

CHAPTER 1

Lighting crackled overhead illuminating the hulk of a house.

Odel shivered as the thunder rolled. His dark hair and clothes were drenched. If he didn't move now he never would.

A flash of lightning lit up statues lining the staircase that led up to the door:

flash – a leaping lion

flash – a charging bull.

Odel moved up the stairs slowly, his boots squelching.

Another flash of lightning - a bear – patting its head and rubbing its stomach at the same time.

Odel stopped and looked again as the rain dripped from his face – the bear was definitely patting its head and rubbing its stomach.

He squinted in at the window – the sign was still there. The sign he'd seen yesterday:
Help Wanted.

Odel rang the bell. Footsteps sounded in the hallway. The door opened a crack. A large man stood there in a black suit, a white shirt and a tie that was so tight it almost looked like it was strangling him.

Odel pulled down his hat, and twisted it nervously in his hands.

'I've come about the job.'

The man looked at him. 'Good,' he said. 'I thought you might have come about a ball that landed in the back garden yesterday.'

'No.'

'Never mind, the dog ate it. Don't want to have to cut him open. Again.'

Odel paused. Maybe this wasn't such a good idea after all.

The man led Odel into his study. Thick curtains held out the storm, and the only light was from the fireplace where a small fire in the grate was throwing shadows out. A desk lurked in the corner of the room festooned with papers that it shed like loose skin onto the floor. Two wingbacked chairs faced the fireplace and a low table sat between them. And upon the table, on a tablecloth, piled high on a tiny plate, were biscuits.

'Please take a seat,' said the man lowering himself into one of the chairs.

Odel sat on the edge of his seat, his legs fidgeting, as his boots made puddles on the floor.

'My name is Bilious and I am the owner of this, establishment,' said the man waving his hands vaguely. His hands were large and bearlike, too clumsy to do something like write with a pen, type or use chopsticks.

'And what is your name?'

'Odel, sir.'

'And what was your previous employment?'

'I worked on a ship as a kitchen boy. Portering, making sandwiches....' said Odel wringing out his sleeves.

'Ah the open seas, the wind in your hair...'

Odel remembered rough seas, and struggling to staying upright with his food in his stomach.

'and your parents?'

'Overseas, eeking out a living as guides in Serendip.'

'Now, have you ever worked with.... exotic animals?'

'Exotic?'

'You know, like a mammoth?'

Odel shook his head. He heard a noise like the gurgling of a hungry stomach nearby. He looked round, but saw nothing.

'How about the Giant Rat of Sumatra?'

Odel tried to think, but his mind was distracted. In the corner of his eye he spotted some movement, but he kept his eyes locked with Bilious, as the tablecloth and the plate with biscuits began moving.

Neither of them looked, as the plate continued to move slowly.... and teetered at the edge of the table.

'You know,' said Bilious looking deep into his eyes, 'they say that dogs can smell fear. But they are wrong. Dogs can smell biscuits better,' and he lent forward and pulled a wriggling ball of fur from under the table.

The puppy snapped trying to grab some of the biscuits

'I told you Cerberus...'

Odel stared - the puppy had three heads.

Two of the heads looked crestfallen, the third screwed up its face. There was a momentary pause, and the sound of damp tweed.

'and no widdling indoors,' roared Bilious.

Bilious stood up and beckoned Odel to follow him. 'Congratulations. You're hired. You will now meet the Cook who you will be working for. And you,' he said holding Cerberus tightly. 'It's out in the yard for you.'

Bilious lumbered down the dimly lit corridor, Odel hurried to keep up with him.

'Now your terms of reference – do you have next of kin, just in case anything should happen to you. Do you want anything to happen to your clothes?'

Odel shook his head.

'It will be a six month arrangement, you can have one weekend off every six months. You give one months notice if you survive, I mean if you want to leave....'

Odel nodded. One month was all he needed.

'This is a trial run,' added Bilius.

Cerberus' heads watched him over Bilius shoulder. Odel swore that it was sticking its tongues out at him.

Bilius opened the door to a large kitchen with windows that looked out onto a courtyard. A massive fire place took up one side of the room belching out light and heat. Steel weapons and large cutlery hung from the walls, while a fearsome fridge with a massive padlock stood at the far end.

The floor was made of large gray flagstones and a huge table dominated the centre of the room. Rough hewn chairs huddled round it for protection. A large woman with greasy hair and a hard worn face sat on a chair held together by goodwill and rope. She had huge arms that were blotchy and raw.

'Morning Mr Bilius,' said the woman standing up.

