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*For my wonderful, ever-supportive mum and dad.
(Also, see! I told you letting me stay inside in the warm and
read books about dragons would pay off eventually.)*

– BR

For my favourite brother, James.

– LT

‘We have heard the chimes at midnight, Master Shallow.’

– WILLIAM SHAKESPEARE

Henry IV Part 2

Act III, Scene II



Emily really hadn't ever expected to be a sister. As an only child, she'd often wondered what it would be like, but had never, at her advanced age, thought it would happen. So even now, many months after the first shocking announcement from her mum and dad that they were, y'know, totally preggers, the whole idea still confuzzled her. When she had nothing better to do she would pick away at it like a satisfyingly crusty scab. Like right now, in fact, during a boring half-term, as she loitered untidily outside her dad's potting shed, watching him elbow deep in stinky compost inside.

'It's just weird. I mean, like, how are you having a baby?'

Emily's dad shifted awkwardly from foot to foot at his potting bench.

'Well, I suppose it's time we had that conversation . . . erm, well when two people love each other very much—'

'NOOOOOOOO! ABSOLUTELY NOT. EVER!' screeched Emily.

Emily's dad looked relieved despite the damage to his hearing.

'I meant, how *now*?' said Emily. 'I mean, you're really old.'

'Charming,' said her dad. 'Well, after what happened last year, it made us think about what was important, I suppose.'

With typical dad understatement, he was referring to the mayhem that occurred after a mysterious midnight letter led to him and her mum being kidnapped, and Emily stumbling into the magical London of the Midnight Hour, a pocket dimension frozen in Victorian times that contained the last remnants of magic in the world (and all the monsters). It had been a pretty intense week.

'... and this was a happy accident.' He'd still been talking while she was thinking of moon-silvered streets, and being chased by were-bears and vampires. He paused and studied her more closely.

'You do think it's happy too, I hope? You can tell me, you know, if you're worried about any of it.'

Emily shook her head.

‘No, it’s fine. I’m happy. It’s just . . . a lot.’ She scrunched her nose up as she thought about it. ‘I kind of thought finding out I was a magic pony was the oddest thing that was going to happen for a while, is all.’

‘You are not a p—’

‘I know, I know. I’m Pooka, it’s a proud heritage.’

‘I was going to say you’re only half magic pony, but yeah, that too.’

‘Dad!’

He grinned.

One of the weirdest things about the adventure that had knocked her whole life sideways was finding out her up-to-now totally normal (well, apart from her mum) parents were secretly part of the Midnight Hour themselves. Her dad was a magic postman and her mum was a Librarian (which was like being a secret agent). The very weirdest thing, of course, was discovering she was a bit magic herself. She had magic pony— *Pooka* heritage from her mum’s clan and could transform into a hare and do other freaky stuff, although only, to her disappointment, inside the Midnight Hour, because that’s where all the magic was nowadays.

Not that she was getting to go into the Hour at all now, of course.

‘Sure you’re okay?’ He went to touch her shoulder then

stopped as she gazed in horror at his composty hand. ‘You don’t normally loiter around the shed unless you want something.’

This was true. Emily was of the opinion that the shed smelt funny. She suspected her dad kept it that way so he could have quiet time in there.

‘I’m just all . . .’ She kicked at the pots in frustration and her dad winced. ‘I miss going into the Hour with Mum is all.’

‘Ahhh,’ he said.

‘It was great. We were doing loads of shape-changing practice and I nearly managed the hound. Well,’ she paused, ‘nearly nearly, and then all the stupid baby stuff happened and now she won’t go in anymore and I really miss it . . . and her.’

She blurted the last bit out and hadn’t known she was going to say it. That, of course, happened a lot, but normally only when she was angry.

‘Ahhh,’ her dad said again, in a different tone. He grabbed a rag to wipe his hands on.

‘I mean, we weren’t even rowing then. Well, much, and now she’s a bonkers person again,’ said Emily.

‘It *was* much more peaceful for a while,’ her dad mused. ‘It was like a little holiday by the sea.’

‘Dad!’

He held a still-grimy hand up to calm her. ‘You

understand there's a good reason why she can't, don't you? Pookas can't—'

'Change when they're pregnant,' she finished for him, 'I know. In case of . . .' She gave herself donkey ears with her fingers, and stuck her front teeth right out. According to her mum, Auntie Lavell got stuck as a horse while pregnant once, and little cousin Artie had always been a bit . . . pony ever since. Her dad's lips twitched as he tried not to smile.

