffic noises disappeared. She was searching. She was a mudlark.

Clem found:



- Clay pipes, because she always found clay pipes
- A small glass bottle with beautiful swirls
- A handful of brass buttons
- Four bright metal caps from ancient pop bottles
- Six pieces of smooth blue-green glass that looked like they were made of river and sky
- A tangly loop of metal that looked like nothing at all, but something made her pick it up anyway
- A muddy coin that she washed off excitedly with her water bottle and which turned out to be a 10p piece

Clem put all of her finds carefully in her bucket. Inside was a spill of colour and secrets.

The water was still churning. Clem eyed the cross-looking river.

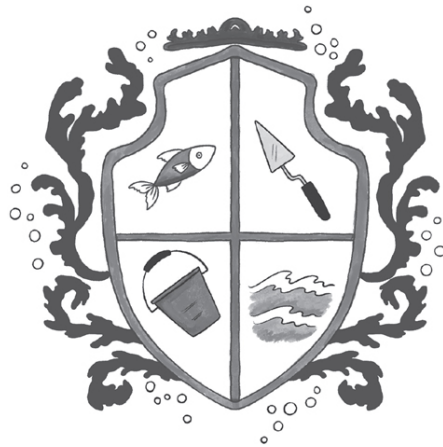
Then something moving in the water caught Clem's eye. A swimming dog? She blinked.

Then whatever-it-was moved again, and Clem was sure she could see flashes of pink. Dogs weren't pink, apart from the time Mr Zafar's poodle had rolled in jam.

The maybe-dog twisted and Clem got a flash of two huge eyes and a swirl of pink below the water. Those eyes didn't look like they belonged to any dog Clem had ever seen. They stared right at her, and then away again. Clem could have sworn it looked like it was searching too.

She blinked again, and it was gone.

And then the heavens opened and the rain poured down.



CHAPTER 4

The foreshore quickly became a mudbath. It was almost impossible to spot anything in the driving rain as the wind began to whip the river into a whirlpool. Clem had never seen anything like it.

‘Come on, Thames and Tiders,’ shouted Mr Zafar over the howl of the wind. ‘To Oswald’s! Quickly, before the river eats us!’

The wet mudlarkers stomped and squelched up the steps and down a little cobbled street to the museum. Clem was too busy hurrying along trying to get out of the storm to notice that spidery cracks were starting to bloom across the cobblestones.

After mudlarking, the Thames and Tide Club always came to the museum to warm up with a cup of hot chocolate and show Oswald their finds. The best bit about mudlarking was definitely mudlarking, but this came a close second. Clem’s heart lifted as she stepped through the big wooden door into the gloom of the museum.

The cabinets in the museum were overflowing with strange and rare things. Oswald was always asking if they’d donate their finds to him. He collected everything. Clem hardly ever

understood why he wanted half the junk they found. He never seemed interested in anything she wanted to keep for herself, and in return for the odds and ends he did want, he always offered something that he somehow knew they'd want more. She'd been sure he'd like a tiny silver bottle she'd found a few months ago, but instead he wanted an odd blue-green lump of glass from her bucket. He'd given her a little red notebook with a real lock in exchange.

In some of the cabinets right at the back there were glass eyes and big toothy fangs and skulls and twisted coins and glass bottles from a hundred years ago and swirly fossils and bits of dinosaurs. Last week she'd spotted a huge fire-red egg, but Oswald had whisked it away before she got a proper look. There were things in the museum you couldn't ask about and there were places in the museum you couldn't go. All along the back of the museum were locked doors of various shapes and sizes. Some were only as high as Clem's knee, and some stretched all the way up to the ceiling. Oswald kept the key to those doors on a thin silver chain around his neck.

Zara and Ash barrelled in after Clem. Ash knocked into a shelf, causing puffs of strange-smelling dust to fly into the air and scatter across the museum floor. Clem wasn't sure dust was meant to sparkle, but she'd long given up trying to work out what everything was in this place.

Oswald had made hot chocolate ready to warm them up. He'd added six pink and white marshmallows for Ash, whipped cream for Zara and marshmallows *and* cream for Clem. Mr Zafar and Mrs Drummonds liked four sugars, Sol and Raj preferred hot Ribena. Clem thought hot Ribena tasted like sick, but it wasn't polite to say so.

The weather had ruined everything. They all peered out of the big museum windows at the raging storm. Was it Clem's imagination, or were the buildings actually bending in the wind?



‘Has no one got anything to show me?’ asked Oswald. He sat down at the big wooden table and ran his hands through his sleek grey hair. He sipped his own hot chocolate, which he had sprinkled with cinnamon. Lots of things about Oswald were odd (his collections, his patterned waistcoats and bright bow ties, Gerald the iguana, his love of tinned sardines), but Clem thought that having cinnamon on hot chocolate was just about the oddest.

‘I’ve got this,’ said Ash. He held up a very, very smelly tennis ball. Ash mostly seemed to collect rubbish, which was probably good for the environment but bad for Ash’s parents as he insisted on keeping most of it.

Oswald looked mildly interested. His nose twitched.

‘Well, it’s certainly got a very powerful scent, hasn’t it? Anyone else found anything?’

Mrs Drummonds showed off some pretty yellow pottery. Mr Zafar had found a perfect blue bottle with a beautiful glass stopper. It looked like maybe it had once contained a powerful potion, Clem thought. Mr Zafar's granddaughter would love it.

'What about you, Clem?' said Oswald, as he popped a red-and-white striped peppermint into his mouth. He gave one to Gerald, who had abandoned his nap in an urn and was curled up on Oswald's shoulder.

Clem tipped out the contents of her bucket on to the table.

'Well, well. That beautiful river glass will go very nicely in my collection!' said Oswald happily. 'I could swap it for some sherbet lemons, if that suits. Very sour, very delicious. Now, what's next?'

Raj showed Oswald some marbles and a musket ball, and Sol was extremely proud of an old tin soldier which Oswald said was at least a hundred years old.

It was only as they put on their coats and prepared to go back outside to the howling gale that Clem realised the funny tangled metal ring was still in the bottom of her bucket. She'd have to show Oswald next time.



CHAPTER 5

LONDON BRIDGE IS FALLING DOWN!

A ROYAL FLUSH: LOOS EXPLODE AT BUCKINGHAM PALACE

THE TIDE IS HIGH – AND WE'RE HOLDING ON!

**RIVER RAGES - ARE CLIMATE CHANGE, A VENGEFUL GOD
OR WORKING MOTHERS TO BLAME?**

WE'RE CRACKING UP! CHIHUAHUA FALLS THROUGH
PAVEMENT, BECOMES BEST FRIENDS WITH SEWER RATS

Over the next few days, the Thames and Tide Club noticed more and more strange things happening.

Mr Zafar was caught in a hailstorm while walking his poodle, Gilbert. Mrs Drummonds, who was three metres behind them (knitting, of course), got home completely dry.

‘There was just one cloud, and awfully low!’ she said as Mr Zafar dried a furious Gilbert with a hairdryer.

Raj and his sister were walking over Tower Bridge when the whole thing swayed like a dandelion in the wind. People were clinging to the railings and the river below was churning. It actually made the teatime news, and Raj got to tell a reporter how scared he’d been. Ash was green with envy.

Sol went to a picnic by an outdoor fountain on the banks of the river, and came back drenched.

‘It went mad,’ he said, trailing great puddles of water behind him. ‘It was spraying out of control – they had to call the police! It was like something out of a film!’ Ash was furious to have missed out.

Two separate office buildings along the river suddenly developed huge cracks and had to be evacuated. Zara saw all the workers staring up at their offices, and even spoke to a firefighter and a police officer about what had happened. Ash didn’t talk to her for a day and a half.

Clem went to Mr Kostas’s bakery to buy bread, and found Mr Kostas frantically filling bucket after bucket with grey water that was bubbling up through a huge crack in the floor. He was sweaty and sad.

‘I don’t know what’s happened, Clem,’ he said in despair. ‘I thought I saw some little cracks this weekend. But suddenly, the whole floor opened up! Five trays of cherry cupcakes and honey bread fell right in. Everything is ruined! I’m going to have to close the shop. The water just won’t stop! Six different plumbers haven’t been able to fix it.’



He was right. No matter how much water Clem helped Mr Kostas bail out, more and more bubbled up to replace it. It smelt like salt and fish, and so did all the beautiful cakes that hadn't already fallen through the floor. Even the seventh emergency plumber couldn't work out how to stop it. Mr Kostas sat on a stool with water lapping his ankles and buried his face in his hands. He was so proud of his beautiful little shop and it was ruined.