'This is Odel, our new kitchen help, this is the Cook and this is our horrible dog,' said Bilius as he slung Cerberus to Cook.

'Who's been a naughty boy?' said the Cook gently as the puppy made its way towards her, staggering, its tail wagging furiously.

'And Cook, take care with this one. We haven't got time to hire another,' said Bilius, and turned and strode out of the kitchen.

CHAPTER 2

The Cook was a fat woman with threadbare hair that covered her head begrudgingly. 'Oom running out of gas,' she said. 'Put the kettle on I'm parched.' Her skin was red raw, blistered in places, and scaly in others. Odel picked up a battered kettle and put it on the cooker - a huge slab of metal that looked like a stove, mangle and steam engine all in one.

'So,' said the Cook her milky blue eyes looked at him slyly. Her arms were as thick as a wrestlers, and her fingers were thick and badly cut. 'What do you *really* want?'

'I want a job'

'If its silver or gold or cutlery you thinks is around here then you're out of luck.

Bilious sold them things ages ago to pay the bills.'

'I didn't come to steal anything,' said Odel.

'It's not safe here,' said the Cook. 'Things go bump in the night,' she wagged her fingers.

'I'm not scared,' said Odel.

'Well we'll see about that,' said the Cook gripping a soup ladle tightly, as she remembered something, before putting it away in a large drawer by the sink, stuffed full of strange metal cutlery.

'Come on then, let's get a move on...'

She opened one of the cupboards below the sink and pulled out an old smock.

'Dry your clothes out by the fire, and put on this,' she said indicating the smock.

Odel didn't move.

'Don't worry – it won't bite, and I won't have you catching your death with cold.' She turned her back as Odel slowly removed his soaking clothes and placed them over the back of a chair by the fire to dry, and put on the smock.

As he did so, the kettle began to whistle, and then gurgle and the Cook lifted it up, poured a slug of hot water into a cracked mug and flipped in a tea bag from a jar. She swilled it round and slurped the brew.

'Have you eaten yet?'

Odel shook his head. The Cook took down a bowl and filled it from a saucepan still bubbling on the stove. She placed it before Odel.

Odel looked at it. It was a thick yellow liquid, with large chunks of meat hovering below the surface.

'It's cock a snookie soup. Made from only the biggest chicken I could find. I think its chicken. It was a big bugger. Did I mean chicken?.... No, I meant ostrich.'

Odel continued to stare.

'Don't worry - it's fresh. I had to wrestle it myself down the market. Those things don't come quietly. Took me a day to pluck it. Then the gibbles, bubbled through leeks...anyway when you finished put the bowl down for Cerberus to finish.'

Cerberus looked enthusiastically up at him. All three heads grinned and wagged his tail encouragingly.

Odel ate a mouthful out of politeness, chewed and chewed and chewed and eventually swallowed with difficulty.

'It'll grow on you. We never let anything go to waste. Do we Cerberus?'

Cerberus shook its heads in unison.

The Cook wandered over to the sink.

Odel put the bowl on the floor. He held his fingers to his lips. Cerberus's heads nodded then silently battled and squabbled to get into the bowl first.

'Bring the rest of the stuff my boy,' she said over her shoulder, waving at the table which was covered with plates, knives, giant forks, and various spoons and something that resembled a medieval torture instrument, but turned out to be just a large metal toast rack.

Odel struggled to lift a spaghetti strainer as the Cook began to put large pots and pans, huge dishes, and dented plates into the sink as well as all the cutlery.

She turned on the hot tap and let it run until the whole sink was full of soapy water, and only a strange steel outline could be seen amongst the bubbles, like a lurking metal crocodile.

'That'll do till morning. Let the hot water work its magic. Got to get the grease to float to the top.'

She wiped her hands on a blue and white rag that was under the sink.

'I'm going to have a fag,' she said wheezing. She limped slowly to the kitchen door and opened it. Cerberus hurried after her.

'Can't smoke, or widdle in the house you know.'

Odel followed reluctantly.

She led the way through the door and they were in the inner courtyard, a wooden overhang kept them dry from the worst of the rain that was still falling from the dark sky.

They stood in the darkness. Odel could only see the tip of the cigarette glow red and flecks of red in the Cook's eyes.

'So you want the job eh?'

Odel nodded.

'You don't seem over surprised,' she pointed at Cerberus who was busy licking himself all over. One of the heads stared at him, its head cocked.

'It's just a dog.'

The Cook nodded slowly, 'and that it is.'

They remained silent for a long time as the cigarette burned down. She blew the smoke through her nose, and her eyes were as red as embers in the darkness.

