

BUCK & EARS

PIRATE DETECTIVES

LOOK OUT
FOR HIDDEN
CLUES

JENNIFER BELL

ILLUSTRATED BY *Sarah HORNE*





For Alfie - J. B.

For my nieces, Iris, Rose and Dora - S. H.

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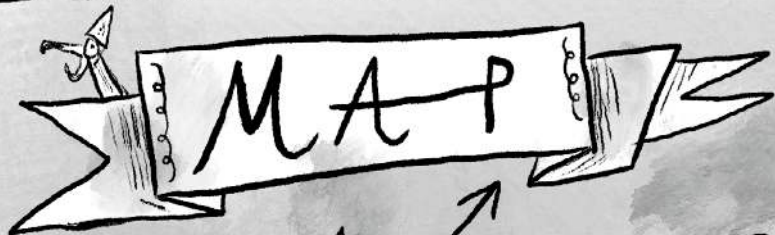
BUCK & EARS

PIRATE DETECTIVES

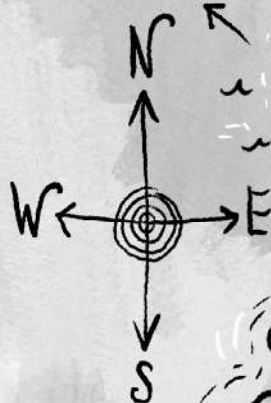


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MAP



TO THE
SEVENTY
SEAS



WATERSKI
COURSE



VALENTINA'S
GROTTALOW

PEARL
BEACH



THE
CODFATHER'S
USED SHIPYARD

SCUTTLEFLINT
BAY

VERMICELLI'S

CLEAR
WATER
COVE





Ahoy there, readers!

It is I, Agatha Fishty, the most famous mystery writer on the Seventy Seas! You may be confused to see me in someone else's book, but I am on holiday and I always read other writers' stories when I'm away.

I have found this tale about pirate detectives Buck and Ears to be most intriguing - and my books even feature in the story! I wonder if you can solve the case before Buck and Ears...

I'm not giving you the answers; you'll have to work them out for yourself. However, if you spot me again, it probably means there's a clue around. I'll talk to you at the end.

Happy sleuthing!

Agatha Fishty





CHAPTER ONE



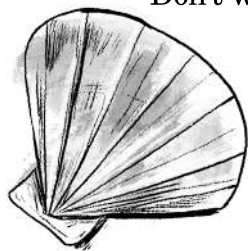
Pirate rubbish was always washing up on the shores of Scuttleflint Bay, but this was the first time a pair of rubbish pirates had swept in on the tide. They were strapped to a stinking barrel of sardines painted with the words **SHARK BAIT** in big white letters.

“Neptune’s knickers!”

one yelled, thrashing against the ropes that bound him. He was a scrawny boy with dark freckles, and wore a scarlet jacket and black-buckled boots. His pirate captain’s hat fell off as the barrel rolled forward, flipping him upside down. “We need to break free before someone sees us, Ears. This is so humiliating!”


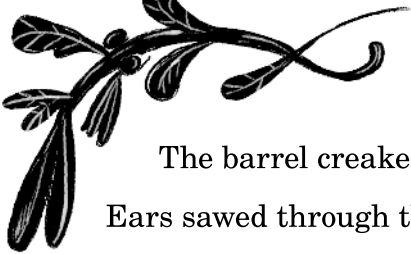
A scruffy grey rabbit wearing baggy trousers and a striped shirt was fastened to the other side of the barrel. As they cartwheeled over, she grabbed a clam shell off the beach.

“Don’t worry, Buck. I’ll cut us loose in no time.”




As always, Buck was grateful to have Ears with him. She was the sort of best friend you could rely on in an emergency, which was exactly why he had asked her to be his first mate when he’d taken his first-ever pirate captain’s job.





The barrel creaked and rocked as Ears sawed through the ropes with her shell. Eventually there was a loud *snap*. The pressure around Buck's chest released and he fell head first into the sand.



“Freedom!” Ears spluttered, spitting out a washed-up old flip-flop. She hopped upright and her whiskers jumped when she saw Buck. His hair was sopping wet, and mangy clumps of seaweed protruded from his pockets. Glancing down at her dripping clothes, she cringed.

“We look like we’ve been dragged through a storm backwards. Are you all right?”

“No,” Buck fretted. His insides twisted with worry as he collected his pirate hat off the beach and shook it clean. “I can’t believe our very first crew mutinied against us! My parents will be furious when they find out. All they’ve ever wanted is for me to become a fearsome pirate captain like them,



and I've failed on my maiden voyage." He sniffed and wiped his nose on his sodden jacket.

Ears offered a sympathetic smile. "I know you might feel awful now, but try to look on the bright side: at least you didn't get eaten by sharks or piranhas or razor-toothed sea muffins!"



