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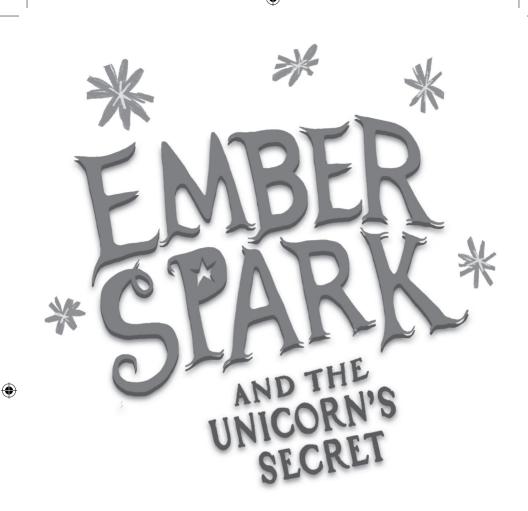
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## ABI ELPHINSTONE

Illustrated by Kristina Kister

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For Georgia, my glorious goddaughter



Grown-ups don't, in general, like surprises. At least not the sort that make them jump and shriek. They prefer knowing what's round the corner. Things going to plan. Zero dramas. But when you're sharing a house with a magical beast, surprises are unavoidable.

Not that the grown-ups living inside Number 7 Manderson Lane knew there was a magical beast living under their roof, of course. Ember's dad, Hamish, and his girlfriend, Sally, had no idea magical beasts even existed. Not an inkling that beyond the seaside village of Slumber there were krakens in the North Sea, a griffin tucked into the Statue of Liberty's fist, pygmy dragons nesting in the roof of the Taj Mahal and all sorts of hippogriffs,

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phoenixes and unicorns scattered about in between. No, Hamish and Sally simply thought that ten-year-old Ember Spark's pet, Forty Winks, was a hamster.

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Ember, however, knew better. She had discovered, after finding him eight months ago on a beach nearby, that he was in fact a nibblesqueak. A magical beast who could glow in the dark, leap huge distances and screech so loudly glass could shatter. Ember wasn't planning on blowing Forty Winks' cover though because she knew that for magical beasts to live in peace, they had to be kept a secret.

But what Ember hadn't anticipated was that Forty Winks would sneak into the bathroom of Number 7 Manderson Lane on the first day of the Christmas holidays and attempt to steal Sally's shampoo.

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Ember and her best friend, Arno Whisper, woke to a shriek.

'What was that?' Arno cried, sitting bolt upright on the top bunk in Hamish and Sally's house. 'Are we being burgled? Is there a fire? WHAT IF IT'S THE APOCALYPSE?!'

From the bunk below, Ember threw back her duvet.

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'This,' she said purposefully, 'sounds like the beginning of an adventure.' She made to grab Forty Winks from her pillow, where he often slept curled up beside her, but was surprised to find he wasn't there.

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Sally shrieked again. 'Why is the hamster in the bathroom?'

'Oh.' Ember's shoulders fell. 'So, *that's* what this is all about.'

Arno shimmied down the bunk-bed ladder. 'Well, I'm glad it's only Forty Winks because I'm really not ready for a burglary, let alone a fire or an apocalypse. I haven't even brushed my teeth.'

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He followed Ember out onto the landing where her dad was pulling on his dressing gown. He had wild red hair, like Ember, and the same dazzling green eyes.

'I'm a big fan of Forty Winks,' he said, hurrying towards the bathroom, 'but I thought we agreed you would keep him in his cage at night?'

'He *was* in his cage,' Ember replied, 'for the first five minutes anyway. Then he got bored so I let him into my bed for a cuddle. He must've got bored again after I'd fallen asleep and gone for a stroll. Unless he sleepwalked.'

Ember's dad squinted. 'Can animals sleepwalk?'

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Arno looked unconvinced but all Ember said, as she nudged open the bathroom door, was, 'If it'll get Forty Winks into less trouble then yes, he can.'

Sally was wrapped in a towel and pointing at the bathtub, her eyes wide with shock. Ember followed her gaze. And there, perched on the rim of the bath by the taps, was Forty Winks, clutching a bottle of shampoo like some sort of small, furry burglar.