Just then, Ash and Zara appeared in the doorway. They were both panting and panicked.

'Quick, Clem,' gasped Ash. 'You have to get back to the estate – now!'



CHAPTER 6

Clem, Ash and Zara raced along the pavement between the bakery and Elm Estate. Clem felt the ground wobble beneath her feet. All along the pavement ran a huge crack that snaked through the whole estate and disappeared right under her building.

‘The firefighters and police told us we all need to evacuate!’ panted Zara as the three of them sprinted and jumped over cracks that were opening up every second. ‘Elm Estate might collapse! We’ve got five minutes to grab what we can!’

Clem was horrified. Elm Estate was the best home in the whole world. What would happen to them all if it collapsed? The thought of living apart from Ash and Zara and Raj and Sol and Mr Zafar and Mrs Drummonds was awful.

Clem ran past the fire engines and the huddle of Elm Estate residents who were standing outside the community centre clutching photographs and toasters and hamsters. Mr Zafar was staring in horror at the crack creeping through the estate’s big shared garden and up to his front door.

Clem took the stairs two at a time and burst into her flat. Her mum and dad were inside and hurriedly throwing boring things like pants and the kettle into a big black bag. What should Clem save? There was just too much. All of her mudlarking finds. Her books. Her teddy bear, who was a loyal companion, *not* a toy. She put Lord Teddington Pawsworth in her backpack, along with a huge bag of river glass and her binoculars.

The building lurched.

‘Quick, Clem! We’ve got to go,’ shouted her mum from the living room, where she was wrapping up a frankly terrifying china ornament shaped like an evil kitten.

Outside, Clem could hear a megaphone telling residents they had two minutes to get out. She could hear the sound of the river raging and water spurting. She could hear the creak of the pavement cracking.

But Clem could hear something else. It wasn’t coming from the pavement or the sky or the furious river. It was coming from inside her flat. A strange rattling noise.

The rattling got louder and more insistent.

It was coming from her finds bucket.

At the very bottom of the bucket was the strange grey loop. It was rattling and shaking and glowing gold. Clem reached down and touched it. Immediately the building gave a huge shudder. Clem was flung sideways.

She scrambled back to the bucket and poked the loop again. The whole block swayed. Whatever this was, it did not like being touched.

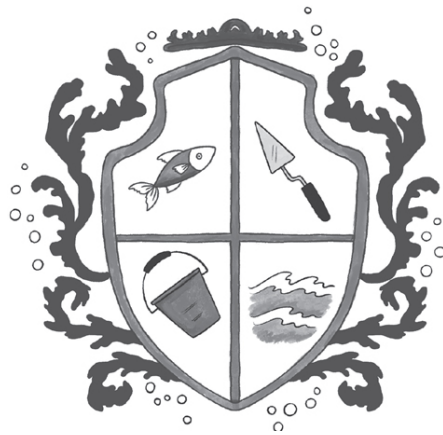




‘EVERYBODY OUT NOW!’ came the shout from the megaphone outside.

Without thinking too much, Clem grabbed the bucket and ran down the stairs after her mum and dad.

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CHAPTER 7

Ash and Zara were already outside. Ash was clutching a mechanical toy shark and Zara was holding three microscopes and a calculator.

Clem just pointed. She tried to remember how to make her brain and mouth work together.

‘It moved! It glowed!’ she stammered. ‘And when I grabbed it, the building shook!’

Zara looked in the bucket. The metal had stopped glowing. It was still.

‘Really? Are you sure it wasn’t just the lightning flash and the thunder?’ asked Zara. ‘And a coincidence about the building?’ Before Clem could stop her, Zara touched the metal loop.

The flats lurched. Mr Zafar’s house wobbled. Ash squeaked.

‘Wow!’ said Ash, his mouth hanging open. ‘Wow! What *is* it? How is it doing that?’

He and Clem both looked at Zara. She always knew the answer to everything.

‘I have no idea,’ she said slowly. ‘But I know who might ...’



CHAPTER 8

The three of them ran along the pavement to the museum, avoiding the cracks in the concrete and the spurting drains. As they sprinted past Mr Kostas's bakery they saw it was full to the brim with water and whooshing like a fountain.

Once they reached the museum, they found Oswald sitting at the front desk with Gerald curled up on his shoulder. The iguana was wearing a small knitted bonnet and eating a grape. Even though the street outside was completely flooded, inside the museum was warm and dry.

'Hello, you three! What incredible weather! Would you like a grape? Gerald is usually happy to sh—'

'Erm. No, thanks,' said Clem. Gerald was eyeing her suspiciously and adjusting his little hat. It was quite menacing. He wasn't giving up his grapes.

'What can I do for you? Just a hot chocolate?' Oswald smiled at them.

'We have to show you this,' babbled Clem. She thrust the bucket towards Oswald. 'It ... well, it glowed.' She felt a bit silly. 'And rattled!' she added. 'And when I touched it, the building

shook. I think it must be linked to everything that's happening! The cracks and the storms and the water and if Elm Estate collapses we'll have nowhere to live and then how will there be a mudlarking club and please help ...' she trailed off miserably.

Oswald put on a pair of perfectly white gloves and lifted the loop out of the bucket. He ran his fingers along its seaweedy curls.

'Ah. I see,' he said. He couldn't have sounded less surprised if he'd tried. Gerald yawned. 'Hmm yes, this might explain a few things. When did you find it?'

'Saturday,' said Clem. 'On the foreshore.'

'Ah yes, Saturday. That makes perfect sense,' said Oswald.

Clem thought none of this made any sense at all.

'What does it do?'

'Hmm?' said Oswald. 'Oh, this and that. What do you think?'

Clem stared at him. Gerald snaffled four grapes. His mouth bulged.

'Well, it needs to go back, doesn't it?' said Oswald. He stroked Gerald's head. 'Greedy blighter. Sometimes things are washed up on the shore that need to be looked after somewhere safe.' Oswald's hand went to the key he wore around his neck. 'And sometimes things are washed up by the river by accident. And they need to be returned.'

He put the loop back in the bucket and passed it to Clem.

'I have to return this, to the foreshore?' said Clem.

'To the river,' said Oswald, nodding.

'Um. OK,' said Clem. Oswald was being very odd. Even for Oswald. 'But what is it?'

'Giving it back will help fix this,' said Oswald, pointing out of the window at the raging weather. He was more mysterious than ever and Clem felt cross. 'It will help Elm Estate. You have enough time before it collapses. If you don't go, things will only get worse. I'd go myself but I can't leave the museum.' His hand touched the key again.

'I would take Ash and Zara with you, if I were you,' he added. 'You'll need their help. Oh, and you'll need something else ... hold

on.’ He walked to one of the locked doors that they were never allowed to go through. It was bright blue and shaped like an arch. There was a sound like a shower of tiny sparks and Oswald disappeared through it to the back of the museum. Within a few seconds, he came back with a pile of strange black and grey fabric.

‘What are those?’ said Zara, peering over. ‘They smell weird.’

They really did. A combination of damp and fish and something salty too. Clem felt a bit sick.

‘A form of wetsuit,’ said Oswald. ‘Like I said, you need to return the item to the river.’



‘Hang on, do we have to go in the *actual* river?’ said Clem. ‘*In* the actual river? We have to go *in* the river? To give this back? Why won’t you tell us what’s happening?’ She felt like she was being very rude to Oswald, but he just smiled.

‘Because it’s important you do this yourselves,’ said Oswald. ‘Don’t forget to put the ... er ... suits on. Very chilly this time of year. Go deep, be brave. And be careful down there. Anyway, must be getting on. I’ve promised Gerald a pedicure. Oh, and tell Barbara I said hi.’

And with that, he turned and walked to the back of the museum, leaving the three children staring open-mouthed after him.

‘What on earth does any of that mean?’ said Ash in a very quiet voice. Clem had never heard him try to speak quietly before. The glass cabinets still rattled.

‘I have absolutely no idea,’ said Clem.



CHAPTER 9

Clem, Ash and Zara ran along the muddy foreshore by the river. Clem couldn't help but sweep the ground with her eagle eyes. She immediately found a gleaming oyster shell. This one was particularly lovely, so she popped it in her pocket. Ash pocketed a withered crisp packet and an old Coke bottle, which Mrs Drummonds would almost definitely have made him recycle.

