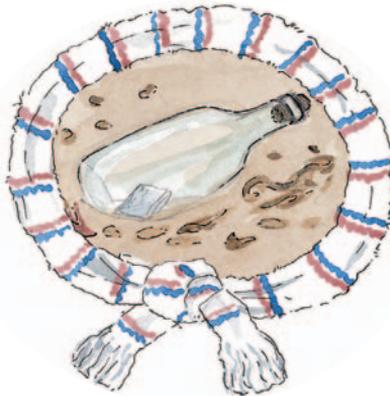


SEA GEM

*and
the Land of Ice*



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1 *Sea Gem's Daydream*

FOAMY BAY IS A VERY WARM PLACE. In summer, the bright sun shimmers above the scorching sand and flashes on the sea like sharp glass. Under the hot sky, swarms of insects gather in the drowsy haze and plants wilt. Sea Gem hated the heat. Unlike her brothers and sisters, who could cool off in the bubbly surf, Sea Gem had to stay indoors or sit under the trees wearing a large hat. This was because she was a rare white seadog who couldn't go into the hot sun. If she did, her pale skin was bound to get horribly burnt. When the temperature rose, Sea Gem languished in the shade and imagined herself in a cold place where the sun couldn't harm her.



Sea Gem's twin brother, Tumblegrass, was an ordinary brown seadog. In fact, none of Sea Gem's brothers and sisters was white like her, and in her gloomier moods, Sea Gem thought she had been born into the wrong family altogether. That's probably why she seemed a very quiet and shy seadog. But how we appear on the outside is not always the whole picture. For instance, when Sea Gem told an exciting story, she forgot her shyness and her little white face became a mirror of each thrilling moment. She recounted many such gripping chronicles to me; some fact, some pure fantasy. But of all of the tales she told, none was as incredible as the one which happened to Sea Gem herself. I'm not sure you'll believe it, but every word is true. She was only halfway past her first birthday (that's ten in human years) when she went on a brave journey far from home, all the way to the bottom of the world! Although I cannot do the special voices like Sea Gem does, I will try my best to remember all of the exciting bits.

The story begins in the quiet village of Foamy Bay on a hot summer afternoon. Sea Gem was sitting with Tumblegrass under a large tree in the cool shelter of a sandbank. She scanned the shoreline for her parents and saw her mother, Blue Bottle, standing at the water's edge holding the new twins, Cotton Reel and Tangle. She caught sight of her father at the wheel of the family boat. Old Cork shouted instructions to the older children, who were helping him to trim the sails.

Some of the other boats were already at sea, moving across the foam-capped waves, their sails pillowy against the sky.

‘You’d better hurry,’ Sea Gem said to her twin. ‘I think they’re ready to leave.’

‘I wish you could come too,’ replied Tumblegrass. Sea Gem shook her head.

‘Don’t worry,’ she said, ‘I’m going to practise my harp.’ She picked up the instrument then, and began to play.

‘You really don’t mind?’ he asked. Sea Gem didn’t reply, but plucked the strings in soft chords. Without a moment’s hesitation, Tumblegrass ran down the beach towards the water, shouting, ‘Father! Wait for me!’



Sea Gem sadly watched his retreating form. Presently, Blue Bottle came walking towards her, carrying the babies. Tangle was barking.

‘Hello, Sea Gem,’ her mother said as she approached. ‘We’re off for a nap.’

Sea Gem nodded.

‘Stay in the shade,’ Blue Bottle added before continuing back to the burrow.

Sea Gem was alone. She knew it was silly, but she felt hot tears blur her eyes. Ugly blue eyes; ugly white fur! To everyone else she was a very pretty seadog, as delicate and pale as a ghost gum flower. Sadly, Sea Gem thought that she was a freak. After all, everyone stared at her wherever she went. As well as that, she was always missing out



on things the rest of the family was doing, especially in summer.

