

MERMEDUSA



THOMAS TAYLOR

WITH ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



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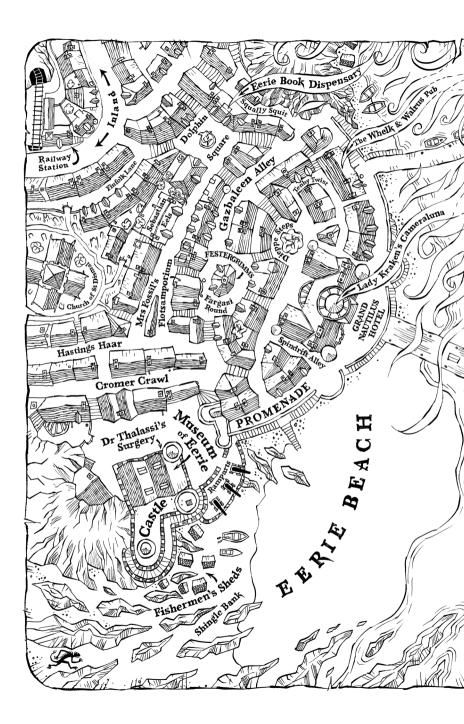
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MIDWINTER

TIME.

It's just one thing after another, isn't it?

One moment you're excited about everything to come, the next it feels like those new beginnings were nothing but the first steps towards the end.

"Herbie."

It's the ticking that gets me – the endless ticking of a clock as it counts away all the things you haven't done yet \dots

"Herbie?"

... and reminds you that you were always late, even for the things you did.

"Herbie! Wake up!"

The voice of my friend Violet Parma slaps me back to the here and now. It's evening, and we're in my lost-property cellar, in the cosy glow of the wood-burning stove, surrounded by a century's worth of forgotten items, mislaid whatsits and assorted doodaddery of every description.

Icy snow scratches at the basement window as the dismal weather of late December gusts around the town of Eerie-on-Sea. Violet is in my armchair, up to her chin in blankets and the purrs of Erwin the cat, while I, Herbert Lemon – Lost-and-Founder at the Grand Nautilus Hotel – am wobbling on the bottom step, staring at something in my hand.

Because it's only gone and happened again, hasn't it? "Sorry!" I gasp. "Did you ... did you feel that?"

"Feel what?" Violet regards me curiously. "Your bell rang, you went up and answered it, and now you're back down here, clutching the wall and looking green. What's there to feel?"

I shake my head clear. It's obvious that Violet sensed no eerie vibrations, no dizzy-in-the-head-fizzy-in-the-fingers sensation like the ones I've been getting lately – a weird wooziness that makes my brain go all funny and my thoughts go all runny. But then, getting queasy about things *is* a bit of a speciality of mine, especially when we're overdue for a new adventure.

"It's nothing," I straighten my cap. "Forget it."

"It's not nothing," says Violet as I join her by the armchair. "Something's just been handed in to your Lost-and-Foundery, Herbie, and made you go all weird. And I'd like to know what."

Then, before I can stop her, she darts up and snatches the object from my hand.

And what is this thing that set the bell on my desk ringing and my thoughts tick-tocking on the theme of vanished time? Well, see for yourself.

It's a watch.

A battered, broken wristwatch that was obviously lost many years ago.

"Ooh," says Violet, turning it over in her hand. "A windup one, too." And she roughly twists the little winder knob between her forefinger and thumb, before burying the watch in her wild hair, about where her ear must be.

"Nope," she declares, disappointed. "Not a tick."

She holds the watch up to show me its shattered face.

"Dead!" she declares dramatically. "Frozen forever at the moment of some terrible crime..."

"Give me that!" I grab the watch back. "I haven't had a chance to check it yet, that's all. It was found by a cleaner down the back of a radiator in the hotel restaurant. Probably been there for years. Just needs a bit of looking after, that's all."

"A terrible crime," Violet continues as if I haven't spoken, "that happened at midnight!"

"Midnight?"

I look back at the cracked face of the watch. Its two hands point straight up at the number twelve, as if its very last act was to try to surrender.