Buck gave her a half-smile. One of the qualities he admired about Ears was her eternal positivity. Her family were famous for being the best ship workers in the Seventy Seas, but she

didn't seem worried that she'd been fired from her first job too. Buck wished he could be as cheerful as Ears, but nothing was going to lift his spirits right now. He gazed out at the ocean, remembering the moment their crew had turned against them. Their voices whirled through his head, haunting him like ghosts.



"We're *not* taking orders from a lily-livered child like you."

"We don't want to say *please* and *thank you* when ransacking a ship!"

"You wash too often and you smell like my grandma's soap!"

YUK

"And you change your underpants every day!"

"You're the WORST PIRATE EVER!"

Buck shook his head. What was he going to do? He was ten years old; he'd spent his entire life training to be a pirate captain and now he'd failed at his first attempt.

He looked about miserably. "Where even are we?" he moaned.

Ears nodded towards a sign that read



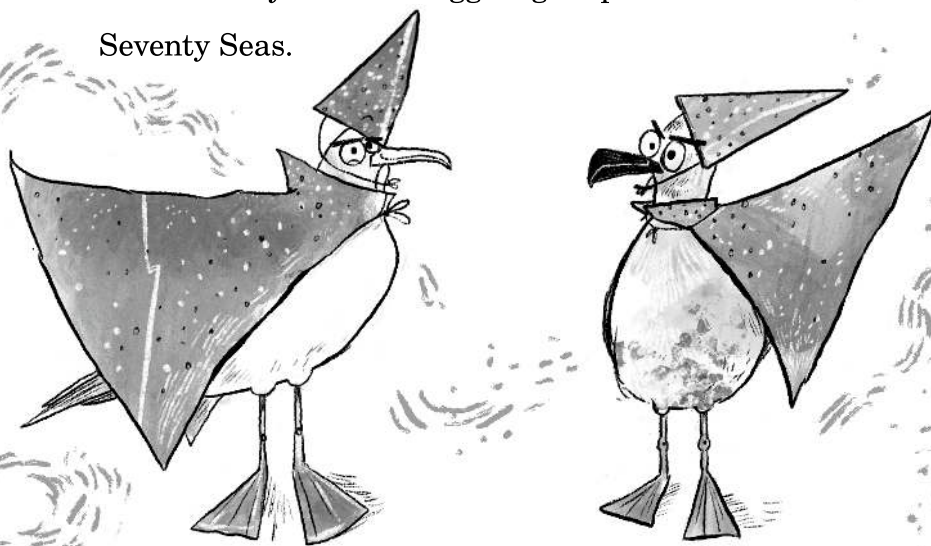
"I think it's a pirate town," she replied. "I've heard my siblings talk about it."

Buck didn't bother asking which siblings. Ears had seventy-four brothers and sisters, and Buck always forgot their names.

"*Pee-eww!* What's that stench?" squawked a voice overhead. "It smells like mouldy fish guts!"

Sand swirled into the air as a pair of beady-eyed seagulls landed on the beach beside them. One had speckled brown feathers; the other was

snowy white with a sharp yellow beak. Both were wearing sequined capes and glittery party hats that sat at odd angles on their heads. Buck groaned. A pair of nosy seagulls was all they needed. They were the biggest gossips on the Seventy Seas.



The white gull covered his nostrils with his wing and squinted curiously at Buck and Ears. “I know you! Aren’t you Charlie Black-Buckle and Henrietta Sharp?”

“We prefer our nicknames: Buck and Ears,” Buck replied, frowning warily at Ears.



“The last I heard, you’d both set sail to make your fortune at sea,” the brown-feathered gull chirped excitedly, pecking seaweed from Buck’s sopping hair.

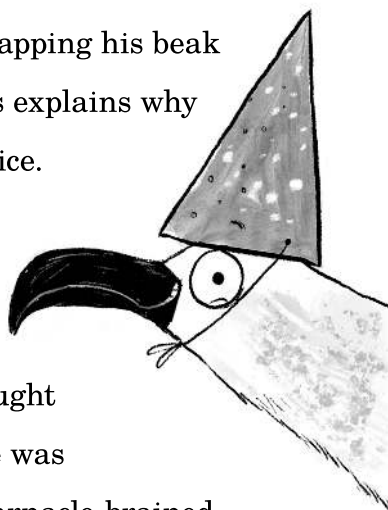
“Not going well?”

“Aha!” the white gull cried, tapping his beak against the sardine barrel. “This explains why you both smell like rotten fish juice.

You’ve been thrown overboard!

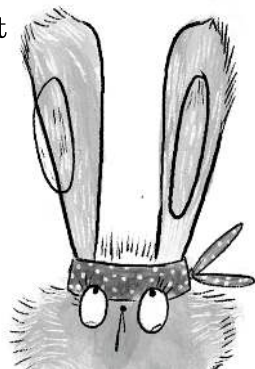
Mutiny much?”

Heat rose to the surface of Buck’s cheeks. Just when he thought things couldn’t get any worse, he was about to be teased by a pair of barnacle-brained seagulls.



