

The Day Elena Ate a Wrigglydoop

Elena sat on a large gray rock on the shore of a lake. She was reading a book, a particularly good book, and her mind was miles away. That was why she didn't even notice when an otter swam by and waved at her. When the otter didn't get a response, he swam by again, but this time closer, and flapped both of his hands at her. Elena, however, was still enthralled by her book, and didn't pay the otter any heed.

Now, otters are a finicky bunch, and they don't like being ignored. They love attention, and if they think that they aren't getting enough attention, they get ornery. This otter was no different, and when Elena didn't even glance at him, he decided to swim up so close to her that she couldn't miss him. He swam right up to her feet, dipped his nose into the water, and sneezed.

A big spurt of water slopped onto the land and drenched her shoes. This snapped Elena out of her book and she glanced at the pesky otter.

"Stop that!" she said. Without another word, she lifted her book and picked up where she left off.

This, of course, wouldn't do. The otter thought that he was such a magnificent otter that he wanted Elena to admire him for a very long time, and so he flipped his tail at her, splashing her legs. Elena yelped and stood up.

"Knock it off, you crazy otter!" she said. She bent over, picked up a small rock and threw it near the otter's head. When it plopped into the lake the otter submerged. The water grew calm, and after a while Elena sat back down and continued with her book.

The otter was not yet satisfied, and after a moment he remerged. This time Elena had her eyes out for him, and when he came close she set down her book and glared at him. The otter twitched his long wet whiskers and paddled from side to side. Without warning he slapped his tail down onto the water's surface with a loud—*clap!* A spout of water

jumped out of the lake and shot towards Elena, and she dodged to the side to avoid getting soaked. As fast as she was, the water was faster, and she got hit in the face, drenched from head to toe. The otter floated on its back and made chuckling noises as Elena flipped back her damp hair.

“That’s it! You’re going to get it!” she said, and she jumped into the lake after the otter.

The otter swiftly swam away. Elena dove as deep as she could into the lake and followed the trail of bubbles left by the otter. After a short while she began to realize that she was running out of breath, and so she decided to head towards the surface. But just as she was about to break off her pursuit, a little blue creature that resembled a sea urchin floated past. For some reason the critter looked particularly tasty, and Elena found herself reaching for it. As soon as she grasped it she thrust the critter into her mouth and gobbled it down. It was squishy, a little slimy, and tasted like potatoes with a faint hint of mint.

As soon as she finished she realized what a gross thing she had just done, and tried to figure out what on earth had compelled her to eat the urchin. But before she could think about it for very long, she felt a rumbling in her tummy. Her eyes went wide and she gasped, releasing the remainder of her air in big wobbly bubbles, and she contorted, twisting round and around. In one sudden movement she grew a long, furry otter tail, and her hands and feet curled around and became webbed. She tried to screech but instead inhaled a bunch of water. To her astonishment, doing so relieved her, and she exhaled the water as if it were air. Almost as soon as it had begun, her transformation was complete. She floated underwater examining her new, fuzzy hands and breathing in the clear blue water. She grinned big and wide, and with a yelp she shot off through the water after the terribly annoying little otter.

It wasn’t long before she caught sight of the otter. He thought he had lost her, and so was nosing around in some sea plants looking for

something to eat. He looked up from his search just in time, and the sight of Elena swimming towards him sporting a new otter tail scared him half to death. He sped away and Elena chased him. The otter led her through tall slimy plants, around big round rocks, down into dark cold chasms, and then up to the surface again. The otter shot into the air and took in a big breath before plunging back into the lake. Elena was right behind him, and when she surfaced she spit a stream of water, did a back flip, and dove head first with the utmost of grace.

The otter was getting frantic now, and he swam as hard as he could. He led her deep into the lake, and the light from the sun above slowly dimmed. Soon the otter was just a shadow, and it was harder to follow him. Elena saw something odd and suddenly stopped in her tracks. The otter had disappeared through a screen of some sort of sparkly distortion. Elena swam up to the violent distortion that went from the top of the lake to the very bottom, as far as she was able to see. She reached up one clawed hand and touched it, and it felt much colder than the water she was swimming in. But she was not afraid, and so she took in a deep breath of water and swam through.

She was swept sideways, then backwards, then forwards and in a circle. The violence and coldness of the water she was now in took her off guard, but she extended her tail, flapped her feet and swam through it as hard as she could. Soon the churning water stopped, and she looked back. The distortion was there but she had made it through. She took in a deep breath and realized that she was now in salt water. The sea tasted gross and she almost gagged, but she was still able to breathe it and so she turned to find her otter.