"Could be mid*day*," I suggest. "Why do you always go for the most alarming option?"

Violet grins and scratches Erwin behind the ear.

"Either way, Herbie, no one will want that watch now. It looks like someone trod on it. Best to just chuck it out."

"Chuck it out!" I splutter, hardly able to believe my ears. "You mean *throw it away*?"

"Of course," Vi replies. "It's useless. Don't tell me you're going to keep it."

I hold up the watch and turn it in the light. As well as the cracked glass and the dust of decades, the leather strap is baked stiff by radiator heat, and the steel casing is criss-crossed with scratches. I admit, the prospects of fixing this watch are not great. But then I glance over to the small shelf below where I hang my Lost-and-Founder's cap. There, gleaming in the warm firelight and packed full of mechanical wonders, is the pearlescent shell of my trusty clockwork hermit crab, Clermit.

"I can't believe, Vi," I reply, "that even after you have been here a whole year, you still don't get how my Lost-and-Foundery works. It's my *job* to look after this watch, no matter how battered and busted. And get it back to its rightful owner, too, if I can."

With this, I take the winder in my own forefinger and thumb, and give it a steady twist, like a pro. Then I hold it to my own ear.

But if I had hoped to somehow prove a point to Violet, I'm disappointed.

The watch remains silent and still.

And dead.

"Just bin it, Herbie," Violet insists, before adding, "And I haven't been here *quite* a year, have I? Not yet. I arrived on Midwinter's Night, remember? That's still two days away."

Remember?

How could I forget?

And what a not-quite-a-year it has been!

A rush of memories from our adventures barges uninvited through my mind: our near-death experience with the legendary malamander; monstrous mayhem with the storm fish Gargantis; the terror of our dealings with a being known as the Shadowghast; and then – just a few weeks ago – all those gruesome goings-on at Festergrimm's Eerie Waxworks.

My life has hardly been boring since Violet showed up in it.

But I don't say all this, of course. I may be a newer, braver Herbie these days, but I still don't want to encourage talk of adventures, not with the longest night of the year so very close and Christmas just around the corner. Instead, I take up the slimmest screwdriver I can find on my repair desk and pop the back off the broken watch.

Inside, in contrast with the ruined exterior, the watch's clockwork mechanism gleams pristinely. Holding it to the lamplight, I stare into the brass wheels and cogs wondering where to even begin.

"But," comes Violet's voice again, "exciting though my time here has been, what was the point of it all?"

I look up to find that it's Violet's turn to stare into space now, her excited mood suddenly gone, her eyes bright inside her hair.

"Prp?" says Erwin.

"A year!" Violet cries. "A year since I came here to find my parents, Herbie, and found instead ... you! And Eerie-on-Sea, and a whole new life of adventure and magic. And yet, wonderful though it has been, I'm no nearer to solving the mystery of my parent's disappearance than I was that first night. So, maybe, in the end, this amazing year has all been for nothing, after all."

"It's not nothing!" I cry, just as Violet did a moment ago. "I mean, you came to find your parents, Vi, and – and found yourself instead. Like a character in a book or something."

"That's a bit corny, Herbie."

"Yeah, well —" I turn back to the watch — "it's still true."

And then I see it: a tiny, sparkling grain of sand, lodged between two cogs. I take my screwdriver, and – as delicately as I can – I push the grain of sand out of the watch mechanism.

Instantly, I'm rewarded with the sound of a tick, and the sight of tiny brass cogs moving again after however long it has been.

"There." I close the watch and hand it to Vi. "Now, if you'll set the correct time, please, I'll write out a lost-and-found label and—Hey!"

I shout this last bit because Violet suddenly jumps out of her chair, scattering Erwin all over the room.

"Herbie!" she cries. "The time! Have you forgotten what we're doing tonight? We're going to be late!"

In a moment she has set the watch, buckled it onto her wrist, and is pulling on her coat.

I do a shudder.

I can't help it!

I haven't forgotten what we're doing tonight, but I was hoping Violet had.

"Don't look like that," Violet grins as she winds her scarf around her neck. "We promised. And judging by the weather outside, it's the perfect night for it."

