

# Trees, Monsters, and a Ship

## Chapter 1

Once upon a time in a city like yours, behind a little-known theater, the impossible happened: An ocean appeared. As far as the eye could see, green swells rose and dipped. The air sharpened with salted mist. Giant skates slid on rubbery wings through a kelp forest as tall as the skyscrapers. Seabirds screeched.

The only one to notice was Arlie, a fourteen-year old boy, small for his age, and homeless.

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Midnight regarded the boy trudging through the back streets. It didn't smile, though it had constructed an amusing scenario for the waning gibbous moon. The wind rose. High overhead, the constellation Hydra reconfigured her stars, craning her neck for a better view. The breeze waxed tropical with aromas of sea daisy and mango. It floated through the alleyway, seeking its target in the person of young Arlie...

Found.

Chilled and hungry, he was captive from the instant the scent reached his nostrils, his skin, his hair. It whispered, "Warmth." He listened. "Lemon chiffon," it sighed. He followed.

At the base of a garbage bin behind a small theatre, a bumpy, circular object covered with aluminum foil reflected the night at various angles. Broken graffiti and starlight. Arlie lifted the

tray to his face and sniffed. Cake. He pulled back the foil covering to find twelve elaborately decorated cupcakes, each with a month of the year inscribed in green icing.

His mouth watered and he swallowed hard, then fingered a dollop of pinkish-orange frosting off the foil and licked. The tangy sweetness landed on his tongue with romantic fervor. Nothing had ever tasted so intensely of fresh raspberries, but in a moment it was gone, replaced by a sharp spiciness. That changed almost immediately to peppermint cream, which faded slowly and gently to a memory of oranges and a faint notion of coconut. Arlie's eyes grew wide over that long moment. They brimmed with tears. An inadvertent moan emerged from his chest.

“Hey! Put that down!”

Startled, Arlie nearly dropped the tray of sweets, but someone snatched it out of his hands before it could come to harm.

“Oh, geez, close call,” said the grabber, a man only slightly bigger than Arlie, dressed in a crisp yellow button-down shirt and navy blue sweat pants. He rewrapped the aluminum foil around the edges, then looked closely at the boy, who reached a hand out.

“Just one?” he pleaded. “I never tasted anything like that before.”

“Sorry, kid. I really am. But these are for a party, and there are exactly a dozen people.”

“But they're not as hungry as me. They can't be. You could give them all to me. Then they'd never know what they were missing,” he reasoned greedily, nearly drooling.

“Yeah, but I would. Look, there's a twenty inside my shirt pocket. Take it.”

“I'm not a beggar,” the boy said, turning away.

“I found it out here earlier,” the man called after him. “It’s probably yours, anyway, right? Doesn’t matter who lost it, it’s not mine. Come on, just get it. I’ve got my hands full here.”

Arlie turned back. Of course the money would be useful. He reached over and slipped it out of the guy’s starched pocket. “Well, I just found those in the alley,” he said, indicating the cupcakes. “How do I even know they’re yours?”

The man scowled. “I only left them here for a minute. Finders can’t always be keepers, friend.”

Arlie nodded and stuffed the money in his jeans. “I guess it’s a fair trade. OK, thank you, Mister...?”

“I’m Morris. Not ‘Mister’ anybody, right? Now get outta here. Go get something to eat.”

Arlie turned and moved down the alley—hood up, hands in pockets—but he walked softly and listened. When he heard a squeaky door pulled open, he glanced back over his shoulder. The man disappeared into the little theater, and the boy made a quick about-face, returning to the dumpster. Hopefully, there were more goodies to be found. A twenty-dollar bill was too precious to spend on food, if there was any other option.

He remembered what his friend, Jump, had said about theater people. About how they would order rich food, then eat only a little so they wouldn’t gain weight. The rest of the delicacy would sometimes get wrapped back up neatly before going in the garbage. Arlie imagined lasagna, his favorite. That Jump could fantasize about sweet potatoes and greens was ridiculous. “Give me cheese,” he thought, drooling for real this time. He wiped his chin with the

back of his hand and stopped in front of the garbage bin. This must be the one Jump told him about.

Overhead, two meteoroids, running late, shot through the ionosphere on their way to the Marshall Islands, where he would eventually meet them. For now, only a skinny black cat seemed to notice his whereabouts. It hissed at him from beneath the dumpster. Arlie squatted and tried out a little mew, but that made the creature cower and back further under, until only his yellow eyes gave him away.

