

## THE VOYAGE TO DOWN BELOW

### A Christmas Story by Claire Fayers and Sarah S Reida

As we cruised through the clouds, my four-year-old sister Haylie was glued to the window.

The sea stretched forever – glinting blue. It looked like the opening shot of an adventure movie.

“How is Santa going to find us?” Haylie fretted. “We’re a million miles from home!”

I smiled, my brain clicking away for a reason. “Don’t worry,” I told Haylie. “Santa can find us, no matter where we are. He just *knows*.”

“But how can he know if we don’t tell him?”

“How can he build all those toys for a million kids each year? Or stuff himself into itty bitty chimneys? Trust me – if he can do that, he can find you in Hawaii.”

*He can find you.* I shivered. I didn’t mind *Santa* finding Haylie.

Unfortunately, he wasn’t the only one looking for her.

“Here we are!” Dad announced as our taxi pulled into the circular drive of our hotel. It was one-story and sprawling. “Hacienda-style” according to the brochure, featuring a kidney-shaped pool with a tropical waterfall and a nearby Jacuzzi.

Shading her eyes, Mom squinted at the beach. “Wow, look at those waves. I can’t believe this is where we’re spending Christmas!”

“Neither can I,” I said, kicking a piece of asphalt. “It’s gorgeous. But what are we going to do for a Christmas tree?”

I appreciated a trip to Hawaii. But I missed our Christmas traditions, especially decorating a tree. We hadn't bothered with one this year.

Haylie's blue eyes widened. "No Christmas tree?"

Dad gave me a warning look. "Of course we'll have a Christmas tree, Haylie. It just might have to be a palm tree instead of a pine tree."

"That could be fun," I allowed, since I didn't want Haylie to get upset. "We could use flowers for ornaments."

"Ooh! Can we get our tree *now*?"

"I don't know. . ." Mom glanced at the beach again, and I knew she was imagining her toes in the white sand. "Tell you what. Let's catch some sun, and when we're at the beach, we can look for things to put on the tree?"

I suppressed a smile. Mom didn't know it, but she was getting a tree covered in rotting jellyfish and slimy algae. Haylie would include any "ornament" we couldn't find at home.

The beach was empty except for a few people. White lounge chairs and huge yellow umbrellas dotted the sand. My flip-flops made a smacking sound as my parents and I hurried after Haylie. Free from beach gear, she raced ahead, scooping up broken shells and flapping her arms at seagulls.

We found a spot along the shore and set up camp. "Look what I have!" Mom announced when we were settled in. "The hotel gave this to me." It was a pink plastic pail containing shovels and molds for castle turrets. "Who wants to build a sandcastle?"

As Mom sunbathed, Dad and I helped Haylie build her sandcastle. When we were done, it looked like a collapsed birthday cake with a moat, but Haylie seemed happy. “Yay!” She clapped her hands. “Let’s decorate it.”

Mom lowered her sunglasses, swinging her legs over the chair. “That looks great.” She nodded at a pier farther down the beach. “Lissa, can you watch Haylie while your dad and I check out our dinner options?”

“Er, sure.” I couldn’t ask them not to leave. A thirteen year-old in a tropical paradise shouldn’t be scared. But if I asked them to stay, they’d ask why, and I wasn’t opening *that* can of worms.

Dad looped his arm around Mom’s waist. “Be good.” They were already walking away.

I breathed out, swiping at a piece of hair. The humidity made the strands stick to my forehead. “You can do this,” I muttered.

Haylie looked up from her sandcastle, where she was pressing seashells into the turrets. “What?”

I forced a smile. There was no danger here – just miles of sand, ocean, and a sun that blazed so bright it was almost blinding. Even if only last Halloween, Haylie had been snatched to the world of monsters that live Down Below, they wouldn’t come *here*. That would be like the man-hungry shark from *Jaws* showing up in *Finding Dory*.

I opened our lunch bag-sized soft cooler and took out a couple of cans of Coke. “Want one?” I asked.

Haylie shook her head. “I need seaweed.” As she wandered off to collect some, I forced myself to sit down on a lounge chair instead of trailing after her. Me acting paranoid wouldn’t make her feel safe.

I gazed into the waves, letting myself get lost in their rhythm against the shore. I wished Adam was here. The two of us could handle any crisis – Adam with his Boy Scout superpowers and me with my creative genius. And this beach would make a great spot for a film – something *without* monsters. I could write the script, and he could be my co-star.