The otter floated right before her, staring at her.

“What do you want, you silly girl?” he asked.

“I want to get you back for splashing me!” said Elena. After everything that had happened to her already, talking with an otter underwater seemed hardly amazing.

“Fine then, but you will have to catch me,” said the otter. “I can hold my breath for a very long time, so it will be a long chase!”

With that, the otter dove deep into the sea, and Elena chased after him. The seabed quickly came into view and the otter skirted the floor, heading towards a dark outcropping of rock. Tall lamp posts with glowing white crystals began to appear, and they lit the seafloor so brightly that there were very few shadows. As the rock outcropping got closer, Elena saw that it was formed into a gate, and carved into the gate was the word *Decapodopolis*. The two of them passed through and the otter led her past large colorful rocks that had windows and doors in them. Elena thought she saw shapes within the windows that were very human-like, but she shook her head and focused all her attention on the chase.

The otter led her up a flight of rough steps, through a red archway and into the hole of a very large and spherical rock. They were now swimming along a golden road, and golden pillars passed by to her left and right. The otter had finally gotten within reach and so Elena lunged at him. She tackled him and the two tumbled through the water in a ball. Elena began to tickle the otter’s armpits and the poor otter laughed uncontrollably.

“That’s what you get for splashing me with water!” she said. The two of them stopped spinning and Elena shook her dizzy head. The otter was still laughing wildly and so Elena stopped tickling him, figuring that she had gotten him good. She noticed, however, that they had come to rest at the base of something green. It was shiny and so Elena looked up to see what it was.

It was a throne, an enormous throne, and it sparkled in hues of greens and blues. But what was more amazing was the creature that sat upon the throne. It had the torso of a man, but from the waist down it looked like a giant crab. It had five, bright red legs, all of them covered with white and green barnacles. The man’s hair was wavy, pitch black and very long, and he wore a shirt made from the fins of fish. In his

hands was a long bit of blue coral in the shape of a horn, and on his head was a crown made from starfish. He looked right at Elena and raised an eyebrow.

“Well now. Hello there,” he said.

Elena stared at the giant crab-man without saying a word. The otter had by now recovered from his fit of laughter and swam up to the crab-man.

“This girl was chasing me!” said the otter, and the crab man furrowed his eyebrows.

“Was she mean to you?” he asked.

“Yes! She tickled me!”

“Oh, well, that won’t do now. Shame on your girl, tickling a poor otter like that!”

“Hey wait a minute,” said Elena, recovering from her astonishment. “That isn’t fair.” She swam up so that she was at eye level with the giant crab-man.

“He was splashing water at me! I was just getting him back.”

“Splashing water at you?” said the crab-man, and he laughed. “What’s wrong with that? I mean look at you—you are swimming in the great ocean, and are submerged in water.”

“But I wasn’t before,” said Elena. “I was on the surface, reading a book.”

“The surface? What do you mean?”

“You know, the surface. Above the sea, on dry land. I’m a human girl.”

The crab-man frowned and turned towards the otter.

“Preen, were you harassing humans again?” he said in a very stern voice.

“Uh...maybe,” said Preen the otter. “I just wanted her to see how magnificent I am.”

“Look what you’ve done! She’s gone and followed you all the way to my city. Now I can’t let her go.”

“What?” said Elena. “You had better let me go! I am a human girl. I don’t belong here.”

“That may be true,” said the crab-man, “but here you are now and the humans can’t know that I exist. If they do, they’ll come down in their sinking ships and steal my golden lamp posts, my beautiful coral buildings, and my starfish crown!”

“I promise I won’t tell anyone,” said Elena.

“Too late! I can’t take that chance.”

Elena stared into the eyes of the crab-man for a brief moment, and then quickly swam away. The crab-man then lifted his giant coral horn and blew into it. Bubbles spewed from the end of the horn in a frenzied stream, and when each bubble popped it went—*glom! glom! glom!*

As Elena reached the opening in the rocky palace, she felt the water tremble. Suddenly a host of giant clams burst through the entrance, opening and closing their shells rapidly, shooting themselves in swift motions towards Elena. As they opened and closed their shells they said, “Glom! Glom! Glom!”

Elena shrieked and swam away as fast as she could. The crab-man laughed heartily and Preen the otter did back flips, and the giant clams chased Elena all over the room. Finally one gobbled her up and snapped shut. The other clams all stopped moving and they sank to the palace floor.