'Yes, and there are also serious safety concerns about you going in alone.' He was frowning again. 'You upset some very nasty people, you know.'

She couldn't deny that. She had faced off with the Nocturne, one of the great Older Powers, and defeated her by accidentally blowing her up using a necklace of cursed coins. Emily stared at her trainers. It was hopeless, she was never going to get back in.

'However, in a bid to regain the sanctity of my shed,' said her dad, 'I have already given this a lot of thought, and spoken at length with your mother. Sometimes she even listened.' He shook his head. 'We've decided that while you're on holidays, with appropriate supervision and strict boundaries, it might be okay for you to go back in—'

Before he could finish she jump-hugged him, compost hands or not.

'Yay!' She squeezed him, then paused and glared up. 'Next time, start with that!'

The enthusiastic squishing had restricted his breathing but didn't stop his safety speech.

'*Strict* boundaries. You'd come in with me to work, practise nearby, then we'd leave together. Also your mother has a *major* lecture to deliver before you get to go anywhere.' He fuzzled her hair with his grubby hands, but she was prepared to forgive him under the circumstances. 'Go and see her, she's in the studio.'

'Thanks, Dad!' She skipped at high speed up the garden.

'Mind my pots! Oh, never mind . . .'



It wasn't a proper studio. It was a garage with too much art in to fit a car anymore. Emily had to squeeze down the corridor past metalwork sculptures, plaster hangings and a stack of other piled-up art just to reach the door. Her mum, Maeve, was always busy with her sculpture, but she'd gone mad(der) making things since the pregnancy. Their whole house was becoming a gallery. She'd even started painting again, and apparently she 'hadn't done that since the 1800s'. Emily's mum could say things like that because it turned out she was a magic Pooka person who, until she'd left the *Midnight Hour*, had been frozen in time since 1859. This was before TV, or cars, or even – *shudder* – indoor loos. Finding out her mum was a magic shape-

changing Irish woman in exile from another time had been a shock, but it also answered a lot of questions about why she was so odd.

Her mum was sat at the workbench. Maeve was as pocket-sized as ever, with her trademark big black boots on, but her faded Metallica T-shirt was stretched out of all proportion by her giant baby bump. She looked like she'd swallowed a space hopper. She had a wodge of big rough-edged sheets of paper balanced on top of her bump, and was drawing on them with quill pen and ink. Her multi-coloured hair hung down over her face as she concentrated, and her tattooed arm moved smoothly across the page. The cursed necklace of bad pennies that had been the start (and the end) of last year's adventures dangled out of the top of her T-shirt and glinted its wicked gleam. Emily never had been sure if they'd got them all back after she'd hurled them at the Nocturne and given her a dose of bad luck she'd never forget. They were notoriously hard to count and keep track of.

Emily stayed quiet for a while and watched, surprised by how beautiful her mum's sketches were. Maeve drew fluid lines and shapes that resolved themselves into horses running across the paper. Her sculptures were so wildly out there and bonkers that the perfect horses flowing from her pen were unexpected. Emily's mum didn't look up but still managed to do the annoying mind-reading thing she did

(which she vowed wasn't a Pooka power, just 'Ma sense').

'Why so shocked I can draw, darl?'

'Well, it's just ...'

Emily gestured at the scrap-metal chaos filling the rest of the room.

'Ah, that's later work. This is where I started. Ye've got to know the rules before ye can break them, see.'

Another horse fell from the end of her pen on to the page, and her mum blew on it and passed the rough cartridge paper to Emily to pin up on the wall to dry. There was a chain of horses already there, pinned up side by side. It was like an old animation loop of a horse running across the studio wall. Her mum looked at them and sighed, her hand reaching to rub her swollen belly.

'The only running I'll be doing,' she said, and then her voice hardened. 'And the only running ye'll be doing, unless ye listen to my rules, right?'

'Okay,' said Emily, whose lecture sense was tingling.

'Here's the deal: no nosing, no adventures, and never leave home without yer hedgehog.' She gave Emily her terrifying mum-stare, which could read minds and boil eggs at a hundred yards. 'Are we clear?'

'Crystal.'

