

PLATINUM PIE RATS



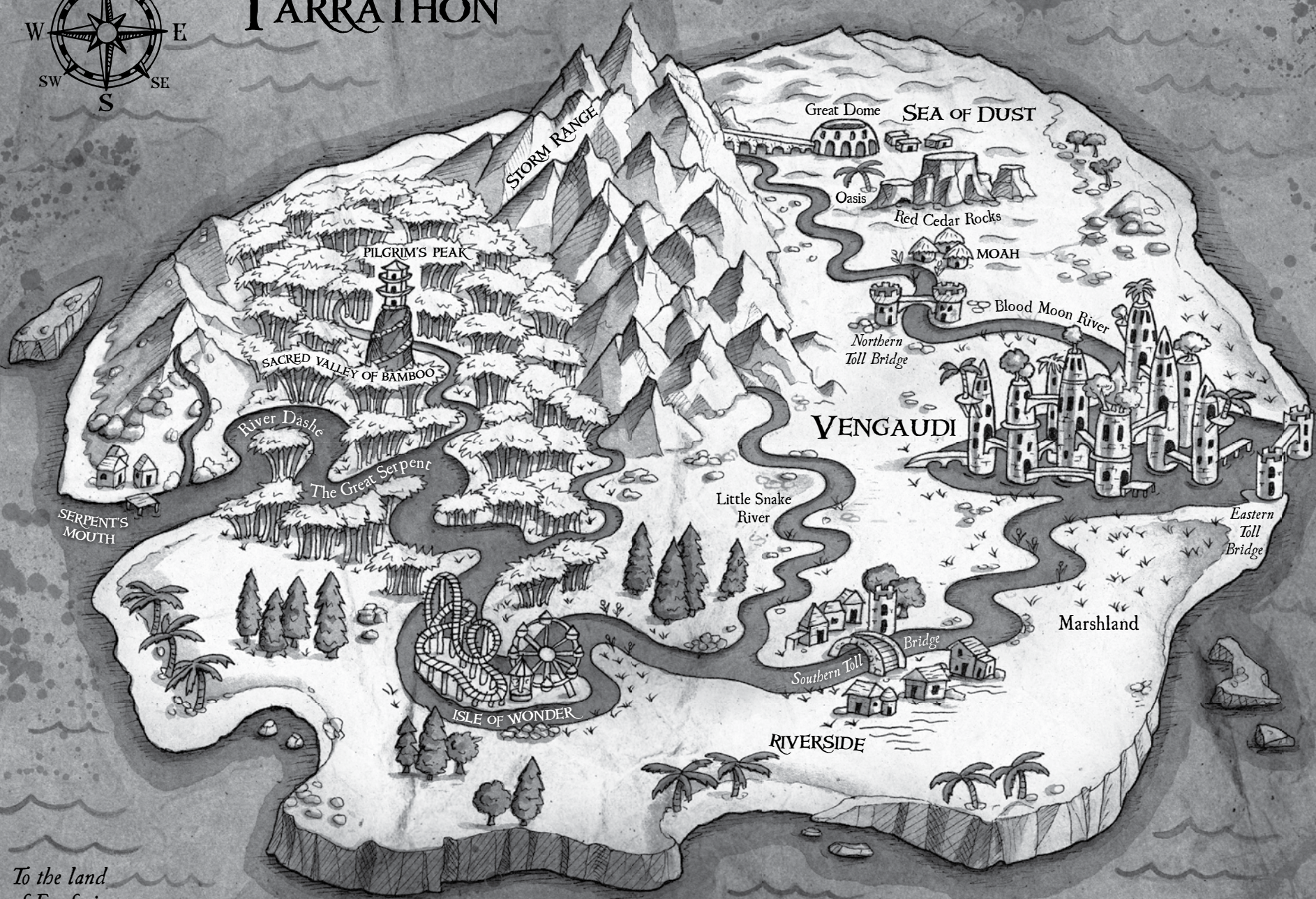
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TRAITOR'S TAIL

CAMERON STELZER



TARRATHON



To the land
of Freeforia



Pie Rats (Series 1)

The Forgotten Map
The King's Key
The Island of Destiny
The Trophy of Champions
Child of the Cloud
The Golden Anchor

Platinum Pie Rats (Series 2)

Traitor's Tail
Isle of Wonder
Aye Spy
Dust till Dawn

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PLATINUM PIE RATS

TRAITOR'S TAIL EXCERPT (ABRIDGED)



CAMERON STELZER
Illustrations by the Author





– *Prologue* –

Three weeks earlier

*It is not always the most likely hero
that saves the day.
Sometimes it takes a villain
to get the job done.*

Hook Hand Horace

from

*My Life as a Famous Pie Rat –
the Battles, the Victories, the Pies!*

Published by Fact or Fiction Press

The full moon hung low in the eastern sky, its silvery light illuminating the rugged clifftops and windswept waves of an island in slumber. To the west, the approaching storm front rumbled over the ocean with unrestrained fury.