Ember smiled weakly at Sally. She liked her dad's girlfriend; she was always up for an adventure – swimming in the sea, finding new bike routes nearby and taking Ember to *The Rumbling Tum*, the sweet shop in Slumber, whenever Arno came round for a sleepover – but, as with most grown-ups, she also enjoyed relaxing – a concept totally lost on Ember. Every Saturday morning before breakfast, Sally liked to unwind with a bubble bath, a scented candle and a chapter of her favourite book. What Sally didn't usually factor into the relaxation routine, Ember realized, was a hamster...

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'How – how did he even get up onto the bath?' Sally cried. 'And is it just me, or does he look like he's trying to *steal* my shampoo?'

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Forty Winks blinked innocently at Sally but he didn't release the bottle, and Ember had to admit it did sort of look as if he wanted to make off with it. Which was odd, Ember thought, because up until now, Forty Winks had shown no signs of being interested in washing or keeping clean at all. In fact, he regularly weed on the sofa and sat in his own poop.

Ember's dad cocked his head at Forty Winks. 'I'm beginning to wonder whether there might be something

strange going on with your hamster, Ember. When Sally and I were driving you and Arno back here after the school nativity yesterday, I glanced into my rear mirror and saw Forty Winks rooting around in Sally's handbag.' He scratched his head. 'Call me crazy, but it looked like he was trying to nudge her hand cream up over the edge of the bag. But then we arrived home and he hopped back into your pocket so I forgot about the whole thing.'

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Ember frowned. She hadn't even noticed Forty Winks leave her pocket in the car. She'd been too busy whispering plans to Arno about how they'd fill the Christmas holidays. For they were Apprentice Vets to Magical Beasts and had been now for the last eight months. Ever since discovering a secret cave further up the coast filled with extraordinary creatures, and meeting dear old Rusty Fizzbang.

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Stonechatter Cave was a short bike ride away from Hamish and Sally's cottage in Slumber – and from Ember's mum's place in the nearby village of Yawn, where Ember spent most of her time and where Arno and his family also lived. But if Forty Winks carried on showing this amount of interest in Sally's toiletries then Hamish and Sally were bound to start asking questions about him and getting suspicious about where Ember and Arno were

biking off to each day. Which was the last thing they needed. Because Rusty required their help more than ever at the moment. He had inherited the job as Vet to Magical Beasts from his ancestors, who themselves had helped any poorly and injured beasts stopping by Stonechatter Cave. But Rusty had been badly hurt a few weeks ago, after a veterinary mission he'd taken Ember and Arno on in the Arctic had gone very wrong indeed . . .

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'He's just a hamster, Dad,' Ember said casually. 'Don't get carried away.'

And with that, she slipped between Hamish and Sally, tugged the bottle of shampoo out of Forty Winks' paws and carried the nibblesqueak back to her bedroom, with Arno following behind.

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'What was all that about?' Arno asked, as he and Ember sat on the bottom bunk together with Forty Winks curled up in Ember's lap. 'Why is Forty Winks so interested in Sally's hand cream and shampoo all of a sudden?'

Ember frowned. 'I've no idea. Maybe he's unwell and having some sort of funny turn?'

'He looks fine to me,' Arno replied. 'Perhaps he just wants a bit of pampering.'

Ember shot Arno a withering look. 'Unicorns may

enjoy getting their hair brushed and their horns polished but nibblesqueaks are above such things.'

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Arno was silent for a moment. 'He could still be feeling fragile after what happened in the Arctic, you know.'

'That was six weeks ago!' Ember blurted out.

But when she thought back to everything that had happened there, it felt like yesterday. Ember and Arno's teacher, Mrs Rickety-Knees, had told their parents that the three of them were setting off on an all-expenses-paid field trip to the Arctic. But that hadn't quite been true. Mrs Rickety-Knees was Rusty's closest friend, having stumbled across Stonechatter Cave as a child, and she had stayed behind to look after the magical beasts while Ember and Arno had gone north with Rusty. Mostly to help him with a neverwhale migration but also, as it turned out, to uncover Jasper Hornswoggle's secret lair.

