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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Alex Bell has published novels and short stories for both adults and young people, including *Frozen Charlotte*, *The Lighthouse* and the Explorers' Clubs series. She always wanted to be a writer but had several different back-up plans. After completing a law degree, she now works part-time at the Citizens Advice Bureau. She lives in Hampshire with her husband and sons.

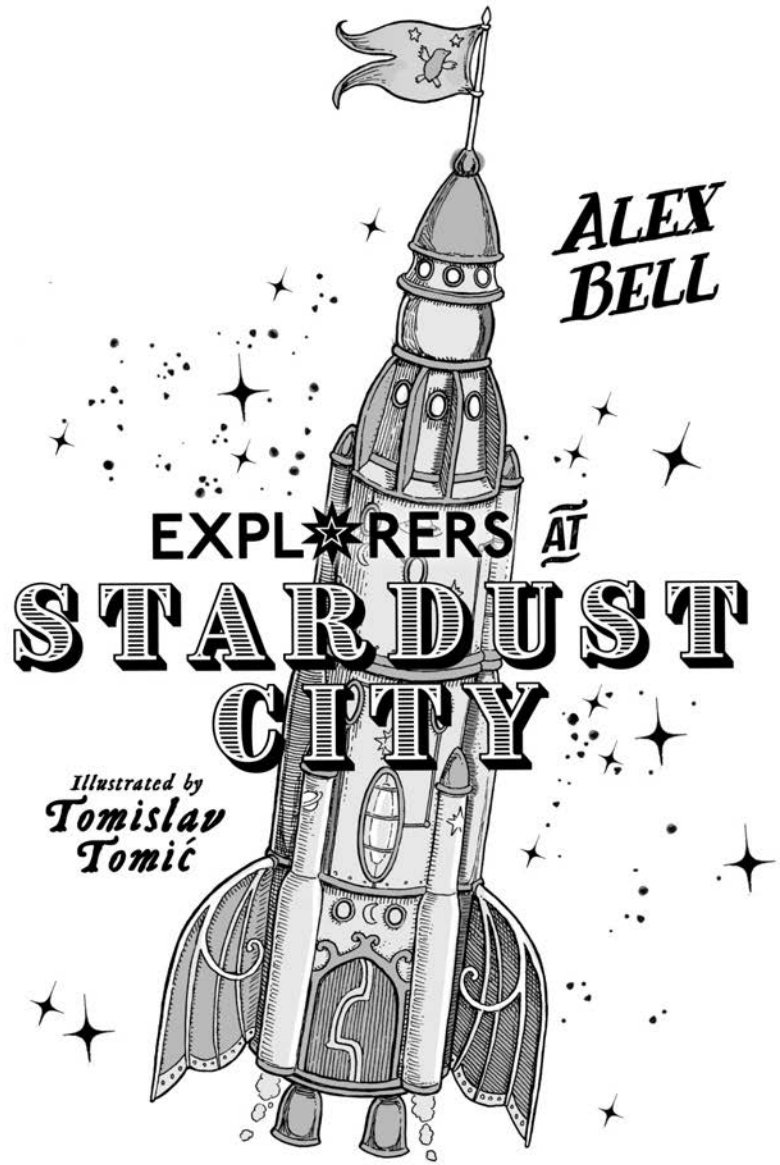
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Tomislav Tomić was born in 1977. He graduated from the Academy of Fine Arts in Zagreb. He started to publish his illustrations during his college days. He has illustrated a great number of books, picture books, schoolbooks and lots of covers for children's books. He lives and works in the town of Zaprešić, Croatia.

THE EXPLORERS' CLUBS SERIES

The Polar Bear Explorers' Club
Explorers on Witch Mountain
Explorers on Black Ice Bridge

The Ocean Squid Explorers' Club
Explorers at Pirate Island
Explorers at Stardust City



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For my son, Toby Dayus.
I look forward to reading this book to you one day.

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Chapter One

Ursula swam a short distance from the *Blowfish* with the snow globe clutched tightly in her hand. Her friends had urged her to be quick since there was a storm coming. Fortunately, Ursula was a very fast swimmer because she was half mermaid and changed from her human form as soon as her legs touched saltwater.

The waves churned restlessly and the sky above had already turned purple and black with clouds. Ursula could smell the storm in the air and imagined that somewhere nearby a storm maiden was already preparing to hurl lightning bolts and hurricane cats. This wasn't a good time for the *Blowfish* to be above the ocean, but the submarine's water reserves were almost empty and they had had to stop to collect fresh supplies.