I jerked my head up. Where was Haylie? Grabbing the cooler, I ran after the trail of footsteps in the sand.

I spotted Haylie moments later, through a cluster of palm trees and beach umbrellas, and she wasn't alone.

"Haylie!" I shouted.

Haylie turned. So did the two people with her. They looked like extras from *Pirates of the Caribbean*: a man and a woman, both wearing long boots and dark clothes with belts full of fake knives and cutlasses. The woman's hair stuck out in a pale yellow frizz beneath a grubby headscarf with a skull and crossbones on it. The man was shorter than her, with faded blue tattoos all up his bare arms.

"Avast!" he shouted at me, brandishing a knife that did *not* look like a prop.

I grabbed Haylie's hand and pushed her behind me. "Um, sorry to bother you. We'll go now."

The woman snatched the knife out of her companion's hand. "Ewan, don't frighten the natives. It's nice to meet you. I'm Trudi Storme and this is Ewan Hughes. We're from the onion."

"You're from a vegetable?" I asked.

Trudi put Ewan's knife through her belt with a sigh. "The pirate ship *Onion* – famous all over the Eight Oceans. Where is this?"

Now I got it. Just like my parents had, some director was taking advantage of cheap travel costs over the holidays. I craned my head, looking around. Where was the rest of the crew?

“This is Hawaii,” I said, playing along. “Hawaii, USA, Planet Earth.”

They exchanged glances – genuinely puzzled glances. “Is Planet Earth on the way to the Western Ocean?” Ewan asked. “That’s where we were heading, right before the centipede swarm.”

“Centipedes don’t swarm.” I frowned. What kind of a script were they working with? And why weren’t they breaking character?

“Sea-centipedes do,” Ewan said. “They’re bright blue, and as long as your arm, and they sting like a barrel full of nettles. If you’re unlucky enough to catch them in swarming season, you can only run. That’s why we didn’t spot the whirlpool. Sailed straight into it.”

“Well, sailed circularly into it,” Trudi corrected him. “The ship started to spin and Tom was saying something about holding on because of centripetal force when Ewan and I spun off the deck and into the sea. Next thing, we were crawling onto this beach. We need to get back to our ship. Have you seen the tunnel? Something like a mini-whirlpool where the water goes the wrong way round?” She circled her arm frantically, counter-clockwise. A blue centipede fell from her sleeve and burrowed into the sand. That was *not* a special effect. A cold feeling formed in the pit of my stomach.

Haylie pulled a string of brown gunk from Ewan’s boot. “Seaweed,” she announced triumphantly.

“Don’t give it to Trudi,” Ewan warned. “She’ll try to cook it. Not that I’d say no to some food – just not Trudi’s food.”

Trudi smacked him.

“I’ve got food,” I said, opening the cooler and pulling out a bar of chocolate.

Ewan peeled back the wrapper suspiciously, tasted a corner, then took a huge bite. “This is. . . magical! What is this?”

“It’s called a Hershey bar.”

“Her? She? That can’t be right. I’m man as can be, and I find this delicious.”

The chocolate was already gone.

Trudi scowled. “I thought we were looking for the tunnel.”

The only place I knew where water flowed counter clockwise was a toilet, and I doubted that was what the pirates had in mind.

As I searched for a reply, a nearby lounge chair moved. I turned to see something blue emerge, long as an arm. For a moment I thought the centipede had come back, but then I realized it actually was an arm, and it was attached to a familiar little blue body.

“Blue!” Haylie cried, running to hug her monster friend.

Blue comes from Down Below, but he’s a nice monster. If it wasn’t for him, Haylie might still be trapped in the monsters’ world. But that’s another story.

Neither of the pirates looked surprised to see a half-sized monster appearing out of the sand. This, more than anything, convinced me they weren’t actors. Actors would be running away screaming: “This isn’t in my contract!”

“What are you doing here, Blue?” I asked.

Distracted, Blue held up a blue centipede. “I found food.” He sucked the thing up like spaghetti, smacking his lips as the wriggling tail disappeared into his mouth. “Yum.” He sneezed sand all over me. “I came to find you. Atticus has taken Adam.”

“Adam? How?” I sputtered, but I knew that a monster kidnapping was unpreventable. Even if you’re over six feet tall and can toss a fifty-pound feed bag over your shoulder, if the monsters want you, they’ll get you.