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Ember shuddered as she thought of Jasper. He'd been one of the country's most dangerous criminals. A man who'd learnt about the presence of magical beasts the year before and had set up a secret organization to track them down and sell them on to individual collectors across the globe. He'd been after Ember, too, ever since he'd realized that magical beasts sought her out for help. They also

came to her aid if she was in trouble because she had a knack for gaining their trust and understanding them. So, it had been Jasper's thinking that he could force Ember to lure the beasts in for him to speed up his operation. Only it hadn't worked out that way . . .

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Ember stroked the nibblesqueak in her lap before setting him down on the carpet. Then she drew out the piece of paper she'd kept under her pillow every night since coming back from the Arctic, whether she'd been staying at her mum's or her dad's. It had belonged to Jasper Hornswoggle; she and Arno had found it in the pocket of his cloak after he'd died. It was an order form for two magical beasts that had never made their way to the collector in question, thanks to Ember, Arno and Rusty intervening.

## **ORDER NUMBER 76**

&x unicorns 1x silver dragon (discounted due to poor health)

SHIP TO: TB on Friday 28th October

'Six weeks have passed and we're still no closer to understanding who or what TB is,' Ember mumbled. 'There's nothing in the library or on the internet about a wealthy individual or organization going by the name of TB. But we *need* information because even though we got rid of Jasper Hornswoggle and freed the magical beasts he'd trapped in his Arctic lair, who's to say that the collectors themselves haven't started finding their own ways to track down magical beasts?' She stiffened as she remembered the cursed nets called doomsnatches that Jasper and his gang had used to steal creatures away. 'The magical beasts aren't safe until we've stopped every single collector from taking them.'

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Arno sighed. 'I wish Dazzle would show up. He managed to help us find Jasper's lair in the Arctic so I bet he's discovered something about the collectors by now. Even if it's just a clue to track down one of them . . .'

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Ember bit her lip. Dazzle was a frost phoenix, a sacred guardian for magical beasts far and wide, who last October had flown from Svalbard to Scotland for the sole purpose of finding Ember. He'd had a hunch that she was the one to help him free the magical beasts that Jasper had imprisoned. Up in the Arctic, he and Ember

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had grown close. Dazzle had rescued her from Jasper's gang and Ember, in turn, had tended to Dazzle's injuries and even ridden on his back. Without the frost phoenix, they'd never have got rid of Jasper Hornswoggle. Yet since returning to Scotland, Ember, Arno and Rusty hadn't laid eyes on the frost phoenix.

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Ember picked at her pyjama top. 'Come on. Let's get dressed then grab some breakfast. Rusty said he'd be off his crutches today so I told him we'd be at his cave to help out by nine o'clock and it's already—'

There was another scream. Sally again. And when Ember and Arno looked down at the carpet, they realized Forty Winks was nowhere to be seen.

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Sally's voice came loud and shrill from the bathroom. 'The hamster's back in here, and this time he's making off with my face cream!'

Ember's dad was downstairs cooking scrambled eggs with the radio blaring so he hadn't heard a thing. But Ember and Arno rushed out onto the landing where they found Forty Winks scurrying out of the bathroom, nudging a pot of face cream with his nose. He looked up at them, mid-burglary, and blinked eagerly.

Ember frowned. 'What are you doing?'

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Forty Winks pushed the cream a little closer to her.

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Ember picked it up impatiently and was just about to slip it back inside the bathroom when Arno grabbed her arm.

'Wait a minute,' he whispered. 'First Forty Winks tries to take Sally's hand cream, then her shampoo and now her face cream. What if he's actually trying to tell us something?'

Sally's voice sailed out of the bathroom, calmer now Forty Winks had left her relaxation zone. 'Sorry to cause a fuss, Ember! Just a bit of a surprise, that's all, and the face cream is brand new so I'd quite like to hang on to it. It's that *Glamtastic* range lots of people are talking about. Expensive stuff but works miracles, which is why I forked out for their shampoo, face cream *and* hand cream. If you could just move it out of Forty Winks' reach that would be great.'