Since their eventful visit to Pirate Island, the explorers had been travelling hard for a week. They were still fired up after their encounter with the

villainous Collector Scarlett Sauvage. Although they had rescued some children she'd taken prisoner, the explorers hadn't been able to prevent Scarlett escaping from them, and taking Stella Starflake Pearl with her. The Collector had ensnared the ice princess in a pair of magical golden handcuffs that would compel Stella to do whatever Scarlett told her. And the explorers all knew it was a very dangerous thing for Scarlett to have ice magic at her disposal.

Scarlett was part of the Phantom Atlas Society, a secret organisation that had been stealing places from the world for years and locking them up inside magical snow globes. The Collector had finally run out of snow globes, so her stealing had stopped . . . for a while. But now she held Stella captive, she could force the ice princess to use her magic to make new ones, and even more places would be stolen. Scarlett had to be stopped, and quickly.

So Ursula and her friends had set off in the *Blowfish* on a new mission. Apart from a brief stop to drop off their Polar Bear explorer friends, who had helped them on Pirate Island, and another to release a sea gremlin they'd taken prisoner, they'd hardly slowed down since.

But submarines needed water and now they'd stopped to fill up their reserves, Ursula took the

opportunity to swim out with one of the snow globes they had rescued that contained a water horse. On their recent visit to Mercadia, the mermaid city, the explorers had met Princess Coral. The mermaid had been caring for a water foal whose mother had been stolen by the Collector. Now Ursula was eager to help reunite them.

Thunder rumbled ominously overhead as she unscrewed the glass dome from the base of the globe. Immediately, a fully grown water horse burst forth, snorting, stamping and prancing over the waves in its delight at being free. Ursula felt a huge smile spread over her face. She didn't think she'd ever get tired of being up close to these majestic beasts. Water horses were magical creatures made from the sea itself, and this one had frothing white foam for her mane and tail, sparkling blue water for her body and pearly shell hooves that glinted in the last beams of light slanting through the storm clouds. After a short while, the horse stopped frolicking and turned back to Ursula, leaning down to nuzzle her hair.

'I don't know whether you can understand me,' Ursula said, looking up into the horse's blue eyes, 'but I hope you can because I need to tell you that your foal is waiting for you in Mercadia. She's safe – Princess Coral is looking after her. I'm afraid we're a long way

from the mermaid city, but hopefully that won't matter too much to you.'

Water horses were the fastest sea creatures in existence, able to fly over the waves with astonishing speed. The beautiful horse whinnied and pressed its soft nose against Ursula's head for a moment before she turned and galloped off across the ocean.

'Goodbye,' Ursula whispered. 'And good luck.'

She began swimming back towards the *Blowfish*. The wind had really picked up now, whipping her hair around her face, and enormous waves were already crashing over her head. Ursula ducked beneath the surface and swam underwater. It was calmer below, although she could still sense the ocean's restlessness and was keen to get back to the shelter of the submarine as quickly as possible. She was almost there when she saw a water horse dive beneath the surface. At first, she thought it was the one she'd just released from the snow globe, but she soon realised that this was a different horse altogether. In fact, it wasn't a normal water horse at all, but something even rarer – a storm stallion.

The stallion was massive, its entire body rippling with speed and strength. Its coat was dappled black and grey rather than blue, its hooves were the colour of lightning and its green eyes flashed with wildness.

It looked so untame that Ursula was a little afraid to get too close, but the horse spotted her at once and galloped over, leaving a churning tunnel of bubbles in its wake.

Ursula couldn't help shrinking back as it skidded to a halt and reared up on to its hind legs, but then she saw that it had a golden shell in its mouth, which it dropped in front of her. Ursula recognised the shell as one of the ones used to send messages on the bubble tide – the mermaid postal service. These messages were usually delivered by the tide itself, or sometimes by dolphins if the message was particularly important. She'd never heard of a water horse messenger before though, let alone a storm stallion, and she knew this message must be incredibly important. The horse was watching her expectantly, so she reached out and grabbed the shell before it could float away.

'Thank you,' she said.

The stallion snorted into the water, then turned and galloped off, quickly disappearing into the darkness of the sea. Clutching the shell tightly, Ursula hurried back down to the submarine and entered through the swim-out hatch. As soon as the water drained away she used the intercom to tell her friends on the bridge that she was safely on board. The engines immediately came to

life and she felt the vibrations through the floor as the *Blowfish* dived deeper below the surface.

