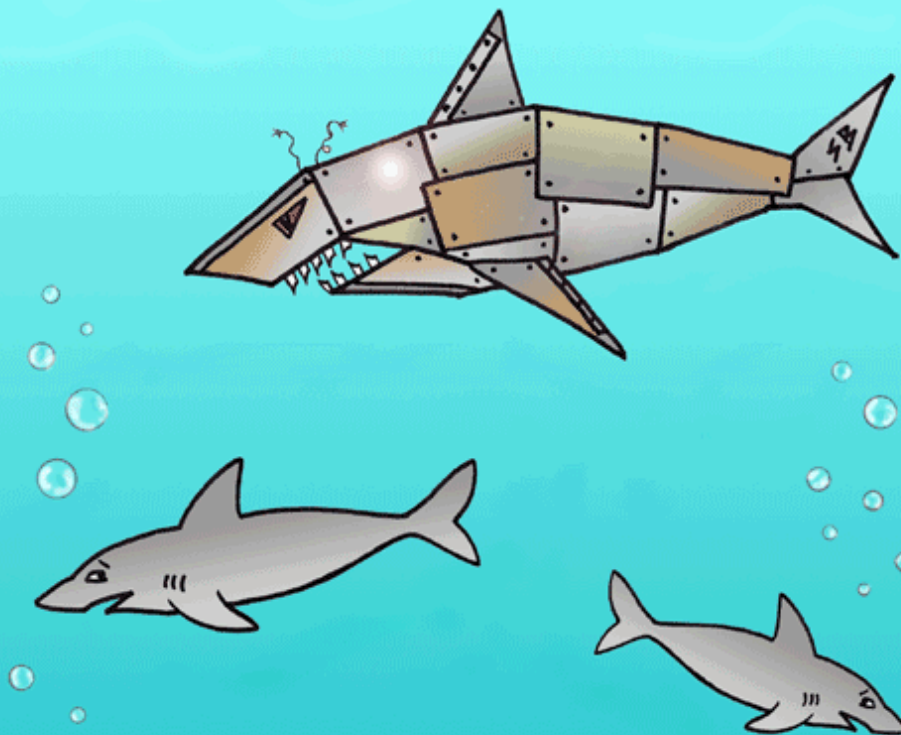


Sharkbiter



Emma Laybourn

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Chapter One

The sea was in a happy mood.

It played see-saw with Fergus the fisherman, bouncing him up and down in his little boat.

It played follow-my-leader with silver shoals of fish darting through the waves.

And on the beach, it chased the children and threw foam at them like custard pies.

Watching the children, Fergus shook his head.

“It’s such a shame they’ve only half the beach to play on,” he said. “The stony half, at that!”

For the children’s side of the beach was made of pebbles. The sea tossed them around in an endless, clattering game of marbles.

On the other side of the beach, soft sand was heaped like golden pillows and duvets. But a fence of spiky railings bristled all around it. Children weren’t allowed on that side. It belonged to Mr McBlistter, the millionaire.

Mr McBlistter had a house as pink as a peach and as grand as a palace. It had gilded galleries, sumptuous cellars and a posh patio beside a huge, square swimming pool. On the drive sat a thin black sports car like a giant earwig.

Two of the children peered longingly through the fence at the deep, soft sand where Mr McBlistter lay sunbathing.

“I wish that was our beach,” sighed Will. “I do miss having sand.”

“Me too. Remember the sandcastles we used to make?” asked his sister Jessie.

“With towers and moats and tunnels,” said Will.

Mr McBlistter heard them. He sat up and shook his fist.

“Go away!” he yelled. “This is my beach!”

“Please can we have some sand?” asked Will. “Just a bucketful?”

“Certainly not,” snapped Mr McBlistter. “It’s mine.”

“It’s not your sand!” Jessie said indignantly. “It used to be on our beach – until you shovelled it all up with a bulldozer one night. You stole our sand!”

“Did not,” said Mr McBlistar. “A storm blew it over to my side. Now go away.” He stuck his tongue out and lay down again.

