

CHAPTER FOUR

'WELL NOW,' SAID THE SANDMAN HITCHING his seaweed belt up over his belly. 'Isn't this a turn up! I go off to find meself some nice fresh bladderwrack for me breakfast, and what do I find when I get back? There's a beach full of people and a great grey cucumber thing lying in the sea and lots of funny fellows gawping at me like I'm maybe an ogre or something.'

'It's not a cucumber,' said Polly. 'It's a ship.'

'A submarine,' I explained.

'A ship!' The Sandman roared with laughter.

'Do you call that a ship?'

'It's a kind of ship,' I said. 'It can go on the water or under the water, whatever it likes.'

'And it's Russian,' Polly went on. 'And you see that man jumping down into the water, he's the captain.'

'And it's stuck,' I said. 'It's going to need a push.'

'Is that so?' said the Sandman thoughtfully. He'd stopped laughing now and was looking far out to sea as the Russian captain waded towards us. I could feel the shadow as he bent over me and whispered. 'Are you certain sure that thing's a ship and not a cucumber at all?'

'Quite sure,' I said.

Captain Sergei Ivanovitch Prokofiev kept his distance from the Sandman, which was hardly surprising I suppose. I introduced them to each other because no one else did and when the captain saluted, the Sandman put his bladder-wrack down on the rock and saluted right back.

'Well, I've never in me life set eyes on such a ship,' said the Sandman to the captain. 'Are you sure she's a floating sort of a ship?'

'Of course,' replied the captain stiffly, 'but first I must get her off the sand. My engines, they try very hard but they cannot pull her off. I do not know what more I can do.'

'Supposing,' said the Sandman, 'just supposing we could somehow push her off, and just supposing she was pointing in the right direction, d'you think she might float all the way over to Ireland maybe?'

'My ship she float anywhere you like,' said the captain. 'My ship, she can go all around the world, but if she stay like she is she will pretty soon be – how you say it, Polly?'

'Busted,' said Polly. 'That's what Dadci said too, didn't you, Dadci?'

'We've got to get her off and quick,' said



Dadci, who seemed to have recovered a bit by then.

'What about the big tractor?' said Aunty Eleri. 'Won't that do?'

'Tractor won't touch it,' said Dadci, shaking his head, 'not in a million years. There's only one way you're going to shift it. You'll need something pulling her, something pushing her, and her engines on full power. Only way.'

The Sandman was smiling broadly now. 'Well now,' he said, 'if that isn't a coincidence. I was just thinking the same thing.' And he put two fingers in his mouth and whistled. Gulls, fulmars, shags and cormorants shrieked in alarm and lifted off the cliffs all around us. 'Come on in, boys,' cried the Sandman, and he whistled again, even louder this time.

Out in the bay beyond the submarine, the three giant turtles bobbed up one after the other. 'There's your pullers,' said the Sandman.

'All we need now is three good strong ropes. Would you be having such a thing, captain, down in your cucumber somewhere?' Captain Sergei Ivanovitch Prokofiev was looking rather bewildered, but he nodded. 'Good,' said the Sandman, 'and I'll be the pusher.'

'You?' The captain laughed. 'You will push and turtles will pull?'

'Isn't that a grand idea?' said the Sandman and he was smiling from ear to ear.

'But my ship, she is big, she is heavy. Is not possible,' said the captain.

The Sandman said nothing, but turned to Dadci and Aunty Eleri. 'If you don't mind, I'll be needing that rock you're sitting on.' Dadci and Aunty Eleri stood up and moved away. 'Of course, I haven't had me breakfast yet,' said the Sandman breathing in and out through his teeth and flexing his fingers, 'but let's see what I can do all the same.' And with that he bent

down and slipped his arms under the rock. He lifted it to shoulder height and then, balancing it on the palm of one hand, he tossed it over the submarine and out into the sea beyond, where it landed with a great showering splash. All of us looked at each other for a moment.

'See?' said Polly proudly.

'Jumping Jehosophats!' said Dadci.

The Sandman looked very pleased with himself. 'It's like this,' he said. 'Me and the boys – that's me darlin' turtles out there – we'd be happy to help you out; but it's like me old mother always said, "you scratch my back and I'll scratch yours," if you see what I'm saying.' You could tell from the look on his face that Captain Sergei Ivanovitch Prokofiev hadn't a clue what the Sandman meant. 'Well, how shall I put it?' said the Sandman. 'Will you take a look out there? That's me poor old coracle that brought me over from Ireland, and it's all

upside-downed and no use at all any more. So I was wondering maybe if I was to give you a little push and me boys out there were to give you a little pull, then maybe you could take me back home to Ireland in your cucumber. What do you say now?’

The captain thought for a moment scratching his beard. Then he shook his head. ‘Is not possible,’ he said. ‘My ship she is too small. You are too big to go inside.’