Ursula was so curious about the message that she didn't even wait to dry off her tail, but raised the shell to her ear straight away. The cool tones of Princess Coral came through to her at once:

'Ursula, I've sent this storm stallion from my own stable to instruct you to make your way to the Seashells Mermaid Academy in the Jelly Blue Sea with all due haste. It's too complicated to explain everything now, but it's to do with the fire magician who provided Scarlett with the magical handcuffs. The coordinates are engraved into this shell. Yours truly, Princess Coral.'

Ursula removed the shell from her ear and saw that there was indeed a set of coordinates engraved into it. She lost no time in drying off her tail and changing back into her engineering coveralls. Dressed like this, it was hard to tell that Ursula was half mermaid. The only things giving it away were the streaks of blue and purple in her otherwise black chin-length hair.

Taking the shell with her, she exited the swim-out hatch and ran along the submarine's gleaming wood-and-brass corridors. Through the portholes she could see they were already under way, streams of bubbles racing past, along with the occasional blurry glimpse of

a passing fish or eel. Like most Ocean Squid Explorers' Club submarines, the *Blowfish* was sleek, speedy and gigantic, almost like a floating hotel with its onboard library, skating rink, cinema, ice-cream parlour and other facilities.

Although the *Blowfish* was designed to carry an entire team of explorers, Ursula and three other children had been the only ones on board when Scarlett Sauvage had stolen the Ocean Squid Explorers' Club all those weeks ago and so escaped the Collector's clutches. They had been travelling together ever since. Along with snow globes containing the water horse and several places, they had managed to rescue the one with the club from the Collector's stronghold on Pirate Island, and the explorer Zachary Vincent Rook had recently set off to return it to its rightful place in the Jelly Blue Sea.

Of course, technically speaking, Ursula and her friends should have returned the *Blowfish* to the Ocean Squid headquarters now the club was safe again. But the children knew that if they returned there, or made radio communication with anyone, then the president – or their various parents and guardians – would be sure to force them to come home, and none of them wanted that. Not when there was still an ice princess to be rescued and a villain to be foiled.

It took Ursula a few minutes to reach the bridge and she was out of breath by the time she finally arrived. Jai was at the controls, making some adjustments to their course. He was the acting captain of their team and spent a lot of his time on the bridge. Max was over in the corner tinkering with his new robot shark. Although he was renowned in the club for misbehaviour, he was also an extremely talented robot inventor and his various creations had come in handy more than once during their adventures. Finally, Genie stood at one of the windows waving at her shadow kraken Bess, who had attached herself to the side of the submarine and was peering in at them, her gigantic eye taking up the entire window.

'Genie, could you ask her to move?' Jai said, glancing up. 'She's blocking our view.'

But Bess had already faded away. As a shadow animal, she had no physical substance and could appear and disappear at will. She was never far from Genie though, as Genie was one of those rare breeds of people known as a whisperer, meaning that she could communicate with a particular type of animal – in this case, kraken. No one knew for sure why whisperers had shadow animals that accompanied them wherever they went, but many believed they were a little piece of the whisperer's soul given physical form.

'Hi, Ursula,' Genie said now, turning from the window. She and Jai were brother and sister and both had the same brown skin and black hair, although Genie's hair was partially covered by an extraordinary hat. She was very skilled at making hats and seemed to have a never-ending supply of imaginative creations. Today she wore one in the form of a coral garden. Several bits of coral were the same shade of sparkly pink as the cowgirl boots she always wore. 'Did it go OK with the water horse?' she added.

Realising that their friend had appeared on the bridge, the others turned towards her too.

'Yes, I set her free,' Ursula replied, finally catching her breath. 'But as I was returning to the submarine, a storm stallion appeared and delivered a message.'

Max frowned. 'Storm stallion?' he asked.

'They're a type of water horse,' Ursula said. 'Very rare. Princess Coral has some in her private stables. In fact, this message is from her. It says . . . well, you'd better listen to it yourselves.'

She held up the shell and the message from the mermaid princess replayed. Once it had finished, everyone was silent for a moment. Then Jai came over to look at the shell and exclaimed in dismay. 'But these coordinates will take us back the way we've just come,'

he said, 'in the opposite direction from where we need to go.'

Before parting from the Polar Bear explorers, the Ocean Squid team had been given the *Phantom Atlas*, a book that Stella and her friends had discovered, containing a record of all the places that had been stolen by the Collector and where they had come from. Now the Ocean Squid explorers were trying to reach the Nebula Sea, the original location of the captured Stardust City, home of the galaxy fairies.

Ursula and her friends planned to release the city from its snow globe and then ask the fairies who lived there for help locating Stella and Scarlett. The galaxy fairies had wings made of moon dust, which meant they could fly all the way into space, and were even said to have invented rockets. With their help, the explorers would be able to find the Collector much more quickly.