“There wasn’t any storm!” said Will, but Mr McBlistar had his fingers in his ears.

“Never mind,” said Jessie. “At least he can’t steal the sea. That’s everyone’s. Come on!”

With a chant of “ouch, ouch, ouch,” they ran back over the pebbles. Soon they were playing leapfrog with the waves.

But out in his boat, Fergus the fisherman was worried. He scanned the ocean with a frown and listened to the gulls’ alarms.

Then he saw... trouble.

A long, sharp fin was slicing through the water like a knife.

“Shark!” yelled Fergus. “SHARK!”

The children all dashed and splashed to the shore in a hurry. They looked back and gasped.

Dozens of grey fins tore up the sea. Sharks lunged through the waves, snapping up fish with teeth as sharp as broken glass.

One tried to chew Fergus’s boat. He banged it on the nose with his oar, and quickly rowed to land.

The children hugged themselves, silent and shivering.

“Why did they have to come here?” wailed Jessie.

“They’ve come to eat,” said Fergus. “These are hungry young sharks. They’re hunting fish. When they’ve had enough, they’ll go away again.”

Mr McBlistar shouted over the fence. “You’re a fisherman, Fergus! You go and catch those sharks!”

But Fergus shook his head. “Sharks are too big. And there are too many.”

“It looks like every single shark for miles around is here!” fumed Mr McBlistar.

“No. Not every shark,” said Fergus. “Not Old White.”

“Who’s Old White?” asked Will.

“He’s the biggest, oldest shark of all. I’d love to see him, but I never have,” sighed Fergus. “He doesn’t come into the bay. He stays far out to sea.”

“I wish they’d all stay away!” grumbled Mr McBlister. “Those sharks are spoiling my view! If you won’t do anything about it, then I will. I’ll sort them out.”

He marched over to his sports car and jumped in.

“I’ll show those sharks a thing or two!” he yelled. With a dreadful screech of tyres and a stinking cloud of smoke, he sped away.

Chapter Two

For the next three days, nobody swam in the sea except the sharks. They did not play with the sea: they slashed it with their sharp grey fins. The sea grew restless and bad-tempered.

Every morning, Jessie and Will sat on the rocky shore, gazing hopefully out across the bay. And every day they saw the sharks’ fins carving up the ragged water.

Then Mr McBlister’s ear-wig of a car returned and pulled up with a strangled squeal of brakes.

Will and Jessie stared. Behind the car was a trailer: and on the trailer, tied down with long ropes, lay a fish.

But this was no ordinary fish. Instead of scales, its sides were made of thick steel plates. Instead of fins, it had vicious iron blades thrusting from its back.

Two wire antennae curled from its head: its metal tail hung over the end of the trailer. It was bigger than Mr McBlister’s car.

“What is it?” whispered Will.

Mr McBlistler grinned. “Meet Sharkbiter!”

Pulling a black box from his pocket, he twiddled at a row of knobs.

The wire antennae twitched. Two tin eyelids opened to reveal red, glassy eyes.

The iron fins quivered. The great fish began to thrash around on the trailer, snapping at the air with metal teeth.

“Sharkbiter?” said Fergus doubtfully.

“I hired the best engineers to build it! I made them work night and day, till it was finished!” bragged Mr McBlistler.

“Very nice,” said Fergus politely. He didn’t like the look of it at all.

“But what’s it for?” asked Will.

“For biting sharks, of course! Just watch this.”

Mr McBlistler towed the trailer to the edge of the sea. He cut the ropes and Sharkbiter slid down into the waves.

Mr McBlistler twiddled the knobs on his box. “Go get ’em, Sharkbiter!” he shouted.

With barely a splash, the metal fish began to swim. It moved very fast, its tail beating at the water like a whip. It headed out to sea, where the sharks were circling; and it dived.

For a moment, nothing changed. Then the sea around the sharks began to swirl and seethe, as if terrible, violent things were happening underwater.

“Go, Sharkbiter!” yelled Mr McBlistler.

“Go, Sharkbiter!” echoed the children.