Blue shook his head as he grabbed a glop of bright green seaweed. “I don’t know,” he said, stuffing it into his face. “Atticus told me to tell you you’re both invited to Christmas dinner in Down Below. I don’t think he meant turkey.”

“Down Below?” Ewan asked, his thick brows furrowed. “Who is this Adam? And Atticus?” He grabbed a dagger from a holster on his thigh, like Atticus would appear at any second.

“Adam’s my friend,” I said, stepping back, “And Atticus is. . . my foe.” That seemed like appropriate dialogue for a conversation with pirates.

Ewan still gripped his dagger. “A foe? We’ll help you vanquish him!” He pointed his dagger out to sea, and Trudi used the moment to slip some seaweed into her side pocket. “On one condition,” Ewan continued. “You help us find our tunnel.”

“Deal.” We shook on it. His hand was callused and dirty. Like a pirate’s.

I glanced up the beach. There was no sign of my parents, but any second, they’d stroll down the sand and yell “cut!” to this scene. The deal to save Adam would be off, and he’d be stuck in the monster land of Down Below.

I kneeled to look at Haylie. “Haylie, remember how last Halloween, the monsters took you, and Adam helped get you back?” She nodded solemnly. “Well, now they’ve got Adam. So Blue and I have to go Down Below to save *him*. I need you to. . .”

“No!” She stamped her foot.

“What?”

“I want to go too!”

“Haylie, we’re not getting an ice cream. We’re going to *Down Below*. Where there’s every kind of monster – zombie, and mummy, troll, vampire, werewolf. . . And that’s not all! The – *land* is dangerous. Remember that crazy water slide?”

Ewan’s eyes were bright with anticipation. He actually *wanted* to go to Down Below. Meanwhile, my stomach was already in knots.

“Adam saved me.” Her lower lip poked out.

I sighed. “Okay, fine. But – ”

My phone buzzed in the pocket of my cargo shorts, playing the Taylor Swift ringtone for Mom. I pulled it out, but before I could answer it, Ewan grabbed it and tossed it into the ocean.

“Hey! That was an early Christmas present!”

“A metal animal that sings before it attacks! You’re lucky I was here.”

No way would this dude understand the concept of an iPhone. “Great. Thanks.” I turned to Blue. “How do we get to Down Below?”

He pointed to the lounge chair.

That made sense. Portals to Down Below exist wherever people sleep – bed, futon, couch. . . a lounge chair worked just fine.

“Quick,” I told my new motley crew. “My parents will be back any second.”

Blue dove under the chair, disappearing into the white sand. A second later, his head popped up. “Give me your hands!” he chirped to Ewan, who obliged. Soon Trudi, Ewan, and Haylie had disappeared.

I glanced one more time down the beach – “Sorry, Mom and Dad!” – and, grasping the cooler because I didn’t know when we’d see human food again, I plunged into the world of Down Below.

We landed on sand, but it was nothing like Hawaii. This sand was cold and grey, dotted with flat rocks. There wasn't any sea, either, just more grey rocks stretching away to the horizon. It was like the desert in that movie *Holes*.

Blue jumped onto a rock. "Don't tread on the sand!"

"Why not?" Trudi asked, prodding it with her cutlass.

A bony hand shot out of the grey mass and grabbed at the blade.

Haylie shrieked.

"Skeleton!" Ewan shouted, whipping out a pair of long daggers.

The skeleton rose from the sand almost in slow motion. It shook itself and grinned at us. It didn't have much choice – since it had a *skull* for a head – but something about that grin looked deliberate.

Ewan threw a dagger. It clattered through the skeleton's ribcage and crumbled to dust.

"That doesn't look good," Trudi said.

It was about to get worse, too. All around us, sand moved and more skeletons emerged. I grabbed Haylie and lifted her on the rock next to Blue. "Stay there," I told her, dumping the cooler next to her. Blue was starting to snuffle. A bubble of green snot formed on his nose and burst.

"Don't touch them," he said. "They're made of dust and anything they touch turns into dust too."

As if to prove it, Trudi's cutlass connected with a skeleton and poured away into the sand.

We leapt onto rocks. It seemed the skeletons could only walk on the sand. They prowled around us, their jaws chattering, but they didn't try to touch us.

Ewan threw another knife and we watched it turn to dust. “What’s the point of a monster you can’t fight?” he grumbled.