And it wasn't just her colour that was peculiar. Ever since she was a tiny baby, she had been troubled by daydreams. They happened without warning. She would hear a whooshing sound in her ears and then she would see things, things that weren't there. Sometimes she saw events before they happened, or had visions of scenes from the past. She had even known about her sister Marigold being found as a baby in a basket at sea before anyone told her. She'd seen it one day in a vivid daydream when she'd picked up Marigold's glasses. The vision had





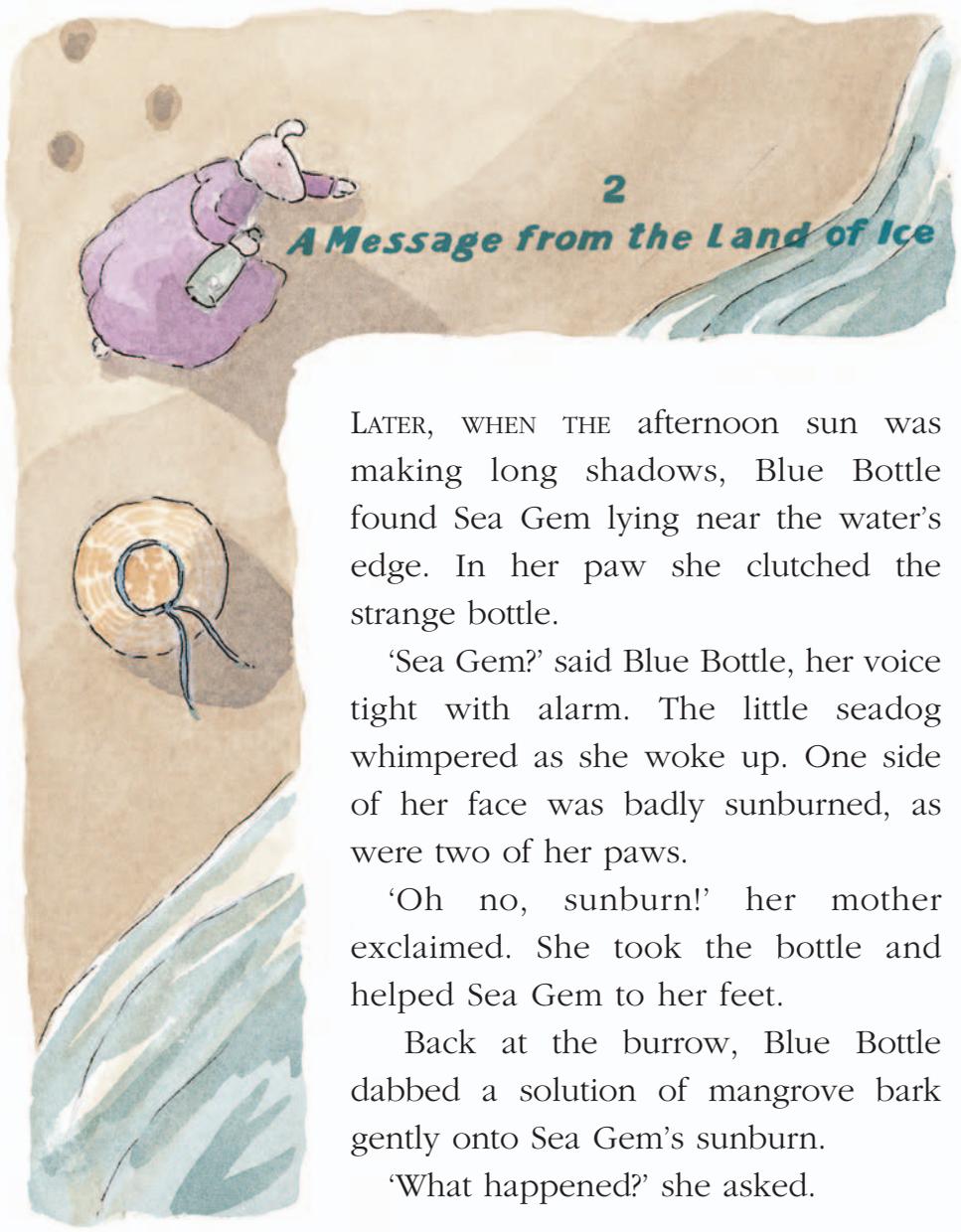
been so real that it had frightened her; and afterwards she'd been tired and drained, and had had to be put to bed with a cup of squink.

Sitting on the beach, Sea Gem was adjusting her hat and trying to banish the sad thoughts when something glinted with a quick flash. She scanned the shoreline. Then she saw it again, lying on the dark sand where the tide had retreated. Sea Gem moved towards it, and when she came close, she saw it was a bottle with a cork in the top. Through the greenish glass, she could see a folded note!

