CLASH OF THE TOTEMS AND THE CATASTROPHE OF CALLISTUS

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CLASH OF THE TOTEMS AND THE CATASTROPHE OF CALLISTUS

BOOK 2

Yonnie Garber



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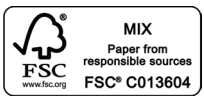

For Dan, Seb, Todd, Bo and Archie,
who take on the world with their relentless
sense of humour.

And to Moo, Poo and Cookie,
who strengthen my resolve with their
unconditional support.

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1

A FIERY START

It was late. My bedroom was so still, so unnervingly quiet. Even the tick-tock of Mum's antique grandfather clock in the hall seemed quieter than usual. I didn't want to sleep despite being struck by an overwhelming tiredness. I tried to fight it. I didn't want to have that awful dream again.

It came to me a few weeks ago, just after I'd overheard Myerscough talking to Mum about Nash. Saxon Nash – the terrifying former head of the Magaecian Circle. Loved by some, hated by many, but feared by all. Every time I mentioned his name, both parents changed the subject. Probably Myerscough's idea. Hendrick Myerscough had manoeuvred his way into our lives with outstanding ease. My *long-lost dad* now lived with us, but calling him "Dad" just didn't come naturally to me. It was lovely to see Mum so happy, although some of the subtle kissing and cuddling they tried to sneak past me was enough to make me gag at

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times. I almost preferred the moody, depressed Myerscough. Being affectionate and sweet didn't suit him at all. I'd only known him for a year, during which time, I can't deny it, he saved my life. I was grateful, of course, but that didn't excuse him for being absent for the thirteen years of my life that took place before it. He put up with me calling him Hendrick or Myerscough and was obviously making a huge effort to do *Dad* things over the summer, spending time with me, teaching me Magaecian lore, even though I'd rather have spent it doing *Mum* stuff. I missed having time alone with Mum, reading the new magazines she'd get sent for the school library, and baking bread together.

Although it wasn't official, I knew deep down that Saxon Nash was back. Magaecians gossiped a lot. The most irritating piece of gossip I'd heard was that *the newly turned teenager, Ellery Burgess-Myerscough was going to bring back balance to Mother Earth.* Yeah, right! How exactly I was meant to do that was anyone's guess…and I wasn't a newly turned teenager; I was going to be fourteen at the end of the month. People just expected me to share the wisdom and brilliance of my uncle, Darwin Burgess, who was probably the greatest ever leader of the Magaecian Circle. I'd never met him – he died in a car accident before I was born, although, everyone knew that his "accident" was most likely engineered by his successor, Saxon Nash. A sense of foreboding had grasped me so tightly of late, it was suffocating.

An owl hooted outside, which startled me from my troubled thoughts of impending gloom. I sat up in my bed, fidgeting with my fingers, unconsciously biting at a fingernail as I glanced through the window where the

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curtains didn't meet. I stared until my eyes grew heavy, hypnotised by moving shadows thrown from flickering street lights. I knew I'd have no choice but to surrender to sleep – it would inevitably envelop me, but I was still going to try my darnedest to keep awake as long as possible. It was such a disturbing dream and just so vivid. I probably should have told my mum or Myerscough about it. Perhaps it meant something. Of course, there was also the possibility that perhaps it didn't, and the truth was that I was actually going mad. I tried to calm myself. I thought about my friends; I'd see them again soon when school started in a couple of days. I had some great friends at my new school. It was a school for Magaecians, which wasn't, to my great disappointment, a school for learning magic, but instead a school for kids who respected their planet, Magae – also known as Mother Earth. Magaecians thought that Magae was a living entity capable of doing everything in her power to stay alive. So if humans continued to pollute, damage and destroy her, she would have no option but to destroy us first. That's why Saxon Nash hated Dwellers, the non-Magaecian folk. He thought the only way to save his people was to kill all the Dwellers. Charming man! Thinking about Nash sent my heart into uncomfortable palpitations. I was never going to get to sleep with him on my mind.