'You're a bit of a quiet one. Don't like them too chatty... or too screamy,' she sighed.

'I really did think the last one would last... anyway.'

'Your first task is to guard the fridge,' said the Cook as she limped back into the kitchen, barring Cerberus as he tried to wriggle between her and the door frame. 'In you go,' she said to Odel. 'You stay outside,' she scolded Cerberus, 'you widdler!' and slammed the door in its face.

She moved slowly with a limp and a stagger. 'It's me hip,' she said, smoke erupting from her nose. 'Can't get 'round as I used to,' she moved in a strange up and down motion as she came toward him. 'Bullet caught me,' she said, and guffawed.

Odel gaped.

'Not really, just a story I like to tell the younguns! Now I'm going out. I'll be back bright and early,' she said pulling on her coat and retrieving a large umbrella from a bucket by the door.

'I've left the coals to burn. They'll keep you warm till about three in the morning. Don't want you getting too snug. I wants you to be watching that fridge. Don't let anything at it.' She limped slowly to door and turned.

'You be extra careful they don't get hold of this,' – she pointed to a barrel which was tightly chained, and slippery with grease.

On it was scrawled: '*slush fund.*'

'That is worth its weight in gold.'

'What's in it?' asked Odel shivering. He looked at the barrel.

'Do you really want to know?' she asked.

'No,' he said quietly.

'I didn't think so.'

Odel watched the Cook shut the door behind her, and tried to find the best place to be unobserved while keeping an eye on the fridge. He lay under the table. His eyes felt heavy, and he slowly drifted off to sleep.

Later that evening...

as darkness fell, a huge shadow peeled away from the side of the building and disappeared over the wall.

CHAPTER 3

At 2am there was a scratching at the kitchen door, and whining. Odel dozily opened the door and Cerberus scuttled in.

'No widdling,' said Odel pointing at him.

Two of the heads nodded, while the third playfully nipped him

'Might have a use for you,' thought Odel. 'I might need all the help I can get.'

At 3am the coal stopped burning. The temperature fell until it was too cold to sleep. Odel hugged his legs. Then, he hugged Cerberus who was as warm as a hot water bottle, but snored like an old man.

Its legs were moving furiously.

'Still dreaming about biscuits?' thought Odel his eyes feeling heavy and closing slowly.

He had just drifted off to sleep when he heard something that made him stir uneasily. His mind struggled to place the sound. It sounded like the distant creaking of stairs. Then footsteps... coming closer. His eyes opened slowly and he tried to remember where he was.

He was under a table...

... in a kitchen...protecting a fridge... from hungry...

His mind raced but he didn't move a muscle.

The Cook hadn't left him any advice. Or weapons. Could he use force? A Chinese burn? He had once had that done to him. But can you do that on someone's ankles? Odel was now wide awake. He fought down his terror. And lay flat on his front barely breathing.

The kitchen door opened slowly. Odel could make out some furry feet from way he lay. They crept closer and closer and then they went past him, claws snicking on the flagstones. Odel – his heart racing - reached up to the table top and felt around for a weapon. But they had put everything in the kitchen to soak. His fingers desperately searched until they felt something. He snatched it up and hunkered down into the shadows. He looked at his weapon. He was holding a wooden spoon.

The fridge door opened and light spilled out.

Odel opened his eyes wide.

There was a monster about four feet tall covered in silvery gray fur. Its long arms reached into the fridge rooted around while its other hand shielded its eyes from the light. Its hands fastened round something.

Odel felt his muscles freeze. He couldn't move. But his job was to protect the fridge. And he was more scared of the Cook than the monster before him. But not by much. He rolled out from beneath the table and stood up, his teeth chattering.

'Hold it right there,' said Odel squeakily, pointing the wooden spoon.

The monster froze.

It turned.

Odel dropped the wooden spoon and shrieked. So did the monster, dropping a trifle all over its feet.

The fridge door shut closed and they were plunged into darkness...

For a moment nothing happened. Then, blindly, Odel felt his way slowly around the table, toward where he remembered the kitchen light was and closer to the heavy breathing monster. He tried to keep quiet as he edged round slowly. After what felt like years he arrived and switched on the kitchen light.

The monster stood frozen, squinting in the light, shading its eyes with its paw. And trifle all over its feet.

'Who are you?'

'Who are you?' growled the monster.

'I'm Odel, the new kitchen boy,' said Odel feeling a bit calmer with the light on. The monster had scrunched up its face, shielding it from the harsh light. But Odel could make out grey fur, brown eyes and small yellow teeth. It wore a utility belt slung over one shoulder.