Time was running out.

Lightning split the sky, chasing away the moon shadows for one electrifying heartbeat before the world plunged back into an eerie half-light.

Scrambling up a rocky path cut into the cliff face, the thief moved with purpose and urgency. A storm had never been part of the plan, but rain, hail, or lightning strike, the mission had to succeed.

With a final burst of energy, the thief reached the top of the cliff and took several panting breaths. A row of pandanus trees lined the clifftop, leading to a lone two-storey house. In the distance, the golden beam of the lighthouse rotated across the sky.

A beacon or a warning?

Another flash of lightning and the vine-covered walls of the house grew clearer. The thief's eyes found



their target in an instant.

Top floor. Third window.

A broken window latch and an owner too busy to fix it created the perfect entry point. The vines acted as a ladder and the window was reached in seconds.

Heart pounding, the intruder slipped inside, taking several cautious steps down a narrow hallway. At the far end of the hallway stood a heavy oak door.

Thunder rumbled overhead, rattling window frames, and promising a rainstorm to remember. Flashes of lightning revealed a rough anchor scratched into the wooden door – the handiwork of a bored child. But the anchor meant so much more. It marked a threshold. One more step and there was no turning back.

Only look forward.

Reaching out, the thief turned the handle, unsurprised when the door opened easily. An unlocked door offered nothing worth stealing.

Unless you knew what to look for.

The room was plain. No furniture cluttered the floor. No curtains covered the windows. Moonlight shone through two large windows overlooking an apple tree in the garden. The ghostly light revealed a single painting on the far wall. Five faces stared back from the canvas.

Shutting the door, the thief approached the painting, almost expecting the faces to speak. It was a family portrait, freshly painted, judging by the scent of oil that hung in the air. Each member of the family wore a matching gold anchor pendant, which seemed to glow in the darkness. A roguish-looking grandfather stood

behind two parents. The father had a smudge of grease on his sleeve. A leaf was stuck to the mother's skirt. The details told a story: inventor and gardener. Their son was handsome, confident, and strong. His younger sister had a natural beauty, but her awkward smile betrayed her nervousness. She was hiding something.

A clap of thunder shook the house, jolting the thief back into action. Running a finger along the underside of the gilded picture frame revealed a small lever. With a soft *click*, the painting swung away from the wall, exposing a square metal safe.

From a pocket came a strange brass key with teeth on four sides. It was new, shiny – unused. The locksmith had claimed he was the best. The plan would fail if he was wrong.

A large keyhole was visible beside a round dial, an added layer of security. The door required both a code and a key to unlock.

A four-number combination.

A four-sided key.

One chance to get it right.

According to the information, the combination had never been spoken or written. It was not an important date or someone's birthday, but a sequence of random numbers – the hardest combination to guess.

And yet, somehow, the thief knew the numbers.

18 ... 14 ... 22 ... 6 ...

Steady fingers turned the dial, pausing on each number, before moving to the next. With the numbers complete, the thief held the key to the lock.

And stopped.



In the silence between thunder claps came the creak of the front door. The sound meant one thing: the owner was home early. Refusing to give in, the thief thrust the key into the safe and gave it a firm twist.

A heartbeat later, the door swung open on well-oiled hinges, revealing four items. Moonlight glimmered off an anchor pendant, its thin cord circling a small diamond ring. Lying beside a thick book was the true prize – a tiny wooden box marked with an anchor. The thief grabbed the box and slipped it into a pocket, leaving a replica box in its place.



Footsteps echoed down the hallway. Lantern light poured through the gap under the door. The thief froze with the safe half-shut, terrified the owner would burst through the door and discover the crime. But the light dimmed and the footsteps faded as the owner moved to another part of the house.

Not wasting another precious moment, the intruder moved the painting back into position, threw open the nearest window and scrambled down the vine, landing on soft ground.