‘Sure that’s just a little thing,’ said the Sandman. ‘I’ll sit on top, so I will. I’ll ride your cucumber all the way back home. Well?’

The Russian captain seemed a little happier with that. ‘Da, da,’ he said. ‘All right. We try it.’

‘But you got to give him lots of food,’ said Polly, ‘else he’ll go to sleep and then he’ll fall off. He likes bladderwrack sandwiches. That’s seaweed.’

‘If he push my ship off the sand,’ said the

captain, ‘then I promise you I give him all the seaweed sandwiches he want.’

It took a little time to get the turtles ready. First they had to have their milk and soggy crusts and then they had to be roped up. Meanwhile the Sandman asked for his breakfast and so Polly made up the sandwiches. He settled down on the sand and stuffed himself with crunchy bladderwrack sandwiches, and then he emptied the churn of milk down his throat. I waited for his burp, and when it came it was just as loud and long as I’d hoped for; and when Polly giggled we all did, including Aunty Eleri, and that surprised me.

The Sandman stood up. ‘Well, I’d better be on me way then,’ he said, and he thanked us all and promised he’d come back and see us sometime. And Polly gave him her tooth that had fallen out in the night.

'For luck,' she said, and he scooped her up and kissed her on the cheek.

'Aren't you the darlin' girl?' he said, and he set her down again beside me. He winked at me and said, 'I'll be seeing you.' Then he whistled to the turtles to take the strain and the engines started up. He splashed out through the shallows to the submarine, spat on his hands, took a deep breath and began to push. Nothing moved. He pushed again, harder this time, blowing his cheeks into great balloons. On board the Russian sailors looked down over the sides and shook their heads. The sea churned, the turtles paddled, the Sandman huffed and puffed, and still the submarine would not shift.

'Come on, boys,' he bellowed, but I could see the turtles could do no more than they were doing.

'Gee up! Gee up!' cried Polly, and she was

jumping up and down and cheering them on. Then the Sandman was calling for us to help, and we all of us ran down into the water and threw ourselves against the hull of the submarine. Polly arrived last because she'd tripped over; and I swear the moment she touched that submarine it moved. And then I saw the Sandman's face. He was smiling down at me.

'Oh she's terrible strong, that girl,' he said. 'Who'd have thought it? She's gone and done it all by herself.' You could see Polly believed every word he said, and I knew then, we'd never hear the last of it.

As the submarine inched away seaward the sailors cheered, and then she was free of the sand and the Sandman vaulted on board. The rest of us went on pushing until the sea was too deep for us to go any further; and by this time the Sandman was sitting astride the



bow and waving back at us, and Captain Sergei Ivanovitch Prokofiev took off his hat and led his crew in three ringing Russian hoorahs, and they were all for us. 'Shivery,' said Polly, and I knew what she meant. Aunty Eleri thought she meant something else and rushed her back out of the water before she caught a chill. By the time we reached the cliff path, the submarine was already way out beyond Coracle Rock, the three giant turtles still out in front, and across

the water I was almost sure I could hear singing. Perhaps it was the Sandman or perhaps it was the Russian sailors. Maybe it was both.

We'd all had hot baths and were sitting drying our hair in the kitchen when we heard Uncle Rob's car draw up outside. 'Who's going to tell them then?' said Aunty Eleri, and we all knew the answer to that.

'Me,' said Polly, and of course she did. They

had hardly set foot inside the door before she started. Aunty Eleri, Dadci and I, we just looked at the floor and listened. 'And I pushed it out all by myself,' Polly said. 'Honest.' She had finished at last. Uncle Rob smiled and patted her head as Barry limped across the room towards me on his crutches.

'I've had my stitches out, Mike,' he said, pointing to his forehead and ignoring Polly completely.

'But it's true,' Polly cried. 'Cross my heart.'

'Here, my stitches. I kept them,' said Barry, and he handed me a little envelope. 'Doctor gave them to me.' There were bits of dark cotton inside. Bit disgusting I thought.

'No concussion,' said Uncle Rob. 'Doctor says he can do what he likes. Plaster comes off in six weeks.'

'There you are then,' said Aunty Eleri. 'That's nice.'

Barry was standing right in front of me. 'What's happened to you then?'

I shrugged my shoulders. 'I got wet,' I said.

'Pushing out the Russian submarine, I suppose?' said Barry.

'Yes,' I said, but I didn't dare look him in the face.

'That's quite a story, Polly,' said Uncle Rob. 'You get better and better. For just a moment there you had me half believing you.'

And then Aunty Eleri spoke up. 'I know this is hard to believe,' she said, 'but I'm afraid it's all quite true, everything Polly said, every word of it.' Uncle Rob and Barry tried to laugh it off at first. Then for some time no one said anything. You could hear the kitchen clock ticking loudly in the silence.

'Don't be a cuckoo,' said Uncle Rob. 'Fair play now.'

'True as I'm sitting here,' said Dadci.