“Shut up!” he snarled. “It’s mine.”

The children could see a flock of grey fins racing through the waves. The sharks were swimming out to sea as fast as they could manage. Behind them, the glittering fin of Sharkbiter zigzagged through the water like a swishing sword.

“You see?” cried Mr McBlistter. “All the sharks are leaving – thanks to Sharkbiter!” Putting the box in his pocket, he swaggered off to his peach palace.

Will and Jessie stared at Sharkbiter’s shiny metal fin, gliding to and fro, alone on the uneasy sea.

“Is it safe to swim now?” Will asked Fergus. “Have all the sharks really gone?”

“I’ll go and check,” said Fergus. He climbed into his boat, and rowed out to take a look.

There wasn’t a shark to be seen. Fergus leaned over the side and peered down into the water. A long, lean shape came streaking towards him like a torpedo – Sharkbiter.

BANG! went Sharkbiter’s nose on the boat. Fergus almost fell out.

BANG! Sharkbiter rammed the boat again, so that it rocked wildly. Sharkbiter’s gleaming head reared up from the waves. The glassy eyes glittered. Fergus saw that the wire antennae were both broken.

He tried to push Sharkbiter away with an oar.

CRUNCH! went the metal teeth, as the oar turned into splinters. Fergus grabbed the other oar and paddled back to land.

“Well? Is it safe?” asked Jessie.

“Not yet!” panted Fergus. “Not until Mr McBlistter switches off that Sharkbiter!”

“Mr McBlistter! Mr McBlistter! Switch off Sharkbiter!” Jessie cried. “We want to swim!”

Mr McBlistter came on to his balcony wearing diamond-studded swimming-trunks.

“All right!” he grunted. “But *I’m* swimming first.” He twiddled the knobs on his black box, and frowned. “That’s funny. The controls aren’t working!”

Sharkbiter still sped through the waves, teeth snapping.

“Must be water in the works,” grumbled Mr McBlistter. “He won’t switch off.”

“But you’ve got to turn him off!” cried Will.

“We can’t go in the sea unless you do!” wailed Jessie.

“I don’t care,” said Mr McBlistar. “I’ve got a pool. Go away and play with the pebbles.” And he dived into his swimming pool.

The children stood dejected. They couldn’t build castles out of pebbles. There wasn’t enough sand to fill a thimble.

And they couldn’t play with the sea – for out there lurked Sharkbiter.

Chapter Three

When the young sharks got munched and crunched by Sharkbiter’s steel teeth, they fled in panic. They swam away at full speed and escaped back to the deep ocean.

There, in the rolling green fields of the sea, lived the biggest shark of all: Old White.

Old White never came to shore. He stayed in the wide, wild, open sea. He basked on the rocking hammocks of the waves, and dozed in the rusty bones of a shipwreck on the soft seabed.

He watched the whales and tasted the wind and listened to the dolphins’ song. He smelt the rumours wafting through the water.

And he smelt... trouble.

Wounded sharks darted past him in a flurry of blood and fear. They would not stop, but raced away.

Old White was curious. Why were they so scared? What could possibly scare a shark?

He decided to find out. For the first time in many years, he left the deep ocean and swam into the bay.

The water smelt of blood, and oil, and iron. There were no sharks here: there were no fish at all. The sea was empty.

Then Old White saw a shadow underwater. It sped towards him like a bullet. The water surged around it.

It was Sharkbiter.

Old White was big; but Sharkbiter was bigger. Sharkbiter charged at him with open jaws, and Old White felt iron teeth tear at his skin.

No shark had dared attack Old White for many years. He was taken by surprise. But when he tried to bite back, he couldn't. His teeth slid painfully off Sharkbiter's metal sides.

Sharkbiter crashed and clashed his iron jaws. The water frothed around him furiously. As Old White twisted, trying to get away, Sharkbiter followed, snapping.

Old White veered round frantically. He swerved this way and that, but he could not shake off Sharkbiter.

So he headed back to the deep ocean. Far out he swam, and then dived down, down, right to the bottom of the sea. As the green gloom turned to midnight darkness, at last he left Sharkbiter far behind.