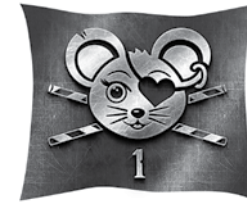
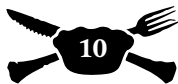
As the thief dashed through the shadows towards the village dock, the storm finally hit, rain falling in torrents, washing away all evidence of the crime.

The perfect theft.

Almost ...

What the thief failed to notice were two eyes watching from the apple tree.

Eyes that saw everything.



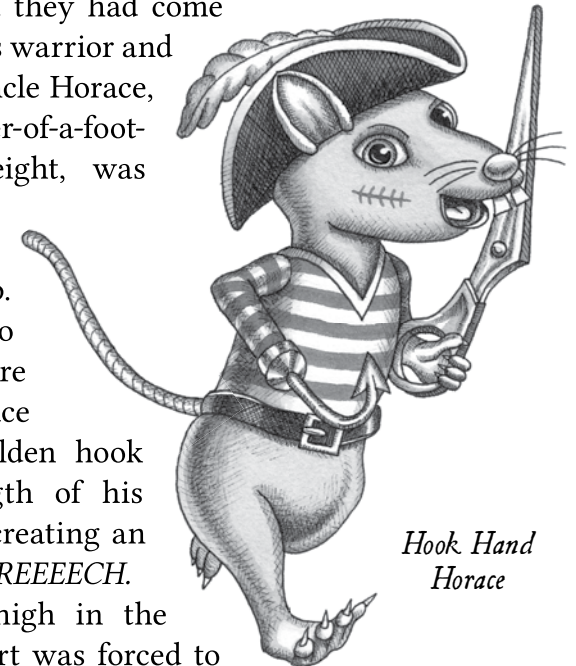
The Good Ship Apple Pie with Mice Cream

‘SURRENDER SCURVY PIE-HATER OR FACE THE WRATH OF THE MIGHTY HOOK!’

The words were delivered with such power that Dart almost believed they had come from a ferocious warrior and not from his Uncle Horace, who, at a quarter-of-a-foot-nothing in height, was about as threatening as a newborn lamb.

Attempting to appear even more terrifying, Horace scraped his golden hook down the length of his scissor sword, creating an ear-splitting SCREEEECH.

Even from high in the crow’s nest, Dart was forced to



*Hook Hand
Horace*



cover his ears to block out the terrible sound.

‘Do you hear that?’ Horace roared at the cowering mouse in front of him. ‘That is the sound of your defeat! And by *defeat*, I mean total and utter annihilation ...’

Dart stopped listening around that point. He had heard enough of his uncle’s rants to last him a lifetime. No doubt the words *ROTTEN PIES* were shouted, along with the phrase *SHIVER ME SAUSAGE ROLLS* or something as ridiculous. As much as Dart loved his uncle, the constant gasbagging drove him crazy. To preserve his sanity, he shuffled to the opposite side of the crow’s nest to watch the other rat-vs-mouse battle taking place.

Pinned against the starboard side bulwark (a low wooden rail resembling the crust of a pie), Anna *Bravetail* Winterbottom was fending off an attack from a rosy-cheeked mouse by swinging her sword in wild circles. To her opponent’s annoyance, Anna gripped her green-handled scissor sword tightly in her tail.

‘Show off,’ Dart muttered under his breath.

Anna, like her older brother, Whisker, had been born with a unique tail. Where Whisker’s tail mirrored his emotions and was often hard to control, Anna’s tail worked like a third arm.

She had kept her gift a secret for most of her life. But since becoming a Pie Rat apprentice, there was no holding back.

‘Not fair!’ squeaked Emmaline Silver Scoop, unsuccessfully trying to land a blow with her two silver ice cream scoops. ‘This is supposed to be paw-to-paw combat. Not paw-to-magical-tail combat!’

‘Hang in there, Emmie,’ panted her twin brother, The Extraordinary Eaton, staggering across the deck in a top hat and cape, which, though not technically a pirate uniform, looked fetching on the amateur illusionist. His battle wand (a thin metal contraption with an igniting tip) struggled to stay alight.

‘Phooey to cheap gunpowder,’ he muttered.

Horace chased after him, blustering, ‘No one escapes the hook of awesomeness! No one defeats the defender of pies. And don’t you dare disappear in a puff of smoke!’