Luckily Ears came to his rescue. “Will you

look at the sun! Is it that time already?” she said, pointing at the sky.



“We really must get going. People to rob, places to plunder!” She grabbed Buck’s sleeve and dragged him briskly up the beach, away from the seagulls. “Come on, let’s get out of here,” she hissed. “*Quick.*”

“Mutiny on their *first* voyage!” the white-feathered gull cawed as Buck and Ears hurried away. “They’ve got to be the *worst* pirates ever.”

“The *worst*! They’re going to be the talk of the glitter gullabaloo tonight!”

“Oh, yes! What a party it will be! You look fabulous, Janet.”

As the birds took to the air with their sequined capes fluttering behind them, Buck’s heart sank. In a few hours, every seagull in the Seventy Seas would know what had happened.

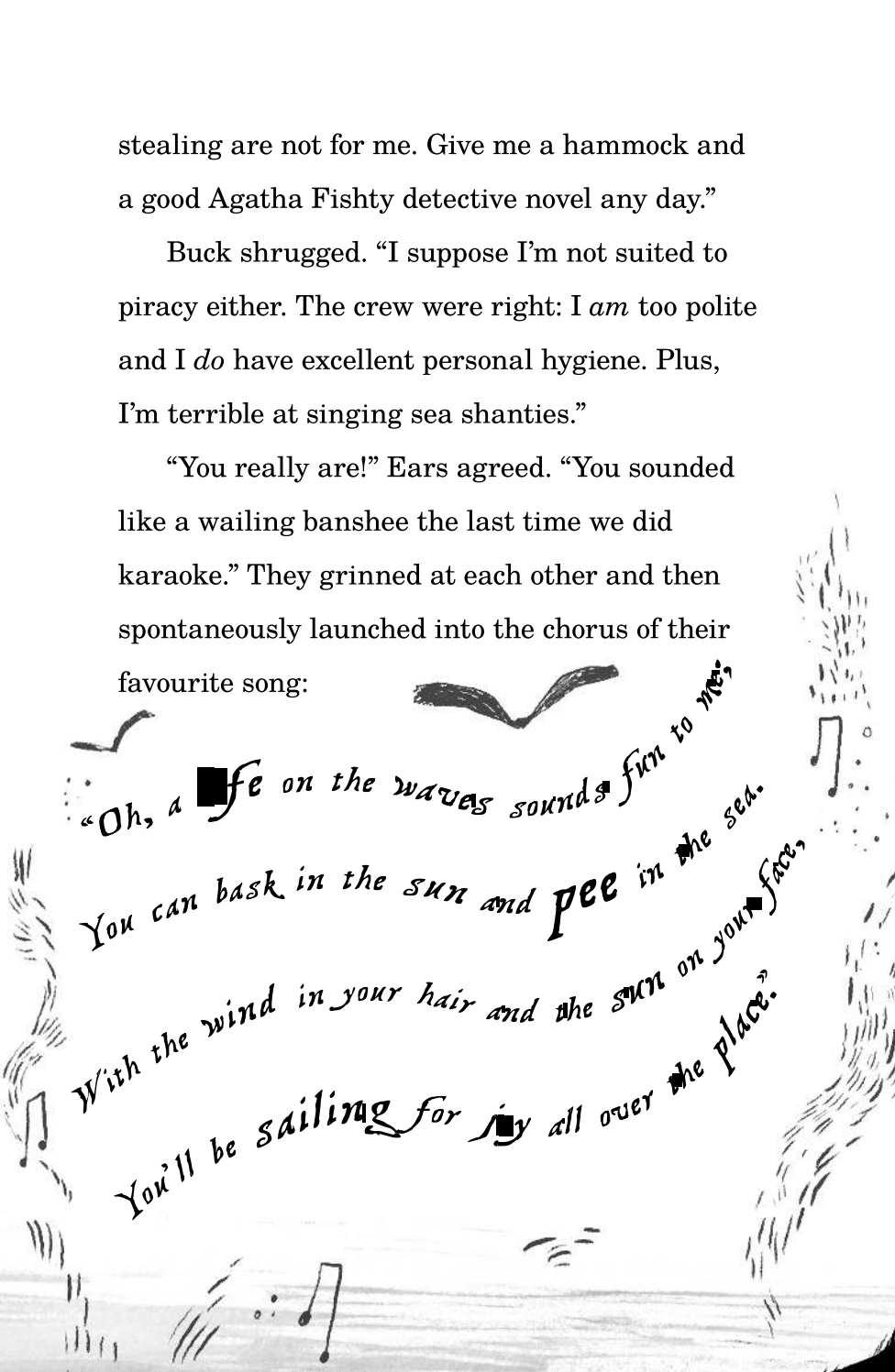
“No crew is ever going to work for me after this,” he muttered. “My career as a pirate is over.”

“I didn’t much care for pirate life anyway,” Ears said cheerily. “Shouting, brawling and

stealing are not for me. Give me a hammock and a good Agatha Fishty detective novel any day.”