Sea Gem picked the bottle up. But as soon as she touched it, there was a whooshing sound in her ears. It gave her a hollow feeling; a sick feeling as if she were being turned inside out. She staggered as dizziness nearly overcame her. Then, in the very next moment, she was no longer on the beach. This wasn't just an ordinary daydream. Around her, gigantic icebergs sailed silently, their frozen shadows turning the sea dark blue. The air was sharp and as clear as the cleanest thing you could imagine. Then, the vision began to fade. It grew transparent, but before it vanished altogether, a face appeared. It came into focus for a moment and then was gone. Sea Gem, once more, was standing on the beach, holding the bottle in

her paw. In another wave of dizziness, Sea Gem fainted. She collapsed on the sand, and her hat rolled off.





2

A Message from the Land of Ice

LATER, WHEN THE afternoon sun was making long shadows, Blue Bottle found Sea Gem lying near the water's edge. In her paw she clutched the strange bottle.

'Sea Gem?' said Blue Bottle, her voice tight with alarm. The little seadog whimpered as she woke up. One side of her face was badly sunburned, as were two of her paws.

'Oh no, sunburn!' her mother exclaimed. She took the bottle and helped Sea Gem to her feet.

Back at the burrow, Blue Bottle dabbed a solution of mangrove bark gently onto Sea Gem's sunburn.

'What happened?' she asked.

‘I’m not sure,’ Sea Gem replied, flinching. ‘I felt so dizzy ... and then ...’

Sea Gem’s story was interrupted by barking. The rest of the family had returned.

‘Hello, Sea Gem, I caught eleven fish!’ shouted Tumblegrass as he bounded into the bed-slug.

‘Sea Gem has bad sunburn,’ Blue Bottle said. ‘Why don’t you sit with her for a while?’

Sea Gem tried to smile at her twin, but her face hurt to move.

‘Will she be all right?’ asked Tumblegrass anxiously.

‘She’ll be fine in a day or so,’ Blue Bottle replied with a smile. Then she hurried out to prepare the dinner.

Tumblegrass sat on the edge of Sea Gem’s bed. ‘What’s this?’ he asked, picking up the greenish bottle.

‘I found it on the beach,’ Sea Gem replied, trying not to think about the weird daydream she had had.

‘Look, Sea Gem,’ said Tumblegrass, peering into the bottle, ‘it’s a message!’

‘Yes,’ replied Sea Gem, remembering the folded piece of paper.

Tumblegrass prised out the cork and shook the note onto the bed. Then he carefully opened it. It was a hand-drawn picture of a boy seadog. *Lost*, said the curly writing at the top. There was some more writing underneath the picture, but it



was very difficult to read as the ink had been damaged by water. *'Please ... help me ... alone ... Fr ... a ... y something ...'* Tumblegrass read slowly. After that it was harder to decipher, and he held the note closer to the light.

Sea Gem gasped in recognition. It was the place she had seen in her vision. A small picture of icebergs and the words *Land of Ice* were faintly traced on the bottom of the piece of paper. There was another thing, too; the seadog in the picture reminded her of someone she knew.

That night while Sea Gem slept, she dreamed again of the Land of Ice. She saw the icebergs and then the same face. She saw that it was the face of the seadog on the note and he spoke in a strange accent.

'I've turned those cheeses. Shall I see to the orphans?'

It was such a funny thing to say that Sea Gem woke up. It was already morning, and a bright stripe of sunlight lay across her bed. She felt the tightness of the sunburn, but it wasn't as bad as before. How she hated the sun! She wished she lived in a cold place where the sun couldn't hurt her. Sea Gem climbed out of bed and headed for the cooking-snug. As she opened the

door, the loud clattering and barking told her that everyone was already eating breakfast. She watched quietly from the doorway. Nobody turned and saw her standing there.

‘At Choppy Inlet,’ Left Shoe was saying between mouthfuls of seed cake, ‘there’s a ship all the way from the Land of Ice. It’s a steamship.’

‘Hmmm, a steamship, you say. Why don’t we go and have a look today, then?’ said Old Cork. ‘I’d be interested to meet the captain.’

‘Can we come too, Father?’ asked Tumblegrass.