Emmaline Silver Scoop

The Extraordinary Eaton

MICE CREAM APPRENTICES

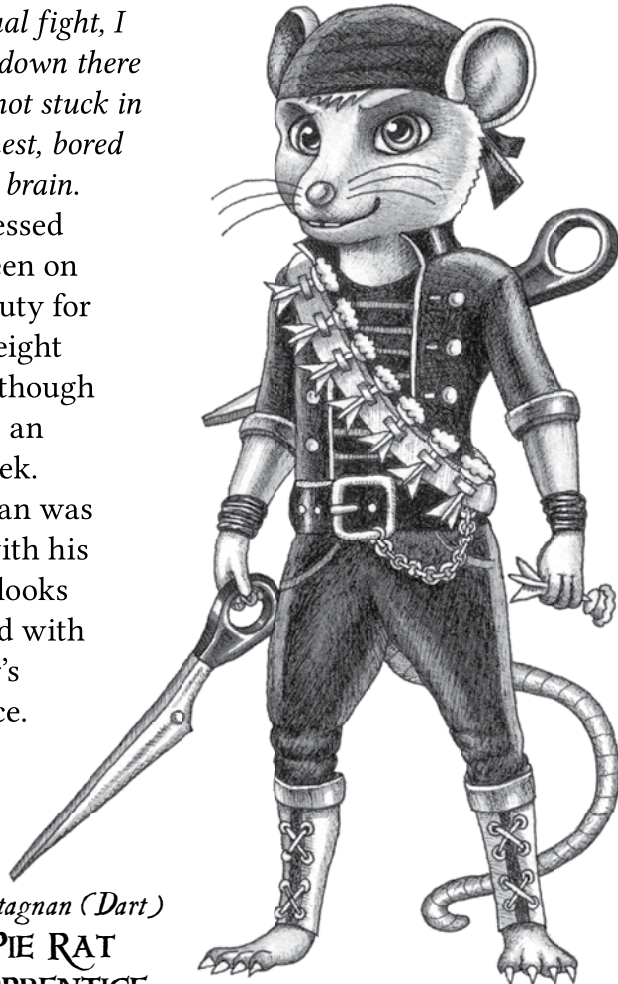
Emmie shot a glance over her shoulder and winced. 'Poor Eaton. And I thought I had it bad. Forget sword fighting. I think Horace is trying to talk you to death!'

'Argh! Rotten pies to insolent apprentices,' Horace scoffed. 'In an actual fight, no one would zip their lips or offer to sharpen your sword.'

Dart shook his head.

In an actual fight, I would be down there fighting, not stuck in a crow's nest, bored out of my brain.

He guessed he had been on lookout duty for seven or eight hours. Although it felt like an entire week. D'Artagnan was blessed with his mother's looks but cursed with his father's impatience.



D'Artagnan (Dart)
**PIE RAT
APPRENTICE**

Unfortunately, the combination made him look like one of the ancient marble sculptures outside the Seven Seas Academy – handsome demigods with chiselled features who wore one of only two expressions: a frown or a scowl.

The 'classic' look his parents had called it. His fellow students had several other ways to describe his less-than-friendly appearance. These included the phrases 'Heart of darkness,' and 'Destroyer of all that is good.'

'This is such a waste of time,' he grumbled. 'Why am I up here, anyway? Freeforian ships are never attacked.'

His dark, brooding eyes fixed on Anna, and he felt his frustration growing. Her one stint in the crow's nest had been for a measly thirty minutes. And that was only because Rat Bait had suggested it as the best place to watch the sunrise.

It pays to be the Admiral's granddaughter, Dart thought bitterly.

It was obvious who the star apprentice was. Anna even dressed the part. While Dart wore a black pirate jacket, plain black pants and a simple black bandanna, Anna dressed in the same green velvet as the admiral. Her figure-hugging jacket and feathered hat screamed *FUTURE CAPTAIN!* Adding to her regal look was the gold anchor pendant she wore around her neck. Worn by every living Winterbottom, the anchor was her ticket to fame and fortune.