Buck shrugged. “I suppose I’m not suited to piracy either. The crew were right: I *am* too polite and I *do* have excellent personal hygiene. Plus, I’m terrible at singing sea shanties.”

“You really are!” Ears agreed. “You sounded like a wailing banshee the last time we did karaoke.” They grinned at each other and then spontaneously launched into the chorus of their favourite song:

A whimsical illustration of a seascape. The sky is filled with several birds in flight, some with wings spread wide. The sea is depicted with simple, wavy lines. Musical notes and a treble clef are scattered throughout the scene, appearing to float in the air. The overall style is hand-drawn and artistic.

“Oh, a life on the waves sounds fun to me,
You can bask in the sun and pee in the sea.
With the wind in your hair and the sun on your face,
You’ll be sailing for joy all over the place.”

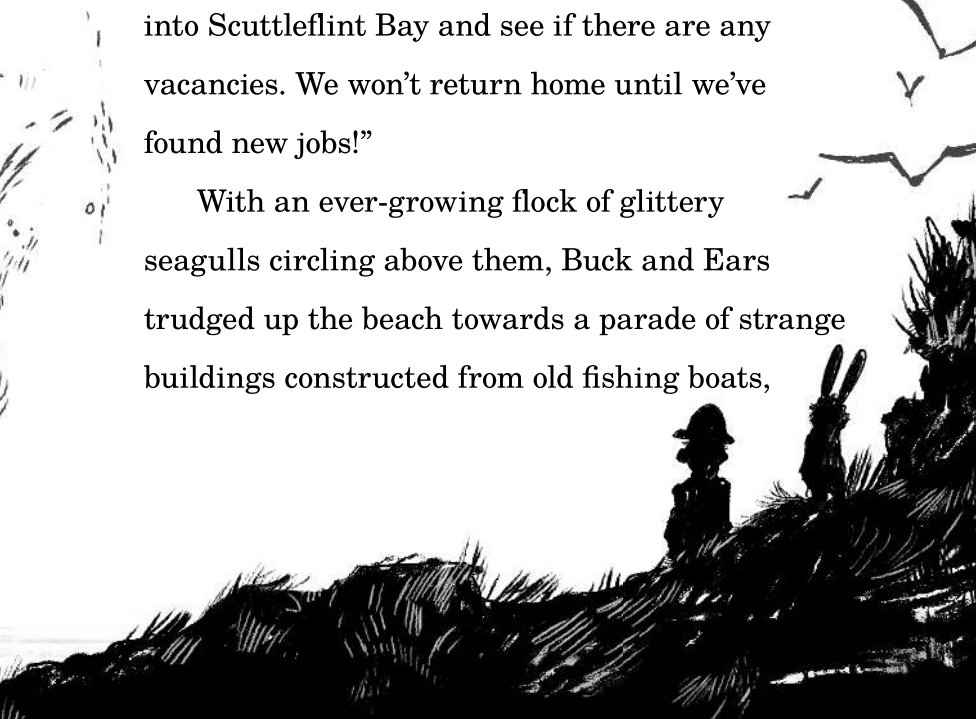
They both burst out laughing.

“Anyway,” Ears said, “you know what they say: ‘You can’t control the wind, but you can adjust your sails.’”

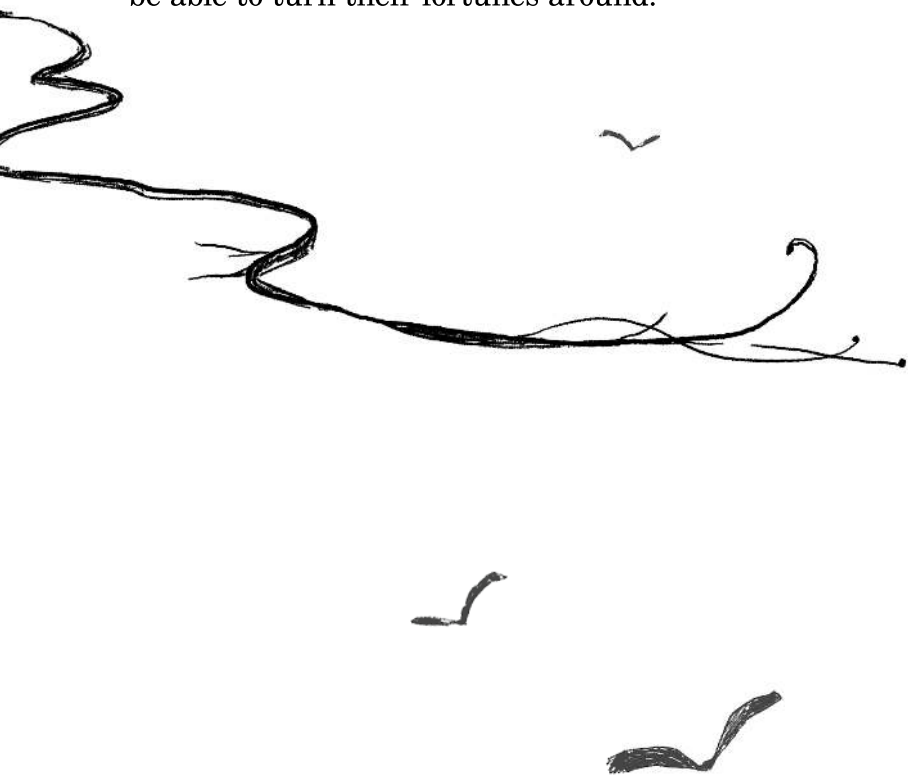
“*Who* says that?” Buck asked.