We *could* fight them. We just needed to figure out how. Last time Adam and I ventured into Down Below, we had a set of playing cards with clues to defeating the monsters. Too bad I didn’t have them now.

What did I know about skeletons? They were made of bone, they moved with jerky motions, they didn’t talk in movies except to offer advice. . .

“I’m thirsty,” Haylie said.

I rummaged in the cooler for another can. “Don’t drink it all at once. It might be a while before we find any more.”

A fine spray of coke fizzed out as I snapped open the can. The nearest skeletons all jumped back.

*They’re made of dust*, I thought – *bone dry*. How do you fight dust? You add liquid!

I shook the can, held my finger over the hole, and sprayed. Two skeletons got caught in the shower and melted into the sand.

“Quickly,” I said, tossing another two cans to the pirates. “Shake and spray. “

Holding our cans like weapons, we all stepped off the rocks and walked single file across the sand.

The skeletons lurched after us. Any time one came too close, we let loose with a sticky brown spray that turned the monster to mud. Sweat ran down my face and dripped off the end of my nose. We were past the last of the rocks. If the skeletons attacked, we’d have no escape. And my Coke can was empty.

But they didn’t attack, and in less than a minute the grey sand changed to jungle.

I leaned against a tree, breathing heavily. Trudi licked the back of her hand where she'd accidentally sprayed herself. "This tastes good," she said. "I wish I had some mushrooms. I could make soup."

Mushroom-Coke soup? Ew.

I was still contemplating this when Haylie tugged at my arm. "Look!"

Caught in the rough bark of a tree was a piece of string. Most people wouldn't have noticed it, but this string was knotted.

"These knots are good," Ewan said, examining them.

"They're Adam's." I felt a flash of pride on his behalf. I ran my fingers over them. They were all different.

"This one's called a monkey's fist," Ewan said. "Then there's a water knot and a reef knot."

"And what about this one?" I asked.

He smiled. "That's called a friendship knot."

"This is a clue," I said. "He's trying to tell us where the monsters are taking him. A water knot. Blue, are we near the sea?"

Blue scratched his head. "On the other side of the jungle. There's a coral reef, too. But that's where the hydra lives. That's one of the scariest monsters."

Hydra or not, that was where we had to go. I held my hand out to Haylie and started off through the trees.

"What about the monkey's paw knot?" Trudi asked.

Something zoomed out of the trees straight at my head.

I've seen the flying monkeys in *The Wizard of Oz*, and they don't scare me. They look too much like people in costumes with stuck-on wings. These ones weren't like

that. Smaller, like *real monkeys*, they landed on me and grabbed at my hair, my ears – anything they could get their hands on. Whooping, two of them tried to make off with the cooler. Trudi swatted them away, but another pair of monkeys landed on each of her shoulders and started fighting each other. As I gripped the cooler tighter, another monkey snatched a dagger from Ewan's belt and flew off with it.

I shook a monkey out of my hair. Haylie was wearing one like a hat and laughing. That monkey seemed to *enjoy* being treated like an accessory, chirruping like it was happy. Figured. Haylie has *Sleeping Beauty* charm when it comes to animals – even the demented ones like her.

I dug one hand into the cooler, finding chips, chocolate, and finally a packet of peanuts Mom had tossed in – a leftover from the flight.

“Here, monkeys,” I called, throwing the bag at a tree. It burst open, spilling nuts.

The monkeys, temporarily distracted, left us alone as they fought each other for the food. We ran.

Dark shapes swooped after us. “Keep running,” Ewan said. He broke off a tree branch and took up a fighting stance. The first monkey flew at him and he batted it into a tree. Five more rushed him and he spun full circle, hitting each one out of the air. Pirate vs monkey baseball.

“Should we help?” I asked.

Trudi pushed her hair out of her face. “He seems to be having fun. Let's just run away.”

Ewan caught up with us at the edge of the trees. He was missing a few tufts of hair and he'd gained a few scratches.

“Good fight,” he said, swinging the branch and looking around, probably for something else to hit.

Something glinted on the ground. Adam’s key ring, minus the keys. We were getting close.

Haylie toddled on a few paces and picked up a key. “There’s another,” said Trudi.

We walked on, picking up keys like a trail of breadcrumbs. I pocketed them. I *had* to believe that Adam would need his keys later. We’d survived this place once, and we’d survive it again.