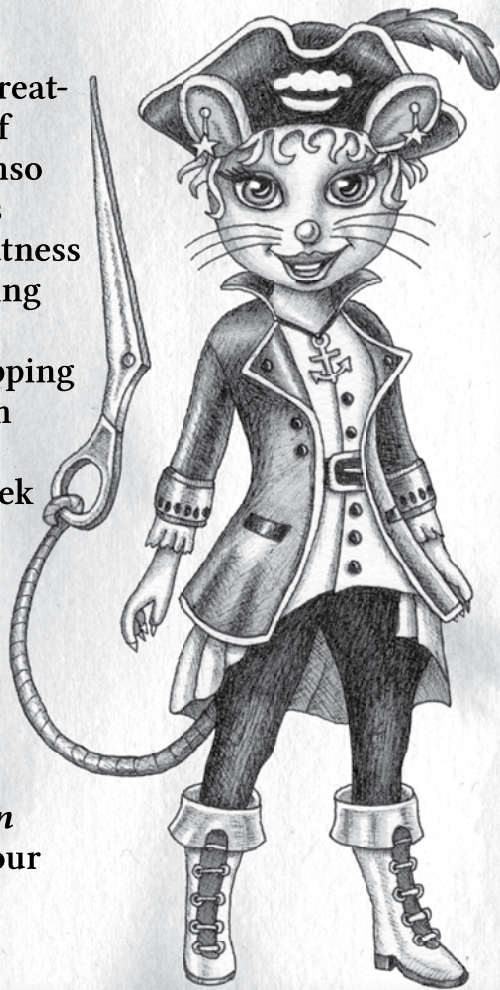
The scowl on Dart's face deepened as he recalled the latest newspaper headline.

WINTERBOTTOM WONDER

Freeforia's favourite daughter sets sail on her next big adventure

Anna Bravetail

Winterbottom, great-granddaughter of the legendary Anso Winterbottom, is destined for greatness after recently being crowned Miss Freeforia and topping her class at Seven Seas Academy. Will her four-week training voyage see this talented individual go from apprentice to captain in record time? In a poll conducted by the *Freeforian Gazette*, 92% of our readers say yes!



Full story Page 7

'Tabloid trash,' Dart fumed. 'Ninety-two percent of your readers can't read!'

Returning his attention to the battle below, Dart watched as Anna slipped on a patch of half-melted ice cream, which Emmie had not-so-accidentally dropped on the deck during afternoon tea.

'Hey!' Anna yelled, tumbling backwards. 'The food fight is tomorrow afternoon!'

Emmie raised her ice cream scoops in victory. 'Call it an appetiser! You fight dirty, and I'll fight creamy!'

Attempting to keep her balance, Anna swung her sword-carrying tail wildly through the air.

Emmie threw herself to the deck as the scissor sword swept over her head, clipping her baggy chef's hat, and sending it flying into Horace's face.