“Ha-ha! What fun!” said the crab-man, and he scuttled with his five large crab legs over towards the clam that had gobbled up Elena.

“Wasn’t that fun?” he asked, but all he could hear was muffled noises coming from the clam.

“What was that?” he shouted, but Elena couldn’t be heard. She began to bang and knock around inside the clam shell, and the clam began to grumble.

“Hold on,” said the crab-man, “be still now. You don’t want to upset your clam, now do you? Just answer my questions by tapping gently on the shell. Gently now! Don’t hurt the clam! One tap for no, two taps for yes.”

Elena stopped thrashing about and the clam sighed.

“There we go. Now, are you really a human girl?” he asked. Elena tapped the shell twice.

“Wow, fascinating. I’ve never seen a human before. Do they really eat small crabs?”

Elena hesitated. She was afraid of what the crab-man might do if she answered truthfully. After a while she slowly tapped twice.

“Ah! Good. I hate those little crabs. They give mighty Brackinthrops like me a bad name. I’ll never be foolish enough to walk into a giant metal cage, no matter how tasty the bait is!”

The crab-man, or Brackinthrop, picked up the giant clam and scuttled over to his throne. He set the clam down and sat in his throne with a heavy sigh.

“All right, if I let you out, do you promise not to swim away?”

Elena gave the clam two very eager taps. The Brackinthrop thwacked the clam with one of his legs and the clam yawned open. Elena swam out as fast as she could and shook herself.

“Ugh! They’re so slimy on the inside. Don’t ever put me back in there!”

“I won’t, unless you give me a reason to. But enough! I haven’t properly introduced myself yet. My name is Crustymaw, and I am king of this entire city. I hope you like it, because you’ll be here for the rest of your life!”

“But mister Crustymaw,” said Elena, “I have a family and friends on the surface. I can’t stay here forever!”

“You should have thought of that before you came into my city.”

“But I didn’t even know you existed!”

“Good! That’s the way it should be,” said Crustymaw, and he turned towards Preen the otter. “I guess you have this fellow to thank for your new life beneath the waves.”

Elena grumbled and stared daggers at Preen. The otter shrugged.

“I’m sorry. While you were chasing me I panicked. This is the only place I knew to go.”

“Well, no sense in losing sleep over it. It’s time for a feast to welcome our new friend! What did you say your name was?”

“Elena.”

“Ah, good. That’s a pretty sea name. I would have preferred something like Bonynose or Saltyfin, but Elena works too.” Crustymaw scuttled over to a big silver bowl that was tipped on its side and resting against the wall. He hit it with his coral horn and a thundering noise reverberated throughout the chamber. Elena had to cover her ears.

Soon afterwards, sea creatures of every shape and size flooded into the palace. Giant lobsters carrying bowls of small black eggs, sharks holding bundles of sea plants in their mouths, squids with strangled little fishes in their tentacles—every sea creature Elena knew and many she didn’t know came in and left food items on the floor of the palace before leaving as quickly as they came.

Then the other Brackinthrops began to arrive, scuttling into the palace in couples and with their children, and they arranged themselves around the pile of food in a big circle. The Brackinthrops came in all shapes and sizes, though most were slightly larger than the average human. They were very pale and each one had a different color of long wavy hair, even blues, purples and greens. They were dressed in shirts made from the fins of fishes and they all had legs just like Crustymaw, but none of them were as big as he was.

“Come my friends!” shouted Crustymaw from atop his throne. “Join me in this feast, and let us all welcome this Elena, a human from the surface, for she has become a new citizen of Decapodopolis!” There

were cheers from all the Brackinthrops and many of them waved at Elena, who blushed just a little. Then everyone began to eat. It was a very messy business. Bits of fish and plant were flung in all directions. The water got a little cloudy from all the food bits floating everywhere, but no one seemed to mind all that much and they ate and talked merrily. Crustymaw picked up Elena and brought her down to the food.

“Here, have this,” he said, and he gave her a little shell filled with fish eyeballs.

“Eww! No, I won’t eat it.”

“Why not?”

“Because it’s gross! This isn’t human food.”

“That didn’t stop you from eating the wrigglydoop.”

“The what?”

“The wrigglydoop. They are little creatures that look sort of like sea urchins and have special properties. If my kind were to eat them, we would grow legs and walk around on land. If your kind eats them, they change into whatever aquatic shape fits them best.”