‘All right,’ said Old Cork, chuckling. ‘We’ll all go, except, of course, for Sea Gem. Sea Gem will have to stay indoors.’

‘I’ve been to the Land of Ice,’ Sea Gem said suddenly.

‘Sea Gem!’ barked Blue Bottle, ‘I didn’t see you there ...’

‘I’ve been to the Land of Ice!’ she said again, more loudly this time.

Old Cork and Blue Bottle shared a meaningful glance.

‘Now, Sea Gem, I think you mean in your imagination, don’t you?’ said Blue Bottle.

‘I don’t know, Mother,’ said Sea Gem quietly. ‘It felt like I was really there.’

‘What did you see?’ asked Tumblegrass.

Well,’ she said slowly, ‘I saw the icebergs ... and there was a face. Then I saw the same face again in a dream. He talked strangely.’

‘What did he say?’ asked Marigold.

‘Well ...’ Sea Gem began, looking uncertain. ‘I think he said, “*I’ve turned those cheeses, shall I see to the orphans?*”’

There was a slight pause as the rest of the Sandburrows tried to look serious. Tumblegrass burst into laughter. ‘That’s funny!’ he barked. Then the rest of the family laughed too.

But Sea Gem wasn’t laughing. In fact, she couldn’t even smile. She just stood there silently. She felt so ugly. She could feel her horrible pink and white face growing hot with embarrassment. Her eyes stung and she crossly brushed away a tear.

‘Come on, Sea Gem,’ said Blue Bottle, collecting herself. ‘We aren’t laughing at you ...’ But Blue Bottle didn’t have time to finish what she was saying, because Sea Gem had turned away and quietly left the room.

I know what you’re thinking. You’re wondering why the family didn’t run after her and make sure she wasn’t too upset. But the very next moment, one of the babies dropped a china cup. Old Cork rushed over to clear up the sharp pieces and by the time it was tidied away, everyone had forgotten about Sea Gem. It all might have been different if Sea Gem hadn’t gone to her bed-slug and shut the door.

The strange bottle was still standing on her bedside table, and next to it lay the crumpled note. Sea Gem remembered those miserable words, *lost ... help ... alone*. Her gentle heart was

saddened, as she felt alone too. Sea Gem was frightened to touch the sorrowful letter, but she was drawn to it like an insect to a candle flame. She reached out and picked it up. The whooshing sound roared in her ears and once again she was in the Land of Ice. This time, she was standing on the deck of a boat. It had a tall black chimney and made a chugging sound as it moved forwards through an ice-strewn sea. The vision faded and the seadog on the note appeared. His gloomy face seemed to cry out to her. Then he vanished. When she found herself once again standing in her bed-snug, Sea Gem made a decision. She resolved to help the lost boy on the note. She would go to Choppy Inlet and find that boat with the tall black chimney. She would travel to the Land of Ice.

The door opened and Sea Gem jumped. Blue Bottle poked her head through the gap.



‘Sea Gem,’ she said, ‘the others have gone down to Choppy Inlet. I’m going to rest with the babies.’ She yawned lengthily and then added, ‘Will you be all right?’

‘Yes, Mother,’ Sea Gem said, tears suddenly springing to her eyes. Once again, her family had gone off without her. She was always alone! Sea Gem sniffed and wiped her face with her sleeve. Then she realised that the house was quiet. No one would notice if she ran away right now, this very moment.

After a rapid search, Sea Gem found a large duffel bag at the back of her cupboard. She pushed the bottle inside. Her heart began to beat faster as her determination grew. She spied the clothes basket in the corner and had a sudden idea. When she had found one of her brother Driftwood’s old shirts, and a pair of Tumblegrass’ trousers, she put them on and checked her image in the mirror. In Driftwood’s sailor shirt she could pass as a cabin boy. Turning around slowly, she inspected her white tail poking out of the wag. No one would recognise her dressed as a boy. She pulled on a woollen cap and hurried off to collect the rest of her supplies. Sea Gem had to be very quiet so as not to alert her mother. When she was ready, she wrote a short note and propped it up against the squink-pot. *Gone to the Land of Ice*, it said in careful printing, *love Sea Gem*. Her heart banged an uneven rhythm. Pulling the cap down to hide her face, she shouldered her duffel bag and walked out the door.