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For my kind, gracious, lovely friend, Evie Wan.

*Let us be grateful to people who make us happy.
They are the charming gardeners who make
our souls blossom.*

MARCEL PROUST

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The
**GLORIOUS
RACE** of
**MAGICAL
BEASTS**

ALEX BELL

Illustrated by Tim McDonagh

faber



CHAPTER ONE

All sensible people know that libraries are wondrous and magical places. Not only are they bursting with words and stories, facts and figures, delightful glimpses into other lives, but they're also full of cosy corners in which visitors can tuck themselves away for an hour or two. Some might want to read, or study; others might just wish to be quiet for a while, somewhere warm, and friendly, and safe. All libraries are special, of course, but none more so than the Royal Library in the port city of Harmonia. It had the honour of being the largest library in the world, and was home to more than two hundred thousand books, which were carefully looked after by a dedicated team of fifteen librarians.

There was the Head Librarian – a much admired person at the very top of the hierarchy. Then there were two deputies, and below them were three managers,

followed by four higher and four lower librarians. And right at the very bottom of the chain was the apprentice librarian. The one currently in position at the Royal Library was a twelve-year-old boy named Elijah Cassius Dewey Fleet – but most people called him Eli. Getting accepted as an apprentice a month ago had been the happiest day he could remember. It was his dearest wish to work in the library for the rest of his life, perhaps even making it to Head Librarian one day.

That morning, just like every other, he arrived bright and early, before anyone else was around. In fact, it was *so* early that there was still a sliver of pale moon in the sky and the sun was only just beginning to rise. Eli didn't mind getting up at dawn. He liked being useful, and it fell to the apprentice librarian to perform a very important task at the Royal Library – namely, to tidy up after the library bats.

Most visitors never saw them because by the time the doors opened to the public, the little winged creatures had long since tucked themselves away and were fast asleep behind the stacks, or dangling upside down from their roosts in the library's courtyard.

Each time he arrived, Eli paused at the bottom of the steps for a moment, set down his briefcase and gazed up at the building to admire its beautiful marble pillars

and domed roof. From the corner of his eye he noticed a bat swoop in through one of the open windows. Most of them would be back by now, but it wasn't unusual to see one or two stragglers.

The doors opened to the public in exactly two hours, so there was no time to waste. Eli picked up his briefcase and climbed the steps. A pair of marble lions guarded the front doors, and he patted them both on the head before taking a heavy gold key from his pocket and letting himself inside.

The Royal Library was home to many rare and precious books, including the world's very first encyclopaedia, the largest bestiary of magical animals and an ancient scroll containing the original city plans for Harmonia. It was an impressive collection, but the problem with old books was that there was always a host of bugs and bookworms wanting to feast on them. And that was where the library bats came in. Each night they emerged to hunt among the stacks, gobbling up all the insects they could find.

It was an ingenious solution, but it had one significant downside – the bat droppings, or guano, left behind each night. Someone had to tidy up the mess, and that task naturally fell to the lowliest staff member – the apprentice librarian. It was a famously unpleasant

and time-consuming job, but Eli was perhaps the first apprentice in the library's history who didn't mind, and even got a sense of pride and achievement in making everything spick and span once again.

The front doors led straight into the library's famous Long Room, but the dimness made it difficult to see very well that early in the morning. Fortunately, Eli had a solution for this and was pleased that he didn't need to waste expensive fuel in the library lamps. After setting down his briefcase, he shrugged the straps of his tortoise bag from his shoulders and carefully put it on the floor by his feet. He had designed the bag himself. It was somewhat bulky and awkward, but there was no easy way of transporting a tortoise. The bag had to be large enough to contain a plastic tank, which in turn had to contain a little heat lamp, a tortoise cave, a shallow dish of leafy salad and one or two favourite toys. And Humphrey himself, of course. There was even a small mesh window, although this was currently covered with a knitted curtain.

Eli crouched beside the bag to unzip it, and long beams of moonlight immediately poked through the gap. He reached inside with both hands to take out Humphrey – who was asleep in his shell. He set him down on the library's marble floor, and at once the

entire space was bathed in a silver glow. The effect was both beautiful and ghostly. Eli doubted there'd ever been a moon tortoise in the Royal Library before he'd brought Humphrey. They were extremely rare creatures, with only a few hundred left in the world. Their shells shone with the pure silver light of the moon – a light strong enough to illuminate even this large space.