I took a couple of deep breaths and began again. I tried reciting the alphabet backwards, hoping to keep my mind off bad thoughts, but I only got as far as "R" before I'd concluded that it took too much effort. I decided that I was overthinking this. All I needed to do was to analyse my dream and to take something positive from it. This wouldn't be difficult:

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I only had to ask myself what it was about my dream that frightened me, then try to rationalise my fear. But there were so many things about it that frightened me. It would always start in the same way. I'd try to connect to my honey badger but then, I'd be overwhelmed with distress when my animal totem wasn't there; no matter how hard I tried, I couldn't find it. My brain would scream *danger* like a flashing red sign in my head, causing my senses to jump to high alert. Instead of finding my honey badger, I'd see a hideous creature looming above me, filling me with a dreadful panic that overflowed into my limbs so that they stiffened, rooted to the spot, like a rabbit caught in the headlights of a car. This creature's ivory blades of teeth would drip strings of smelly saliva onto my head and shoulders. An enormous reptile, so much bigger than I was. Some kind of flying serpent king letting out a flaming roar.

I shook my head to remove the vision from my thoughts, which might as well have been tattooed onto the inside of my eyelids as I seemed to see it every time I closed my eyes these days. I shuddered, pulling my bed covers over my shoulders and up to my neck for comfort.

I brought my knees to my chest and hugged them, trying my best to think "happy thoughts" before I fell asleep, but this was proving a lot harder than I'd expected. As I tried far too hard not to think about my disturbing dream, it suddenly dawned on me: a fire-breathing reptile – *that's a dragon!*

"Dragons don't exist," I told myself over and over. *Dragons don't exist.* Perhaps in my head, where I could shapeshift into my totem, maybe here they did. But was I even shapeshifting at all? This was nothing but a nasty dream that I could wake

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up from – a nightmare, not real but in my head. I was being ridiculous. I released my knees and uncurled my body to lie down, sinking my head onto my soft pillow. It wasn't long before I fell into a deep sleep…

…A moving mountain of scales with glistening talons, sharp as kitchen knives, was ready to slice me to death in a heartbeat. Bulging reptilian eyes so cold, concrete-grey, apart from the long black line of its pupils, traversing through the middle. As smoke poured from its nostrils, sulphur filled the air. I began to choke and became light-headed as I held my breath. The beast roared full throttle, causing my eardrums to throb in protest. The ground beneath me juddered so violently, I lost my footing and crashed to the floor, smashing onto my face, nose first. I blacked out for a minute but when I came to, I recognised my surroundings. I was in my cave, and yet it wasn't my cave, my safe haven – it was different somehow. A strange painted emblem permeated the walls which were desecrated and defiled by this horrible creature. My body ached as I shook from head to foot. The cave that should have been still and calm encased me in fear as I strained to find my way to freedom. Hot monster breath blasted over me and I felt my insides melting. Gasping and gulping, I came face to face with the open jaws of eternal blackness, hovering over me to snap me up and swig me down a terrifying slide, a gullet of doom to my end.

I edged backwards, looking for the way out but there wasn't one. The only way to safety was forwards. I scrambled to my feet, heading for an area of light ahead, hoping it might lead me outside and onto the safe meadow.

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The faster I ran, the more I stumbled over my feet. It didn't take me to the outside, to the fresh green grass I longed for, but to a rocky ledge. I knew I shouldn't have looked over it but I did. I wish I hadn't as I was confronted with a void so vast, an endless vacuum of death, it caused my legs to give way. There was nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. If I didn't jump, I'd be dragon food, for sure. If I did, I'd be splattered human smoothie, and that's if I ever even reached the bottom. I might end up falling forever. A huge wave of adrenaline passed over me. I was supposed to be a honey badger, for goodness' sake. My schoolmate, Nyle Pinkerton, said it was the toughest, coolest, kick-ass totem – so why had it abandoned me? My totem wasn't coming. It wasn't coming. I made my decision fast – human smoothie. I squeezed my eyes shut and jumped, falling so far, for so long before jolting every part of my body on reaching the bottom…

"Ellery! Are you up? It's late. We need to get going. Hurry up!" screamed Mum.