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Arno took the face cream from Ember. The brand name, *Glamtastic*, was scrawled over the lid in gold ink. But Arno wasn't looking at that. He had turned the pot upside down and was peering at what was written in small print on the other side. His eyes widened suddenly, then he looked up at Ember.

'TB,' he breathed, pointing to the trademark beneath the wording.

Ember looked at the letters, then she glanced down at the nibblesqueak, whose nose was twitching excitedly.

She grinned. 'Maybe we do have a lead on one of the collectors after all.'



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And why does Forty Winks suddenly know something about this?'

Ember shrugged. 'No idea. We need to head out and ask Rusty as soon as possible because this really *is* the start of an adventure now. I can feel it in my bones.'

They threw on some clothes then ran downstairs, skidding past the easel and paints in the hallway and very nearly knocking over the stack of pictures lined up outside the kitchen. Hamish Spark was an artist. Each week he took his materials outside to paint the local area: Slumber harbour with its lobster pots and ramshackle

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fishing boats, the little lighthouse perched on an island out at sea, the *Wobbly Squid* pub on the outskirts of the village. It wasn't a job that made a lot of money but it brought in enough for him to get by and Hamish loved it.

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What he also loved was dancing while listening to the radio. And, to Ember's embarrassment, he was in full flow when she and Arno burst into the kitchen. Leg kicks, jazz hands and lots of red hair whipping about the place. It was like watching a Highland cow having some sort of allergic reaction to the world.

'Eggs are ready!' Hamish called, turning down the music. 'And, you'll be pleased to hear, the latest issue of *Gutsy Wonder* has just arrived.'

Normally, Ember would have torn the comic open, eager to read about the latest adventure of her favourite superhero: a girl called Gutsy Wonder, who could fly and turn invisible and who spent her life ridding the world of evil aliens and monsters. But this morning was different. All Ember could think about was the trademark on Sally's face cream and whether Rusty might know if it was indeed linked to one of the collectors taking the magical beasts, as Forty Winks seemed to be suggesting.

'Thanks, Mr Spark,' Arno said, as he tucked into

his eggs. 'And great dancing, by the way. Loved the jazz hands.'

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Ember rolled her eyes. Everyone in her class thought her dad was great, and though she did, too, she also found him deeply embarrassing. The way he picked her up from school in the Sloth, his battered old Mini that didn't go over twenty miles per hour and broke down every few weeks. The way he laughed louder than all the other parents at the nativity. The way he always had a blob of paint somewhere on his face.

Hamish winked at Arno then picked up the *Gutsy Wonder* comic and placed it in front of Ember. 'Aren't you going to have a read?'

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Ember pushed Forty Winks down into her pocket and took the comic. 'Thanks, Dad.'

But she didn't open it because her eyes had caught on the other item the postie had delivered that morning: a magazine called *Health and Beauty Weekly* which Sally subscribed to. Ember wouldn't usually have dwelled on it – as far as she could tell it was filled with all sorts of useless information on where to buy candles that smelt of happiness and bubble bath that sent you to sleep – but one of the captions on the cover had caught her eye.

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'Look,' she said, nudging Arno and pointing to the caption. 'Top Five Products from Glamtastic: the revolutionary cosmetics brand everyone is talking about.'

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Arno's eyes bulged as Ember flicked through the magazine to find the full article.

'Didn't have you two down as *Glamtastic* fans!' Hamish laughed as he took a seat beside Ember. 'But Sally's friends have been raving about their stuff.'

Ember spread the magazine open at the page. 'Arno and I are just doing a bit of,' she paused, 'research for a project at school. On branding and how companies promote stuff.'

Arno gave a thumbs-up but he didn't dare say anything because he was hopeless at fibbing and Ember had warned him, on the way downstairs, that they couldn't afford to raise any more suspicions ahead of their visit to Rusty.

'Well,' Hamish said, as he tucked into his eggs, 'whoever's behind the *Glamtastic* range is doing a good job because even *I've* heard of them.'

Ember read out the wording above the list of products: 'Glamtastic *is a ground-breaking new cosmetics brand which burst onto the scene earlier this year. Not much is known about its origins but here are just five of their* 

products currently taking the world by storm.' Ember scanned the list below. 'A revolutionary face cream that claims to make wrinkles invisible overnight.'

