





CHAPTER 18

Despite all my worries, it's impossible not to enjoy our bike ride through Roar. I'm with Win, the sun is shining and it's hard to feel stressed when you're on a bike. Plus I keep seeing incredible things that I'd forgotten existed, like monkeys that sleep in trees in tangled balls and long lines of spotted beetles and snails that hum as they move.

Every now and then we pass another crack in the ground, just like the one I cycled over. I catch up with Win and ask him where they've come

from.

'It's actually just one crack,' he says. 'It cuts right across Roar, from my cave to the Bottomless Ocean.'

Before I can ask what he's on about, he yells, 'PEDAL POWER!' and zooms ahead, weaving through an orchard of apple trees. I follow, my wheels crunching over apples and filling the air with the smell of butterscotch.

As we're coming out of the orchard I spot my first furry. It's swinging on a branch like a hamster dangling from the bars of its cage. 'Furry!' I shout. Its bulgy eyes fix on me and it drops from the branch and starts flying around my face making a high-pitched whining sound. I have to stop pedalling – I can't see a thing – and that's when I realise the furry is talking to me.

'ArthurArthurArthur!' it's saying over and over again. Then it wraps its tiny arms round my neck, gives me a furry squeeze, and zigzags off through the trees.

'Come on,' calls Win, 'or we'll miss the Magic Road!'

We cycle through a valley, then cut across a meadow filled with enormous sunflowers. I'm so busy looking up at them that I almost crash into the back of Win. I slam my feet down and skid to a halt.

'Why've you stopped?' I say, but when I look over his shoulder I understand.

Directly in front of us is a dark, gaping sinkhole. It's so big Grandad's house could disappear inside it. Win gets down on his hands and knees and peers over the edge. 'You've got to look, Arthur . . . It's the weirdest thing.'

Cautiously I kneel next to him. Roots and stones stick out of the sinkhole's crumbling sides, and there's even a tree caught upside down between two rocks. I can't see the bottom of the hole, just pitch-black nothing. I start to feel dizzy. I hate the idea of falling, and falling into this thing would be terrifying.

'When did it appear?' I say.

'About a year after you left. I saw it happen. One minute there was a hill here, covered in trees and flowers and birds, and the next – BOOM! –

everything was gone. Well, the birds were still there, hovering around in the dust and looking confused.'

I stare into the darkness. 'It looks deep.'

'Yeah, I reckon it's bottomless.' To prove his point Win picks up a rock and throws it into the hole. We don't hear it land. We just kneel there, listening, as cold, damp air washes over us. After a moment Win adds, 'I think Crowky might chuck stuff down there.'

Immediately I picture Grandad tumbling into the blackness. 'What makes you say that?'

Win shrugs, then gets to his feet. 'Like I said, things have disappeared – the unicorns, some merfolk – and they started disappearing when these holes showed up.'

I shiver. The sun is shining, but the chill of the sinkhole seems to have crept inside me. 'Let's get out of here,' I say, picking up my bike.

Keeping well away from the edge, we circle the sinkhole then cut across a field. It's only when I'm pedalling hard, freewheeling through grass filled with yellow butterflies, that I manage to

shake off the sinister feeling left by the sinkhole. Rose, I think, as one of the butterflies sits on my hand before flying away. Rose has always loved yellow.

But as we cycle further across Roar the sunshine and butterflies disappear. The trees become taller and lose their leaves, grass is replaced by dust and clouds roll over the sun. After a while I realise I haven't seen or heard a bird in ages. Except crows. They sit in the trees, watching us as we go past, cawing to each other.

We stop for a rest at the edge of a forest. 'Well, we're definitely in the Bad Side,' I say.

Win nods and we take in the twisted limbs of trees and the spiders scurrying through dry leaves. The Bad Side was always full of things Rose and I were scared of. Which is why right now fluffy cats slink between the trees and silvery spiders' webs cover the ground like a thick mat. The cats stare at us. Their eyes shining in the gloom.

'I don't like it,' I say.

'Neither do I.' Win glances around uneasily.

'We're in Crowky territory here. We'd better put on some camouflage.' He pulls a couple of purple and yellow felt-tip pens from his pocket and starts scribbling on his cheeks. 'The first rule of being a ninja is to blend in to your background.'

He hands me the pens and to keep him happy I draw a couple of lines on my forehead. 'Win, our faces are purple and yellow. What background do you think we're going to blend into?'

'A stormy desert.'

'But the Crow's Nest is in the middle of the sea.'

'Ah!' Win holds up a finger. 'The second rule of being a ninja is be prepared for any eventuality.'

'Like the eventuality of the sea turning into a desert overnight?'