Old White stopped there, safe in the cold and dark, to think.

He was shaken. He had never come across anything like Sharkbiter before. He'd only just escaped!

Old White feared no other creature, neither giant squid nor vast blue whale: but he knew now why the sharks were scared of Sharkbiter.

He couldn't kill Sharkbiter. No shark could kill an enemy of steel.

What could he do? Maybe all the sharks together could drive Sharkbiter away. But that would just send him to a different part of the sea; and he might come back. It wouldn't get rid of him.

No. It would take something much, much bigger than a shark to defeat Sharkbiter. But what?

Old White swam wearily to his rusty wreck on the sea bed. Lying on its rotting decks, he brooded.

Down in the hold, he heard the giant squid unwind its curling tentacles. A giant squid was bigger than a shark, he thought....

But tentacles would be no match for Sharkbiter's iron teeth.

Far above him, Old White heard the mournful crooning of the vast blue whale calling to her daughter.

She was the biggest creature in the sea. Surely a whale could tackle Sharkbiter?

Old White shook his head reluctantly. The whale couldn't tackle anything except the tiniest shrimps. Huge as she was, she had no teeth.

The sea was for animals to live in, not for metal monsters. With Sharkbiter there, it wasn't safe for anyone.

Sharkbiter had to go. But how?

Old White heard a school of distant dolphins whistling a warning. He felt the deep sea stir around him; and the shudder of nervous waves.

Perhaps something would come along...

So Old White watched, and waited.

Chapter Four

Fergus could no longer fish. There were no fish left in the bay in any case – they were either dead or fled. Sharkbiter's fin knifed through the waves alone.

The sun glared down like an angry eye. Along the horizon, heavy purple clouds were gathering.

"Storm coming," Fergus muttered.

The sea was dark and oily and bad-tempered. It had had no-one to play with for too long. The children dared not swim, though they were panting with the heat.

Will and Jessie ouched across the pebbles to Mr McBlisters fence.

“Mr McBlisters!” called Will. “Please can we go in your swimming-pool? Its so hot!”

“Buzz off!” growled Mr McBlisters.

There was a distant rumble. Far out to sea, the purple clouds began to turn to black.

“Big storm coming,” Fergus muttered.

“Mr McBlisters!” Jessie called. “Please can we play on your nice cool sand?”

“Buzz off!” snarled Mr McBlisters.

Fergus felt a cold breath sweep across the shore. The black cloud swelled, shutting out the sun. Lightning flickered deep inside it.

Then Fergus saw something that made his hair stand on end. A finger of black cloud reached slowly down towards the sea.

“Its a tornado!” shouted Fergus. “Get under cover!”

“Can we come in your house, Mr McBlisters?” cried the children. “Can we hide in your cellar?”

“Buzz off!” roared Mr McBlisters. He hurried down to the cellar underneath his peach palace, and locked himself in. Huge drops of rain began to fall.

The children ran, with the rain chasing them and the wind beating their backs. They ran to their own homes, while Fergus scuttled into the boathouse and listened to the raindrops hammering on the roof.

Old White heard the rain too, as it splashed into the sea. Swimming to the surface, he looked up at the black cloud that brooded low over the water. He saw the huge, dark finger of wind that pointed at the waves.

Every other fish was diving deep until the storm was safely past.

Old White did not dive deep. It was time to go hunting – for Sharkbiter.

He swam towards the bay. Fronds of lightning flickered overhead.

Thunder growled, and the waves crashed angrily in answer.

Sharkbiter was cruising up and down, looking for sharks to bite. As soon as his glassy red eyes spotted Old White, he sped towards him.

Old White waited until Sharkbiter had nearly caught him up. Then he turned and swam for his life, with Sharkbiter chasing hungrily.

Still Old White did not dive deep. He kept swimming, straight as an arrow, right into the storm. The sea churned round him. Huge waves reared up to fight each other. Jaws of metal clashed behind him; jaws of foam gnashed ahead.