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Arno looked doubtful. 'A nail varnish that lasts, unchipped, for a decade once applied. And a shampoo that's so effective you only have to wash your hair once every six months.'

'That can't be right,' Ember replied.

Arno pointed to the article. 'I wouldn't have thought so either, but the journalist testing the products says here that her hair is still squeaky clean four months after using the shampoo.'

Ember screwed up her nose as she carried on reading. *'A lipstick that never ever smudges.* This all sounds a bit ridiculous . . .'

Hamish nodded. 'Normally I would agree, but see that last product on the list? The perfume that makes you glow in the dark? Sally's niece tried it the other day – apparently, it's all the rage with teenagers – and she sprayed it all over her clothes then walked out onto the beach at night. And, sure enough, she was glowing in the dark! It was like magic!'

At the word 'magic' Ember felt an uneasiness slide

beneath her skin. And that uneasiness grew when she read the journalist's closing words aloud: 'Customers should snap up the products while stocks last because since the end of October there have been reports of problems with supply, and the Glamtastic website gives no update on whether items will be restocked or not.'

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Ember stared at the article. She could see the little trademark, TB, on the photos of the products. Products that seemed to boast almost magical qualities. Products that had been in short supply since the end of October – the exact time that she, Arno and Rusty had put an end to Jasper Hornswoggle's operation, which was stealing magical beasts. She swallowed. Was all this linked somehow? Could one of the collectors be *using* magical beasts to make beauty products?

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Ember felt suddenly very sick because this would, indeed, explain Forty Winks' sudden obsession with Sally's *Glamtastic* products. Magical beasts could sense their own kind nearby – it was how they always knew where to find Rusty's cave if they needed help – so perhaps Forty Winks had recognized something about the *Glamtastic* products that felt familiar. Ember looked up at Arno and from the horrified expression on his face,

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it was clear he was thinking the same thing.

Ember didn't have an appetite for her eggs after that. She looked up at her dad and, in as calm a voice as she could muster, said, 'Arno and I thought we'd go for a bike ride along the cliffs this morning.'

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Hamish took a sip of his tea. 'Sally and I could come too, if you like?'

'Not a good idea,' Ember replied, thinking fast. 'Arno's got a problem he wants to chat to me about, you see. In private.'

Arno nodded soberly.

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'I hope everything's okay,' Hamish said, laying a sympathetic hand on Arno's shoulder.

'Girlfriend issues,' Ember mouthed.

'Girlfriend issues?' Hamish spluttered. 'At your age, Arno?'

Arno's face filled with panic. 'Um, yes. I – I accidentally have six of them and it's all got a bit confusing so Ember and I have to leave right now.' He stood up. 'Goodbye, Mr Spark!' He scurried out into the hall to fetch his coat and Ember ran after him.

'Something's up with you two this morning!' Hamish called. 'I can tell!'

'Don't know what you're talking about!' Ember shouted as she zipped up her coat.

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Hamish shrugged as he followed them to the door. 'Well, I want you both back here for lunch because Sally and I are cooking fajitas, then I thought we could take the Sloth for a spin further down the coast to see if we can spot any dolphins out at sea.'

Ember nodded. 'We'll see you in a few hours, Dad.'

And she meant it. She had no idea, at that point, that she wouldn't see her dad again for several days.

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It was cold when Ember and Arno stepped outside, and Ember was glad of her gloves as she pushed her bike through the garden gate and onto the pavement. She looked up to see an old man everyone in the village knew as Wee Dram. He was small and extremely talkative and he ran the *Wobbly Squid*, but thankfully he was walking his dog in the other direction. Other than that, the village looked empty. Slumber was a quiet place, after all.

'Girlfriend issues?!' Arno groaned as he wheeled his bike level with Ember.

Ember settled Forty Winks on her handlebars. 'Could've been worse. I was going to say you'd committed a small

but very terrible crime. Or that you had the beginnings of a fatal disease.'