'*Exactly.*' Suddenly Win's smile disappears and he grabs my arm. 'Arthur, can you hear that?'

At first all I can hear is a whining meow of a particularly fluffy white cat, but then I pick up on another sound, the distant thud, thud, thud of tramping feet. 'What is it?'

Win's eyes are round with panic. '*The*

scarecrow army! We've got to hide!' He shoves his bike into the cobwebs and starts to climb the nearest tree. The bare branches are draped in more cobwebs and Win squeezes himself inside them. I go to follow him, but he pushes me back with his foot. 'Find your own tree, Arthur. This one's mine!'

The marching footsteps get louder, and in a blind panic I run from tree to tree, but I can't find any with a branch low enough for me to climb up.

'Hide, Arthur!' Win hisses.

Between the trees I see movement – shadowy figures – and I throw myself face down on the ground and lie as still as possible. A fat tabby cat comes and sits next to me and flicks its tail in my face. Its deep purr vibrates through me. It was Rose who didn't like fluffy cats after one bit her when we were playing in the alleyway behind our house. But the spiders were my thing. *Still are my thing*, I think, as I'm forced to bury my face into their sticky webs.

The marching feet come to a stop. I raise my head a fraction and see four scarecrows standing

shoulder to shoulder staring into the trees. I freeze as their button eyes flick left and then right. They're wearing a jumble of ragged clothes and straw pokes out of their loose seams. Their mouths are grim stitched lines.

I shut my eyes and try to breathe as quietly as possible. Something small with lots of legs scurries over my cheek.

Seconds, then minutes tick by. The cat sniffs my face. Then I hear Win drop down from the tree. Next thing I know he's pulling me to my feet. He grins and his felt-tipped scribbles stretch across his face. 'Good job we had our camouflage on!' he says, brushing a spider off my shoulder.

'Thanks for not letting me into your tree,' I mutter. 'They nearly saw me!'

'*Never* share your tree, Arthur. That's the third rule of being a ninja.'

I shake my head as I reach for my bike. Then I see something that makes cold shock slam through my body. 'Win,' I whisper, '*they're still here!*'

The four scarecrows are standing at the edge of

the forest. They have their backs to us and their arms are outstretched. I'm trying to decide if I should throw myself back down in the leaves or make a run for it when Win starts laughing.

'They're not *really* here,' he says.

'What do you mean?'

'Come and see.' Before I can stop him he walks towards the scarecrows. He doesn't sneak from tree to tree or keep low to the ground. He just strides straight up to them bold as anything.



I run to catch up with him. 'Are you sure this is safe?'

'Yes, look.' He pulls me round in front of the scarecrows.

It's a chilling sight. They sway over us, their mismatched button eyes staring into the distance, their tangled straw hair blowing in the wind. Win stands close to one wearing a battered top hat. He waves his hand in front of its sack face. 'Hello?' he says. 'Anybody in there?' He turns to me and grins. 'See? No one's at home.'

I step up to a scarecrow wearing a ragged robe. Tattered sleeves billow around stiff arms and stick fingers point to the sky.

'So *right now* this is just a scarecrow?' I say, amazed by how still the scarecrow is. 'How does Crowky control them?'

Win shrugs. 'If he's near them, he talks to them – it's all caws and clicks – but I don't know how he does it when he isn't around. Remember Crowky is half crow and crows communicate in strange ways.'

And they are clever, I think as I study the scarecrows in front of me. Somehow Crowky worked out how to make these things *and* bring them to life.

Automatically I look at the scarecrow's button

eyes. Suddenly they seem less dull. I might be imagining it, but have they narrowed slightly? I hear a tiny scraping sound and my eyes shoot towards the scarecrow's stick fingers. They're not outstretched any more, but curled at the tips, as if they're about to ball into fists.

'Probably the wind did that . . .' says Win.

'Probably.'

Win's eyes slide towards me. 'Shall we crack on?'

'Yep,' I say, then the two of us start walking towards the forest. Without warning a group of crows burst from a tree and rise up in the air. I didn't even realise they were sitting there.

Win and I speed up, breaking into a run the second our feet hit the dead leaves. We grab our bikes, jump on and start pedalling. Spiders skitter out of our way and cats dash in front of our path, but we don't slow down.

The rasping cry of the crows follows us as we hurtle through the forest, desperate to get as far away from those button eyes as possible.

Chapter 18



Questions

1. Why does Arthur stop pedalling? (2 marks)
2. Why do they fear the Bad Side? Use evidence from the text to support your answer. (3 marks)
3. What does the word 'camouflage' mean? (1 mark)
4. What two things were the characters trying to get away from at the end of the chapter? (2 marks)