They reached the water's edge. In the distance, Clem could see that Elm Estate was still standing. But for how much longer?

In Clem's bucket was the metal circle. It was still rattling and glowing.

'Can we just ... chuck it in?' asked Ash.

'Why would Oswald give us wetsuits if we were just going to chuck it in?' said Zara.

Clem nodded.

'I think we have to go in,' she said. She wondered how to swim with the bucket, and decided to attach the loop on to her belt instead.

'Right. Well. Let's get this over with,' said Zara. 'It seems very unwise to me. I mean, we haven't even got life jackets. And we

haven't got a plan.'

Ash rolled his eyes. 'I've always wanted to go in the river! You're just scared of fish.'

'I'm not!' said Zara, but she blushed.

Clem stared into the river's whirling, spitting darkness. She actually agreed with Zara. It seemed like madness to get in, wetsuits or not. But Elm Estate needed them. And who knew what might happen to the rest of London if they didn't do something?

Clem unrolled the wetsuit Oswald had given her. At least it had looked like a rolled-up wetsuit when he'd handed it over. As it unfurled, it was just one large rectangle, like a cloak. Clem felt the rough texture beneath her fingers. It was almost like fur.

Without thinking, Clem put the suit around her shoulders.

As soon as she did so, she felt everything change.



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CHAPTER 10

Clem and the cloak were no longer separate. It wrapped itself around her and it seemed to become part of her skin. She held out her arms and saw that they were ghostly grey. Her fingers looked longer and were joined by grey webs of furry skin. Her eyesight sharpened. She felt smaller and when she looked down she was definitely closer to the ground than usual.

She felt like she was totally brand new.

She felt fantastic.

She felt like she had to be in the water.

Without thinking, Clem plunged forward into the river.

And she swam.

Clem wasn't a brilliant swimmer. She had managed to doggy-paddle her way to her 50-metre badge at school, but she didn't like the feeling of water up her nose or in her eyes. But now, it felt like the most wonderful thing in the whole world. She was swimming underneath the surface of the River Thames, like she'd been born to do it.

She didn't even need to breathe. She twisted to one side and saw Ash and Zara, both glowing grey and whizzing along with

her. Clem watched as they tumbled through the water. The cloaks had become like their very own sleek fur.

‘This is brilliant,’ shouted Ash. Except just a stream of bubbles flew out of his mouth and no sound. But as they popped, the words fell out and Clem could hear them. Ash whooped in delight.

‘What is going on?’ laughed Zara, and her wordbubbles burst as she somersaulted through the water. ‘This isn’t scientifically possible! You both look like you’re part seal!’

‘I don’t think Oswald gave us wetsuits,’ said Clem slowly, staring at Ash’s furry bottom wriggling through the water. He was definitely seal-sized and not Ash-sized. ‘I think they’re seal suits!’

‘What are we supposed to do now?’ asked Ash as he performed a very acrobatic backflip.

‘I think we should swim to the riverbed,’ said Zara as she spun through the water. ‘Oswald said go deep, remember?’

So the three of them swam down and down. As they got deeper, the water around them got darker. Strange shapes flashed by – Clem saw a shoal of bright orange fish and she could have sworn at least half of them had moustaches. Zara pointed wildly at a huge seahorse complete with a shiny red saddle. It was being ridden by a grumpy-looking jellyfish who was using a strand of seaweed as reins and quite clearly wanted the seahorse to go much, much faster. Ash was so busy staring he nearly swam face-first into a pair of chattering clams with jewels set into their shells.

Then the light changed. The darkness faded away and suddenly the water around them glowed green and clear. Clem thought the very bottom of the river would be dark and murky and hard to see, but her eyes were full of shimmering lights. The three of them slowed down as their toes brushed the muddy riverbed.



She expected to see old, twisted shopping trolleys and dumped rubbish. Instead, there were huge rocks dotted with bright patches of lichen.

Except they weren't rocks at all. They were buildings, carved from great pieces of stone. They had windows with seaweed curtains and rock gardens decorated with twists of what looked like old crisp packets and drinks cans shaped into beautiful sculptures. There were pebbly paths on the riverbed, and ... were those street lamps? Clem blinked. They were glowing green and not orange, but they were definitely street lamps.

Clem spun around. There were salmon pulling along great big shells filled with fish, like some sort of bus service. There was a bridge with towers made from stone, and a tangle of streets lined

with shops. The shops had glass fronts that were cracked at the edges, but Clem could still see displays of brightly coloured shells and beautiful gems and even what looked like cherry cupcakes topped with seaweed. *Yuck!* thought Clem.

They swam through a bustling intersection with a sign that read Octopus Circus, where an actual octopus was directing the traffic. The traffic was made up of red clamshells and black mussel shells filled with little fish and pulled by salmon. A red clamshell bus stopped and shoal after shoal of excited fish and clams and seahorses swam out, chattering about what they were going to buy today.

‘I’m going to get my shell polished right up,’ said a passing clam.

‘Ooo lovely,’ said another. ‘I think I’ll go for some jewels this time. Something subtle, like four hundred small crystals.’

The fish and the clams all rushed into a huge shop with a rocky black sign that read **SHELLFRIDGES**.

Clem gaped.

They were in an underwater London.

‘Holy mackerel,’ said Ash.

‘**Stop!**’ came a loud, booming voice from absolutely nowhere at all. ‘**Who gives you permission to be in our city? I eat trespassers on toast.**’

The voice was louder than Ash’s. Whatever it came from must be enormous.

Ash and Zara were frozen in horror. Their shoulders were trembling underneath their grey fur.

Clem’s heart skipped a beat and she whirled around. Where was the voice coming from? It didn’t sound remotely happy to see them.

She grabbed Ash and Zara’s hands and pulled them towards the rock bridge. The towers were big enough for them all to hide behind. As they whooshed behind one, a cloud of fish darted out from behind a lamp post. Zara opened her mouth and screamed.

Clem watched in terror as the fat screambubble floated out of Zara's mouth and up and away from them.

It was milliseconds from bursting and giving away their hiding place. Clem's whole body felt like it was made of stone.

But suddenly, there was Ash, swimming upwards after the bubble at superspeed. He reached into his pocket and drew out the old Coke bottle and unscrewed its top. In one quick scoop, he caught the bubble and jammed the lid back on as water rushed down its neck. Then he calmly floated back down to the bottom of the river and grinned.

'I said WHO GOES THERE? Be warned, I am hungry for sautéed trespassers.'

The voice bounced off the stones. Some of them began to crumble. In fact, now Clem looked closely, the whole underwater city was looking a bit worse for wear.

Zara put her hand over her mouth to stop herself squeaking. Clem didn't know what to do. They couldn't stay hidden behind this tower forever. She bent her head to the side and tried to hear where the voice was coming from.

'SHOW YOURSELVES. I am the great protector and I will use force and tomato ketchup in order to eat you up.'

Clem shuddered. The voice seemed to be coming from inside the tower itself! Clem swam swiftly and silently to the first little seaweed-curtained window and peeped in. She braced herself for a sea monster. A river monster. Something with huge fangs and glittering eyes and slimy claws.

Instead, she saw a very small snail shouting into a very large shell.



CHAPTER 11

Clem couldn't quite believe it. The terrifying, booming voice belonged to something roughly the size of her middle toe.

She giggled. She couldn't help it.

The gigglebubble popped and the snail looked up from the shell it was shouting into.

Right at Clem.

Clem didn't know, until that exact point in her life, that water snails could blush.

'Um. Hi,' she said, and gave an awkward little wave.

'YOU DO NOT GREET THE LORD HIGH PROTECTOR OF THE UNDERCITY OF LONDON WITH "HI",' said the snail ferociously. Or it would have been ferocious, if it hadn't sounded exactly like you'd expect a really tiny snail to sound when they're not using a massive voice-amplifying shell.

'I'm so sorry,' said Clem, biting the inside of her cheek. 'How should I address you?'

'Lord High Protector, or Oh Snaily One,' replied the snail haughtily. Clem noticed his shell was decorated with a lot of medals and tassels.

They were, she also noticed, made almost entirely from Wotsits packets and Coke bottle tops.

‘Hello, Lord High Protector,’ said Clem formally. ‘It is a great honour to meet you.’

The snail puffed out its chest.

‘I was wondering, if perhaps you would do me the great honour of helping me. It would be such an erm ... honour if you could.’

The snail looked smug.