Elena looked at her webbed claws and she flapped her otter tail.

“I don’t know why I ate it. At the time it just looked like it would be tasty.”

“Was it?”

“It was all right.”

“Well then, how do you know if these eyeballs are gross unless you try them?”

Elena looked at the shell and hesitated. Finally she picked one out and ate it. She grimaced as she chewed but then her face lit up, and she began to eat the rest of them.

“Not bad at all!” she said, and Crustymaw laughed.

“Good! Seafood always tastes better after eating a wrigglydoop.”

Elena began to enjoy herself, and the Brackinthrops proved to be good company. They talked about the different myths they had

concerning humans and were impressed that Elena acted so civilized and respectable, for they had always had the impression that humans were crude and a bit barbaric, only slightly better than the accursed sea giants that were wont to harangue the poor Brackinthrops from time to time.

Just then the ground began to shake. The Brackinthrops stopped eating and glanced at each other nervously.

“Oh no, not again,” said Crustymaw. There was a sudden bang and everything within the round stone palace began to float aimlessly. The palace spun round and around about them and the Brackinthrops screamed and clung to each other. When the palace finally stopped spinning and things began to settle, Elena heard a loud, booming laugh coming from outside.

“Grab your spears lads!” called Crustymaw, and he and the male Brackinthrops ran around, trying to find their spears.

“What was that? What happened?” asked Elena. Preen the otter swam up and hid under her armpit.

“It’s the sea giants!” he said, and he shivered miserably. “They kicked the palace and we went for a tumble. Now they want to stomp us!”

“Why are they attacking the Brackinthrops?”

“The sea giants are notoriously territorial, and they can’t stand to see other creatures living in what they consider to be ‘their’ seas. They dine on whales for all their meals and they spend their days stomping on sharks and octopuses and eels! They hate Crustymaw with a vengeance because he is the only one who has been able to stand up to them. Now they’re here to finish us all off!”

The men had found their spears and were arranged below the exit hole, which was now positioned above them.

“Stab at their knees boys, take out their knees! If we can get them to topple then they can’t get back up. Are you ready?”

“Ready!” they all called, and then with a flurry of moving crab feet, the Brackinthrops all swam up through the hole.

“Let me help!” called Elena, swimming over to Crustymaw.

“No, stay in here. I don’t want any harm to come to our newest citizen.”

“But I can help you! I’m very fast,” said Elena, but Crustymaw shivered in rage.

“This is not the time for games! You otters are helpless creatures. Don’t get in the way!”

“I’m not an otter,” said Elena. “I’m a human girl.”

“Just as worthless in a scrape,” said Crustymaw coldly, and he left the palace to fight the sea giants.

“Fine! Be that way,” called Elena after him. “I only wanted to help.” She left the palace and began to swim for the surface. Preen the otter followed her and the two swam as fast as they could go. She saw the sea giants for the first time, and they were enormous. They dwarfed the Brackinthrops, who didn’t even reach halfway to the giants’ knees. There were five giants, and they had rough, angular features, almost as if they had been chiseled from stone. They wore the broken hulls of ancient ships as pants, which was a very peculiar sight, almost as if they were wearing big wooden kilts. Their heads were completely shaven, though they had long blue beards that were braided in twisting patterns, and intertwined within were the bones of sharks and whales. They did not have eyelids and stared at the Brackinthrops with cold, evil eyes, and they lifted their legs to stomp on them. Elena saw Crustymaw and his men with their spears, stabbing at the giants’ knees, and though it seemed to annoy them, it certainly didn’t do enough harm to take them down.

“Poor Crustymaw!” said Preen, and Elena stopped. She looked on at the battle and sighed.

“I promised that I wouldn’t leave,” she said, “but I didn’t promise that I wouldn’t help!”

She swam as fast as she could towards the fight, and Preen followed close behind. As she got closer she could hear the sounds of the battle. The Brackinthrops were exhausted, having done everything they could to fell just one of the giants, but the giants remained unmoved and they laughed evil laughs that reverberated throughout the sea. Elena and Preen reached the giant that Crustymaw was currently fighting and began to swim around its head. The giant stopped fighting the Brackinthrops and began to grunt in displeasure.