I opened my eyes, sweating with a sense of dread. I was back in my bedroom. I was alive – of course I was alive; it was a dream, it wasn't real. I looked down at my bed sheets which were covered in blood! In fact, there was blood everywhere. I screamed until my voice was hoarse. Mum and Myerscough flung open the door, rushing to my side like a couple of superheroes, only without the capes.

"What's happened?" shrieked my mum, a couple of octaves higher than usual as she examined me for wounds.

Shaking, I couldn't speak.

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"You've had a nosebleed," grumbled Myerscough. "You could've gone to the bathroom instead of traipsing blood all round your room, Ellery."

"Sorry," I croaked, touching my nose which felt crusty and horrible. I didn't say any more than that; a dragon, if that's what it was – and I'm *sure* that's what it was, wasn't something a teenager would want to admit to. It was right up there with unicorns, fairies, the Easter Bunny and sparkles. I was too old for that kind of stuff.

"Don't worry, sweetheart," said Mum with a smile. "Go and get washed and dressed. It's late. We're going to the Mitchells' for lunch." She slid off my bedding and took it downstairs to wash.

Hakan and Laura Mitchell were both teachers at my school. They'd been away for most of the year in Alaska, where they had family, so my parents were looking forward to catching up with them. Their kids, Mika and Ashkii, were going to be there too but I didn't know them very well. In fact, I'd always thought Ashkii was a girl, not a boy. I swear I heard Myerscough ask Mitchell last year how Laura and *the girls* were. Mind you, Myerscough was not the type of person to put much effort or importance into finding out anything about any of his friends' kids; too busy with other stuff, like telling people off or arranging meetings with the new Magaecian Circle. And, Mitchell would have been far too polite to have corrected him. Anyway, unlike my parents, I was anything but keen to get going to the Mitchells' for lunch; it was going to be ultra-boring. I stomped down the stairs, stopping halfway, anticipating a sharp pain to stab me in the ribs but it never came. I broke several ribs after

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my encounter with Saxon Nash last Christmas but that was nearly nine months ago now.

"What are you wearing?" growled Mum. "Let me iron that."

"It's fine," said Myerscough with a wink, but Mum stood rigid with her arm outstretched to receive my creased-up shirt.

"I'll start up the car while you do that," said Myerscough, quickly turning on his heels to avoid seeing his teenage daughter in her bra, which was hardly worth the effort – my boobs were practically non-existent.

Although Myerscough's disposition had improved over the year, I still found him pretty frightening. His voice was deep and gruff, like a wolf with a migraine, not to mention the muscular build that went with it – his hands alone were the size of extra-large pizzas.

We arrived at the Mitchells' in Dormly Village, my freshly pressed shirt feeling as though Mum might have put the hanger back into it somewhere. The village of Dormly was even more rural than Tribourne. I think there was only one other house besides the Mitchells' and that belonged to an old, retired artist that no one had seen in years. Mum wondered if anyone ever checked on him. *"He could be dead in there and no one would ever know."*

As we approached, there were two large canvas tepees in the front garden all covered in hawks, painted on like tattoos. Behind them was a small dwelling, a bungalow which I guessed housed their kitchen and a couple of other rooms, hopefully a toilet at least.

"Hau!" said Mitchell as he walked towards us.

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"Hau!" returned Myerscough.

Mitchell pulled him into his chest and whispered something into his ear but I couldn't hear what it was.

"Welcome, Nell and Ellery," panted Laura, who ran up the path to greet us. She was always smiling as if every moment was a joy to her. "This is Mika."

I *knew* it was Mika – who else could it have been? I suppose we'd never really been formally introduced so I just smiled politely. Mika was a small, pretty girl with short, black, shiny pigtails and a dark-skinned face that contrasted her unusually light blue eyes.

"Mika starts at Quinton tomorrow," added Laura. "Looking forward to getting back to school, Ellery?"