“Can you hear something?” I asked.

A faint rumbling in the distance, growing louder as we walked. It could be thunder, or a waterfall, or...

Or both.

A waterfall spilled off a black cliff into stormy sea. Storm clouds surrounded it, grumbling with thunder and lit by flashes of green lightning.

“It’s like the Sea of Souls,” Trudi said. “Only the Sea of Souls is full of ghosts, and I don’t see any ghosts here.”

“You might want to look again,” Ewan said, drawing his sword as three transparent figures flitted through the water. One passed through me, the sudden cold making me shiver.

Then I heard Adam shouting to me. “Lissa! Over here!”

Trudi stabbed one of the ghosts, her cutlass passing through it. Featureless, with a bottom half that disappeared into cloudy wisps, the ghost was like a low-budget special effect. It didn’t seem interested in hurting us, or even capable of it.

“It’s a distraction!” I yelled, grabbing Ewan’s arm before he could charge ahead. “If I know Down Below, the real danger’s going to pop up soon. So be careful.”

He pulled away, snorting. “I’m always careful!”

We skirted around the waterfall, cowering as lightning bolts struck the ground inches away. Down Below was toying with us – it wanted us to know it could hurt us if it wanted to.

We reached the edge of a cliff. It was bare except for dozens of scruffy trees that resembled pipe cleaners. In the water, I spotted a coral reef. It wasn’t a normal coral reef – pink and mottled, in a sparkling blue ocean with colorful tropical fish. This one was grey, submerged in a sea with choppy, angry-looking black waves.

I squinted. Was that – ? Holy cow, it was! Electric eels.

That wasn’t all. A forked tail flicked. Seconds later, seven black heads rose from the waves. The hydra.

“Adam!” I screamed. “Where are you?”

“I’m on a ledge about twenty feet from the water! But don’t – ” There was a thump, like he’d been punched in the stomach, and Atticus took over.

“Come and get him,” he taunted in a sing-song voice.

“I’m with two bloodthirsty, fearless pirates!” I called. “Sure you don’t want to hand him over and save yourself?”

“I think I’d prefer a good fight,” Atticus said, and Ewan moved to oblige him.

“No!” I hissed, grabbing his sleeve as an idea formed in my mind. “It’s a trap.”

He blinked. “A trap?”

“Didn’t you hear Adam? He said *don’t* before Atticus silenced him. He was going to say *don’t come down here*. And Atticus sounds too confident. According to

every rescue mission movie ever made, those are clues that something's waiting for us."

"I don't know what a movie is," Trudi said, "but the girl's right about the rest." She looked at me admiringly. "Those are good survival skills. You know, the *Onion's* always looking for – "

"I'm growing impatient!" Atticus roared.

"Oh, keep your pants on," I grumbled. Louder: "We're coming down!" I looked at Haylie and Blue. "Except for you. Blue, make sure Haylie doesn't budge an inch, okay?"

I turned to Trudi and Ewan. "Can you swim?" In a low voice, I told them my plan. It was risky, but something told me my two new friends wouldn't mind.

Ewan handed me a cutlass. "Here you are. Good luck."

"You too," I said as my fingers closed around it. It was heavier than I'd expected. I watched as Ewan and Trudi skulked away, using a winding path that led from the top of the cliff and into the ocean.

"We're coming!" I yelled to Atticus, giving Haylie one last hug before stepping to the edge of the cliff.

A narrow path led across the cliff-face. I followed it down, hugging my arms against my chest as the temperature plummeted.

A group of bats swarmed, shrieking, from a crevice less than ten feet away. I hit the ground, shielding my head with my arms and wincing as rocks dug into my bare skin. If I knew anything about bats – from my exposure to movies where characters search for treasure in old, old places – they don't stick around for long.

In seconds, the shrieking had faded. I raised my head to see the last bat flapping its wings as it flew from the cliffs and over the choppy waters. I continued down, my heart pounding.

A light blazed from a cave overlooking the water. Below that, black water churned around slabs of rocks jutting out of the water.

I breathed out in relief. This was the perfect location for the final showdown scene with Atticus. Now, if only I was up for my role. . .

“Atticus!” I yelled, scanning the waves as I gripped the cutlass tighter. There, so far away they were almost a speck, I spotted Trudi and Ewan on the coral reef.