“Some old crocodiles near Gunpowder Lagoon, I think. The point is, now that our pirate careers seem to be over, we just need a change of direction.” Ears shook her fluffy tail enthusiastically. “There must be other professions better suited to our skills. Come on, let’s head into Scuttleflint Bay and see if there are any vacancies. We won’t return home until we’ve found new jobs!”

With an ever-growing flock of glittery seagulls circling above them, Buck and Ears trudged up the beach towards a parade of strange buildings constructed from old fishing boats,



driftwood and netting. Perhaps with a bit of luck, Buck thought hopefully, in Scuttleflint Bay they'd be able to turn their fortunes around.





Like all thriving pirate towns, Scuttleflint Bay was home to a wide variety of shops and businesses. As Buck and Ears wandered along the high street, they saw mapmakers,

swordsmiths, tattoo parlours and tea rooms. At Sea Dogs Barbers, fireworks could be plaited into your hair to give you a more ferocious appearance, while at Flotsam Opticians you could purchase mist-resistant spectacles and artisan eyepatches. There was even a famous flagdashery, Madame Briner's, where the notable pirate seamstress created bespoke flags for every occasion.

It was a wildly noisy and incredibly stinky place. Pirates young and old greeted one another loudly from across the street, howling with laughter and offering hearty cheers of "Yo ho ho!" (Buck's mum had once told him that pirates speak louder than regular people because their

ears are full of seawater.) On land, most pirates removed their heavy boots and walked around barefoot, so the air reeked of mouldy cheese.

Buck guessed the identities



of several pirates from their reputations. They passed a silver-suited flamingo wearing huge jewel-encrusted earrings who he assumed was Long Jill Silver, the infamous jewellery pirate. There was a grisly-faced man in a tartan kilt carrying an armful of bottles who he thought might be the dreaded whisky pirate, Corkscrew Macdonald; and a group of smartly dressed pigs on roller skates had to be the crew of the *Whizzing Swine*.

After exploring the high street, Buck and Ears decided to do something to cheer themselves up.

Buck purchased a toasted coconut ice cream from the Pieces of Eight ice cream parlour, while Ears popped into the local library and borrowed a new Agatha Fishty novel, *Danger on the Seashell Express*.

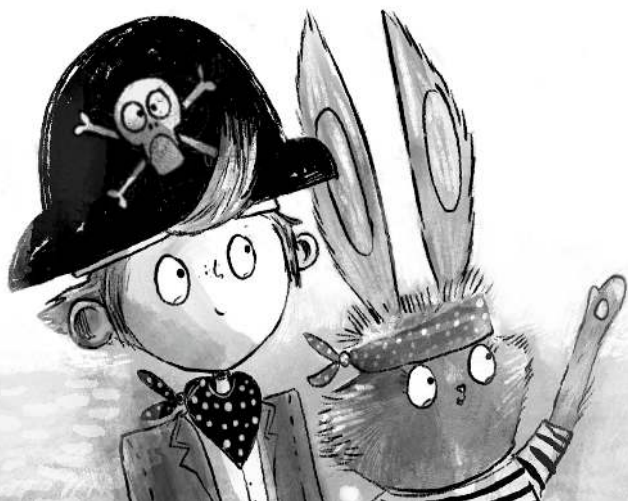


“What is it about those stories that you like so much?” Buck asked, taking a lick of his ice cream.

Ears hugged the book to her chest. “There’s a mystery at the heart of every story – a murder, a theft, a kidnapping – and you have to work out who did it. It’s so much fun trying to piece the clues together to see if you can find the answer before the detective.”

Buck frowned, unconvinced. “That sounds like a lot of hard work to me.”

“Look.” Ears pointed to a large cobbled area beside the docks. “That’s got to be the town square. Let’s see if they have a noticeboard. We might find some vacancies being advertised there.”



The busy square was dominated by a magnificent stone fountain of an ancient pirate ship called *The Crimson Crab*. Buck's parents used to sing him a nursery rhyme about it when he was little:

*“The captain of The Crimson Crab had sixteen crew,
or so he bragged.
Two to cook and three to clean,
One to sing and four to look mean,
One to study the changing weather,
And five to guard his golden treasure.”*

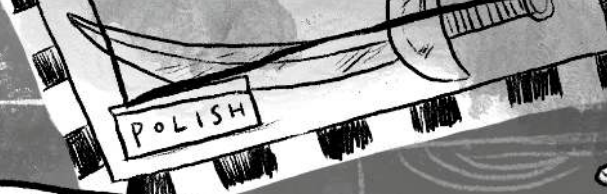


Buck's heart sank as he thought how disappointed his parents would be when they realized he would never captain a famous pirate ship like *The Crimson Crab*...