I nodded with a fake smile. It was a stupid question. I'd much rather be on my summer break than at school, although I suppose I was looking forward to seeing my friends again. I'd not seen them much over the summer as Myerscough wanted to spend time with me…or something like that. My thoughts were interrupted by the vision of a younger, leaner, taller version of Mr Mitchell: sixteen-year-old Ashkii Mitchell. His glossy black hair was scrapped back like silk into a ponytail held by coloured rope. He had brown eyes, and yet when they caught the light they were more like orange. If my friend Letty caught sight of him, she'd probably faint on the spot. She had a serious crush on Mr Mitchell, but Ashkii might well replace that. He shook hands with Myerscough, trying to appear like one of the men but he failed miserably as he tripped over while walking indoors. I think he caught me giggling as I bit my lips together in an attempt to cover it up.

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A large tribal feather dreamcatcher hung over the front door, the sparkly beads woven into the web, producing a beautiful pattern on the porch as the sunlight caught them. As I headed inside, a strong smell of cedar filled the air. I couldn't decide if I liked it or not. Walking further in, the walls were strewn with brightly coloured woven rugs, all with geometric patterns of red, yellow and orange. A big circular table filled practically the whole dining room, which was warm and welcoming. The smell of cedar had been replaced with the delicious aroma of cornbread and bean stew, which was served inside the shells of three enormous pumpkins. Luckily the table had sturdy legs; the pumpkins looked so heavy. A selection of mismatched crockery accompanied the cutlery for us to tuck in straight away.

We ate loads and chatted politely about nothing really.

"Ash and Mika, why don't you take Ellery out to show her your tepee? I don't suppose she's been in one before," said Mr Mitchell, looking across to his wife as if to signal something.

"Yes," replied Mrs Mitchell. "Good idea. Nell can help me sort out dessert. I'll get Dad to call you when it's ready."

Ash puffed, blinking in slow motion. "Mika can take her. She doesn't need me."

"Ashkii! Do as your mother asks," snapped Mitchell.

Ash's cheeks reddened and his shoulders dropped. He went ranting on about something or other under his breath then drove his chair back with a loud scrape as he stood, almost toppling it over. He signalled with his head for me and Mika to follow as he stomped outside.

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"I don't need a babysitter, thanks," I muttered. "What don't they want us to hear anyway? It can only be boring stuff about the Magaecian Circle."

"Or secret stuff about Nash," whispered Mika.

"Like what?" I said.

"That's the whole point," barked Ash, his American accent far more noticeable now that his mood had changed. "They don't want you to hear. It's not your concern. It's an adult conversation which I should be hearing and probably would be if you weren't round for lunch."

"If I'm old enough to face Nash and fight him, then I'm old enough to hear what they're saying about him," I retorted indignantly, putting my hands into my trouser pockets to hide my trembling fingers at the very mention of Nash's name. Unfortunately, Nash and I had something in common. We were both ebonoid, which meant that we had the ability to produce negative energy physically. Although it sounded really cool, it was actually a curse. When I became angry there was always the possibility I could inadvertently hurt someone – *really* hurt someone that was close to me. There was also the added bonus that if I used my negative power too much, I would become like Nash: out of control, cruel with harmful intent and I would lose myself to the grave darkness and ruin on my downward slope to self-destruction. Ebonoid didn't have a great record of survival through history. I'd been told time and again by my teachers to control my temper but this was an enormous task for a teenager, and they knew it. One teacher even commented that temper and teenager went together like salt and pepper. In my case it seemed to be more thunder and lightning.

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Ash looked at his sister, then nodded. "Follow me, then," he said. He took us round the back of the bungalow where there was a small drainpipe sticking out. He put his finger to his lips before unscrewing the bottom of the pipe very slowly and quietly. As if by magic, both our fathers' voices were as clear as crystal, carried up to us as if we'd put an intercom system in place.

"Mika discovered it," said Ash.

We each lay on our stomachs and listened to the clink of ice cubes in whisky glasses from inside…or it might have been brandy. I didn't know what adults drank after dinner, only that it smelled disgusting.

"She'll kill us all, Hendrick," said Mitchell. "That's why you've got to be proactive. You can't wait any longer, my friend. You've got to take care of this."

"But she's just a child," Myerscough replied.