'Everything. The Sandman, the turtles and the submarine. And Captain Sergei Ivanovitch Prokofiev – he's the lighthouse keeper's grandson, just like Polly said. I took some photos. True now.'

'What is this?' said Uncle Rob. 'An April Fool in August?'

'Mike?' said Barry, and this time I had to look at him.

'Well . . .' I said, trying to find the words.

'Lot of rot,' said Uncle Rob, and there was an edge to his voice now. 'Stories is stories, but that's all they are. You shouldn't go encouraging her like that.'

'But, Rob,' Aunty Eleri tried to interrupt him, and so did Dadci, and so did Polly. Uncle Rob would have none of it.

'A joke's a joke,' he said firmly, 'and this one's not funny any more.' Polly went on protesting and then Uncle Rob got really angry.

'I don't want to hear any more about it, understand? Now I've got work to do. There's a fence down above Whaletooth Beach. I'll take the tractor. You coming, Barry?'

'Yes, I'm coming,' said Barry, and I could hear the cold anger in him. 'Load of rubbish,' he muttered as he limped out after Uncle Rob.

'Pegleg!' Polly shouted after him and she turned to Aunty Eleri. 'They don't believe us, Mum. Why won't they believe us?' Her eyes were filled with tears.

'Don't you worry, Polly,' said Aunty Eleri putting her arm round her. 'They'll believe us when the photos come out. They'll have to, won't they, Dadci?'

Dadci was taking the camera down off the mantelpiece. He turned around. 'I'm afraid there won't be any photos,' he said. 'I just remembered, there's no film in it.'

Uncle Rob and Barry never came back for

lunch, and I was upstairs in the bathroom reading one of Barry's Tintin books, the one about the yetis, when I heard the tractor come rattling into the yard. There were footsteps running across the cobbles, and then Uncle Rob was calling excitedly. 'Quickly!' he shouted. 'Come quick!' I pulled up my trousers and ran downstairs taking the steps two at a time, still doing up my zip. Not easy that. As I came through the sitting-room I caught a glimpse through the window of Aunty Eleri and Polly and Dadci haring out across the fields towards the cliffs. Beyond them there was a column of black smoke rising into the sky. Uncle Rob came in then doubled up with laughter, and Barry behind him giggling like I'd never seen him. Uncle Rob helped Barry down on to the sofa and then collapsed into his armchair. They were both howling uncontrollably.

'You been burning off the bracken?' I asked,

but neither of them was capable of replying. 'What's going on?' I said. I was beginning to feel a little left out and I didn't much like it.

'We fixed 'em,' said Barry, and they managed between fits of rib-aching laughter to tell me all about it. 'We fixed 'em good, didn't we, Da?'

'We did,' said Uncle Rob still wheezing. 'We did indeed - with a little help from the dragon of course, y'know the blood-red one, the spikey one. Funny thing though, not a sign of the dragon was there? And we looked everywhere didn't we? Knocked on his door and he never came out.' And they were both heaving again. 'We thought, didn't we, Barry, we thought maybe he'd gone shopping.'

Barry went on when he could. 'You'll never guess what we did. We made this pile of driftwood, didn't we, Da? And then Da poured on the diesel, and then we threw on a

couple of old tyres from the silage pit.'

'Blackens the smoke something terrific that does,' said Uncle Rob.

'Dragons make black smoke, remember?' said Barry. 'Just like Dadci says they do. Then we get back here as quick as we can and we tell 'em. You tell it like you told 'em, Da. Da was brilliant, Mike, you should have seen him.'

Uncle Rob was on his feet and pointing. "Quick," I said. "Down on Whaletooth," I said. "We was down there fencing, the two of us; and Barry here, he chucks a stone into a cave. He didn't mean any harm, did you, Barry? And a moment later there's this roaring and then there's this thick black smoke billowing out of the cave. Never seen nothing like it. And then out comes this spikey blood-red dragon belching fire and smoke. Well we didn't hang about I can tell you. Last we saw of him, he was coming up through the bracken

and half the hillside was on fire. Hurry now." I told them. But I needn't have. I've never seen Dadci move so fast. Going like the clappers he was when I last saw him; and Polly was all leaping up and down and screaming, "The dragon's true too, the dragon's true too." ' And he sat down again groaning with laughter and wiping the tears from his eyes.

'Good one, eh, Mike?' said Barry. 'Good as any daft Russian submarine?'

But I had heard something outside. I was looking out of the window. Polly was running back across the fields looking over her shoulder and falling over herself all the time; and then I saw Aunty Eleri dragging Dadci along by his hand. They were in a hurry too. And as I watched I saw a spikey blood-red dragon come lurruping along behind them breathing out orange flames and black smoke and setting fire to the bracken as it came. I didn't know quite

what to say. Well, I didn't want to sound stupid
– you can understand that can't you? So
looking them straight in the eye and with my
voice as calm as I could make it I just said:
'You're not going to believe this.'