Just then, Zara and Ash appeared at Clem’s elbow.

‘Pssst,’ hissed Ash. ‘What’s going on? You gonna get eaten?’

‘Erm,’ said Clem. She didn’t want to upset the snail. ‘I’m just having that conversation now.’ She looked back to the snail.

‘So, Oh Lord High Snaily Protector One, I have to return this,’ Clem said, holding up the metal loop on her belt. ‘And I have no idea where or how. Can I give it to you?’



The snail's eyes bulged at the top of their wobbling stalks.

'Where on earth did you get that from? I've been getting so much hassle about this, you wouldn't believe. Did you steal it? How very dare you, that's absolute treason that is.'

'No!' said Clem indignantly. She didn't much like being told off by a toe-sized snail wearing crisp-packet medals. 'I found it and I'm trying to give it back.'

'Well, you need to go to the palace,' said the snail. 'But they won't let the likes of you in there,' he added pompously. 'I'd offer to take it myself, but obviously I can't abandon my post here. The whole place would fall apart!'

As he spoke, a small building collapsed behind him. The snail ignored it.

'How do I get to the palace, please, Oh Snaily One?' asked Clem through gritted teeth. She was getting quite cross with no one telling her exactly what she'd found, or why it was important. She also didn't enjoy being spoken to like she was a toddler by a small snail with a large megaphone.

'That's classified,' said the snail smugly.

In her head, Clem screamed. She ducked below the window to where Ash and Zara were waiting.

'Right, this thing has got to go to the palace, and a snail with an attitude won't tell us where it is,' said Clem. 'So that's all going well.'

'Did you offer him anything in return for the information?' asked Zara. She was an enormous fan of spy novels and she was sure a trade would work.

'Like what?' asked Clem. 'I haven't got anything except the thing we're returning. Ash, got any cheese and pickle sandwiches?' It was worth a try.

'Floofer mugged me this morning,' said Ash glumly. He turned out his pockets. 'Just got this stuff.' He showed Clem the bubble-filled bottle and the old, withered crisp packet.

Clem had a very bright idea.

She popped back up to the window.

'Hello again, Lord High Protector,' she smiled. 'I wondered if you might be interested in becoming a Knight of Elm Estate. It's

a very huge honour, as I'm sure you know, and very fitting for a snail of your standing.' Clem held out Ash's crisp packet. The snail's stalk-eyes widened.

'Oh my,' he murmured. 'A Knight of Elm Estate. I mean, of course I know of it, what noble snail wouldn't? I never dreamed it could be mine though.' His stalks extended as he gazed at the crisp packet in Clem's hand. 'Mon-stah Munn-ch?'

'Er yes!' said Clem enthusiastically. 'It means you're a Knight of Elm Estate and also of er ... monsters?'

The snail let out a whistle.

'Well, I am only too honoured to accept, of course,' he said. 'It certainly befits a snail of my standing. I have long said that I should be made a Knight of Elm Estate and also monsters, and to now have that—'

'There's just one thing that all Knights of Elm Estate must do before they can receive their medal,' said Clem, interrupting the snail. She felt a bit rude, but also like he might never stop talking.

'Anything! Name it!' said the snail, greedily eyeing the crisp packet.

'Well, as Elm Estate representatives, we must obviously go to the palace and inform them of your promotion,' said Clem. 'So if you could, you know, point us in the right direction?'

'What? Oh yes, of course. Just follow the green-glass path until you get to the *Cutty Shark* and then turn left. Mind the eels. Nasty bunch. Stole my hat last time I was around there,' he added resentfully. 'Saved up for ages for that hat. Lovely embroidered octopus on the side, very classy. In some ways it was my best friend. Eels don't like loud noises at all though, so they stay away from the tower at least.' He tapped the shell amplifier. 'Oh hang on, there might be roadworks. Let me give you a map.' The snail disappeared for a moment, then reappeared with a map the size of a postage stamp.

'Thank you, Lord High Protector,' said Clem, taking the map. She handed the crisp packet over through the window.

'That's *Sir* Lord High Protector to you,' bellowed the snail into his amplifier, and Clem disappeared in a trail of stifled bubblegiggles.



CHAPTER 12

Ash was being particularly smug.

‘Everyone says I find rubbish, but I saved the day not once but *twice*,’ he said. He reminded Clem ever-so-slightly of the snail.

‘Well, not really,’ said Zara. ‘Because even if the snail had heard my scream, what was he going to do? Poke you with one of his antennae until you begged for mercy? Or just bore us to death?’

‘No, that’s your trick,’ said Ash. ‘You’re just jealous because you haven’t done anything helpful at all unless being boring suddenly counts.’ Clem had to swim between them before they had a full-blown underwater fight. Ash sulked behind a statue of a porpoise wearing a crown and Zara examined the window of a shop selling handbags made from small shells.

Clem looked at the tiny map. It was practically impossible to read. She squinted and held it up to the green street lamps.

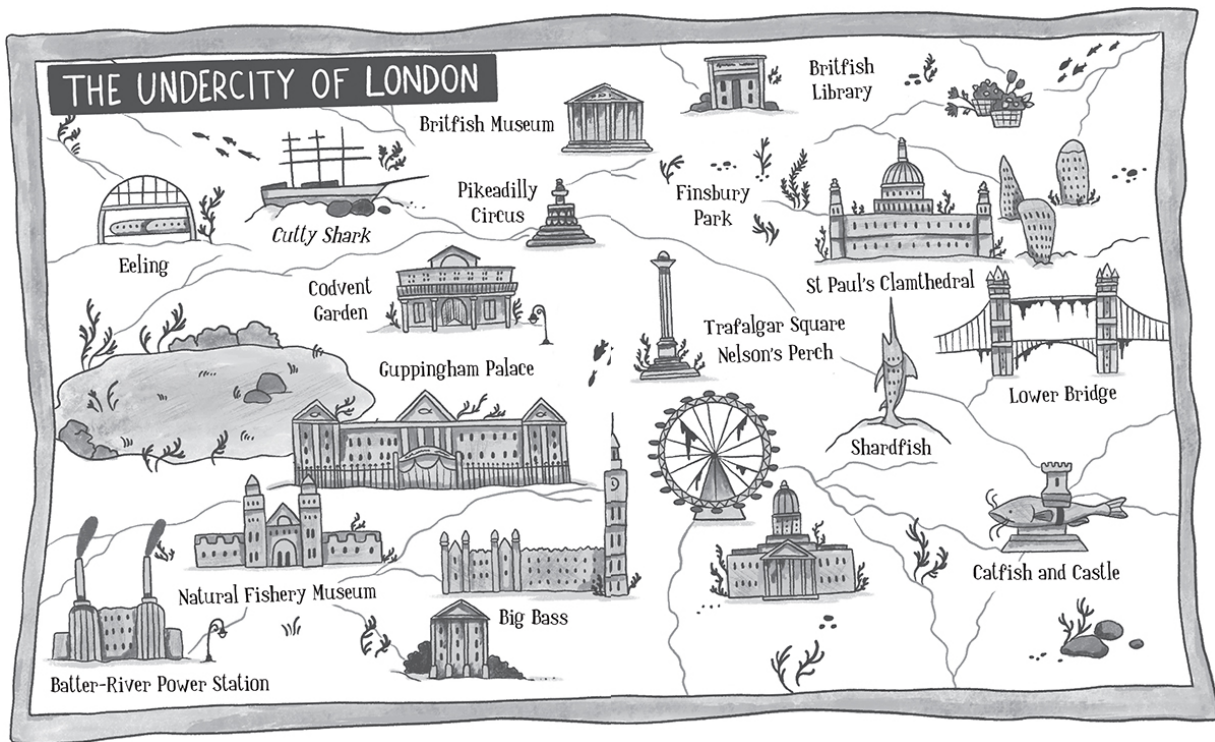
‘Oh, do you need a magnifying glass?’ asked Zara cheerily. ‘I’ve got two. Do you think you want an aspheric lens or a biconvex one?’ She produced two magnifiers from her pocket like it was completely normal. Clem pointed at one randomly.

‘Excellent choice,’ said Zara happily. Ash’s snort of bubble laughter popped around them and fell like rain.

Clem held the magnifying glass over the map.

‘OK, so I think we’re here,’ she said, pointing at a little picture labelled *Lower Bridge*. ‘And we need to get to here,’ she added, running her finger along to *Guppington Palace*. ‘So if we just swim along Finsbury Park to Pikeadilly Circus, we should be able to follow the road to Codvent Garden, past the *Cutty Shark* and turn left ...’