A short distance away, a driftwood hoarding was pinned with a colourful patchwork of flyers. There was an advertisement for Crystal-Shine Cutlass Polish; a poster celebrating the opening of a new production of *Treasure Island* at the local theatre; and a wad of twenty per cent off vouchers for the Salty Sandwich Cafe. Buck's interest, however, was drawn to an announcement from the mayor of Scuttleflint Bay in the centre of the board:



SURE
ID
CTION



ATTENTION ALL PIRATES!

FOLLOWING THE MYSTERIOUS
CRASH OF **THE RAZOR CLAM**
ON MONDAY 4TH SHOREGUST, WE
URGE YOU TO REMAIN VIGILANT AT
ALL TIMES.

A DOZEN PIRATE SHIPS HAVE NOW
BEEN **WRECKED** DURING CALM SEAS
AND CLEAR SKIES THIS MONTH.
YOU'LL NEED TO PLAY YOUR CARDS
RIGHT TO REMAIN **VIGILANT.**

Mayor



SALES ASSISTANTS REQUIRED
AT OUTFITTERS
FLEECE & BRIGAND

APPLICANTS MUST HAVE EXCELLENT
CUSTOMER SERVICE SKILLS.

Kitchen porters
required at

Sal's Fish 'n' Chips

Must be hardworking and
not afraid of a few fish guts.



That's strange, Buck thought to himself as he read the notice about the Razorclam shipwreck. It was highly unusual for shipwrecks to happen during good weather. He wondered if the mayor of Scuttleflint Bay was investigating.

“Here’s something,”

Ears said, tapping a leaflet featuring a picture of a fish with bulging eyes.

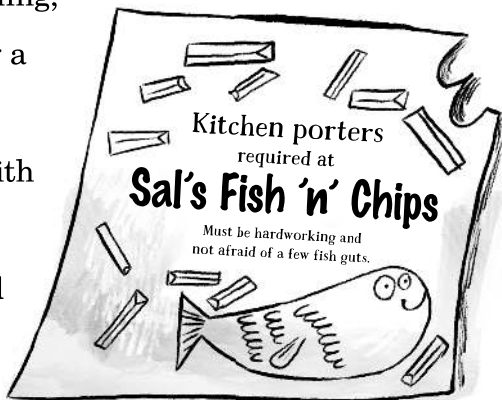
Buck wrinkled his nose dubiously.

“We’ll add it

to the maybe list. I would say my best skill is probably map-reading. What do you think?”

“You’re also really good with people,” Ears said. “They listen to you.”

He scoffed. “*Do they?*” he retorted, indicating his seaweed-stained outfit. “Our crew definitely didn’t listen to me!”



“They did a little bit. When they wanted to make us walk the plank, you persuaded them to tie us to that barrel instead.”

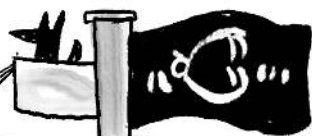
“I suppose that’s true,” Buck conceded, sniffing his jacket and wondering whether walking the plank might have been better. “You’ve got lots of talents, Ears. You’re quick-thinking and good at problem-solving, for starters. Let’s keep looking.”

They continued scouring the noticeboard. Soon enough, Buck’s gaze fell on a small, neatly typed advert:



“This looks promising,” Buck said, tapping Ears on the shoulder.

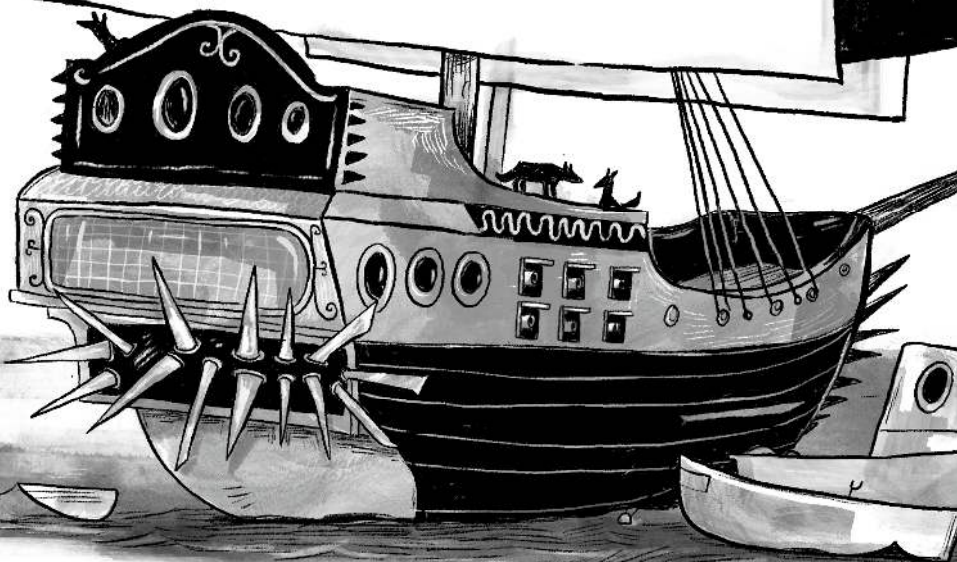
But she had frozen stiff.