The Long Room was, indeed, long, lined with many dozens of bookcases that held almost half of the library's vast collection – some ninety thousand books. Each case was so tall that a ladder was required to reach the upper shelves. The books continued up to a second floor with an ornate wrought iron balcony running all the way around it. The ceiling had three domes – known as cupolas – decorated with astonishingly beautiful paintings, each depicting one of the three muses. And at the end of the room was the famous Book Spiral – a unique, twisting structure that contained the library's collection of forbidden books – because no books were forbidden in the Royal Library of Harmonia.

Eli loved it when the library was open to the public and some of the country's best writers and wisest philosophers and most eloquent poets wandered its

halls, looking for inspiration and knowledge. As one of the librarians, he was pleased and proud to share it with the public – but he also especially liked this early part of the day when it was only him and these thousands of ancient books.

‘Good morning, Humphrey,’ Eli said, giving the tortoise a little pat on his glowing shell.

Humphrey had been a gift from Eli’s parents, and he treasured him greatly. Slowly, the tortoise’s stubby legs emerged, followed by his head. He peered up at Eli with wise black eyes and stretched his neck out so Eli could give him a chin rub. Then his gravelly voice appeared inside Eli’s head. ‘If you need me, I’ll be in the poetry corner.’

Eli was the only person who could hear Humphrey talk, and this was how he knew that his tortoise had an especial love of poetry. Ancient, romantic, classical, modern – Humphrey adored them all. He’d requested a poetry party for his hundredth birthday, which was coming up in a couple of months, but he was having a little trouble narrowing down the particular poems he wanted read out. So he stumped off to the poetry section to browse the shelves for inspiration. He wouldn’t be able to take the books from the shelves, of course, but that didn’t matter to a moon tortoise. They

only had to sniff a book to immediately know all the words contained inside.

‘Remember not to try to climb the shelves!’ Eli called after him. ‘You don’t want to flip yourself over again.’

‘I won’t,’ Humphrey replied.

Eli snapped open his briefcase and took out an apron, a set of knee pads and a pair of rubber gloves. The apron was rather on the frilly side, having once belonged to Eli’s nana. It was covered in a cheerful pattern of bright yellow rubber ducks all wearing different hats. Fortunately, no one ever saw Eli in his apron, or else he feared he might struggle to be taken seriously. There was no set dress code for the librarians, but Eli always took pride in dressing smartly in a tweed suit and tie. He had three other suits at home, all of which he’d found in second-hand shops. They were patched and mended, and a little shabby around the cuffs, but Eli made sure they were always clean and pressed. It may not have been a conventional choice for a boy his age, but Eli had always thought that a smart, orderly appearance helped lead to a calm and orderly life. He slipped his protective gear on over the top of his suit and set to work.

His first task was to remove all the leather sheets placed over the tables and chairs every evening. Several

of these were stained with guano and Eli set them by the door to be scrubbed outside later. The clean ones he folded up and put away in a storage cupboard, before taking out a bucket and mop, and starting on the floor.

There wasn't too much guano – after all, the bats were quite small, and spent a large part of the night out in the city – but their droppings stuck to the marble like glue, and required a great deal of scrubbing to remove completely. Eli would never dream of leaving even a trace behind, and always put in plenty of elbow grease. People tended to underestimate his strength and determination – in part, thanks to his thin frame, mild manners and quiet voice – but he was surprisingly strong.

For over an hour, he worked diligently, bit by bit over the marble tiles, until everything was spotless. Humphrey's light was no longer required by then because the sun had risen outside and was flooding in through the many windows. The pillars and balcony were drenched in white and gold, and the Long Room was airy and pristine. Sometimes it really felt to Eli that the air was purer here, lighter, easier to breathe. He was never happier than when he was at the library. Apart from seeing Nana, Humphrey and Jeremiah, he would have been quite content if he never needed to leave and

interact with the outside world at all.

He whistled to himself as he dragged the stained leather sheets out to the courtyard to be hosed down. Once he'd finished, he made his way through the rest of the library, unlocking doors and making sure that everything was in order. Thankfully, the bats only had access to the Long Room. Eli shuddered to think how many hours it would take him to clean if they could get into the other areas too.

The next largest space was the polished wooden Philosophers' Hall, with its globes and rarity cabinets and marble busts of the world's greatest thinkers. Also contained within the library building was a manuscript restoration chamber, a planetarium, a music library and multiple cosy reading rooms.

Once he'd opened them all up, Eli returned his cleaning clothes to his briefcase and tracked down Humphrey in the ancient poetry corner. He groaned aloud to find him on his back, his stumpy legs kicking as he unsuccessfully tried to right himself.

'You tried to climb the shelves again, didn't you?' he said.

'I can't understand it,' Humphrey said. 'Usually, I'm an excellent climber. Why doesn't this place have a tortoise ramp anyway?'