Zara checked and nodded. Ash did a somersault, and the three of them started their journey.





CHAPTER 13

As they floated along, Clem gawped at the stone not-quite-London-but-almost buildings and the shoals of fish and shrimps and strange creatures that kept swirling past. They all seemed very busy. Several fish actually had briefcases.

Everything looked very familiar. The shapes of the buildings were exactly like the ones above water. There were underground tunnels that opened up every so often to let out a shoal of fish. There was a huge Ferris wheel full of shrimps pointing excitedly at things in the distance.

But the more she looked, the more she could see signs that the city was falling apart.

‘Absolutely terrible, what’s happened to St Paul’s Clamthedral,’ Clem heard a passing pike say. She spotted a building with a domed roof that had completely caved in.

The green-glass path they were following was cracked, and some of the buildings had actually fallen over. It was just like what was happening in overwater London. Things were cracking up. But why?

Clem heard a noise that made the water around her tremble. She looked up in horror. A building was rocking from side to side. There was a crack at its very top, and it was getting bigger and bigger. Clem gulped. This looked a lot like what had happened to Elm Estate.

The crack spread at lightning speed. One second it was just at the pointy top of the building, the very next second it was nearly at the middle. Bits of rock were flying off as the crack opened up, and Zara had to do a mid-water tumble to avoid a particularly sharp stone.

The crack widened and deepened and raced to the bottom. Clem knew what was about to happen seconds before it actually happened.

‘Quick, behind here,’ she shouted. The three of them swam as fast as they could behind a large boulder. Just as Ash doggy-paddled his way to safety, the whole building gave an enormous shudder and collapsed with an ear-splitting thump on to the riverbed. It landed with a puff of sandy dust just where they’d been floating moments before. Clem’s heart lurched. She thought of her family’s cosy little flat in the world above.

The sand clouded the water all around them. It was impossible to see anything. The twinkling green river light was gone and everything was dark.

Ash yelped. At least Clem thought it was Ash. She couldn’t see beyond the end of her own nose.

‘Ash? You all right?’ Clem called into the murky dark. ‘Zara? Where are you guys?’

She was met with complete silence.

Clem began to feel a little creep of fear. Where were Ash and Zara? Clem swam forward slowly, trying to feel her way.

The dust began to settle back down on the green-glass path. It took Clem a moment to adjust to the greenish light streaming through the water from the street lamps. She could see a huge ship looming up from the riverbed. It had a ragged sail that flapped in the flow of the water and splintery holes in its hull.

She blinked. Something flickered in the bottom of the boat.

She blinked again.

Then, without warning, something very big and very strong wrapped itself around her arms and legs. Clem tried to kick and struggle, but whatever was holding her was too powerful. She looked down and opened her mouth to scream, but before she could make a single noise, an eel wrapped itself around her head.

She was tied up with eels.

Eels wearing pirate hats and eels with glinting gold teeth. Eels with little shrimps on their shoulders instead of parrots. At least, shrimps where Clem assumed eels would have shoulders. It was quite hard to tell where shoulders were supposed to be on something that didn't have any arms or legs.



Clem struggled again, and saw Ash and Zara doing the same. They were all completely and utterly tied up and trapped. Ash

looked like he was trying to bite the eel wrapped around his mouth, with little success.

‘Well, well, well,’ came a voice. It was barely more than a whisper. A very large eel slithered out from behind a chunk of fallen rock. He had the biggest shrimp of all sitting on his maybe-shoulder and he was wearing a chain made of bottle caps around his maybe-neck. Perched on the shrimp’s head was a hat covered in feathers, sparkles, glitter and what looked like an embroidered octopus. It was ridiculous. Clem knew immediately whose hat it was.

‘What have we here then? Trespassers? No one comes near the *Cutty Shark* unless we say so,’ said the biggest eel as he loomed up to Clem.

Not this again, thought Clem. She couldn’t say it out loud, because she had an eel’s bottom wedged against her mouth. At least she thought it was its bottom. She tried to bite it, like Ash, but the eel was so slippery that her teeth just slid off its slimy side. It tasted disgusting.

‘Coming down here, stealing our gems,’ continued the eel in the same very soft voice. Clem wriggled in protest. ‘No respect at all, isn’t that right, boys? No respect to the pirate **KINGS** of the Thames.’

A tangle of eels jeered extremely quietly from the sidelines.

The boss eel circled Clem. Up close, he was incredibly muscly, and had a tattoo on his side. It looked like a blurry heart with some writing in the middle. Clem wasn’t sure, but she thought it might say *MUM*.

‘Well, well, well, what’s this then?’ the eel murmured as he looked Clem up and down. His beady little eyes had fixed on the metal object looped on to Clem’s belt. He was grinning. Clem had never seen an eel grin before, and it wasn’t a particularly pleasant sight. Someone should give this eel a toothbrush.

‘I see I was right. They don’t call me Bobby Bigbrains for nothing, you know. And to think, some of this lot said it was an ironic nickname. But no! You Dry Londoners *have* been stealing from us! From the palace of *Her Majesty* no less. Tut-tut, little

girl. Bad move. But no worries, we'll be only too happy to er ... return this item for you. Pirates definitely do that sometimes. No harm done.' The eel's eyes glinted. 'Boys! Please relieve this young lady of her stolen goods.'

Several eels surged forward. Clem's eyes widened in fear. They met Ash's, who looked equally terrified. Zara, however, was staring straight ahead and not looking at anyone at all. She was doing something, Clem realised. Zara's left hand had gently worked itself loose from her eely bindings, and she was reaching towards Ash. She slipped her hand into his pocket and pulled something out.

Meanwhile, the eels were advancing on Clem.

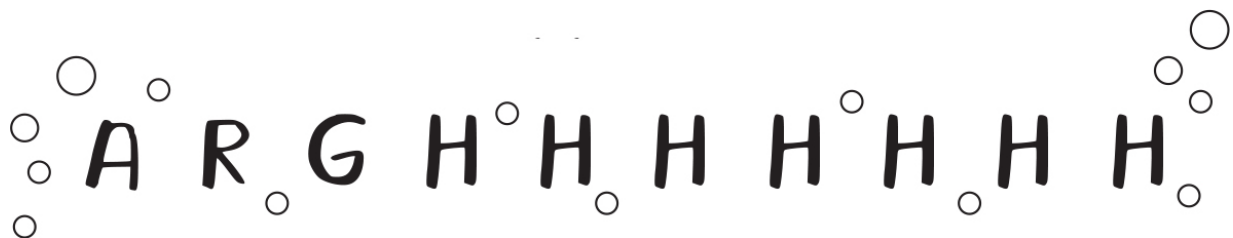
'It's my turn, Gary!' whispered a skinny eel.

'No it's not! Bobby promised me the next bounty, because I fed his shrimp all last week when he had that funny tummy.'

'He said I could do it because I sing him lullabies when he's scared of the dark! Which is every night, so that's a lot of singing.'

'Shut it, Kev, it's mine. I read him all his bedtime stories last week.'

The eels continued to argue quietly about who was going to take the metal loop, which was giving Zara exactly the time she needed. Clem watched as she pulled the bottle out of Ash's pocket, uncapped the top and threw it into the middle of the arguing eels. The bubble inside floated gently out of the bottle neck and then lazily popped.



ARGHHHHH

Zara's bottled scream burst through the water like a bomb. The eels holding Clem instantly fell away. They were twisting and howling and trying to stuff their hats and shoulder-shrimps into their earholes, which was really difficult as they didn't have any arms.

The arguing eels scattered. Bobby was curling and uncurling like a spring, and trying to sing himself a soothing lullaby. Clem saw her chance and took it. She grabbed the little hat off the shrimp's head and put it swiftly in her pocket.

'Quick! Let's go!' hissed Zara. She grabbed Clem's hand and the three of them sped off and away from the crying mass of pirate eels, down the left fork of the path.

Clem could hear a faint cry as they rounded the corner. It sounded very much like a large muscly eel sobbing, '*I want my mummy.*'



CHAPTER 14

‘Zara! You saved us!’ Ash said in a tone of wonder that Clem had only ever heard him use when discussing laser sharks, and definitely not for his sister.

‘It was nothing,’ said Zara modestly, while also managing to look very proud of herself. ‘It was just some simple logic and quick thinking. You see, I heard the snail say that eels didn’t like loud—’

‘Yeah, yeah,’ said Ash. ‘You’ve had your moment. What now, Clem?’