Every sense said DANGER! Yet Old White did not stop. He had to lure Sharkbiter into exactly the right place at exactly the right time.

So he hurtled on towards the storm's black, raging heart with Sharkbiter on his tail.

Back in the boathouse, Fergus peered through a crack in the door. The tornado was not a finger any more. It had grown into a giant, muscular arm that reached down to the sea.

He saw the black fist of the tornado clench around the water and pull it upwards to the sky.

“Waterspout!” he whispered. He stared at the pillar of water spinning and whirling over the waves, as tall as the clouds.

And then, in the middle of the swirling spout, he glimpsed a gleaming, thrashing, snapping *something*...

There was no time to stare. The waterspout was heading straight for shore. Fergus slammed the door closed.

Then he huddled in the corner as the storm crashed past the boathouse. It rattled the walls, and flipped off the roof like a tiddlywink. Fergus closed his eyes tight, while the storm bellowed in his ear.

At last its grumbles grew fainter. It tired itself out, and blew away across the barley fields.

Fergus waited until all had fallen quiet. Then, slowly, he opened the dripping door. He hardly dared to look around.

Chapter Five

The sea sparkled as fresh as the morning. The sky was scrubbed clear of clouds. The golden sand looked newly washed.

“Hang on!” said Fergus. “*Sand?*”

Pillows and duvets of sand were softly heaped around his feet, covering the pebbles.

Fergus scratched his head. “Where did that come from?” he said. Then he looked over at Mr McBlisters beach.

Mr McBlisters beach was bare, hard rock. The tornado had swept up all his sand and dropped it on the other side.

Will and Jessie came running out of their house. “Sand!” they shouted. “We’ve got sand!” At once, Will began to burrow like a mole.

“The beach is just the way it used to be! If only we could have the sea back as well,” said Jessie. “I’d love to swim.”

“But we can’t, because of Sharkbiter,” added Will.

Jessie gazed out to sea. She shaded her eyes and frowned. Where was Sharkbiter? The metal fin was nowhere to be seen.

With a bang, Mr McBlisters threw open his cellar door.

“That was quite a storm,” called Fergus to him.

“I didn’t hear a thing!” boasted Mr McBlisters. “I was cosy in my cellar!” He marched out to sit on his balcony.

But he couldn’t. The tornado had ripped up the spiky wire fence and wrapped it round the balcony like a cage.

“Hmph!” said Mr McBlisters. “I don’t care. I’ll go and lie on my beach.”

He marched down to the beach. But there was no deep, soft sand: nothing but bare, hard rock.

“Hmph!” said Mr McBlisters. “I don’t care. I’ll go and swim in my pool.”

He turned to dive into the swimming pool.

But *something* was already there – a gleaming, snapping, thrashing, gnashing something.

Sharkbiter.

Mr McBlister yowled and leapt backwards.

“What’s it doing in my pool?” he shrieked.

“The tornado picked it up and dumped it,” Fergus said.

“Well, get it out! I don’t want it in my pool!”

“Why not? It’s yours,” said Will.

“But it can’t stay there!” cried Mr McBlister.

“Best place for it,” said Fergus. He climbed into his rowing boat. “It’s nice to have the sea back,” he chuckled, as he rowed out across the bay.

There, he gazed down through the water. Fish darted round his boat in nimble silver flashes.

He looked back and saw Will dash into the waves to play tag with the twinkling sea. Meanwhile, Jessie began to build a sandcastle.

Over at the peach palace, Mr McBlister scurried to and fro with a tattered fishing net. He was trying to throw it over Sharkbiter, but Sharkbiter kept chomping holes in it.

“What good luck that Sharkbiter swam straight into the waterspout!” mused Fergus. “Most amazing marvellous good luck!”

Suddenly, the fish around him scattered. A long, pale shadow glided underneath the boat.

It rose towards the surface, and a sleek head slid out of the water.

It was the biggest shark he’d ever seen. It had the biggest fin, the biggest grin.

A tiny, knowing eye met his. Then Old White moved on, and swam out to the wide, wild, open sea.

THE END

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