A distinct smell of fish told him why the cat was hanging around. “Well, if I find an old sardine, it’s yours,” he said, standing. “Now let’s see if there’s anything decent around here for yours truly.”

The full moon glittered every shard of glass and metallic junk in the alley, but no more aluminum-covered trays. Time to check inside the bin. The lid was closed, so he stood on an old plastic carton, reached up, and gave it a push. The heavy, metal slab rose about six inches before it slammed back down, barely missing his fingers. It was so loud that he ran to hide in the shadows. The cat shot into the night. Someone else was bound to have heard. But when the boom died away with the tone of a distant foghorn and something like the cry of a gull, the boy realized he’d better find something to eat pretty soon. The ocean was hundreds of miles away. He must be hallucinating from hunger.

By the sound of it, the trash bin was empty, but he grabbed a discarded broom handle, climbed back up, and used it to prop open the lid. An inquisitive patter of rain skittered along the pavement, and Arlie looked up, surprised. Weather was not expected by any of the street

people he'd met that day, and they should know. Nevertheless, misty tendrils wrapped the moon, and a few cold drops landed on his face.

“Rats,” he muttered. He already knew there was no space left to sleep at the shelter tonight. He pulled himself up to peer into the bin, but couldn't see much, so he dropped back to the ground and found a pebble, which bounced around making metallic noises when he threw it in. The trash collectors must have been by today. So, although he was out of luck regarding lasagna, the empty bin was convenient. He figured he could hang out inside it till the rain stopped. He'd sheltered in worse places. He clambered up and dropped in, almost landing neatly, but something under one foot tripped him. He fell forward onto his hands at the last minute, grimacing, expecting a slimy floor of rotten food, or worse, but found only clean, smooth surface. This dumpster was not only clear of any garbage, it was immaculate. Spotless, as if it had never been used. And the smell was not bad inside, either, though there was a hint of salt in the air. The boy didn't have much time for puzzlement, however, because the rain now began pelting the alleyway, as if to wash away every sin ever committed there.

Sheets of water came splashing through the open hatch, and Arlie quickly reached up and grabbed the broomstick. The bin slammed shut again, and he cringed against the expected din, but this time there was no bang—only an odd pressure change, as if a denser cushion of air had formed instantly and taken control of the inside space. His ears wanted to pop. He yawned and everything got louder, especially the rain. And thunder, too. Or no. Something was rolling around on the floor. Rumble...boom. Rumble...boom, as it bounced off the walls.

He couldn't see in the complete blackness he'd made for himself, but then the thing collided with his foot—almost gently—and stayed there, nestled against his sneaker. Curious, but

cautious, Arlie gave it a little shove with his toe. It rolled back to him. He poked it with the broomstick, then reached down and gave a few tentative, exploratory pats with his free hand. It was metallic and tubular, about a foot long. He picked it up...kind of heavy. The heft was what gave it away. A flashlight? *A flashlight?* The kind some of the older homeless guys carried around, the kind that could double as a weapon. He felt for the button. It lit. *It lit?*

“Wow,” Arlie whispered at his unlikely good fortune. “That’s convenient.”

He aimed it around, hoping to find some morsel of food, but there was nothing. The flashlight must have been what tripped him before because it was the only thing there. Convenient or not, its usefulness had now reached its limit. Shrugging his small frame into a corner, the boy sat, switched off the beam, and prepared to wait out the storm.

The moment Arlie dozed off—that very second—the sky shifted its tactic. The moon came out and signaled to the ship that the time and weather might never again be so well-aligned.

The ship was a beautiful, clean-lined brigantine anchored sweetly in Sheephaven Bay after negotiating the tricky Irish shelf current. One hundred thirty-four feet prow to stern, the tall, double-masted vessel had taken grateful leave of the ancient and boring port of Brest a week earlier and sailed hard. After a two day rest, it was set, come first light, to take advantage of the westward-veering North Atlantic Current. To cross that cantankerous ocean at its narrowest point. Then to slip around Cape Farewell into the relative safety of the Labrador Sea. Destination: Qaqortoq. Captain Conjecture Orange presiding—and hoping, against long odds, that the harbor would be ice free.

The ship conveyed a pulse that shivered the masts and deck and transferred to the flagpole, setting in motion its royal blue banner. The flag performed a slow undulation in the moon's direction, then fell still.

A small leak opened in the hull.