‘Left along here, I think,’ said Clem thickly. She was wiping her tongue desperately with her hands, trying to get rid of the taste of eel bum. She peered down the path and then back at her map, but it was very hard to read. They had come past the *Cutty Shark* and should be in Codvent Garden now. The ground was cobbly and there were a few shops, including a huge hatmaker’s called Capsized. At least that explained all the hats, thought Clem.

But turning left, there was nothing but darkness. There were no street lamps at all. This didn’t look like the kind of place you’d

find a palace. All around them were crumbled buildings that looked like ancient ruins. The glass paths were shattered.

‘The snail definitely said left?’ asked Zara, who was obviously thinking the same thing.

‘Left and right are hard,’ said Ash kindly.

‘He definitely said left, and that’s what the map says too,’ said Clem with more certainty than she felt. ‘But it’s so dark and empty here.’

Clem tried to look with her mudlarker’s eagle eyes. She swept from rock to rock, examining everything. Five fish darted out from behind stones, which made Zara yelp. Clem called after the fish, but they didn’t want to stay and chat. She could hear them babbling frantically to each other.

‘I’ve never seen her this upset. Not even when she tried yoga and couldn’t find her inner calm.’

‘Better get her that fermented kelp immediately.’

‘Have you tried offering her a nice cup of brine tea?’

‘Have we started the emergency protocol yet? Lullabies, stories and a really big bit of cake?’

‘How many are out searching? Double it!’

Clem watched the fish as they swam away. They were all coming from one particular area, she noticed. She swam over to a small grey rock that looked identical to all the other grey rocks. As she got closer, something caught her eye.

There was a small circle on the rock that was a different texture to the rest of it. It was gently glittering like mother of pearl. Clem poked it. Nothing happened. Clem pushed her face against the rock and peered at the weird bit. She was slightly nervous a crab might suddenly appear and pincer her eyeball, but absolutely nothing happened at all. She shoved the rock. Nothing happened then either.

Ash swam over from where he’d been trying to stick his head between two rocks.

‘Ooo, is that the door to the palace?’ he asked, beaming. ‘Wonder what happens when you unlock it. Maybe ...’

‘NOT LASER SHARKS,’ barked Zara. ‘And it doesn’t look much like a door, does it, dingus?’

Clem felt hopeless. This was all too difficult. Gangs of eels, rude snails, mysterious quests and now a hidden palace. She thought of Mr Kostas’s ruined shop and wobbling Elm Estate, and took a deep breath.

A trout swam past. He was wearing a pair of glasses made from bottle caps and he had a twirly moustache made of seaweed. Zara flinched.

‘You lot coming to Shoalditch for the opening of the new fermented kelp bar?’ he asked. ‘I hear it’s the next big thing! Move over, unfermented kelp! So last month.’

‘Erm,’ said Clem. ‘That sounds really brilliant, but we just have to pay a little visit to the palace first. How ... how do we get in?’

The trout looked baffled. Or as baffled as a fish wearing glasses and a pretend moustache can look.

‘Just use your passport to anywhere in the whole city!’

Clem looked at him blankly.

‘Your Oyster card! Duh!’ he said and swam off with a wave of his fin.

‘You have *got* to be kidding me,’ said Clem. She reached into her pocket and took out her emergency bus Oyster travel card. She pressed it flat against the rock.

Nothing happened.

Clem wanted to scream. So she did. Just a bit. No eels were harmed. A shrimp was mildly startled but was all right after a little sit down.



Clem balled her hands into fists and shoved them in her pockets. Her fingers scraped against something hard and jagged.

‘You have GOT to be kidding me,’ Clem muttered again. She pulled out the oyster shell she’d found earlier. It was worth a go. She pressed it on the rock.

Nothing happened.



CHAPTER 15

Clem put her head in her hands. Another scream was incoming.

‘Clem! Look!’ Ash shouted. Clem looked up.

The whole rock was opening up.

It split like a melon. Out of a dark hole a building began to erupt like a tooth from a gum. It was enormous and it was amazing. The whole thing seemed to be made from some sort of crystal. It had huge turrets dotted with sparkling gems and great towers decorated with gold and silver. It radiated light from every shining nook and cranny. Clem had to shield her eyes. Rainbows of green and white and gold and blue and red and purple bounced through the water. A beautiful sign with curly gold writing read *Gyppingham Palace*.



Ash and Zara's mouths were hanging wide open. Clem realised that hers was too and quickly shut it before she swallowed a fish. After that eel bum she'd had quite enough seafood to last her a lifetime.

'I'm guessing,' said Ash, spitting out a small shrimp, 'that this is the palace.'

'You're a genius, Ash. How do we get in?' asked Zara. She was swimming around the turrets and searching for an entrance.

'Oh, I don't know,' said Ash. 'Obviously I'm not a genius like you or anything, but I reckon we could just try the door?'

He pointed and Clem saw a huge clamshell. Next to it was a little snail-shell doorbell. Zara went pink.

Clem swam over to the doorbell and pressed it. It rang. And rang. And rang.

No one answered.

Clem, feeling very rude, approached the clamshell door and pulled on a small handle hidden in its grooves.

The whole door fell off. It hit the ground with a muffled bang and a puff of muddy sand.

Clem yelped and leaped back in alarm. She was still holding the little handle.

‘Oh my days, you’ve damaged a palace, Clem!’ cried Ash. ‘You could get into some serious trouble! They’ll lock you up in the tower with that annoying snail.’

Clem gulped. This wasn’t great. The idea of spending any time with the Lord High Protector was very unappealing.

‘I guess we’d better go in,’ she said reluctantly. ‘Give this loop back, and hope whoever lost it is grateful enough that they don’t arrest me.’ The sooner Clem returned the weird metal loop, the sooner she could get back to dry land and save Elm Estate.

And with that thought, she took a deep breath and swam through the doorway.



CHAPTER 16

The palace was spectacular. There were twisting crystal corridors and winding mother-of-pearl staircases. The ceilings were so high that Clem couldn't even see where they began. There was just the occasional twinkle of crystal up above.

There were fountains that puffed out bubbles, and great statues of porpoises in a courtyard planted with a hundred different types of water plant. It was quite amazing.

'What's that noise?' asked Zara, peering around nervously.

Clem pricked up her ears.

'I can't hear anything,' said Ash.

But as they stopped and listened, Clem started to hear it too.

It was a wailing and a crashing and a smashing and a screeching. Clem thought it sounded a bit like the time she, Ash and Zara had tried to form a pop group. Singing and dancing were not their strong points, apparently. Their headteacher had actually banned them from the talent show on health and safety grounds.



But whatever it was making this noise, it didn't sound happy.

Clem, Ash and Zara raced through the incredible corridors towards the noise. It was getting louder and louder. The walls were actually shaking and wobbling. Gems and glass and buttons were rattling and falling all around them.

'This whole place is going to collapse if whatever that is doesn't shut up!' gasped Zara, neatly dodging a huge chunk of pottery that smashed inches away from where her head had just been. 'We have to make it stop!'

As they rounded a corner, Clem saw the strangest sight. Stranger than secret underwater cities and hidden crystal palaces and talking snails and gangster eels.

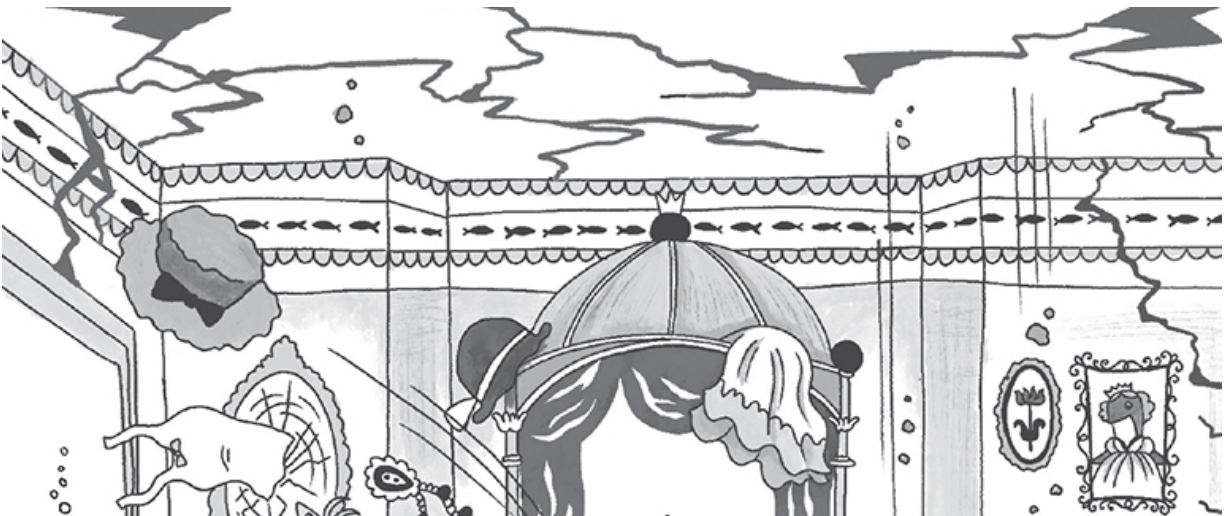
It was a porpoise in a ballgown.