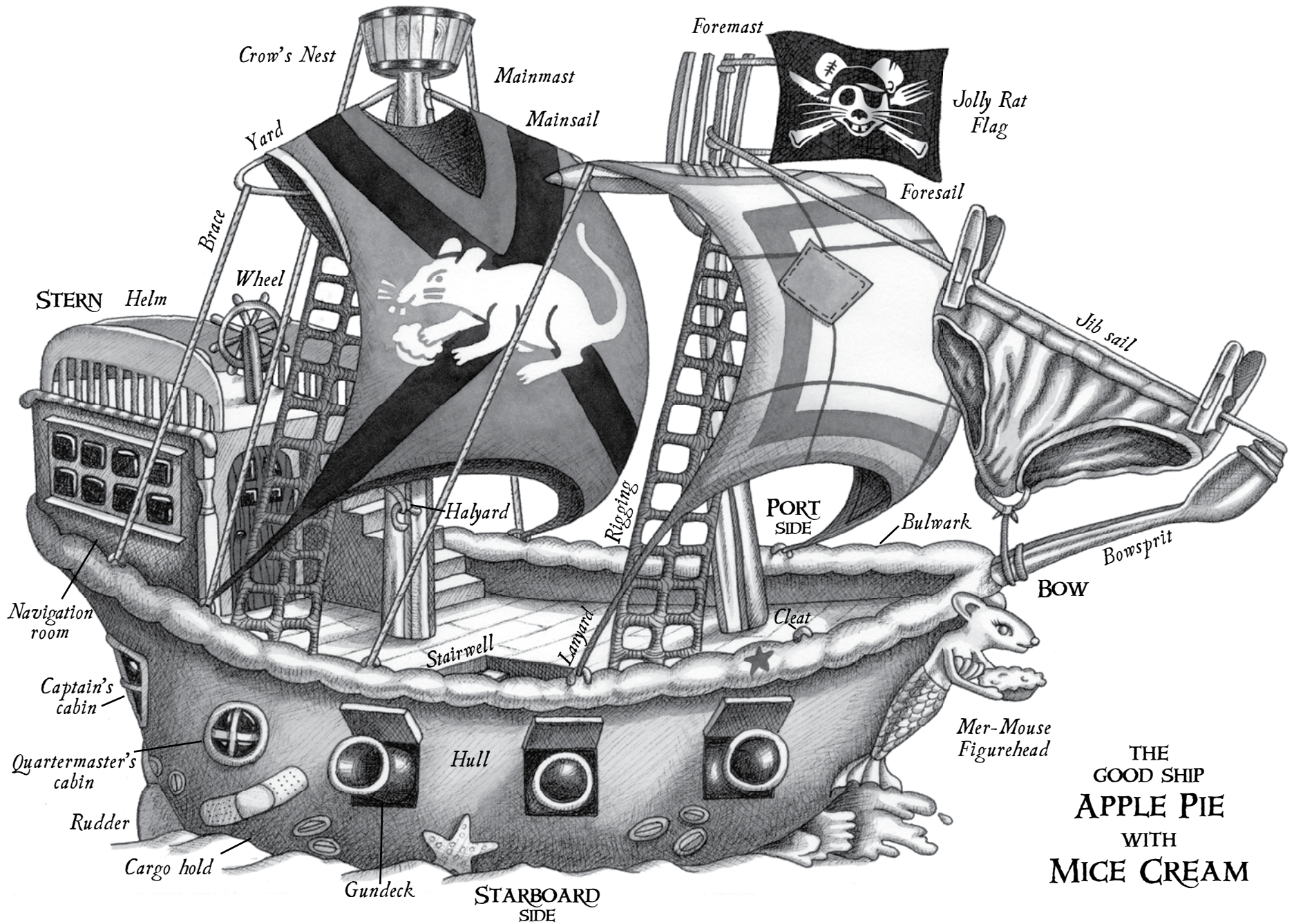
Choking on a mouthful of fabric, Horace tried to bat the hat away with his hook but skewered it instead. In his haste to dislodge the white fabric, he trod on the end of Eaton's cape, who stumbled into Anna and the three of them landed in a heap on top of Emmie.

In the mayhem, Anna lost her grip on her sword. It spun out of her tail, slicing off several of Horace's whiskers before bouncing off the giant knife mast with a metallic *CHING!* Dart felt the vibrations from his perch in the crow's nest.

'Yikes,' Horace muttered, wiggling his remaining whiskers. 'That was close.'

'Too close!' Emmie squeaked. 'I can't breathe under here. Now get off me, you clumsy buffoons!'

Dart rolled his eyes. *If this is the crew I have to fight alongside, then Ratbeard help me!*



THE
GOOD SHIP
APPLE PIE
WITH
MICE CREAM

The stamp of feet drowned out the annoyed grunts of the rodent pancake stack. Fingers tapping restlessly on the rim of the crow's nest, Dart watched Admiral Rat Bait storm out of the navigation room. Anna's grandfather usually walked with a slight limp, but today his strides were strong and purposeful. His snug velvet admiral's jacket stretched to bursting point as he took in huge, heaving breaths.

This should be entertaining, Dart thought. Someone is about to scrub the deck.

'What be the meaning o' this?' Rat Bait roared in his thick pirate accent.

'I, er ... was just giving the apprentices some wrestling practice, sir,' Horace said, clambering off the pile.

Rat Bait shook his head. 'I'm not talkin' 'bout yer tomfoolery, Horace. I'm takin' 'bout him! Our useless lookout.'

He pointed a wrinkly finger at Dart and then thrust it out to sea.



Admiral Rat Bait

Confused, Dart turned to see where Rat Bait was pointing.

To the west of the *Apple Pie*, a turquoise stretch of water led to the cliffs of the Crumbling Rock Islands, now bathed in afternoon sunlight. But it was not the stunning scenery that had caught Rat Bat's eye. Approaching from the south, with its oars lowered and its black sail raised, was an enormous Viking longship.

Dart's smug expression dissolved into a look of horror.

'Flaming rat's tails!' he gasped. 'Where did that come from?'

THE NOT-SO-GOOD SHIP MIDNIGHT HUNT

