



The Magician's MAP

A HOARDER HILL
Adventure

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Chicken
House

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For Brent, who agreed to a favour – K. N.

For Colin, who took a huge leap of faith – M. L.

*In this short Life
That only lasts an hour
How much – how little – is
Within our power*

EMILY DICKINSON

'In this short Life', Complete Poems of Emily Dickinson





CHAPTER 1

A LITTLE CHANGE

‘Spencer! Watch out!’

Spencer van Beer risked a look behind him as he flew through the air. The stone gryphon was closing in on him, its wings flapping fast. Worse still was its outstretched talon, aiming for his ankle. He yelped. Scrunching his legs up before the gryphon could swipe him, he urged his own wings to beat faster and whooshed towards the trees.

The high-pitched whistle of his pursuer dropped away as he skirted the edge of the wood. A minute later, he swooped in amongst the tree boles, randomly

flying left, right, up and down to shake the gryphon from his trail. Autumn leaves rustled in his wake.

Once he had lost count of the turns he'd taken, Spencer peeked over his shoulder. He was in the shadowy heart of the wood now. A bird darted through the air, but there was no gryphon. Perhaps he'd lost it. *Have to get back to the others*, he thought nervously. Eyes peeled, he wended his way out to the fringes of the wood, and then made the final dash for safety.

There they were, waving wildly at him. But when he was just a few metres away, the gryphon streaked out from the trees. It shot straight for him, and Spencer felt his control of the wings slip in panic. He floundered, wings beating out of time. Sensing victory, the gryphon stretched a talon towards him with an exultant screech. Spencer cartwheeled in the air and dropped clumsily to the earth, winded. He spat out a mouthful of grass as the gryphon landed on top of him and croaked, 'Tag!'

The others laughed.

'Are you OK?' his older sister Hedy asked, holding out her hand to help him to his feet. 'You looked like you tripped in mid-air.'

‘Nice flying, Ginger Ninja,’ called Jelly, their cousin.

‘Gingers are the best kind of ninjas,’ Spencer said. With an annoyed glance at the gryphon he added, ‘I can’t believe they won again. Hey, Max, did the gryphon cheat?’

The stone gryphon whistled indignantly at the accusation, and allowed itself to be petted by their youngest cousin, Max. ‘I don’t think so,’ said Max. ‘So Hedy still has the most points out of us.’

Of course she does, Spencer thought, unbuckling the enchanted metal wings that they’d borrowed from his grandfather.

‘Well, I haven’t had a turn in the sky yet,’ said Doug the talking bear rug. He spat out the centipede he had surreptitiously licked up from the ground.

‘I clearly recall *you* saying once that if you were meant to fly, you would have been born with a beak,’ said Stan the stuffed stag head.

‘Just because I wasn’t born to do it, doesn’t mean I can’t,’ Doug rumbled. ‘By the way, you look ridiculous. What on earth has Jelly put on you?’

Jelly sat back on her heels, pleased. ‘It’s just a bit of lip gloss. And a bit of glitter on the antlers. And *one* stick-on jewel between the eyes. It’ll come off, don’t

worry. Unless you want to keep it on, Stan?’ She held up a small mirror for Stan to study his reflection.

‘Hmm. I’m not entirely sure the effect is . . . noble,’ Stan murmured doubtfully.

‘But you *do* stand out,’ Jelly said. ‘Isn’t that what you wanted? It’s just the same as me and Hedy. Hedy looks amazing, see? Total stand-out now!’

Hedy tentatively touched the gem that Jelly had stuck between her own glitter-dusted eyes, at odds with her faded sweatshirt and scuffed trainers.

‘There’s standing out because you’ve got fourteen-point antlers and aren’t afraid to use them, and then there’s standing out like a bee sting on a weasel’s back-side,’ Doug said. ‘Now, Spencer, are we going up for a flight?’