CHAPTER 17

A porpoise in a pink ballgown, frantically throwing things out of trunks and drawers and cupboards, all the while screaming her head off. Ash put his hands over his ears. The walls were shaking.

The room looked like a bomb had gone off. A bomb containing gold coins, jewellery, gems, platters of cheese and most of a large clothing store. It was messier than Clem's bedroom, and that was saying something.





‘I WANT IT BACK! WHERE IS IT? WHERE IS MY CROWN? I AM VERY SAD, YOU KNOW. VERY SAD INDEED.’

‘Yes, you have mentioned that once or twice, your delightful and gracious majesty,’ said a shrimp in a butler’s uniform. He sounded very tired.

At least twenty tiny guppies in bow ties were swimming around the porpoise, offering her cups of tea and slices of cake on silver trays. Several of them started trying to sing a lullaby, but were struck by an iced bun and immediately scattered. The fish were so busy, and the porpoise was so absorbed in her screaming and flinging, that nobody seemed to notice the three seal-children floating awkwardly into the room.

‘Your majesty, if you just calm down we’ll be able to help you—’ started one guppy, but he was hit in the face by an éclair and hid behind a sofa. ‘Someone call the doctor. She’s really lost it this time!’ he shouted, rubbing cream off his face with a velvety cushion. Another guppy darted out of the room, then returned with an enormous fish. Zara whimpered.

‘Your majesty! Dr Gubbins here, from the Royal College of Surgeons. All this flinging is terribly bad for your joints. Why don’t you have a nice sit down and I’ll—’

Just then, Ash sneezed. Ash’s voice might be loud, but his sneezes were on another planet. It was louder even than a mad porpoise queen tearing apart a palace.

The porpoise whirled round.

‘Who are you?’ she shrieked. ‘Are you burglars? GUARDS! GUARDS! SEIZE THEM!’

Clem was getting a bit tired of this. Did anyone in this city do anything other than try to tie up visitors? A few elderly-looking salmon wheezed their way into the room. They looked extremely tired and very out of breath.

‘Seize them!’ repeated the porpoise hysterically. Chunks of the walls were falling off and bouncing along the floor. Every time the porpoise screamed, more and more damage seemed to happen.

The salmon advanced reluctantly towards the three children. They were trailing great ropes of seaweed in their mouths.

‘Never get any overtime,’ muttered one of them under his breath. ‘She’s fired sixty mackerel this month alone. Has anyone given her a cup of tea and a biscuit yet? She’s always better after that—’

‘THROW THEM IN THE DUNGEON! I NEVER WANT TO SEE THEM AGAIN! ALL I WANT IS MY CROWN.’ The porpoise was making the water around her froth with fury.

Clem watched helplessly as Ash was tied up with seaweed. She swam towards him, but her path was blocked by at least twenty bored-looking salmon. Clem whirled around but there was no escape. Behind her was a huge stone statue of a very familiar-looking porpoise wearing a crown. A crown made of pretty curls and twists of seaweedy metal.

Clem looked down at the metal loop attached to her belt and looked back at the statue.

‘OH,’ said Clem.



CHAPTER 18

‘YOUR MAJESTY.’ Clem’s voice was so loud that more rocks fell from the ceiling and a guppy fainted.

The porpoise stopped shrieking.

‘Please don’t arrest us!’ said Clem. ‘We’re just bringing this back! Look!’ She unhooked the metal loop from her belt and held it out. ‘Your crown!’

There was a beat of silence, and Clem wondered if she was going to be the porpoise’s supper. Did porpoises eat children?

‘My crown!’ cried the porpoise. ‘My beautiful, perfect crown!’ And she reached out her flippers, grabbed the metal loop from Clem and shoved it immediately on to her head. ‘I am once again QUEEN BARBARA!’



Almost instantly, the room stopped shaking. The walls were still. The ground stopped wobbling. The crown rattled slightly, glowed bright gold and settled beautifully on the porpoise queen's head.

'Oh thank cod for that,' said one of the salmon.

'All hail Queen Barbara!' cried a slippery little guppy.

'Where did you find this?' cried Barbara happily. 'I've been looking absolutely everywhere.'

'We found it on the shore in London above. Oswald said we had to bring it back. Actually, he says hi,' Clem said, remembering suddenly.

'Oh lovely Oswald!' cried Barbara, flinging her flippers out wide and knocking a lurking guppy into the wall. 'He's such a gentleman. I haven't seen him since the last time I lost my crown!'

Such a sweet man, brought it back as soon as he'd located it in a bit of river sixty miles north. Can't abide that lizard of his though. Doesn't blink enough.'

'How did you lose your crown this time?' asked Clem. She wanted to make very sure it didn't happen again.

'Oh yes! Well, every year I do a lovely little ceremony to celebrate another year being an all-powerful porpoise queen. I put on a small play and I do a marvellous little dance display, really graceful and acrobatic. I sing too! I have the most beautiful singing voice.'

One of the salmon snorted and tried to turn it into a cough.

'Yes, I sing, I dance, I act. Everyone loves it! And they bring me gifts. This year, some darling little crab gave me the most brilliant top hat. Covered in pearls! So I put that on and, well, mislaid my crown. It's normally always on my head, but it must have drifted off and away. But you see, without my lovely, lovely crown, I can get a bit cross. And when I sense someone else is touching MY crown, well, things can go a bit haywire. You know how it is! I'm the Queen – if I don't have a crown, then what am I supposed to do?!

'Not make the whole ruddy city fall apart,' muttered the particularly grumpy salmon.

'But I couldn't help it!' cried Queen Barbara, batting her huge eyes at him. 'I had lost the very thing that makes me *me*! I lost a part of myself. You know?' she added, looking at Clem.

'Erm ... yes?' said Clem. It seemed safest to agree. But then, in a way, Clem did know. She knew how she felt when Elm Estate starting wobbling, and how she would feel if she lost her friends and the Thames and Tide Club. She would lose a part of herself too.

'It's been so hard,' said Barbara, flopping down on a chaise longue. 'I just get so angry and, well, being an all-powerful, magical porpoise queen, that means things can go a bit wrong when I'm cross. I'm in charge of the tides, the water levels, the sky above London. It's all quite wearing. And what's the point of

being in charge of all that if I don't even get to wear a crown? You get it, don't you?

Clem had absolutely no idea what it was like to be an all-powerful, magical porpoise queen, but equally, she had absolutely no desire to make Barbara angry again. What she really cared about was saving Elm Estate.

'Of course!' she said encouragingly. 'We're just happy to help!'

'How clever of you!' beamed Barbara. 'Thank you so much for bringing it back! I would offer you a drink or something to eat, but I seem to have smashed up all my crockery and thrown all the food at that guppy cowering behind the sofa. What can I do for you instead?'

Clem shoved Ash before his mouth could form the words 'laser shark'.

'Well, there is something, actually. Now you're happy and you have your crown, could you stop making the weather so wild? Everything on land is falling apart. Our whole estate might collapse and we might lose our homes, and our friend Mr Kostas's bakery is ruined.'

'Oh *forgive me!*' cried Barbara, putting her flippers over her face and throwing herself back against the chaise longue dramatically. 'The tides, the weather, shaking the city from beneath, the water rising ... it's just self-expression. Your poor friend, I would never knowingly upset someone who makes cakes. I *love* cakes.'

The guppy behind the sofa removed icing from his eye and glared at the back of Barbara's head.

Barbara continued talking happily about cakes and tides, completely ignoring the furious guppy.