"She's an ebonoid. You've got to act before she becomes like Nash. You know it will happen. It's inevitable."

"No! It's not!"

"Stop kidding yourself. How do you think she'll react when she finds out you haven't let her out of your sight all summer, too afraid she might hurt her closest friends if she were left alone with them? You can't watch over her forever. It's only a matter of time before something bad happens. I'm sorry – there is no alternative here."

There was an awkward silence apart from my heart, which was banging loudly in my ears. Ash tried to put the pipe back but I flicked his hand away.

"You have to act now, Hendrick…*now*! You know what has to be done."

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"I'm just not sure I'll be able to do it."

"You will. You must. You're the only one that can. I'll help you, my friend."

Ash forced the pipe back. "You shouldn't listen to any more. It's out of context."

"Out of context?" I shouted. "Which part? The bit where your father was insinuating that my father should murder me in my bed before term begins; or the part where *dear Daddy* agrees to let your father help him do it?"

"The first part?" replied Mika as if I'd asked a trick question with rainbow points for the correct answer.

Ash rolled his eyes at his sister's response. "Listen, Ellery, our dads have known each other for decades – always on the side of good. They're not murderers, either one."

I didn't answer as I followed Ash and Mika down to the tepees.

"You've got to help me, Ash. I'm not safe. I know you can drive," I said, pulling him by the arm to make him turn and face me.

"I'm underage."

"I'm under siege! Please help me. Just get me to a station. I know where to go from there."

"Where?" he demanded.

"I can't tell you right now. Besides…it's probably safer for you not to know anyway."

He looked anxiously at his sister. "You mustn't tell, Mika. Not a word."

"I promise," she replied, with a nod.

"Dessert, kids!" hollered Mr Mitchell.

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"Tell Mum and Dad we're meditating with our totems and we'll be in when we've finished," whispered Ash.

"Coming!" yelled Mika, giving a little signal to wait before she set off back the other way to the bungalow. Within seconds of her leaving, she returned. "Here," she said, throwing the car keys to her brother.

"Good one." Ash smiled. "Dad keeps them in his tepee."

"Won't they hear us start the engine?" I asked, biting off one of my nails.

"Dad's car's electric. No sound," replied Ash.

We sprinted across the grass and to the car, a small silver hatchback. It smelled of tobacco and sweets – not that I was complaining. I'd have sat in it if it smelled of old drains and the rotting body of the *possibly dead* artist up the road if it meant I could get away from those two scheming fathers. Ash reversed like a grown-up and drove expertly away, sweating profusely at the possibility of getting caught, I suspect. He stopped outside Dormly station.

"Now what?" He gestured angrily with both hands open, waiting for me to answer back with an intelligent plan.

"Now you go back and make up a good excuse…like I *made* you take me or something."

"You *did* make me take you, Ellery," he snapped. "Your father will kill me…*my* father will kill me."

"That's why you can't know where I'm going."

"All the more reason for them to kill me. Maybe I should come with you. You're going to need help anyway."

I looked across at my handsome new friend, his stunning eyes staring straight back into mine. I felt my heart begin to dance and my cheeks tingled as they must have turned red. I

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held them in my hands, embarrassed by the heat they produced. I slid them across my mouth pretending to blow on my fingers to make them warm, even though it was a lovely sunny day. I so wanted Ashkii to be my hero, to protect me from danger but I knew in my heart that he wouldn't have a clue what to do in a crisis. It might also be dangerous for him if everyone was trying to kill me, in which case, perhaps I was being selfish. I was so confused. Why would Myerscough suddenly turn against me? I thought I was meant to be the one to finish what my uncle had started and bring back balance to Magae.

"No," I began, opening the car door to get out. "You go back. It'll give me a bit more time." As I turned to leave him, I suddenly remembered I had no money on me. I quickly knocked on the passenger window to ask Ash to lend me some cash before he pulled away. The glass shattered with a crisp crunch. A jigsaw of a hundred glass pieces fell out like loose teeth.

"Why did you bang it so hard? My dad's gonna kill me."