When the sun began to sink lower in the sky, the peculiar group headed on their bikes into the village, Marberry’s Rest. They’d been looking forward to this autumn holiday time together for weeks. Spencer, Hedy and their mum were visiting while their dad was on a long bike ride to raise money for a charity. As soon as it had been arranged, they’d asked for Jelly and Max to join them.

‘Can you tell me again how you found Auntie Rose?’ Max asked.

‘Not again!’ Jelly groaned. ‘Max, you’ve heard it at least seventy-eight thousand times.’

But Hedy looked back over her shoulder at Max with a smile. She never got tired of telling him how, nearly two years ago, she and Spencer had solved the mystery of their missing Grandma Rose and rescued her from the Kaleidos.

The parts that Max really loved hearing over and over again were about how Spencer and Hedy had been helped by the many magical items that Grandpa John had hoarded and kept secret over the years. Besides Doug and Stan, there were the Woodspies who travelled through the wooden surfaces of the house, and the small stone statues known as grotesques that sat atop Grandpa John’s roof to guard against intruders.

Doug was now squeezed into a milk crate on the back of Spencer’s bicycle. Stan was strapped to Hedy’s handlebars, and the gryphon and gargoyle sat in Jelly and Max’s baskets. No one in Marberry’s Rest was supposed to know that Grandpa John collected magical artefacts. Ever since the village shopkeeper,

Mrs Sutton, had once spotted Hedy flying – and had to be convinced by Grandma Rose that she must have mistaken a massive bird for a person – they were under strict instructions not to use Grandpa John’s metal wings where neighbours could see them.

In the village, Doug and Stan behaved exactly as they needed to – unmoving, unblinking and silent – but the grotesques kept forgetting to stay still and had to be shushed by the children regularly.

‘Wait out here,’ Hedy said, standing her bike outside Sutton’s General Store. The shop window was decorated for Halloween with carved jack-o’-lantern pumpkins, giant black spiders and a merry toy witch on a broomstick. ‘I’ll get the cake.’

An elderly couple came around the corner and the children all shuffled across the pavement to make room. Spencer had never seen them before, and he guessed they were visiting the area.

‘Good afternoon,’ said the man, smiling at the children and staring at Stan and Doug. ‘Quite a collection you have there. Good hunting around here, then?’

He was joking of course, but hunting was a very sensitive topic for the animals. Spencer could feel

Doug rumbling low in his throat, and he saw Stan's nostrils flare.

'We're not allowed to have pets,' Spencer explained, 'so we take these around instead.'

'Oh, but I see *you're* allowed a pet,' said the woman to Max. She squinted at the gargoyle in his basket and frowned. 'Oh my, what an odd-looking cat.' By 'odd' she clearly meant ugly.

The gargoyle, instead of staying still and letting them pretend it was a statue they carted around for fun, hissed at the woman, making her gasp and clutch her husband's arm.

'I'm so sorry,' Jelly said hastily, smothering a laugh and rapping the gargoyle sharply on the head. It sank into the basket, glowering. 'We only got it from a shelter not long ago and it's not very well trained.'

Luckily, the bell of the shop door jingled and Hedy stepped out with a large cake box. The affable Mrs Sutton was right behind her.

'Hello Spencer, Angelica, Max!' she trilled. 'Taking your *pets* out for a romp, I see!' Mrs Sutton had wholeheartedly bought their cover story of not being allowed real pets, and was used to seeing them cycling around with Doug, Stan and the grotesques. She

turned her attention to the newcomers. ‘And welcome to our village! Where are you visiting from? Won’t you come inside . . .’

The elderly couple, still taken aback by the hissing ‘cat’, were powerless to resist her hospitable chatter and found themselves drawn inside. Calling out their goodbyes to Mrs Sutton, the children took off.

Hoarder Hill was very different from how it had been when Spencer and Hedy had first stayed there. The gardens were filled with new shrubs and flowering plants, Grandpa John’s clutter inside had been stowed away with much more order, and Grandma Rose had taken to modern appliances with great curiosity.

