

IAN IRVINE



RUNCIBLE JONES
— AND THE —
BURIED CITY.

RUNCIBLE JONES
— AND THE —
• BURIED CITY •

IAN

江苏工业学院图书馆

藏书章

Puffin Books

PUFFIN BOOKS

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (Australia)

250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia

(a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd)

Penguin Group (USA) Inc.

375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada)

90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Canada ON M4P 2Y3

(a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd

80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL England

Penguin Ireland

25 St Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland

(a division of Penguin Books Ltd)

Penguin Books India Pvt Ltd

11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi – 110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ)

67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore 0632, New Zealand

(a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd

24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

Penguin Books Ltd, Registered Offices: 80 Strand, London, WC2R 0RL, England

First published by Penguin Books (Australia),

a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty Ltd, 2007

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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Text and cover design by Adam Laszczuk © Penguin Group (Australia)

Typeset in 11/16.25 ITC New Baskerville by Sunset Digital Pty Ltd, Brisbane

Printed in Australia by McPherson's Printing Group, Maryborough, Victoria

National Library of Australia

Cataloguing-in-Publication data:

Irvine, Ian, 1950–

Runcible Jones: The Buried City

ISBN-13: 978 0 14 330294 0

I. Title

A. 823.3

www.penguin.com.au

Puffin Books

The Buried City

Runcible and Mariam are back!

And they are in big trouble. Lord Shambles has returned, stronger than ever before. Once he finds the lost Citadel of Magic there will be no defence against his evil sorcery.

To stop Shambles, the children must journey to wondrous Iltior and descend to the uttermost pole. But even if they find the Codex of Dreadful Spells, Runcible still has to unravel the mystery of the tainted children, then face his most terrifying nightmare – the sting of the giant scorpion.

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Acknowledgements

Thanks to my agent Selwa Anthony, my editor Nan McNab, and to Laura Harris, Janet Raunjak and everyone else at Penguin Books who has worked so hard and so long on this book. I would also like to thank Angus and Fiona for their comments on the manuscript. Especial thanks are due to Elinor for reading the manuscript several times, and for her thoughtful comments on it. I would also like to thank Simon for the internal graphics and the story images which can be found on my web site.

The Runcie series is for Elinor

ILTIOR

The Continent of Finnitan



0 MILES 500



A decorative banner with a ribbon-like border, containing the word "CONTENTS" in a serif font.

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CHAPTER 1

The Creature in the Chasm

The tall figure in the black cloak looked over the edge, and shuddered. The sheer-sided chasm was unclimbable by man or beast; spikes thick as a porcupine's pelt would pierce anything trying to scale its walls, while an iron grille prevented its dreadful occupant from climbing a rope; yet still the tall man was afraid.

'Master?' His voice went hoarse. 'Lord Shambles? The spell has finally worked – you have a new secret name, known to none. You're safe now; it's time to turn yourself back.'

The smell from the chasm was revolting. Something scuttled along the floor, clawing at the walls; a bone cracked, then he heard a dreadful, squelching slurp.

'Master, you've had that form far too long. You *must* change back –'

The trapped creature scabbled to and fro, striking at the rock, and the sickly-sweet smell of venom stung the tall man's nose. 'You can't, can you?' Raising a brazen staff until the crystal at its tip shone red, he whispered the mighty spell, 'Terror-beast, Transmogrify!'

A splinter of crimson light played across the diamond-studded grille, but failed to penetrate the grey fog below. Another light-shard struck down, and another, boiling the fog until, suddenly, it evaporated.

The creature avoided the light as if it hurt. The light-shard probed towards it and it darted the other way, scratching at the wall with its many legs. Finally the light pinned it to the floor like an insect to a board. As the tall man peered down, mist puffed around the creature, concealing it from his view.

There came a crunching sound, like someone walking on empty crab shells; a snap-snap as of rubber bands; a series of creaks; a gasp of pain; and then a shriek that went on and on until the white diamonds in the grille glittered like needles of frost.

A jangling pulse began, like a drum solo played on saucepans. The mist disappeared, exposing a man gasping in the shadows. Lord Shambles had once been handsome; now he was a monstrosity whose hips and legs looked as though they had been turned to rubber and twisted into knots. His long hair and beard were crawling with vermin and his face was creased with pain lines.

Shambles forced himself to his ruined knees, looked up and croaked, 'Lars, send down my helm.'

The tall man, Count Lars Sparj, lowered a wire mesh helmet on a rope through the grille.

Shambles jammed it on. His coiled moustaches popped out between the meshes, quivering. 'And my staff.'

The brazen staff was let down to him. Shambles struck the bone-littered floor with it, sending out a flurry of sparks, then heaved himself upright. 'Lars?'

‘Yes, Lord Shambles?’ Lars was a First Order sorcerer and a powerful man, but his voice trembled.

‘Nine months I’ve spent in this chasm – nine *agonising* months – and all because of those two Earth brats. I’m going to make them suffer, just as I have suffered. The girl, Mariam, knows a secret I must have if I’m to take their world . . .’

‘The gate to Earth is ready now,’ said Lars. ‘We’ll soon track her down.’

Shambles gasped and nearly fell. ‘And the boy – that puny boy, just twelve years old. His father once stole something I value beyond price, but he’s dead, so the boy must pay for the sins of the father.’ He clung to his staff, grinning savagely, madly, as the jangling reached a crescendo, then stopped.

Lars shivered. ‘Yes, Lord Shambles?’

‘Hunt down the boy for me, for I *will* have my revenge. Find Runcible Jones.’