The Nebula Sea was a week's journey away, which was precious time to them. They had discussed setting the city free in some other part of the ocean, but they couldn't know for sure how large it was and how much space it would need. Max had suggested it wasn't likely to be huge, being a fairy city, but the explorers had made a bad mistake the last time they'd released a stolen place from a snow globe, and the Sunken City

of Pacifica had been destroyed as a result. No one had been hurt, but all Pacifica's beautiful buildings and books had gone. And Jai had pointed out that a new city suddenly appearing somewhere it wasn't meant to be could upset the sea's delicate ecosystem too.

'We have a responsibility to the galaxy fairies and the rest of the creatures in the ocean,' Jai had said. 'So we need to put Stardust City back where it came from.'

'I know it will cause a delay,' Ursula said now. 'But I don't think Princess Coral would have asked us to go to the mermaid academy if it wasn't important. And any information they can give us about the fire magician could be helpful in rescuing Stella.'

Jai sighed. 'I suppose so. I hate to lose the time, though. Scarlett could already be stealing more places, and who knows how much longer we'll be able to remain hidden from her spies.'

They all peered at the pickled parrot charm on the bridge. After their city had been destroyed, the Pacificans were angry with the explorers and had started to work with Scarlett. They possessed psychic abilities and had used these to discover where the children were, forcing them to go to a sea witch for a charm to disguise themselves. This charm took the form of a pickled parrot in a jar, and the sea witch had

told them that when all its silver feathers turned green, the charm would run out. The parrot still had a decent number of silver feathers, but they weren't sure how long this would last.

'What do you two think?' Jai asked, looking at Genie and Max.

Jai could be a little pompous and was a bit of a stickler for the rules sometimes, but Ursula loved that his style of leadership involved consulting the opinions of his entire team and always listening carefully to their views. Rather than handing out orders, he preferred the four of them to discuss matters and reach a decision together, or else take a vote if there was any disagreement.

'I don't see why she couldn't have sent a longer message giving us all the information,' Max grumbled. 'But I guess we'd better do as she's asked, just in case.'

'I agree,' Genie said. 'The mermaids have been useful allies until now, haven't they? Especially with the magic ice cream they gave us, and the trident.'

Although mermaids and explorers had historically been enemies, Ursula and her friends had managed to form a tentative alliance with them in order to help stop the Collector. As a result, they'd been given some special mermaid ice cream that allowed humans

to breathe underwater for twenty-four hours, and Princess Coral had loaned the royal trident to Ursula too. She was still learning how to use it, but it was potentially a very powerful weapon that could shoot out lightning bolts from its prongs.

'All right,' Jai said with a sigh. 'We'll turn the *Blowfish* around. I only hope it's worth it.'

Ursula stared down at the shell in her hand and hoped so too. They were all very aware of the need to stop Scarlett and rescue Stella. It felt wrong to all of them to turn the submarine around, but at least they weren't too far from the mermaid academy.

'We should get there tomorrow,' Jai said, looking down at the controls.

'It's a very famous academy,' Ursula said, in an attempt to encourage the others. 'My mum told me that only the smartest, most gifted mermaids go there.'

Ursula had often secretly dreamed of visiting the school. She'd never had much opportunity to experience mermaid life because many mermaids had disapproved when her mermaid mother had fallen in love with her human father. The three of them had only lived together as a family for a short while before living on land had started to make Ursula's mother ill and she had to return to the sea. Ursula had gone to

live at the Ocean Squid Explorers' Club with her father, but she always looked forward to the times when her mother visited her, bringing mermaid gifts and tales of underwater life.

'I'm sure if anyone can help us, the mermaids at the academy can,' she added.

The others nodded but none of them said what they were all thinking – that for this expedition, they would need all the help they could get.



Chapter Two

The storm raged all night but the water was calm beneath the surface and the explorers arrived at the mermaid academy in the afternoon of the next day. It was deep under the sea and would have been as black as space, but the area was lit up with an abundance of glow jellyfish. The golden light they gave out was very similar to sunshine, turning the ocean an attractive turquoise blue and clearly illuminating the school itself.

It was housed in a grand building made of white coral that sprawled upon a golden seabed scattered with shells and starfish. In fact, with its four turrets, the school looked more like a castle, especially as it also had balconies and statues of dolphins holding up the rails. The main thing giving it away as a school was the merstudents swimming around. Some were attending to a sea garden, while others rode water horses and giant seahorses in the sea nearby.

As usual, Ursula felt a little twist of envy at seeing