Tortoises had been around, in one shape or form, for millions of years. They were one of the oldest surviving species on the planet. This fact never ceased to amaze Eli because it seemed like they had very little in the way of survival instincts. They were wise about things like poetry, but less so when it came to practical matters. Not only that, but once a tortoise was on its back, it was quite difficult for it to right itself without help. Tortoises could die that way. Plus, they couldn't swim, or regulate their own body temperature, or tell which plants were poisonous. They didn't realise that they weren't designed for climbing, or swimming, or jumping. And they had terrible memories too.

Eli scooped Humphrey up and headed to the library staffroom. As they walked down the corridor, Humphrey told him excitedly about a poem he'd read that morning.

'It's called *The Epic Song of Theodora*,' he said. 'And it's perfect for you or Jeremiah to read at my party.'

Eli gave a splutter that he turned into a cough. 'I know that poem,' he said. 'It's very fine, but ... well, it's a bit on the long side. In fact, it's one of the longest poems in existence. It takes more than two hours to read it out loud.'

'What does that matter?' Humphrey replied. 'You

think Jeremiah won't like it?'

Eli said nothing. He was supposed to have had a planning meeting with Jeremiah about Humphrey's party last week, but his friend hadn't shown up. Jeremiah detested poetry and probably thought the entire notion of having a party for a tortoise was a bit foolish anyway, but Eli had still been hurt that he hadn't bothered to come at all. And Humphrey was very fond of Jeremiah, so it was important he was there.

'I just thought you might prefer to have a bit more variety,' he said. 'Rather than using up the whole time with one poem.'

'That's a good point,' Humphrey mused. 'A very good point.'

They settled themselves in the staffroom for a quick breakfast – a peanut butter sandwich, which Eli's grandmother had made the night before. No one made sandwiches like Nana. Not only did she carefully remove the crusts, and put in just the right amount of filling, she cut the sandwich into shapes too. One day it might be a dolphin, the next a train, or a sheep, or a monkey. She had her own restaurant in the Floating Quarter, and also organised children's picnic parties. It seemed like she was always coming up with new and imaginative ways to make food fun.

Today, Eli's sandwich was violin shaped, and when he took his first bite, it began to play a lullaby from his childhood. Hearing it immediately transported him back to being five years old, bewildered and frightened in his grandmother's lap, her arms holding him so very tightly as she tried to explain things in a way that he would understand. Something dreadful had happened and his parents were gone. It was the only time in Eli's life that he had ever seen her cry. And for a while, his bright, happy world became dark and hopeless, but each night there was always that soothing lullaby that Nana sang as she tucked him up in bed. Bit by bit, her love chipped away at the terror and grief and brought Eli back into the light. Even now, after all these years, that simple tune brought a lump to his throat and made a great burst of love for Nana fill up his chest.

He shared the sandwich with Humphrey and then reached into his bag and brought out a little woolly tortoise jumper. When he'd first started looking, Eli had discovered that tortoise jumpers weren't easily obtainable in local pet shops – ordinary tortoises had no need of them, after all – so he had made this one himself. His grandmother had taught him to knit, and he found he very much enjoyed it – and was pretty good at it too.

Strictly speaking, people weren't supposed to bring pets into the library, so Eli always brought a little jumper for Humphrey to disguise his light and make him less conspicuous when Eli put him out in the courtyard. Members of the public weren't permitted back there anyway, and if any of the other librarians had ever noticed Humphrey contentedly munching on a patch of grass, or snoozing under a bench, then they turned a blind eye. Librarians were good eggs like that.

Eli put Humphrey out there now and then dashed to the toilets to check that his appearance was in order. He carefully combed his light brown hair, straightened his tie and fastened it with his favourite tortoise tiepin – the one with the shining opal shell. It had once been a hair clip belonging to his mother. He spent the rest of the day attending to his librarian duties – cataloguing books, stacking the shelves, dusting the stacks and answering queries from members of the public.

These were all things that Eli enjoyed very much, and his day passed quietly and pleasantly, as it always did at work. Soon enough, it was time to lock up the doors, drape the leather sheets over the furniture and say goodbye to the library for the night. He put Humphrey back in his tortoise bag and drew the curtain aside so that Humphrey could see out. As

usual, Eli paused beside the library front doors for a moment and watched the bats swooping about up near the domed ceiling. The books, and the bats, and the quiet, and the dark were all like a balm to Eli's soul. He breathed in the hush and the peace, savouring it, trying to fill himself up with as much of it as he could. Because enjoyable as his day had been, Eli knew that the evening was going to be difficult. What he didn't know was that it was going to be even more difficult than he could have possibly imagined.