The Magic Over the Wall

Runcible Jones was slumped at the back of the classroom, doodling in his exercise book, when coloured lights went off in his head like fireworks. Someone was using *magic*, not far away, and the jagged shapes made his stomach churn. It was not good magic.

Runcie sat up so suddenly that his pencil case went flying, scattering its contents across the floor. The moment he'd been dreading was finally here.

'Pick it up, idiot boy, and get on with your work,' snapped Cordelia Bugg, the teacher.

As Runcie gathered his pens and pencils, he realised that the whole class was staring at him. He'd drawn attention to himself, and at Grindgrim Recalcitrants Academy, the worst school in the country, that was a dangerous thing to do.

He had always been fascinated by magic, even though it was forbidden by law. Why was someone using dark magic near Grindgrim? Did it mean that the war was beginning – a war that the government didn't know about and wouldn't believe even if it was told? A war where the enemy,

Lord Shambles of Iltior, attacked Earth with sorcery against which it had no defence. Runcie had to find out, fast, because it was all his fault.

The flashes in his head grew brighter, then faded away. He always saw coloured lights when strong magic was used nearby, though it hadn't happened since he and Mariam had returned through the gate from Iltior nine months ago. He still missed that wonderful but dangerous world, where everything was brighter and more beautiful, and even the smallest children could do magic. Everyone on Iltior could, except him. Yet magic was the thing Runcie wanted most of all.

The door was kicked open and a boy as big as a man sauntered in, sniggering into a flashy mobile phone. It was Runcie's bitterest enemy, Jasper Fulk, the leader of the First Form bullies. Runcie slid down in his chair; Fulk gave him a malicious grin.

'Well?' snapped Cordelia Bugg, tottering towards Fulk on her four-inch heels. She was thin, dried-up and yellow – her hair, her skin and even her teeth. Today, dressed all in red, she looked like a bizarre tropical fruit. 'What do you want?'

Fulk strolled across and scowled down at her, stroking the black stubble on his jaw. Cordelia Bugg took a hasty step behind her desk. He swung towards Runcie, and Runcie wanted to run for his life, but if he gave in once, the bullies would crush him. They probably would anyway, for he was the smallest kid in his class and had lost more fights than anyone.

'The headmaster wants to see little Runcie,' Fulk smirked.

'Runcible Jones!' Cordelia Bugg's eyes bulged. 'What have you done this time?'

‘I haven’t done anything,’ said Runcie. He’d been on his best behaviour ever since coming back from Iltior.

‘You little liar.’ The yellow hairs on her upper lip quivered. ‘Why else would our esteemed headmaster want to see *you?*’

‘To give me a medal for good behaviour?’

Her cheeks went a muddy yellow. Now she resembled a banana with teeth. ‘Stand up, you insolent little wretch!’

Runcie got up, sweating. The headmaster, Doctor Gravelax, was a shadowy figure rarely seen about the school, but he had a nasty reputation.

‘Not now,’ Fulk said.

Cordelia Bugg frowned. ‘I beg your pardon?’

‘The headmaster isn’t expecting Jones *now,*’ said Fulk, bursting with glee. ‘He wants to see him at seven o’clock tomorrow morning.’

The punishment hour; Runcie blanched.

Cordelia Bugg chuckled. ‘You’d better escort him there, Fulk.’

‘It’ll be a pleasure.’ Fulk swaggered out. ‘Have a nice day, Jones.’

Runcie sat down, rubbing his sweaty palms on his trousers. He was in desperate trouble and he didn’t know why.

When the lunch bell rang he waited for everyone to go. He had to find the source of the magic but he didn’t want anyone to see him. However, four big kids appeared – the other members of Fulk’s bully-boy gang. Jud Thorpe, known as The Blob, waddled towards Runcie, his doughy face beaming.

Runcie eyed him uneasily. The bully boys had been wary of him ever since his magical disappearance last winter, but if they ever found out the truth he’d be finished.

‘Goin’ to see the headmaster, *Runtsie?*’ said The Blob.

He had made that feeble joke a hundred times before, but still The Blob snorted and exchanged grins with his cronies: Stinky Morton the liar, who wore the same clothes all term and had a hundred blowflies on his shoulders; the weasel-faced sneak, Ross Pethick, a born criminal who stole from his crippled mother; and dapper, white-eyed 'Shylock' Homes, a kid so sick that even the terrifying Doctor Gravelax avoided him.

'You wouldn't be laughing if you knew who Gravelax is seeing next,' Runcie said, faking a carefree smile.

'What do you mean?' cried The Blob.

Baiting him was too easy. 'He's interviewing all the kids whose parents are criminals,' Runcie fibbed. '*Real* criminals, I mean.' Runcie's mother was in prison for having a copy of his dead father's banned book on magic, but he didn't count that as a crime. 'You're next, then Shylock, because of his dear old granny's villainy.'

'You don't know nothin',' Stinky blustered, lowering a sagging blue mailbag to the floor. It gave off an acrid smell, like bitumen. The blowflies lifted in a cloud, but settled again.

'Leave my granny out of it, Jones.' Shylock's voice was as dead as his empty eyes, but he looked uneasy. 'How would you know who the headmaster wants to see?'

'Magic!' hissed Runcie in Shylock's face. 'You saw me do it last year, but that's nothing to what I can do now.'

In fact, Runcie couldn't do a scrap of magic, though they didn't know that. Last year when he and Mariam had disappeared, he'd merely set off a spell that was ready to go. He felt like a fraud.

Shylock jumped, but pretended he hadn't. 'You won't be boasting in the morning.' He turned away, carrying a lumpy