To the children’s delight, an old milk van was parked in the driveway, which meant Mrs Pal and Soumitra had arrived for dinner. They pedalled to the back garden, where it was safest for the grotesques to return to the roof without being seen by outsiders.

‘You shouldn’t hiss at people,’ Spencer scolded the gargoyle, making it scowl. ‘If you do stuff like that, Grandpa John might not let you come out with us.’

The gargoyle’s scowl deepened further as it climbed out of the basket. Its only acknowledgement of

Spencer was a stone pellet that it sulkily ejected from its bottom. Apologizing was not in the grotesques' natures.

'Did Fluffy do another one?' Max clapped. He liked to collect the stone pellets, and his insistence on calling the grotesques by babyish names often inspired even more petulant droppings.

The gryphon let loose stone pellets of its own (in support of the gargoyle rather than out of kindness to Max), then the pair flapped up to the top of the house, muttering to themselves.

'The mighty challengers return!' called Grandpa John as he walked up from the bottom of the garden. By his side were Mrs Pal, the owner of a magic shop called the Palisade, and a young man – her grandson, Soumitra. The children ran to hug them.

'Who won?' asked Soumitra.

'The grotesques did, *again*. Only Hedy can ever beat them at flying,' Spencer groaned.

'Just keep trying and you'll catch up,' Soumitra grinned. 'Who's going to give me the race highlights? Stan?'

Stan, carried by Jelly, lit up. 'Why, I'd be delighted, and can only hope that my reflections adequately

chronicle the heroism of the tourney!’

‘That might be the first time anyone’s ever described the grotesques as heroic,’ Grandpa John mused.

As Hedy, Jelly and Max went ahead to the house with Soumitra, Grandpa John held Spencer back for a moment.

‘What’s wrong?’ Spencer asked.

‘I’m sorry, Spencer,’ said Mrs Pal, ‘but we’ll have to postpone your visit to the Palisade. I have an event to go to. We’ll make another time, I promise.’

Spencer tried to disguise his disappointment. He’d had an idea of modifying his Polaroid camera in a special – well, slightly magical – way, and he could think of no one better with whom to figure it out than Mrs Pal. ‘Where are you going?’

‘It’s called the Fantastikhana,’ said Mrs Pal.

A thrill rippled through Spencer, making the hairs on the back of his neck stand up. ‘Can I go with you?’

‘You don’t even know what it is,’ Grandpa John snorted.

‘But it *sounds* good. What is it?’

‘It’s a gathering of fusty old people like me,’ said Grandpa John.

Mrs Pal, however, tutted and said, ‘There’s a youth competition for magic, and workshops where children can get together and tinker. A bit like those arts-and-crafts workshops in the school holidays.’

Spencer’s mind was awlirl. ‘But with *magic*?’

‘Low-level magic, I imagine, not the exciting stuff you’re after,’ said Grandpa John.

‘But it sounds perfect!’ Spencer cried. ‘Please can we go?’

Grandpa John turned to Mrs Pal sourly. ‘Did you plan this?’

‘It seems like the perfect opportunity, Mr Sang,’ she said innocently.

Spencer hopped around his grandfather. ‘Please? I really want to learn how to make stuff like Mrs Pal. Maybe I can run the Palisade when I grow up.’ He suddenly broke off, wondering if he’d overstepped the mark. ‘I mean, if Soumitra doesn’t want to.’

‘Good grief!’ Grandpa John exclaimed. ‘I thought this was an idea for a hobby, not your life’s ambition.’

Oops, thought Spencer, and pulled a face to make it seem like a joke. How could he convince Grandpa John to go to this Fantastikhana and take them with him?

‘Don’t you want to talk with other magicians?’ he asked.

Grandpa John shook his head firmly. ‘Not if I can help it.’