

by Bernard Beckett

“Right, everyone, how about a quick quiz?”

Ms Ripley was bouncing ever so slightly, the way she always did when she had a good idea. Jason knew what was coming, and he looked across to Maia’s table.

Maia’s hand shot up. He was right. “Will this be for points?” she asked.

Ms Ripley had a points system. She rewarded her students for all kinds of reasons. (Last week, Ra had scored five for cleaning out the frog tank at lunchtime.) At the end of each term, the three students with the most points got to choose a book from the catalogue she kept in her top drawer. They were good books too, the kind that were always out from the library. Jason liked reading, but that wasn’t the reason he liked getting points. His reason sat nearby, and right now, she was looking far too eager.

“Actually, Maia ...” Ms Ripley’s normal, uncomplicated smile tightened into a playful grin. “Today’s quiz is worth triple points. How does that sound?”

“Awesome!” Maia replied.

Jason didn’t bother to look again. He could picture the expression on Maia’s face. He could picture it no trouble at all.

Jason had issues with Maia. She was smart – as smart as him, which was part of the problem. But mostly, it was the *way* she was smart. Jason hated her fake look of surprise whenever she beat him. And he hated the smug little smile that always came after, the one only he saw. Maia thought she was better than everyone at everything. Well, not today.

“To make things more interesting,” Ms Ripley continued, “you’ll compete as teams.”

This was a twist. Already, Maia was whispering to her team-mates – no doubt explaining what she’d do if they lost. Jason looked round his own table. There was Ra, enthusiastic but easily distracted, and Dylan. He only cared about football. Dominic would have a go at everything but wouldn’t mind when his answers were wrong. Maeve – the most reliable – was away.

Jason felt his optimism fade. Worse was to come.

Ms Ripley was looking at Maia’s table. She did a quick calculation. “Megan, would you mind joining Tahi? Even the numbers up.”

Jason barely suppressed a groan. Megan was brainy, but she was the most stressed-out kid he’d ever met. She was bound to freeze up. She’d be no help.

Maia caught his eye, then quickly looked away. Definitely she was hiding one of her smiles.

“You’ll see the addresses for three websites on the board,” Ms Ripley continued. “Each one is about the same animal: the North American tree octopus. It will be new to most of you. You have ten minutes to learn as much as you can. Take notes. Go!”

Jason took control.

“Ra, you read the first site, Dylan the second, Dominic the third. I’ll read all three.” He knew that’s what Maia would be doing.

“What about me?” Megan asked.

“Whatever. You decide,” Jason said. He was being mean but didn’t care. There was no time.



Jason had never heard of the tree octopus, but this made the information easier to remember. It was interesting. Tree octopuses didn't live their whole lives in trees (they were born in water), and they only lived in one kind of tree. It had huge, bowl-shaped leaves that collected water. The octopuses used this water like a paddling pool to keep from drying out. The second website said the tree octopus was endangered. The trees it liked were being cut down for wood – “timber” the author called it.

Jason stored it all away, fact after fact. He reached the end of the third website just as Ms Ripley signalled time.

“Last group to pack up loses a point ... Tahi, that's you. Dylan, device away, please.” Jason shot Dylan his most evil stare.

“Question one. First hand up, remember, but I can ask anyone in the group. Now, on which continent –”

A forest of hands reached desperately for the sky.

“Maia, your hand was first. Tavita, the answer?”

Tavita looked relaxed, and Jason's heart sank. A bad start.

“North America,” Tavita said.

“Correct. Two points to Ono,” said Ms Ripley, plunging on. “The tree octopus is amphibious. Meaning?”

The questions came thick and fast. Jason's approach – insisting they huddle together so he could whisper the answer as his hand shot up – was a master stroke. Other teams dropped away, but not his. And sadly not Maia's. At the last question, they were tied, twelve points each.

This was it, Jason told himself. He felt a surge of confidence. They were going to win. He could feel it.

“OK,” said Ms Ripley. “Hands ready. What's the most common cause of death for a female –”

In his excitement, Jason forgot to whisper the answer. He caught the blur of Maia's hand, waving madly, synchronised with his own.

“Close. Very close. I'm going to say ... Tahi.”

“Oh, come *on!*” Maia protested.

Ms Ripley ignored her. “And to answer the question, I'm thinking ...”

Jason closed his eyes. He couldn't bear to watch.



“Megan, please.”

Megan stood very, very slowly. Her bottom lip trembled. A film of water slid over her eyes.

“Would you like me to repeat the question?” Ms Ripley asked.

Megan nodded miserably.

“What is the most common cause of death for a female tree octopus?”

Megan’s mouth opened. She knew the answer, Jason was sure – but nothing came.

“Sorry, Megan. That’s one point off. Ono are our champions.”

Jason wanted to say something to Megan – something dark and mean – but he didn’t trust his voice just then. And he didn’t trust himself not to start crying. Maia was exchanging noisy high-fives with her team-mates.

But Ms Ripley wasn’t finished. “And now the bonus question,” she said.

Maia’s face fell. “You never said there was a bonus question!”

“No, I didn’t, did I?” Ms Ripley replied cheerily. Something was up.

“But there has to be a bonus question – I’ve been giving points to incorrect answers, and we can’t have that.”

“No, we can’t,” thought Jason. “We definitely can’t.”

“The bonus question,” Ms Ripley said, “worth five points: Which incorrect answers did I give points to, and why were they incorrect?”

No hands went up. In fact, nobody moved. Jason racked his brain, but nothing came. In desperation he looked to Maia, but she was stumped, too. Finally, a hand moved slowly, tentatively, in the air.

“Megan. Excellent,” Ms Ripley said. “You should be given the chance to answer again. E tū.”