"That's what worries me!"

I reach for my own coat, trying not to look at the darkness beyond the window. We're just two days out from the night when legend says that a terrifying creature called the malamander emerges from its lair to hunt on the beach of Eerie-on-Sea. It's madness to go near the sea on a night like this, and Vi and I – after everything that happened last midwinter – have more reason to stay away than most. And yet, here we are getting ready to do just that.

"Come on, Herbie," says Vi, opening the cellar window and letting a billow of hard, snowy air tumble into my cosy home. "We mustn't be late." Then she adds, with a wink, "We have a monster to catch."





OF COURSE, WE AREN'T really going to catch any such thing. That's just Violet winding *me* up. But what we are here to do is – well, it's almost as bonkers.

Below the town, at the end of the old harbour wall, a knot of people has gathered in the snowy air, huddled in the glow of the harbour lamp. We see a lanky figure in a huge sou'wester coat and skipper's cap, waving his arms excitedly as he addresses the others. This is none other than our friend Blaze Westerley, of the fishing boat *Jornty Spark*, who you might have met already if you've been to Eerie-on-Sea before. With him are three people I glimpsed earlier today as they checked into the hotel

"It's exciting," says Vi as we hurry through the cold night to join them. "Apparently, they've come all the way from America!" "Exciting is one word for it," I mumble into my scarf. "I can think of others."

As we approach, I get a better look at the three strangers. One is a tall and angular woman with Asian features, who is wrapped in a long black coat with a high collar. She looks like she has come expecting to be photographed. Then there's a short man wearing huge headphones and – amazingly at this time of night – aviator sunglasses. His figure is made all the more round with the equipment he has strapped over his shoulders, and he holds out a boom with a fluffy microphone on the end. The third of these mysterious guests from over the sea is an imposing, broad-shouldered man with a large grizzly beard. He wears a tweed hunting jacket with many pockets, a wide-brimmed hat pinned up on one side, and a tiny pair of spectacles on his nose.

"And that," we hear Blaze saying as we join the strange group, "is the terrible legend of the fargazi. And why, to this day, we fisherfolk of Eerie-on-Sea say the only way to survive a fargazer, is—"

"To tell the truth," finishes the tall woman in black. "Yes, we know. We've done our research."

"Oh." Blaze looks suddenly deflated. "You have?"

"Of course. The fargazi can see through your soul, or so the tale goes. You cannot lie to them. But are you claiming to have actually seen one of these creatures? Seen a fargazer with your own eyes?"

She indicates to the man carrying all the equipment to

hold his fluffy mic even closer, to catch the boy's answer. This man, I see now, also wears a baseball cap with a picture of Bigfoot on it.

"Aye," Blaze says, eyeing the mic suspiciously.

But then he spoils it by adding, "Well, not *seen*, exactly. I mean, not seen *myself*. My Uncle Squint met one once though. When he was a lad. Terrible, it was. He still has the nightmare. From time to time."

"I see," says the woman, gesturing with obvious disappointment for the microphone to be lowered.

"But that's just the *start* of the Eerie-on-Sea Monster Tour," says Blaze quickly. "There are many more legends. Folk hereabouts also tell of the mighty storm fish Gargantis, who nearly destroyed the town. And Gargantis I *have* seen. With my very own eyes. Together with my friends here."

And he nods towards us.

The little group turns, and the furry microphone is shoved our way. I watch the three strangers take in my wonky lost-and-founder's cap, and Violet's untamed hair and toobig coat.

"I'm Violet," says Violet. "And this is Herbie."

"Angela," says the woman briskly. "Angela Song. And this is Herman Newtiss," she adds, indicating the bigger man. "Professor Newtiss of Springheel University, Arizona. We're the hosts of the *Anomalous Phenomena* podcast. I expect you've heard of us."

Well, I haven't. And I don't think Violet has either. I don't

even know how to spell *Anonymous Philominous*, do I? But this looks like all the introduction we're going to get, because the strangers have already turned their attention back to Blaze. I can't help noticing, however, that the big man in the hat – Professor Newtiss or whatever his name is – stares at us for a moment longer than seems absolutely necessary.