"Again?" I answered sarcastically, knowing full well that a little tap on the window wasn't the reason it broke. It must've been faulty, a small unnoticed crack somewhere. "He can't kill you twice, Ash."

"Here," he barked, grabbing a handful of pound coins stashed down the cup holder of his dad's car before practically throwing them through the broken window. His teeth were so tightly clenched there might have been invisible wires holding his jaws together. He drove off, the car's back wheels shooting up dust and stones as he did.

I needed to think. Where could I go? Who could I stay with? Not Thomas or Letty, that would be far too close to

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home and Myerscough would find me immediately. Then there was Dave, of course – Daveena Rupasinghe – the Magaecian guru who helped me last year…but that would be an obvious place too. I stood looking up at the station timetable screen for ideas. Where else could I go in London? Quinton House? My old headmistress, Mrs Huckabee, would be there. I could trust Mrs Huckabee. She'd know what to do. She wasn't headmistress any more, she was the new head of the Magaecian Circle. As I pondered, I felt my stomach knotting but it relaxed temporarily when I noticed an exasperated mum scolding her little girl for getting her lollipop stuck in her hair. The little girl screamed spasmodically as her mum tried to unstick the dark red sweet from her tangled strands. I turned away, not wanting her to see me smirking. As I did, I caught a waft of mint growing wildly on the green station bank. I clambered up to pick a few leaves and caught the stream gurgling on the other side. Mint always reminded me of home; of Mum's cooking; of the mint tea she always drank; and of Lionel, my dog whose nose always smelled of mint from rummaging in the mint bush in our garden. My heart felt suddenly heavy at the thought of leaving all that behind. I placed the leaves in my trouser pocket, next to my totem stone which I always carried with me.

It was a slippery descent as I slid down to the platform towards a stern-looking, middle-aged man, whose stride hastened to a gallop in order to avoid me. He wore a smart camel coat which covered a dark suit beneath it. He took out a black shiny pipe and filled it with tobacco. I'd never seen anyone smoke a pipe before – apart from Sherlock Holmes

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in films – and was intrigued. His brown, bushy eyebrows jumped up and down as he inhaled the flame at the end of his matchstick. As I bit off another fingernail, I stared, almost hypnotised by the flame dancing in and out of his pipe. A small spark separated and removed itself, flying into the man's hair, singeing off the middle part of one of his eyebrows in the process. The man squealed and dropped his pipe as he smacked his head to put out the flames which seemed only to make matters worse.

"That man's head's exploding!" shrieked the little girl, pointing. Her mother wasn't listening, totally oblivious, still trying to remove the lollipop.

The poor man became increasingly unsteady on his feet, hands outstretched hysterically, part of his hair alive, still ignited, a streak of orange running through it. I raced to help him but he slipped and fell before I'd even got close. He landed hard on his back against a recycling bin which went up like a Roman candle. I tore off my hoodie and threw it over him which seemed to do the job – but a wave of flames had already spread along the platform. Sparks rained quickly through the air before joining together to create an erratic flaming whirlwind which engulfed several newspaper stands. I looked across to the man who was no longer alight despite the fact that the rest of the place was fast combusting as Dormly station suddenly acquired an eternal flame in the middle of it.

Alarm bells screeched, station staff appearing from everywhere, attempting to put out the fire, brandishing shiny red extinguishers which looked as though they'd never been used before. Thick smoke belched from the platform, the

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acrid flavour filling my nostrils. It seemed to be getting out of hand unnervingly fast from such a small spark. It didn't make any sense.

"Ellery!"

I turned with a jump to see Hakan frogmarching his son towards me. The pipe-man who'd started the fire was being attended to by a station conductor, examining his lack of eyebrows and singed new fuzzy hairstyle. I thought this might be a good time to leg it. I turned to scarper but was met, head-on by the muscular wall of Myerscough's torso. My heart quickened uncomfortably. I felt it pounding, every beat more unpleasant than the last as the pressure built up to reach my ears, which weren't registering any sound, drowned out by sirens blaring and people screaming.

"Going somewhere, Ellery?" he growled.