Arno took a deep breath. 'Look, let's just get to Stonechatter Cave, okay? I'm really worried that the collector, TB, is the very same TB somehow linked to *Glamtastic*, and they're using magical beasts to make beauty products.'

'That's what I'm nervous about too,' Ember said, as she turned her bike away from the pavement and pedalled



down the track that ran between her dad's cottage and the neighbours' and which joined the coastal path that ran along the clifftops. It was the same path that lined the cliffs beyond Ember's mum's place, too, with Stonechatter Cave set in between. Ember had lost count of the times she and Arno had biked it since discovering that magical beasts existed.

They raced between the cottages and the fields beyond until the track spilt onto the coastal path. The sky



was overcast and the wind was swirling, tossing seagulls back and forth and hurling waves against the cliffs. Ember scoured the clouds for a glimpse of Dazzle but there was still no sign of him. She sighed and pedalled on, leaving the sleepy village of Slumber behind.

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They came to a stretch of woodland which framed the path for a hundred metres and whizzed through it, popping out the other side onto the clifftop once again. Then they cycled on a while until the ruins of Stonechatter Castle came into view, a jumble of rickety turrets and crumbling staircases.

Ember and Arno parked their bikes against the NO ENTRY sign and edged over the ramshackle drawbridge, careful not to tread on the many broken slats of wood. They hastened through the deserted courtyard, right up to the cliff edge, then shimmied down over it onto the ledge of rock jutting out a metre below.

'I shouldn't have eaten those eggs,' Arno mumbled, glancing down at the churning sea and turning green.

Ember, however, wasn't in the least bit flustered. They'd entered Rusty's cave this way countless times before and, unlike Arno, she didn't mind heights.

She leant in towards the cliff face and whispered the

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password right up close to the slab of rock in front of her: 'Dragon nappies.'

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A second later, the rock before them grew fainter and fainter, as if the colour was somehow draining away. Then it vanished from sight completely, leaving an opening in the cliff.

Ember and Arno hastened inside as the slab of rock grew back over the opening behind them. The tunnel was lit by glow-worms but Forty Winks cast an even brighter glow, perched up on Ember's shoulder, as they ran nearer and nearer the grunts, roars and shrieks of a cave full of magical beasts having their breakfast.

'Sounds like Rusty's got a lively bunch today,' Ember panted.

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A short, sharp screech sounded from somewhere ahead of them followed by an old man's voice yelling, 'Will you stop it, Whirlwind! I absolutely cannot concentrate with you nibbling on my beard!'

Arno glanced at Ember as they ran. 'Who or what is Whirlwind?'

They burst out of the tunnel and sped down the sweeping staircase that led into Rusty's secret cave, which was a kilometre wide with a glittering waterfall pouring

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into a lagoon in the middle. Fireflies lit the place, flitting between gnarled trees, giant, purple-spotted toadstools and tropical plants. And everywhere you looked there were magical beasts on the hunt for food. A griffin with a bandaged wing was pecking fruit from a low-hanging branch, shrieking every time a phoenix with an eyepatch crept close to try and grab its share. A limping unicorn was munching on a fern that a poorly dragon had been dozing under and the two were now having a stand-off, while in the lagoon itself two hippocampi were fighting over a fish.

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It was the usual chaos that came with mealtimes in the cave, only the man who usually ensured they ran like clockwork was thrashing about in the undergrowth before the lagoon.

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Ember squinted as they stepped off the staircase. 'What on earth is Rusty doing?'

Arno frowned. They were used to Rusty looking a bit of a mess, especially first thing in the morning, but today his stripy pyjamas were buttoned up all wrong, he was only wearing one slipper and his bushy white hair and beard were so wild about his face he looked like a tumble-dried sheep.

'Oh, thank goodness you two have arrived!' Rusty



cried from further into the undergrowth. 'There's a unicorn in this bush who desperately needs my help, but I can't even get close to her because Whirlwind's flapping about trying to eat my beard!'

Something emerald green and as small as a fist flew, full force, at Rusty, who shrieked and fell head over heels into the bushes.