Megan stood. Her eyes darted about, looking for a place to safely settle. Her voice, when it came, was small. “Um, I think that ...”

“What?” Jason thought. “Hurry up! What did she think?”

“I think *all* the answers, except what amphibious means, were incorrect.”

“Yes.” Ms Ripley nodded. Small sounds of puzzlement popped and fizzled around the room. “And why were they incorrect?”

“Because the sites you sent us to are fake. The tree octopus isn’t real.”

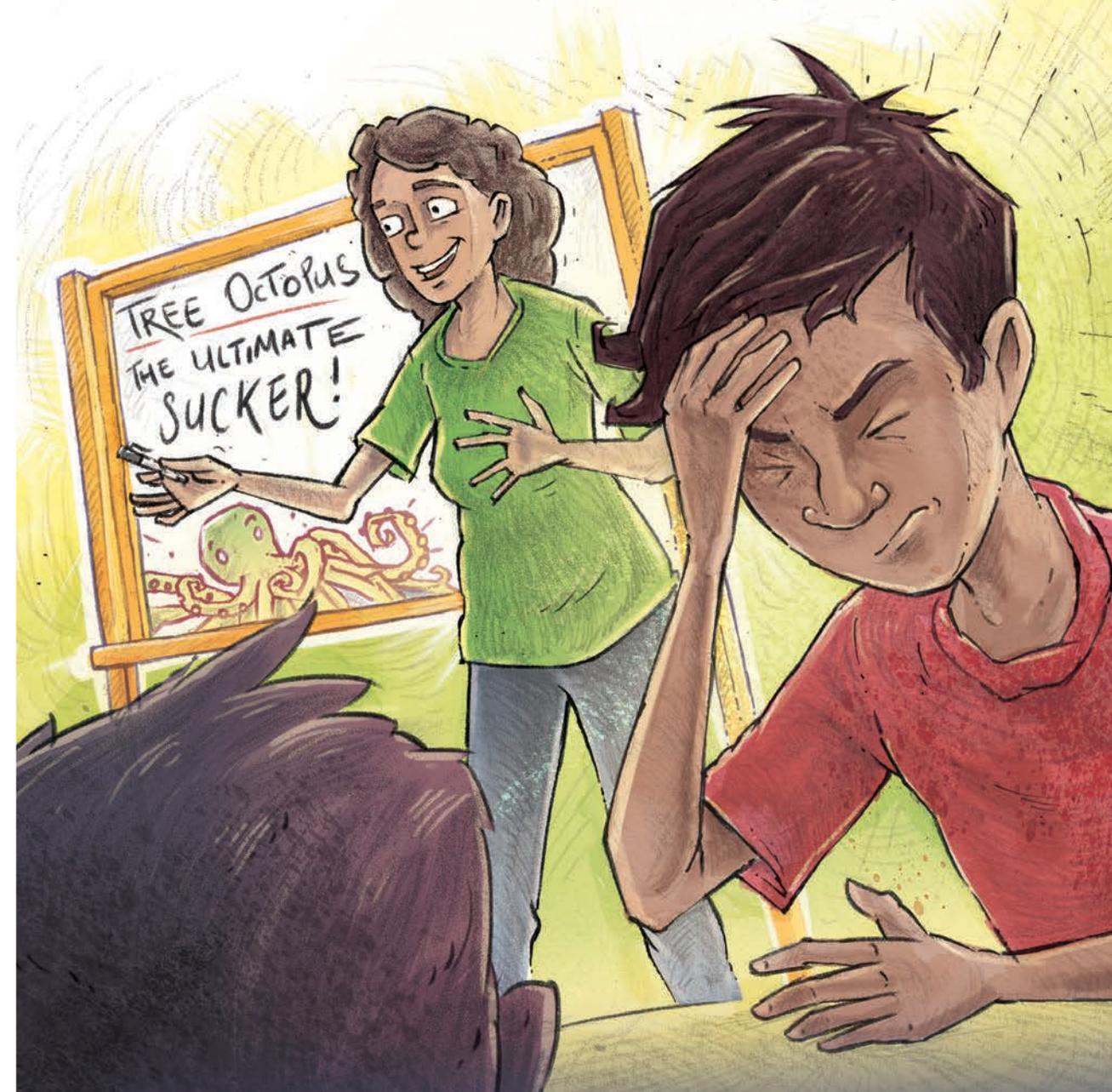
“Quite right. Tree octopus indeed! So what’s the lesson?”

Hoax websites. Ms Ripley had mentioned them last week. She liked introducing new ideas with a bang.

So Jason had won, and Maia hadn’t ... but it didn’t feel nearly as great as he’d imagined. In fact, it felt like the opposite.

He looked back to the board, where the title of the afternoon’s lesson was written in large black letters: Tree octopus – the ultimate sucker!

illustrations by Kieran Rynhart



Suckered

by Bernard Beckett

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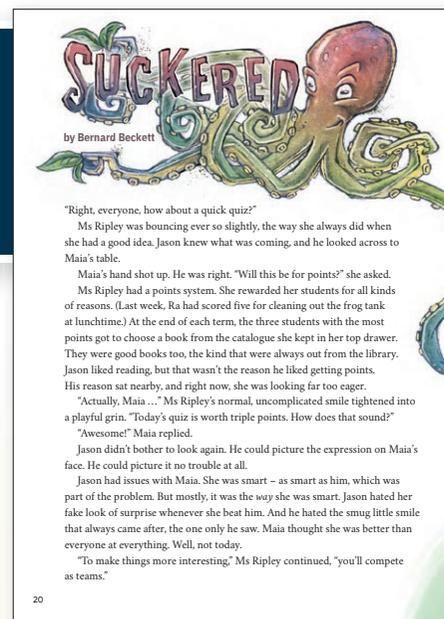
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