I crept into the mouth of the cave and paused to let my eyes adjust to the murky light. Somewhere in the depths, something dripped. “Well? You going to show yourself or what?”

Atticus emerged from the back of the cave, his gangly, hunch-backed body casting a distorted shadow along the floor. He nudged Adam ahead, who was tied up with coils of thick rope like a victim in a cartoon. Luckily, other than having mussed hair and a scrape on his forehead, he seemed okay.

“Where’s your crew?” Atticus asked, sneering.

I tried to look disappointed. “They left. I guess I shouldn’t have trusted pirates.”

“Ah, too bad. For you.”

“I’ll give you one last chance,” I told Atticus, creeping closer to the edge. “Give me Adam, and I’ll go without hurting you.”

Atticus’s mouth dropped open, revealing black teeth. “Oh, of course! Thank you for sparing me.” His glinting eyes narrowed. “Get her!” he screamed, and black wraiths charged at me from the shadows.

Unlike the ghosts, these things could touch me. One slashed at me with long fingernails, tearing at my shoulder. Pivoting, I swiped blindly, realizing that hitting them didn't kill them – they disappeared but then reappeared a few feet away.

“Can't fight your own battles, huh?” I panted. What, are you chicken?” In *Back to the Future*, that line always triggered Marty McFly's anger and made him act reckless.

It worked on Atticus, too. “What did you call me?”

“Did I stutter? I called you chicken! If you're so bad and in charge, get over here and fight me.” I waved the cutlass.

Atticus gave a low growl, and the wraiths disappeared into the cave's shadows. I tilted my head to see the roiling waters and hid a grim smile. My new pirate friends were right on time.

I held the cutlass in front of me. “Come on. Chicken!”

With a roar, Atticus rushed at me, moving surprisingly smoothly – and *fast* – for such a tall, gangly monster. I had just enough time to raise my cutlass.

Then I felt a gust of hot breath on my back and I whirled to see the seven heads of the hydra. Up close, they looked like enormous snakes – black and scaly, with coal-dark eyes. Trudi and Ewan clung to the back of the enormous creature, steering it like it was a deranged horse.

“Now!” Ewan yelled, and I brought the cutlass down on the nearest head. My stomach churned when I saw the head lying on the ground, its eyes still blinking, but there was no time to get a better look. On shaking legs, I ran farther into the cave, dragging Adam with me.

“What – ?” he began, but I interrupted him.

“No time!”

I pushed him against the wall and turned just in time to see seven more heads burst from the place where I'd chopped off the one. Within moments, they'd grown to be just as large as the others. And hungrier. Seven pairs of eyes trained on Atticus.

"No!" he yelled. "Don't you know who I am? I'm –!"

In one quick movement, one of the hydra heads unhinged its jaws and swallowed Atticus. Then it shook itself, and all its heads burped – so loud the sound echoed off the cave walls.

The monster turned and slithered away off the ledge. Maybe it needed a nap after its meal, the way my dad passes out after a big dinner.

As I started to untie Adam, Trudi and Ewan hopped onto the rocky ledge. "Hello, mates!" Ewan said. "Everyone okay?"

Adam rubbed his forehead like he didn't believe what was happening. "It depends. Did everyone else see Atticus get eaten by a giant snake?"

"Not a snake," I corrected. "A hydra. This is Trudi and Ewan, from the *Onion*."

"They're from a vegetable?" Adam repeated, and Trudi smiled.

"The pirate ship *Onion*, led by the fearless Cassie O'Pia. We fell through a whirlpool into your world."

"Of course you did," Adam replied faintly. To me, he asked, "How did you know how to beat that thing? One of the cards from the Monsterville game?"

I grinned. "Common sense. Ever heard the expression, more mouths to feed? I figured that giving the hydra more heads would make it hungrier. And if they're technically baby heads, they wouldn't recognize Atticus. They'd just see food!"

“Mighty good plan,” Ewan allowed as I handed him his cutlass. “We need to get back to Haylie and Blue,” I said. “And then we have to fulfil our part of the bargain and help Trudi and Ewan get back to their ship.”

At the top of the cliff, we found that Haylie and Blue had kept themselves occupied. The two had decorated one of the scruffy trees lining the edge of the cliff. The creation was a dark and twisted version of a Christmas tree – instead of garland, spider webs hung from the pipe cleaner-like branches. Dead spiders and bugs served as ornaments. It looked like a prop piece from Tim Burton’s *Nightmare Before Christmas*.