Arlie woke up shaking. *How had it gotten so cold?* He switched on the flashlight with nearly numb fingers. The first thing he saw was his breath, drifting away from his face like an icy, gesticulating ghost. The next thing was the sloshing, ankle-deep water. His jeans were soaked, and he stood up quickly, banging his head on the roof, hard. Cursing with some choice words he'd learned on the street, he ducked and started rubbing the lump that had already begun to form, then stopped, confused. The roof of the garbage bin was not that low. He had been able to stand up with easy clearance before.

Just then the floor began to pitch back and forth. He slipped, and nearly fell.

“Wait! Stop!” he screamed. “Don't dump the bin!” It had to be the garbage truck connecting up.

He grabbed the broom handle floating by and, legs splayed for balance, started banging on the side of the container. Then he remembered the flashlight and pointed it over his head. *Where was the hatch?* The wild pitching of the bin meant he couldn't hold the beam still, but he spotted something that looked sort of door-like just before he fell backwards in a violent banking motion. He splashed around for several seconds before he could stand again, soaked through, freezing, and freaked out.

“Help!” he screamed. “Help me! Let me out! I’m inside the bin!”

He thought things couldn’t get worse, but a screeching started up that pierced his skull.

*Oh God, I’m going to get dumped and smashed,* he thought.

But the noise stopped.

And a light shone down.

And a voice said, “Is somebody there?”

The hand that reached down was dry, warm, and calloused. It grabbed Arlie’s wrist and gave one good, strong yank, so that he dropped his flashlight in the dumpster and flew up into the dimly lit, self-important engine room of a sea-going vessel.

After rising unsteadily from his knees and elbows, as he’d awkwardly landed, he gaped at his rescuer and surroundings. He scanned the strange dials and levers and gauges, knowing full well this wasn’t a dream. In dreams, every surreal, wild encounter was as normal as pigeons. This, however, was beyond weird. His brain could not have made it up. To check, he said his own name out loud. That’s how you know.

The man who had just saved his life squinted analytically, sizing him up.

He growled, “Jules Verne! Another stowaway.” The stocky, black-haired stranger turned, took five paces away, then turned back and yelled something else in a different language.

“What? I’m not a stowaway...I don’t...I don’t even know where there are any boats!” he stammered.

“Oh, English, eh? I thought you said something in French. Well, you’re on one, boy. Not just a boat. A ship, for your information. How’d you get here, then? What were you doing in the bilge? Just takin’ a nap, I suppose?”

“Um, well, sort of...” Arlie suddenly felt weak and sick to his stomach. He sank to a sitting position on the floor and put his head between his knees. “Why is it so hot?” he gasped,



hoarsely. “And what is that smell?”

“Just as I thought. No sailor, you. Stowaways never are,” the man sneered. “For your edification, it is hot because we just used the engine to maneuver, and also, as you may notice, there are other lovely machines in here doing their jobs. Well, come on, then. Time for you to meet the Captain,” he said, in such a way that Arlie thought he’d rather meet a knife. “I’m Samuel, by the way, chief engineer of this vessel.”

Samuel’s strength needed no introduction as he grabbed Arlie’s arm with one burly hand and hoisted him up bodily, pulled him down a spotless grey hallway, and up a ladder until—glory be—they were in fresh air. Cold, fabulous, open air. The beefy grip released, and Arlie collapsed on the deck, inhaling deeply and with relief. Until he noticed he was actually, truly, on a ship...in the ocean...at which point he started hyperventilating.

Samuel stared at him. “By the living legend, boy. What’s your problem now?”

Arlie coughed out the most important question he could think of: “What the *hell*? How did I get *here*?”

The smoothest voice he’d ever heard interrupted. Or rather, it flowed into the conversation, as if it had always been a part of the sound continuum, only more subdued than the rest. As if it lived naturally in wave depressions, only occasionally lifting to the crests to be audibly detected.

“Have we a new boy, Samuel?”

The engineer cleared his throat. “Well, sir, maybe and maybe not. Stowaway. Not too sound of body, if you’re asking me.”

Arlie looked up to find himself scrutinized by a giant. The man had to be seven feet tall, and built like one of those massive horses he’d seen pulling a beer wagon in a parade. As the man squatted down for a closer look, oversized muscles seemed to vie for space beneath his

windbreaker. Useful attire this early morning, unlike Arlie’s still wet sweatshirt and jeans. The

heat he'd gathered in the engine room dissipated into the frigid air, and his body began to shake with a renewed vengeance. But it wasn't only from the cold. Arlie had never been so scared in his life, not even of his father.