"And where is this so-called Gargantis now?" asks Angela Song. "Do you have tracks? Video? Even a blurry photo?"

Blaze looks completely thrown by the question. All he can do is point vaguely out over the icy sea.

"It's a nice story, kid," says Angela, "but we need more than local colour. At *Anomalous Phenomena*, we 'go past mere anecdote to the truth that lies beyond'. It says so on our website. Our followers like proof."

Vi and I glance at each other, then at Blaze.

"Nice story?" He looks stunned. "Proof?!"

"Maybe we should turn," says Angela, "to the reason we're really here: the legend of the malamander..."

And the fluffy mic is thrust back into Blaze's face.

As for Blaze, it looks like he's been pushed too far already. With a final glare at the microphone, he puts his fingers in his mouth and whistles out into the night.

Vi and I look around, agog, wondering what on earth is going to happen now.

And then we see it.

From back along the sea wall, where Blaze's fishing boat is bobbing beside the others, comes a sudden spark of light. It

leaps up into the night air, this spark, and then heads towards us, with the wavy, indirect motion of a bumblebee in flight.

But glowing!

"A sprightning!" Violet gasps, her face alive with recognition.

The tiny, brilliant light reaches Blaze, and then buzzes around him, small, but crackling fiercely, its electrical power lighting the tumbling snow around us.

There are more gasps, this time from the three strangers, as the bright little thing settles on Blaze's outstretched finger.

"What in the world—" Angela begins. Then she gestures frantically to Fluffy Mic Guy. "Are you getting this?"

Fluffy Mike (let's call him that for now), leans in with the furry microphone in one hand, and a large, old-fashioned video recorder in the other.

"This is Ember," says Blaze, clearly delighted to have stamped his authority on the group at last. "A sprightning, as Violet says. She likes to follow my boat, and is, well, a sort of mascot for my uncle and me. Aye, she's part of our crew."

"Listeners!" says Angela breathlessly, into the microphone. "I am standing here in the presence of, well, what I can only describe as some kind of – of *fairy*. Or, more likely, some new species of firefly entirely unknown to science..."

But before she can say more, Blaze opens a pocket in his waterproof coat. The sprightning zips over and plops eagerly inside, her warm light vanishing.

"Ember," says Blaze again, patting his pocket gently. "Her

name's Ember. Now, let's return to the town for the next part of the tour."

And he sets off, leading the way back along the harbour wall, regaling his audience as they go with the strange tale of Saint Dismal and his Gargantic Light.

"Do you still think this was a good idea?" I whisper to Violet as we follow. "A guided tour at night, at almost midwinter, in search of Eerie legends?"

"Can't see why not," Violet replies. Then she adds, with a wink, "Besides, the legends of Eerie-on-Sea are just stories, Herbie. Remember?"

"Except we've just seen a sprightning!" I say.

Not, it's true, the sprightning queen I once had the honour of harbouring beneath my cap – this will be one of her tiny guardians that protect the lair of Gargantis. But still, I feel a pang of jealousy towards Blaze with his fierce little electrical friend.

"Anyway," I add as I notice that Fluffy Mike has just lowered a pair of what can only be night-vision goggles over his eyes, "something tells me these people won't be satisfied with just stories."

"When are we going down to the beach?" demands the man called Herman Newtiss then, speaking for the first time.

"I explained," Blaze replies as the group comes to a halt at the harbour wall. "The beach is too dangerous at this time of year."

"Nonsense!" Professor Newtiss laughs, dropping one

enormous hand onto Blaze's shoulder. "Dangerous? I once spent a whole month in the desert, on the trail of the Mongolian death worm. It's our most downloaded episode. I am not scared of a few rock pools, young man. And besides, we have to get down onto the beach if we're to have a malamander sighting of our own."