Ember and Arno were too far away to identify the creature but Ember turned to Arno as they made their way through the undergrowth towards Rusty. 'Last week you were looking at a book by Rusty's ancestor, Aveline Bottomless-Pit – *Breakfast for Beasts*, I think it was called – and didn't you tell me there was a creature listed in there as eating human hair as a last resort?'

Arno's eyes lit up. 'Pygmy dragons,' he cried. 'According to *Breakfast for Beasts*, their favourite food is jackfruit, but the teeth of a baby pygmy dragon are sometimes too small to pierce the fruit's skin – and that's when they resort to human hair. Beards, moustaches and – in desperate cases of hunger – nose hair.'

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Ember gave Arno a thumbs-up. 'You might not be good on heights, Arno, but you're a whizz when it comes to remembering facts about magical beasts!' She veered left into the trees, calling over her shoulder. 'You go and help Rusty and I'll grab some jackfruit for Whirlwind!'

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It only took a minute for Ember to reach Rusty's tree. His hammock hung from the biggest branch and, crammed onto the shelves carved into the trunk, cake tins containing all sorts of snacks for magical beasts: meringues for unicorns, doughnuts for griffins, brownies for neverwhales. Treats for every creature except dragons, because they were far too precious about their teeth to bother with baked goods.

Forty Winks leapt from Ember's shoulder and began sniffing his way over all the tins until he came to the one he knew Ember needed – jackfruit, cut into chunks for any visiting baby pygmy dragons.

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'Good work,' Ember whispered as Forty Winks jumped back into her pocket.

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She wove her way back through the trees to the undergrowth. There was no sign of Rusty or, indeed, Arno, but Ember knew they were in the foliage somewhere because she could hear Rusty yelling.

'Leave my beard alone, Whirlwind!'

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Then, Arno's head shot out of a nearby bush. 'This is not going well. Whirlwind's already eaten most of Rusty's moustache and half of his beard!'

Rusty tumbled out of the bush next to Arno, the pygmy dragon clinging to his beard with all his might.

'Okay, Whirlwind,' Ember said as she rattled the tin of jackfruit. 'I've got your breakfast, and it's all yours if you come over here.'

The pygmy dragon ignored her and began swiping his talons at Rusty's nose hair.

'I was due a trim,' Rusty winced, 'but not now, when I've got a unicorn running a dangerously high temperature...' He spun round in a circle to try and shake the pygmy dragon off. 'I've got a job to do, Whirlwind!'

Ember passed the tin of jackfruit to Arno and reached up a hand to Whirlwind's green-scaled back. He was

warm to the touch, like sand in the sun, and little by little Ember felt him relax beneath her palm. Rusty looked at Ember hopefully. He knew much more than she did about being a Vet to Magical Beasts but he also knew Ember was in a league of her own when it came to winning a beast's trust.

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A minute or two slipped by then Ember scooped Whirlwind into her hand. He came willingly this time, spitting out the clump of hair he'd been chewing, burping loudly then hopping down to the ground where Arno was kneeling with the jackfruit.

'Thank you, both,' Rusty murmured as he wiped the pygmy dragon spit from his face and pulled back a cluster of ferns to reveal a unicorn. 'Here I am, Moonstone. I'm all yours now.'

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Ember gasped. The unicorn was lying down, and she was in a bad way. Her eyes were half closed, her coat shone with sweat and her breathing was shallow. Rusty ran one crinkled hand over Moonstone's milk-white back and used the other to raise a bottle of water to her mouth. Moonstone knocked the bottle away with her horn then let out a pained whinny.

'She came in last night,' Rusty explained, 'mane and

tail frozen stiff – and shivering. Pneumonia, I think. And though I gave her ginger and turmeric when she arrived, to bring her fever down, she's looking even worse this morning.' Rusty reached into the holdall beside him, which he used to transport his stethoscope, thermometer, bandages and countless tinctures – and pulled out a handful of dried flowers. 'Lungwort,' he said, trying to ease one into Moonstone's mouth, 'to help her breathing.'

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But that didn't seem to work either. The unicorn could barely chew. Then her eyes fluttered shut completely and she let out a groan.

'There must be something else we can give her!' Ember cried, leaving Whirlwind to his jackfruit and creeping through the ferns with Arno so that they could crouch by the unicorn's side.