“Buck,” she whispered nervously, staring at the docks. “Look over there.”

Buck peered around the noticeboard at the ships moored in the harbour. There were all sorts of different vessels – from small galleys and splendid frigates to elegant caravels – but one ship stood out from the rest. It had acid-green sails, two rows of shining cannon and a cluster of deadly iron spikes fixed to the hull. Flying from its mast was a flag emblazoned with a snake skull.

“*The Hissing Viper*,” he murmured with a shudder. “Captain Bloodfang must be here in Scuttleflint Bay!”



They both gulped. Captain Bloodfang was the most ruthless pirate on the Seventy Seas. With a crew of bloodthirsty wolves at her command, she'd attacked hundreds of ships, stealing anything she could lay her hands on. There was no one she wouldn't rob – sailors, merchants, holidaymakers, even other pirates. Rumour had it she was so cold-hearted she'd once looted *Saltwash Acres*, the retirement ship for elderly pirates.

Scanning the deck of *The Hissing Viper*, Buck saw several wolves prowling up and down, their cutlasses glinting in the midday sun. His fingers trembled as he removed the Fleece & Brigand advert.

“Let's hope Captain Bloodfang isn't planning to stay long. Come on. We've got a job interview to attend.”



FLEECE & BRIGAND

Fleece & Brigand was housed in a horseshoe-shaped building fashioned from the observation deck of an old cruise liner. Behind its porthole windows, a mixture of human and animal mannequins modelled the latest silk sashes and feathered pirate hats.



A bell chimed as Buck and Ears stepped inside. The polished wooden floor was filled with rack after rack of linen shirts, brass-buttoned waistcoats and canvas jackets. Shelves of leather boots lined the walls, and metallic belt buckles glinted as they dangled from hooks in the ceiling. Buck's nostrils tingled with the scent of boot polish.

"I'll baaaa with you in a moment!" bleated a voice from behind one of the many racks. "Feel free to baaa-rowse."

Unable to see who was speaking, Buck weaved through the displays until he stumbled upon an elderly sheep with chestnut wool. Poking out of her tool belt were a pair of scissors, a pincushion and several reels of sewing thread. A scowling pirate penguin with flamboyant orange head feathers stood beside her, and as the sheep held a tape measure across his chest, she muttered some measurements under her breath.

“Hi there,” Buck said politely. “We’re here to enquire about the sales assistants jobs.”

Beside him, Ears puffed out her chest. “We’d like to offer our services.”

The sheep squinted at them through her gold-rimmed spectacles. “In that case, why don’t you wait out the baaaa-ck by the changing rooms? I’ll come and talk to you once I’m finished here.”

Buck and Ears shuffled their way between more clothes racks to the rear of the shop. Along the back wall was a series of cubicles with long velvet drapes. Only one had the curtain pulled across. As they drew closer, they heard a noise they’d never heard in a pirate town before.



It was the sound of someone crying.

“I’m worried sick,” sobbed a voice. “Valentina’s my best friend. She sends me a letter every evening without fail, but I haven’t received anything the last two nights.” There was a noise like a trumpet as the speaker blew their nose. “She’s not at home and she hasn’t been seen at work. What if something bad has happened to her?”

Buck pointed at the occupied cubicle. “It must be a pirate,” he whispered. “They’re so loud.”

“But pirates don’t cry,” Ears said.

She was right. Pirates were fearsome and mean. They made other people cry.

As the weeping continued, Buck winced. “They sound really upset. Perhaps we should offer them a tissue?”

As Ears shrugged, Bucks crept closer to the cubicle. The curtain billowed as someone moved behind it.

“Are you all right in there?” Buck ventured timidly.

A gust of air hit him in the face as the curtain suddenly flew back. Stood in the cubicle was a towering pirate with a spiky acid-green hairdo and a leather jacket dripping with gold chains. Beside her was a wolf with matted fur that stuck out at all different angles like he hadn't had a haircut – or a bath – in years.

**“Captain
Bloodfang!”**

Ears gasped.

Terrified, Buck stumbled back, but before he could turn and run, Bloodfang drew her cutlass and held its sharp point against his throat. The wolf snatched Ears by her tail and lifted her upside down. Her copy of *Danger on the Seashell Express* fell out of her pocket with a thud.

“Now tell me,” Bloodfang snarled, narrowing her dark eyes. “What exactly did you just hear?”