It was Blaze Westerley's idea to create the Eerie-on-Sea Monster Tour. He started it back in the spring, as something to do when the fishing season goes slack, and it went down well with the summer tourists of *Cheerie-on-Sea*. I suppose it's easy to ooh and aah at talk of strange creatures and spooky spectres when the sun is shining and your biggest worry is whether or not your ice cream will dribble down your arm. And Eerie-on-Sea has more legends than an August candy floss has wasps. But, of course, the story everyone loves most of all is the famous legend of the malamander.

Looking back, I suppose it was only a matter of time before someone asked Blaze to hold the monster tour at midwinter itself. Especially when those doing the asking are the makers of *Paragliding Thingummybobs* (or whatever it's called) – apparently a podcast about all things strange and eerie. But it feels odd to have visitors like this, who have come from so far to our out-of-the-way little town. It's as if Eerie-on-Sea, which is normally so good at going unnoticed, has suddenly lost its misty veil and become exposed to the outside world.

But no doubt Blaze thought it would be safe, as long as he avoided Midwinter Night itself. Right now, though, he looks vaguely panicked.

"Don't you want to hear about the legend of the Shadowghast?" he asks, trying to usher his audience away from the beach and into the light of the nearest street. "Or about the long-lost treasure of Purple Pimm? Or..."

"Another time," Professor Newtiss cuts in. "We need to be where the action happens – the foreshore, near the shipwreck. It's only a matter of time before someone gets firm evidence that the creature exists, and I want it to be us."

"Or proof that it *doesn't*," says Angela Song challengingly, and I realize that this entire conversation is being recorded for their show. "The legend of the malamander is based on nothing more than strange weather phenomena and misunderstandings, Professor. That's what we've come here to prove."

"And yet," says Professor Newtiss, turning out towards the ocean and striking a dramatic pose, because yup, this is all being videoed too, "for centuries people have reported hearing a monstrous howl from across the bay. Those people must be hearing *something*, Angela. Tonight, one way or another, we're going to get that something on tape."

Blaze's shoulders sag.

"All right!" he says. "Aye! We'll go down onto the beach. Just for a moment. But we mustn't go far – the shore is treacherous at low tide. You must only step where I step, and

keep close. And I can't promise we'll actually see anything—"

But the podcasters have already set off, keeping up a running disagreement about whether or not monsters are real, while Fluffy Mike the sound man follows silently with his kit.

"Wait!" Blaze calls after them. "I said only step where I step!"

"Are you OK?" Violet asks him.

"I wish I'd never agreed to this," our friend replies, running his hands through his shock of red hair before clapping his skipper's cap back on. "And I didn't realize they would be recording it all!"

"You're really going to let them onto the beach?" I ask, wishing more than ever that I hadn't promised to come along.

"I don't see how I can stop them," says Blaze. Then he adds thoughtfully, "How many can I lose, do you think? Before I get into trouble?"

"Speaking as Lost-and-Founder," I reply, "I don't think you should lose any."

"Best keep them under the pier," Violet says. "Let them poke about in the pools and shingle there. It's the most stable part of the beach, or so Mrs Fossil tells us, and the best lit. Once they've taken pictures of each other's shadows, and recorded the wind, we'll help you get them back to safety."

"We can take them to Seegol's afterwards," I add, hit by sudden inspiration, "for a *monster* portion of fish and chips. That's the only sighting I need."

"Good plan!" says Blaze looking like he's tempted to skip straight to the chips now. But then, "Oh, flippers! They're already going down!"

And he jogs off to catch up as, sure enough, the monster hunters begin their impatient descent down the slimy green beach steps without him.

I look at Vi, and she looks back at me. Knowing what we know about the legend of the malamander, the quicker we get these people to the safety of the chip shop the better.



AN EFRIE-ON-SEA MYSTERY

Welcome to Eerie-on-Sea, where nothing is as it seems.

In the basement of the Grand Nautilus Hotel, Herbert Lemon is plagued by unsettling dreams.

In the heart of the town, the mechanical mermonkey screeches in fear.

And Eerie Bay resounds with a strange and hypnotic *hum*.

As midwinter bites, Herbie and Violet are faced with a mystery that threatens to shake the town to its very core. Is the Deepest Secret of Eerie-on-Sea about to be revealed?

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