The hairs on my arms stood up. I gritted my teeth. I looked back to see Ash being shouted at by his father. Clenching my fists as I turned to Myerscough, I forgot briefly that my ebonoid power was useless on him. He was genetically immune. He grabbed my hands and forced them into a namaste position, then moved aside for me to see an old lady trying to catch her breath on the ground.

"Your handy work, young lady," he began as he pointed to the fallen woman. "And no doubt this whole fiery charade too. Does every new school year have to start with a blazing inferno?"

I said nothing.

"We need to get out of here," shouted Myerscough over the screams of hysterical passengers and staff, running around like headless chickens – some yielding their fire extinguishers

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out of control to spread long trails of meringue-like foam all over the place; others standing gormlessly, shocked by the turn of events at the usually quiet station. An otherwise mild day had turned into anything but, the temperature rising as flames grew around us, engulfing the antiquated station, pouring out dirty smoke everywhere. Embers spat among the sooty particles floating about, covering the ground in a dusty grey layer.

"All passengers exit the station, please!" screamed a lady over the tannoy in between coughs.

Myerscough grabbed my arm but I swung myself free.

"Go on then!" I screamed, causing passengers to turn momentarily from the chaos in favour of watching our commotion instead. "Kill me! Just get it over with."

"What?" answered Myerscough, furrowing his brow.

"I know you want to kill me."

"I'd love to throttle you right now, young lady, I really would," spat Myerscough. "But unfortunately, fathers are not allowed to kill their children…which is just as well. I can't imagine there'd be many kids left if we could."

"I don't understand. You told Mitchell he needed to help you to kill me."

Myerscough stood in stunned silence before letting out an enormous laugh that filled every platform of the burning station, almost drowning out the sirens of oncoming fire engines. "How the bloody hell did you come to that conclusion?"

"I heard you – both of you. You said, 'She will kill us all. You've got to act before she becomes like Nash'."

Myerscough shook his head, then put his hand on his stubbly chin. His sweaty forehead crinkled as he let out

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another blast of laughter, so forceful it seemed to fan the flames even more. "You're an idiot!"

"Okay, Hendrick. Not too harsh, my friend," butted in Mitchell as he pushed us both out of the station exit. "Let's get out of here and go for a coffee. There's a cafe just down the road. Should be a safe enough distance away."

I looked over at Ash and tutted. He'd failed big time to be my knight in shining armour. I followed Myerscough and the other two to the smelly local cafe which felt like miles and miles away – definitely not *just down the road*.

"Firstly," began Myerscough, grabbing a menu off the adjacent table, "you shouldn't eavesdrop."

Ash looked down at the grubby table, stained with age-old tomato ketchup and baked bean residue.

"Hakan *did* say that she will kill us all…*she*, meaning Magae, not you. I also agreed to let Hakan help me to teach you through your totem so that you won't become like Nash. He said I am the only one who can do it because I am the only one immune."

A waitress came over with a scrappy piece of paper to take our order of three black coffees. I wanted nothing and just shook my head at her.

"An orange juice for the young lady, please," said Myerscough, which irritated me. However, when it came, I drank it to soothe my throat, which was still burning from the smoke.

"You see, Ellery," said Mitchell softly, "your *gift* will grow as you do, and that will need to be managed closely."

"I know how to manage my *gift*, thank you."

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"No, you don't," said Myerscough curtly. "Judging by the state of Dormly station, I'd say you're way out of your depth."

"I didn't start the fire!" I yelled, people glaring at me as if I were some juvenile arsonist intent on destroying their local village. "It was the man with a stupid pipe. I might be an ebonoid but I'm not Captain Fire-fingers!"

Myerscough's face crinkled as if he should have heard of Captain Fire-fingers. Ash, on the other hand, dribbled out a bit of his coffee with a snigger. He caught my eye with a smile but then stared vacantly back at the table, probably still feeling guilty about giving me away within the first five minutes of returning home. I should have found a station further away than Dormly. It was a stupid idea to go from there. The only upside was that at least now I knew that Myerscough and Mitchell weren't going to kill me after all. The downside was that there would be a hell of a punishment coming my way.

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