'Good. I mean it about the Hog too. Let's face it, he's the only one of ye with any sense.' She intensified the laser squint and Emily was glad that, for once, she hadn't got a

guilty conscience. ‘Ye go and do yer practice, work on yer hound shape, then back to meet yer da at the curfew time he sets. No side quests. Clear?’

‘Cut glass.’

Her mum folded her arms over her bump. Her stare could have penetrated lead plates.

‘And absolutely no messing about with the Pooka. Ye steer clear of the clan at all costs, or I’ll skin ye.’

Emily twitched. This was a sore spot. The Pooka clan were her mum’s family who lived in the Hour, that her mum was in exile from. The only one Emily had met was Uncle Pat, her mum’s brother, and a Pooka most disreputable. At the very thought of him, Emily managed a small transformation without magic as her mouth puckered up into a little dog’s bottom. Pat had made her feel she’d finally found her family, then he’d locked the door to Midnight in her face. He hadn’t been seen since.

‘But—’

‘I mean it, Em. Not Pat, not none of them, particularly Herself.’

By this, Maeve meant her own mum. It was the only way she’d ever refer to her (apart from ‘that stubborn baggage’ occasionally). Her mum had fallen out with her and the whole clan big time but Emily had never learnt the full details. Pinning her mum down on family stuff was like juggling a greased weasel.

‘But—’

‘One more “but” and I’ll kick yers.’ Her mum was deathly serious. The cursed silver coins around her neck shimmered as she spoke.

Emily’s gob was rising. It was a trait she’d inherited from her mum’s side of the family; a deep-seated ancestral urge to fire off her mouth like a machine gun at the slightest upset. Her mum had it too, so when they argued it was like playing conkers with hand grenades. Emily was determined not to have an explosion today though – she was so close to getting back into the Midnight Hour.

‘*Fine*,’ said Emily, in a voice that suggested it was anything but. ‘The only reason I’d want to see Pat would be to kick his anyway.’

‘Not if I saw him first,’ said her mum, fists clenched.

They shared a fierce mutual scowl, but her mum’s faded into a more concerned frown.

‘Ye don’t go looking for him on yer own. Or the rest of them. Ye’re not ready yet.’ Her mum wasn’t using the laser beam now but big sad eyes instead. ‘Promise ye won’t? It’s my condition for letting ye go.’

‘I promise I won’t go looking for them,’ said Emily.

The laser beam returned.

‘Oh well, yer good and vague there, aren’t ye? Getting the hang of the Pooka-ing already, I see. I think ye need to promise to—’

Just then the baby kicked and Maeve doubled up and knocked the ink pot over and started swearing terribly in Irish, and suddenly everything was chaos and all promises were forgotten.

‘Ye think normal babies kick? Try one that’s going to grow up to be a horse!’ She clutched her side. ‘Get me a towel, and yer da. This is all his fault!’

Emily scooted out the room before it became her fault too.



Fizzing with excitement, Emily ran up to her room to tell Hoggins the good news. He was her rescue-and-occasionally-pocket hedgehog, and was currently snoozing on the bed on his hog-blanket, curled up next to Feesh, Emily’s cuddly crocodile.

‘Hoggins! We get to go! Yes!’

He blinked blearily and closed his eyes again. She could tell he was excited. Emily wasn’t entirely convinced that the Hog wasn’t a little bit magic. There’d been a few odd moments on her last adventure but nothing to put her finger on. Her mum swore he was ‘just a normal hedgepig’ but she could not, of course, be trusted in the slightest. If the Hog knew anything more, he certainly wasn’t saying.

A whirlwind of packing took place as she stuffed her bag with the essentials of Midnight Hour existence (book

to read, snacks, garlic, auxiliary snacks, crucifix, back-up auxiliary snacks, crisp sandwich, Library card, entire packet of biscuits). She tugged on her clompiest boots (because, of course, big boots were best), the bomber jacket she'd swiped from her mum, and grabbed the flat cap her dad hadn't noticed was missing yet. She made a point of leaving her mobile phone on her bedside table though. Magic and technology were a literally explosive combination.

All set, she threw herself on the bed to snuggle Feesh, and the Hog yipped and grizzled as the impact bounced him in the air. 'Sorry Hoggins, come here.' She held out a hand and, after giving her some side-eye, he shuffled his small, warm weight into it.

'Adventure buddies,' she whispered as she stroked his little nose. She was going back to the Midnight Hour. She was going to be magic again.