CHAPTER THREE

Buck's heart pounded as Captain Bloodfang leaned closer. He could feel the warmth of her foul breath on his face. It smelled like raw sewage.

"We d-didn't h-hear anything," he stuttered.

"Nothing at all," Ears squeaked, still hanging upside down. The wolf squeezed her tail, making her grimace.

"I don't believe you," Bloodfang growled. With charcoal smudged around her bloodshot eyes, her sockets looked as sunken

as a skull's.

Animal bones rattled from the chains on her jacket.



“We’re telling the truth!” Buck spluttered.
“Please just let us go.”

Bloodfang grinned savagely, flashing a set of rotten yellow teeth. “I’m afraid I can’t do that, boy. You see, I’m the most cold-hearted pirate on the Seventy Seas, and if anyone knew I’d been ... *crying*, I wouldn’t seem so terrifying, would I?”

Sweat trickled down Buck’s spine. All he could think to do was stall for time and hope Fleece & Brigand’s proprietor came to their rescue.





“Um, well, if you’re thinking of killing us, that would be a huge mistake,” he said bravely.

“And why is that?” Bloodfang sneered.

“Because...” Buck desperately racked his brains for an answer. Glancing down, he caught sight of Ears’ dropped copy of *Danger on the Seashell Express* and had the flash of an idea.

“Because we can help you find your missing friend – Valentina, wasn’t it?”



For a split second, Bloodfang hesitated. Then her lip curled into a sneer. “Nice try, you scurvy swab, but I’ve been searching for Valentina all day. What makes you think you can find her when I can’t?”

“Well, er...” Buck swallowed, the tip of Bloodfang’s blade pressing deeper into his throat.

“Because we’re professional pirate detectives!” Ears blurted.





Bloodfang blinked. “You’re *what*?”

“Detectives,” Ears repeated with more confidence. She placed her paws on her hips – not an easy thing to do when dangling upside down. “In fact, we’re the only pirate detectives on the Seventy Seas, and missing person cases are our speciality.”

Buck nodded slowly, trying to remember what Ears had told him about Agatha Fishty’s books. “That’s right,” he added. “No case too small, no mystery too ... mysterious.”

“And if you hire us to find Valentina,” Ears said, “we can’t tell anyone anything about you because we’ll be bound by client confidentiality.”

“Confidentiality, eh?” Bloodfang’s snarl slowly softened. Rubbing her chin with her free hand, she glanced thoughtfully at her wolf crewmate. “I’ve never considered hiring a detective before... Give them the letter.”

The wolf fetched a glass bottle containing a roll of paper and handed it to Buck.



“This is Valentina’s last letter, sent three days ago,” Bloodfang explained, lowering her cutlass. “She wasn’t at home when I checked this morning, but her gate was locked and everything looked normal.” She frowned, and then seemed to come to a decision. “Consider yourselves hired.”

The wolf released Ears’ tail, and she dropped to the floor in a fluffy tangle of ears and paws. Bloodfang pointed her cutlass first at Ears and then at Buck.

“My crew and I will be watching you closely to ensure you keep your promise. It’s Valentina’s birthday this Saturday, the ninth of Shoregust. If you haven’t found her by sunset then, I’ll dice you both up and turn you into a tasty rabbit and pirate stew. Understand?”

Staring at the bones on Bloodfang’s jacket, Buck and Ears nodded furiously. With a menacing chuckle, Bloodfang stepped over Ears and strode briskly towards the exit. The wolf howled and

followed their captain out of the shop.

Buck's chest tightened. "How are we going to find Valentina by sunset this Saturday? That gives us just three days! And we're not really pirate detectives!"

"I know, I know," Ears said worriedly. She retrieved *Danger on the Seashell Express* and gestured to the bottle in Buck's hand. "What does the letter say?"

Buck tipped the paper out and unfurled it. Lines of neat handwriting filled one side:

16 Pearl Beach
Scuttleflint Bay
Sunday 3rd Shorequest


Dear Bloodfang,

Thank you so much for my birthday present! I'm excited to see what it is, but I promise I won't open it until Saturday.

I hope you and the crew are well. You must all visit me at my new restaurant in Clearwater Cove. We've been so busy since we opened. My macaroni cheese dish has been an instant success and I can't wait for you all to try it.

Looking forward to seeing you soon,
Valentina x





Ears looked up. “Buck, this must be from Valentina Vermicelli! I’ve heard people talk about her. She’s a famous mermaid chef.”

“And she lives here in Scuttleflint Bay,” Buck noted, tapping the top right corner of the letter.

“If we stand any chance of finding her, we’ll need to look for clues at her home *and* her Clearwater Cove restaurant,” Ears decided. “That’s what one of Agatha Fishty’s detectives would do.”

Buck pulled a soggy map of the Seventy Seas out of his jacket pocket and studied it carefully. “Clearwater Cove’s forty nautical miles away! We’ll need a fast ship and a crew if we want to get there today.”

Ears stroked her whiskers thoughtfully. “Perhaps we can buy a ship. How much gold do we have between us?”