“What are you doing?!” shouted Crustymaw. “Get out of there, or you will be smushed!” Elena just ignored him. The giant began to wave his arm around, as if shooing away pesky flies, but his arm was so big and slow that it in no way could match Elena’s speed. The giant twisted and turned around, terribly frustrated with the annoying otters buzzing around his face, and he completely ignored the Brackinthrops. Elena landed on the giant’s nose, and the giant looked at her cross-eyed.

“Hello there,” she said, and she waved at the giant. The giant furrowed its brow and lifted its great arm. He balled up his fist and aimed it right at Elena, hoping to smash her into jelly. But Elena saw the blow coming, and it was such a slow blow that she waited until it was about to hit her before she swam out of harm’s way.

The giant hit himself in the nose and Elena heard a loud—*crunch!* The giant’s head tilted backwards and he was thrown off-balance. He bellowed as he fell and when he hit the sea floor, it was as if a thunderstorm had struck undersea. A cloud of silt rushed out from under him, and Elena was temporarily blinded. When the silt finally settled, the other giants stared at their friend stupidly while the fallen giant struggled in vain to get up.

The Brackinthrops cheered, and the sound frightened the other four giants. They turned and fled into the darkness. The Brackinthrops

leapt upon the felled giant and gloated over him, for try as he might, he was not able to right himself and stand to his feet.

Elena and Preen swam down towards the surface. Many of the Brackinthrops hugged each other and danced around, but Crustymaw came towards Elena wearing a sheepish grin.

“It appears I owe you an apology,” he said. “I underestimated you Elena, and if not for you, this giant would have never fallen. Can you forgive me for being so mean to you earlier?”

“Hmmm,” said Elena, scratching her chin. “I suppose. But only if you let me leave and go home.”

Crustymaw smiled big.

“After this, it seems that you have earned it. I now have complete faith that you won’t tell anyone about me and my little city. Here,” he said, and he took off his crown made from starfish and handed it to her. It was too big to wear as a crown, so Elena draped it around her neck like a necklace. “Take this as a token of my appreciation.”

“I will,” said Elena, “and thank you very much!”

The giant muttered something in a low, booming voice, but it sounded more like a plea than anything. The Brackinthrops just laughed and a few began to jump on the giant’s stomach.

“What will you do with the giant?” asked Elena. Crustymaw smiled and his eyes gleamed.

“Oh, I have a few ideas,” he said. “A few good ideas.” He began to laugh, and it wasn't a very kind one.

“I don’t want to know, do I?”

“Nope.”

Elena waved and turned to leave, but Crustymaw grabbed her arm.

“Before you go, take these also,” he said, and he reached into his shirt made from the fins of fishes. He retrieved a small pouch and handed it to her. “There are so many wrigglydoops in this pouch that you should be able to return as often as you’d like. Eat one to grow legs and

another to revert to your otter form. Do be careful Elena, and visit us often! You will always be welcome.”

“I will, and thank you! Good luck fighting the giants, and I’ll return soon!”

Crustymaw waved as Elena swam off with Preen close beside her. They retraced their steps and when Elena swam through the sparkling distortion, she breathed in the fresh water and was greatly relieved, for it tasted much better.

“That was more fun than I’ve had in a long while!” said Preen as they approached the shore where Elena had sat reading on her big gray rock. “Did you see how we confused those giants? It was amazing!”

“It sure was,” said Elena. “I hope those crab-men learned their lesson. Sometimes the smaller things are more useful than the bigger ones.”

Elena had reached her rock and she turned to face Preen.

“Well, good bye. It was fun chasing you, but don’t splash water on me anymore!”

“Come swim with me again very soon!” said Preen, and Elena promised that she would. She reached into Crustymaw’s pouch, which was really more like a bag to her, and pulled out a blue, spiny wrigglydoop. She gobbled it down, but this time it tasted like lemon cake and carrots. Instantly she began to transform. She felt her tail shrink away and disappear, and her clawed, webbed feet and hands began to stretch and grow, and soon her human features had returned. She suddenly felt like she was out of breath, and she surfaced as fast as she could and gasped. She coughed and hacked as she crawled out of the lake and onto land, and then she sat on the grassy beach in order to catch her breath.

When she had recovered she sat up and looked out across the lake. Preen was floating in the water nearby and he waved. She waved back, and then Preen slapped his tail down on the water surface,

drenching Elena from head to toe. He laughed, a jittering, cackle of a laugh, and dove into the lake.

Elena sighed and stood to her feet. She shook her head and wiped the wrinkles out of her clothes. Then she walked over to her big gray rock, sat down and picked up her book.

“Now,” she said. “Where was I?”