But this man here didn't have the same glint of hatred in his eyes. This man appeared to be taking his time, thinking carefully.

"*Navicularius?*" Samuel was speaking another language again.

The captain put on an amused face and tilted it toward the boy. "Our engineer here likes to show off his Latin skills, despite our general lack of interest. Feel free to ignore that quirk, as do we," he explained, smirking at the other man.

Arlie just nodded and shivered.

"Get him into some dry clothes and into him some food, Samuel," advised the captain. "We won't be sailing quite yet. We've got a bit of time to figure out this small knot you've found."

"Aye, Cap. Shall we see you in the salon?"

"Aye."

Samuel convinced one of the smaller sailors to lend Arlie a change of clothes for a few hours while his own dried back in the engine room. The thick sweater and wool pants, sleeves and pant legs rolled up, hung on the boy like draperies.

"Your own clothes will end up with the stink of oil, no mistake," Samuel remarked, then added, "but that might be an improvement."

No response came from Arlie, now settled in a large easy chair. Samuel sat at one of the three long, picnic-like tables in what had to be the ship's dining area, below deck. The boy sipped rich, hot chocolate from a thick mug that pictured Sapelo Island Lighthouse.

"You can sit there with that open container only as the sea's calm right now," Samuel said.

"I'm trusting you won't spill, right?"

Arlie nodded vaguely as he looked around. This was so cool. Everything in sight—from the benches to the cabinets—was fashioned from beautiful golden-brown wood. Above the tables were long shelves with slim railings to keep the books from sliding out. Cookbooks and atlases. Novels and board games. All the cabinets were fitted with dolphin-shaped hook closures. To his right and left, bright blue curtains hid large openings in the paneled walls. It was all super-clean and super-interesting.

He was waiting for his pancake breakfast. This mouth-watering option had been offered by a wiry woman who seemed young, but sported a silvery eye patch and completely white hair done in a braid that swung about her waist as she moved, which was constantly. She wore button-front wool sailor pants and a long underwear shirt under her once-white chef's apron. Her name was Terra.

“Ridiculous name for someone like me. I can't stand the place, frankly,” she said, setting on Arlie's lap a steaming plate of cornmeal flapjacks swimming in syrup and butter and topped with thick bacon. For a utensil, he got a cocktail fork. He held the tiny tines up in confusion.

“I don't know where we got that, but I gave it to you so you don't wolf your food. Make yourself sick. You look like you haven't eaten in a couple of days. Am I right?”

Arlie shrug-nodded, feeling almost guilty.

“Just chew, OK?”

As Arlie dug in, Terra moved around the ship's dining area, dusting, rearranging, chatting.

“When I say I can't stand the place, I mean Terra Firma. Solid ground, you get me?”

“Ask her why not,” Samuel suggested, as he loaded tobacco into a curvy yellow pipe.

“Why not?” Arlie queried obediently, though it came out convoluted around a mouthful of syrupy bacon.

“Wasps,” she said. “No wasps at sea.”

“Took her eye, one did,” Samuel informed him, puffing vanilla-scented smoke. “*Aculeus*. Might give any sane person pause, eh? You want to stay far away from any that steals your sensory faculties. Now, take the Captain, for example. Says he can’t smell a thing on dry land...”

It was all very interesting, and Arlie tried to listen, but his head kept falling forward. He just had to close his eyes for a minute.

But before he did, he thought he saw a very large spider up in the shadowy corner waving a feeler at him.

Of course, Hildegard wasn’t waving. And it wasn’t called a feeler.

A quivering tremor, lasting only a few seconds, tingled her web. How Hildegard knew it wasn’t a trapped insect: constructive and destructive interference of the waveforms. The source was not point-like—no struggling flea this time. Instead, the vibration radiated evenly from the salon’s beams, the web’s pillars of attachment just above the book shelves. From her central perch she felt the waves meet and overlap, back and forth, dancing her legs. It was a message from the ship itself. The notion of inclusion, the idea of waiting made itself understood. *Hold fast. Do not sail with stranger aboard. New mission imminent.*

Hildegard commenced to eat her spun-silk artwork. It had taken her three hours to build, and the next one would take nearly as long. But the directive had changed and must be duly imparted. Her mate, hiding in the corner, watched apathetically. He had little interest in global affairs.