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'I've tried everything I can think of.' Rusty paused for a moment before glancing at his holdall. 'Unless . . .' He rummaged about inside the bag until he drew out a small glass bottle filled with purple liquid.

'What's that?' Arno asked, eyeing the bottle nervously. 'No idea,' Rusty replied.

Arno frowned. 'What do you mean, no idea?'

'I mean that for the past century, every vet in this cave

has carried this little bottle of liquid around because once upon a time it was believed to be important. Only nobody can remember why . . .'

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He flicked off the cork and the most dreadful smell filled the air around them. Like sewage and sweaty socks with a whiff of rotten fish thrown in. Whirlwind looked disgusted and promptly flapped off into the distance with as much jackfruit as he could carry, while Forty Winks, watching on from Ember's knee, looked ready to throw up. Ember, meanwhile, was looking at the bottle curiously.

'I know I haven't read nearly as many of the books in this cave as you and Arno,' she said, 'but I did come across one a while back that made me laugh: *Beastish Pongs* by Significant Stink. It was a list of all the worst smells linked to magical beasts and the most terrible one – worse even than the stench of chimera poop – was a liquid that smelt of sewage and sweaty socks and rotten fish.' She eyed the bottle of purple liquid. 'I think that could be kraken ink . . .'

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Rusty's eyes widened. 'Kraken ink! I've been in the possession of *kraken ink* all this time?!'

Arno leant forward eagerly. 'Why is it so special?'

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Rusty brought the liquid right up close to Moonstone's mouth. 'It's rumoured to be a cure so powerful it can rewrite a magical beast's medical history – cure them of all ailments – provided the vet can handle the smell and the beast in question can stomach the taste.'

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Ember and Arno watched as Moonstone flinched, then turned her head away from Rusty. He tried again, coaxing her on with gentle words, and Ember tried too. But Moonstone wouldn't open her mouth and all three of them knew there was no forcing a unicorn to do something when it didn't want to. They were the most stubborn of all magical beasts.

'You've got to try it,' Ember pleaded. 'Just one little sip, Moonstone. It could make all the difference . . .'

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Arno stroked the unicorn's mane. 'Please, Moonstone.'

Rusty bit his lip. 'I can't have a unicorn slip away on my watch.'

Again, he tried to offer the kraken ink to Moonstone but once more, the unicorn turned away. It was clear to everyone that she was giving up. That the fever was too much for her. Then there was a rustle from the undergrowth nearby. Ember braced herself for Whirlwind but instead, a unicorn foal tiptoed into view. Nobody

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moved as the little creature picked her way through the ferns and curled up next to Moonstone.

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'I had no idea Moonstone had brought a foal with her last night,' Rusty said. 'The little one must've been hiding in the undergrowth all this time, too shy to come forward.'

But she'd come when it mattered, Ember realized. Moonstone's eyes fluttered open at her touch and she lifted her head a fraction to look at her baby. Then she took a very deep breath, as if summoning up the last of her strength, and opened her mouth.

Rusty lost no time tipping the tincture into Moonstone's mouth. And though the unicorn coughed and spluttered and blew out through her nostrils, as the minutes passed, her breathing grew stronger, the sweat on her back disappeared and she raised her head to nuzzle her foal.

'We did it!' Ember cried. 'She's on the mend!'

Arno beamed.

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'Well, I never!' Rusty muttered, turning the empty bottle over in his hands. 'Thanks to kraken ink and two extremely brilliant apprentices, I still have half a beard and *this* little foal still has a mother.' He smiled. 'Let's give the unicorns some peace for a while. And now that

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Whirlwind appears to be occupied elsewhere, I think we all deserve a sit down with a mug of hot chocolate before we carry on with the morning rounds.'

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Ember shifted. 'We've got something we need to tell you before the morning rounds.'

Rusty cocked his head. 'If it's about it being mid-morning and my still being in pyjamas, I can only say that—'

'It's not about that.' Arno took a deep breath. 'We think we might have a lead on the collector known as TB – and, if we're right, then a great many magical beasts could be in danger . . .'