'I thought the Cook had gone home for the day. So I thought a little midnight snack,' said the monster pulling up a chair, sitting at the table and putting on some sunglasses. 'I didn't realise the kitchen was guarded at night. I'm Shetland,' said the monster holding out a paw.

Odel stared at it.

'I won't bite, you're not one of my five a day.'

Odel carefully shook it. It was freezing.

Odel sat at the other end of the table.

'I was a bit hungry. I've missed the last six months of meals. Been hibernating.'

'Hibernating?'

'Yes,' said Shetland nodding slowly staring at him through sunglasses. 'Hibernating. It's a hard habit to stop.'

'I see,' said Odel. 'I thought only tortoises and bears hibernated'

'And yetis'

'Yetis?'

'You never seen a yeti before?'

'No.'

'Well,' said Shetland rubbing his chin, 'that's cos they're probably all busy hibernating.'

There was a pause while Odel digested this. 'How well do you know the orphanage?'

'Well I've been here all my life. I suppose I know it as well as anybody else living here.'

'How big is it?'

'About three stories high, with about one hundred orphans give or take.'

'I need to find one of the orphans.'

'Which one?'

'I don't know. I think I'll know it when I see it,' said Odel.

'Why?'

'It's a secret'

'We all have secrets,' said Shetland.

'Do you know anyone who could show me around? I need to find one of the orphans. It's important.'

'Well, you'll need to find someone who knows this place inside out,' said Shetland mulling over the idea in his head. 'Someone who knows this place like the back of his hand...' Shetland rubbed his paws. 'I know just the person, me.'

'How about someone whose back of his hand is not furry?' said Odel.

'I'm the best there is...'

'Well...you say that but what proof do you have?'

'My father was Noakes the explorer. The best explorer who ever lived. You may have heard of him.'

Odel shook his head.

'He could find anything. An oasis in desert, an identical snowflake in a snowstorm. But one day a blizzard fell on top of him. And he was lost in the snow trying to find a route over Mount Shetna.'

'Mt Shetna?'

'Yep the tallest mountain that the yeti's conquered.'

'Did he die in the snow?'

'Nope. The snow only froze him. It was the snow wolves that ate him. Ate him like a crunchy ice lolly. All I have left is this belt.' Shetland touched the utility belt slung over his shoulder sadly. 'Noakes RIP.'

'Okay,' said Odel, 'but how does that make you any good at finding things?'

'I inherited his nosiness, but not his of sense of smell.'

'Smell?'

'Smell is how you track stuff in the wild. Without a sense of smell you are blind out there. And I also haven't mastered the ability to tell edible from non edible. When the tribe found out of my failing I was sent here. Can't take a bad tracker on a trek. Slow you down. The snow wolves of the Himalayas are always hungry. But I am

fearless, most of the time, and I don't eat people. That's the best offer you're going to get in here. What's your story?'

Odel paused then slowly pulled out a square of paper from his damp clothes. He unfolded it carefully. It was a faded photo. It was of two babies. One was furry. The other wasn't.

'We were twins. My parents were lost at sea soon after we were born, and we were split up and sent to different orphanages. I left as soon as I could, and vowed I would find them...' said Odel his voice wavering. 'They are all I have left.'

'Ok, said Shetland frowning in concentration, 'which one is the monster. Is it the bald one?' he asked pointing.

'No, that's me. My twin is the furry one,' said Odel. 'This was taken when we were very young.'

'So you have no idea what he might look like now?'

'No.'

'I'd like to help you,' said Shetland standing up, 'but helping is hungry business.'

'Hungry business?'

'Well there's all kinds of wear and tear. Foot maintenance. Knee cream. Got to keep body and soul together.'

'You want food? I can't give you extra food. The Cook would notice.'

'But you can give me some of your daily rations. Until we find your twin. Deal?'

Odel frowned for a moment and held out his hand, 'Deal.'

Under the table, Cerberus slept on.

SHORTLISTED ENTRY – The Monster Orphanage by Rohan Agalawatta

Bio:

I am an award winning stand up comedian and have been shortlisted for the BBC light entertainment writers bursary, longlisted for the BBC sitcom writing competition, and had sketches broadcast on BBC Radio 1 and BBC Radio 4 extra. I performed twice at the Edinburgh Fringe Festival. I completed the Faber Academy Writing for Children Course, and was a finalist in the Montegrappa Scholastic New Children's Writer Competition. I've been contacted by a publisher to write an outline for a continuing series of children's books after entering the Winchester Writing Festival Writing for Children Competition. I have a post graduate diploma in broadcast journalism, and a degree in Biochemistry.