“I found a Christmas tree, *and* the decorations! Blue ate some,” she added, and Blue grinned. Bits of bug guts were stuck to his teeth.

“You take that end, I’ll take this one,” Ewan instructed Adam. “Two big strong fellas can carry this tree back to Ha-wa-ii” – he stumbled over the word – “without breaking a sweat!”

We hurried back to where we’d come. It was a long, boring journey – the kind a movie would gloss over by showing just a montage of us moving over the different terrains. By the time we reached the portal under the lounge chair in Hawaii, Adam and Ewan were red-faced and dripping with sweat.

“Well, that didn’t take too long!” Trudi said cheerfully. “With luck, we might be back in time for supper. Seeing all those eels in that sea made me hungry for eel stew.”

“It’ll be earlier than supper time,” Blue informed her. “When you go to Down Below, you don’t lose any time in Up There.” He gestured to the rectangular golden light that marked the underside of the lounge chair.

“That’s wonderful. Plenty of time to let the eel meat tenderize.”

Blue helped hoist Haylie, Trudi, and Ewan up through the portal. “I’ll take Adam home,” he told me as the three of us stood on the uneven ground of Down Below.

“Thanks, Lissa.” Adam’s voice was husky.

“You’d do the same for me,” I told him, and hugged him goodbye. It was nice how solid and strong he felt. . . even if he smelled like cave mold. Plus, I was no walking perfume ad.

I crawled out from underneath the lounge chair, dragging the cooler behind me.

Trudi and Ewan were both grinning. “What?” I asked, my cheeks flaming.

“Someone’s sweet on you,” Trudi sang. “Did you see the way he looked at her?”

Ewan nodded. “Aye.”

I ignored them. “Come on,” I said. “I think I know where your tunnel is.”

During the walk back, it had occurred to me that maybe the tunnel – a counter-clockwise vortex – wasn’t a toilet. After all, toilets aren’t that big, and every time I imagined two regular-sized humans getting stuffed into a toilet bowl, the scene was either a cartoon or required some serious special effects. And even if nothing about today fit with reality, the tunnel had to make *some* sense.

My fingers laced through Haylie’s, I led Ewan and Trudi to the hotel pool area. There was just one person there – a pale, chubby guy in red swim trunks and

sunblock smeared across his nose. He was asleep on a lounge chair, one arm dangling and a newspaper resting on his stomach. It rose and fell with each breath.

I pointed. "Here's your tunnel."

We were at the hotel's Jacuzzi. Up close, it didn't look like much. The jets were off, and bugs had collected at the surface. "I don't know. . ." Trudi said doubtfully.

"One second." I hit a button at the side of the tub, and instantly the water started bubbling, frothing at the surface. Right before my eyes, a current started moving. Counter-clockwise.

"That's it!" Ewan punched the air. "That's our tunnel." He turned to me. "We can't thank you enough."

"Did you forget? You *just* rescued my best friend."

Trudi pulled me into a hug. "If you ever want to join the *Onion*, come find us," she whispered, and I didn't have the heart to point out I had no clue where to look.

"Farewell, mates." Ewan held out his hand. As I went to shake it, he snatched the cooler from my other hand cannon-balled into the Jacuzzi.

"That's our lunch!" I shouted. "Thief!"

The man in the lounge chair jerked awake.

Trudi grinned at me and jumped after Ewan. With a brilliant stroke of green light, the two pirates were gone. I gripped Haylie tight, just in case she felt like jumping in, too. One adventure a day was more than enough.

For a moment, Haylie and I watched the bubbles of the Jacuzzi. Soon there was no sign it had served as an other-worldly tunnel for two swash-buckling pirates. The jets had shut off, and it had gone back to a stagnant pool with dead bugs.

The man in red trunks glared at us, muttered something about pesky kids, and went back to sleep.

“There you are!”

Mom’s voice made me jump, and I turned to see my parents. Haylie ran at Mom, wrapping her tiny arms around her waist. “I missed you!”

“I missed you too.” Mom laughed, unlatching her. “Goodness, why the affection?” Then she frowned. “What on earth is that?”

I blinked. “Oh.” She was looking at the tree we’d dragged from Down Below, dead bugs and spider webs and all. “Haylie, maybe you should tell her.”

Haylie smiled up at her. “I found our Christmas tree.”

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