'You control the tides?' said Zara. 'But ... what about the moon? Science? Moon-science? Science-moon?!' She was beginning to gibber like a monkey in a panic.

Barbara looked blank. Zara looked devastated.

'Oh now, I really must reward you! Why don't you each choose something from my treasure chests?' Barbara swept a flipper around the room vaguely.

Clem, Zara and Ash stared at the piles of ballgowns, rubble, rubbish and random bits of what looked like old board games. Clem could see a *Scrabble* tile and half of *Guess Who?* underneath a table.

‘Really,’ said Clem. ‘It’s fine. But thank you so much.’

Barbara blinked.

‘Well, you do drive a hard bargain, but all right, FINE,’ she said, crossing her flippers.

‘You can have it!’ She spun round and delved into a trunk. Tiaras and shoes went flying.

‘Why does a porpoise need shoes?’ whispered Ash.

‘Shh,’ said Zara and giggled.

‘Here you are then!’ said Barbara. ‘One of my most prized possessions! For the brave mudlarks who brought back my crown. I bestow it to you, you most gracious creatures.’

The three children leaned forward eagerly. What majestic treasure would the Porpoise Queen of the Undercity of London have for them? Rubies? A magic potion? A whole treasure chest? A teleporter? A *laser shark*?

It was a lump of rock that had fallen off one of the walls.

‘Oh!’ said Clem. ‘Wow ...’ she trailed off unconvincingly.

‘I know,’ said Barbara. ‘From the very palace of the queen! How lucky are you?!’

Clem, Zara and Ash all nodded. Clem could practically see Ash melting in disappointment.

‘Thank you so much, Queen Barbara,’ Clem said formally. She shoved the rock in her pocket.

‘Do come back and visit! Bring Oswald. He always says he’s too old to do this sort of thing now, but if you ask me, it’s sheer laziness. Now, go away please. I have to make the salmon clear up while I have a very long nap. Honestly, it’s absolutely exhausting telling them what to do.’ Barbara began to drift away, stroking her crown lovingly.

Ash, Zara and Clem whizzed out of the palace and through the city. Already it was looking better. The buildings weren’t shaking or puffing out clouds of dust. The green-glass paths were smooth

and uncracked. The street lamps were bright and unflickering. Fish and shrimps and seals were swimming joyfully and calling out to each other.

As they swam past Lower Bridge, Clem quickly and quietly placed the tiny hat on the snail's window sill. She heard a delighted little gasp as she paddled away. The Lord High Protector. He wasn't so bad really.

They swam up and up and through the darkness until Clem could see pale light through the water. They broke through the surface and the cold air hit their faces. The tide gave a huge sigh and pushed them on to the shore. As soon as they were out of the water, the cloaks fell away from them and they were suddenly *freezing*.

'Quick!' said Zara through chattering teeth. 'Let's get out of here!'

In the distance, Clem could see the buildings of Elm Estate standing perfectly still and upright.



CHAPTER 19

‘So, Barbara is going to stop all this nonsense?’ asked Oswald, sprinkling cinnamon on his hot chocolate and giving Gerald a spoonful of cream. Gerald was wearing a pirate hat. It looked very familiar. His nails were also painted hot pink. He kept proudly showing them to Clem.

‘She said she would,’ said Clem as she admired Gerald’s little claws.

‘Jolly good,’ Oswald said. ‘Could have been worse. Last time she lost her crown, she froze the whole river. Well done, you lot. I knew you could do it! You’ll be delighted to know that Elm Estate is now solid as a rock thanks to you. Speaking of which, Barbara didn’t give you a rock, did she?’

‘Er, yes,’ said Clem, pulling the lump from her pocket.

‘Ah,’ said Oswald. ‘Yes. Typical. I’d better just take that from you, Clem. Gently, gently, careful!’ Oswald gingerly took the boring old bit of stone from Clem’s outstretched hand and quickly locked it in a box labelled *FIREPROOF*.

‘How do you, er ... know the all-powerful porpoise queen?’ asked Clem.

‘Well, Clem,’ said Oswald as he stirred his hot chocolate. ‘That’s a very good question. I’ve known Barbara for many years. Since I was about your age, in fact. Not that she’d ever admit she’s that old. But yes, when I was your age I was given those sealskins by the old owner of this museum, Dr Bellingham. I used to come here and show her my mudlarking finds. And one day, I went on an adventure a lot like the one you just did. Barbara is forever losing her crown and getting quite cross about it. And after I got back, Dr Bellingham told me I’d passed a certain test.’

‘Test?’ said Zara, pricking up her ears. She loved tests.

‘Yes. Dr Bellingham said she could trust me enough to tell me a very big secret. That she could trust me with a lot more than that, actually.’

Clem, Zara and Ash looked at each other in confusion.

‘She told me about the existence of powerful magic hidden in ordinary objects. She told me about whole new worlds right under my feet. But she also told me that powerful magic can be lost and stolen. It can be used to do bad things. I told you before, sometimes the river gives us things that must be hidden and protected, and things that must be returned. That’s what this museum is really for. So that’s what I do. And I think after today, that is what you three are destined to do as well. Those sealskins don’t just work for anyone, you know.’

Ash and Zara looked confused and excited. Clem felt her heart beat faster. Gerald fell in a teacup.

‘I am a Guardian of this museum, although I am getting a little old to go on quite so many adventures. I look after many powerful objects and I return many to where they belong. The skins only work for those who can be Guardians. I thought they would work for you and I was right. Being a Guardian is very hard and strange work, but it is clearly who you are destined to be. In case it’s not entirely clear, I would like you three to be Guardians of the Museum too.’

‘Guardians of the Museum?’ asked Clem. Her eyes were shining.

‘Yes,’ said Oswald. And he reached into a pocket of his waistcoat and drew out three silver keys on three silver chains. ‘But you must keep it secret, because there are people who would do absolutely anything for what I’m about to give you. Anything at all. Do you understand?’

The three children nodded, open-mouthed.

‘These are your keys to the museum. They open every door. But the doors will only open when you’re ready to open them.’



Clem gazed down at the tiny silver key in her hand. She’d never felt so excited in her whole life. She had a thousand

questions but somehow she knew Oswald would never just tell them the answers. They'd have to find out for themselves.

'Guardians of the Museum,' breathed Ash. 'This is better than a laser shark.'

'Guardians of the Museum,' repeated Clem.

Gerald raised his hat to her in salute and winked.

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CHAPTER 20

The rest of the Thames and Tide Club was already in Mr Kostas's bakery, helping him clear up and eagerly discussing the day's events.

'It just stopped! About half an hour ago!' Mr Kostas was saying joyfully as the three children entered. 'I think that twenty-second plumber must have been the charm.'

Clem and Zara and Ash all shared a secret smile. Then they set to work helping Raj and Mrs Drummonds mop the floor. Mr Zafar was in the back with Sol, baking. Mr Kostas scrubbed down all the walls and windows and put on big heaters. He whipped up a quick batch of his famous cherry cupcakes, and the whole shop smelt warm and delicious in no time.

The Thames and Tide mudlarks scrubbed and polished until the entire bakery shone and sparkled. Mr Kostas handed round cupcakes, and Mr Zafar produced the halva he and Sol had just made. Mr Kostas said he should start selling Mr Zafar's halva in his shop, and everyone agreed.

'Thank you all so much!' said Mr Kostas. 'I don't know how I would have sorted out all this mess without you.'

‘You have no idea,’ mumbled Ash into his cake. He and Clem and Zara all touched their new secret key necklaces at the same time, but no one noticed.

The Thames and Tide Club sat in the bakery and drank hot tea and ate cupcakes and halva until the sky grew dark. They chatted excitedly as they planned their next mudlarking adventure.

Who knew what might wash up on the shore next week?



Join Clem, Zara and Ash as they face ...

SQUIDMAGEDDON!

KATYA BALEN

Illustrated by RACHAEL DEAN

THE
THAMES
AND
TIDE
CLUB

SQUID INVASION

COMING SOON



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Katya Balen is an award-winning author of books for children. Katya's debut novel, *The Space We're In*, was published in 2019 and was highly commended for the Branford Boase Award. Her second, *October, October*, won the Yoto Carnegie Medal. Her third novel, *The Light in Everything*, was published in 2022. When she's not writing books, Katya likes to scroll through dog-rescue websites, bake, and attempt to keep all her house plants alive. She lives in London with her partner and their dogs Raffi and Mouse.

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