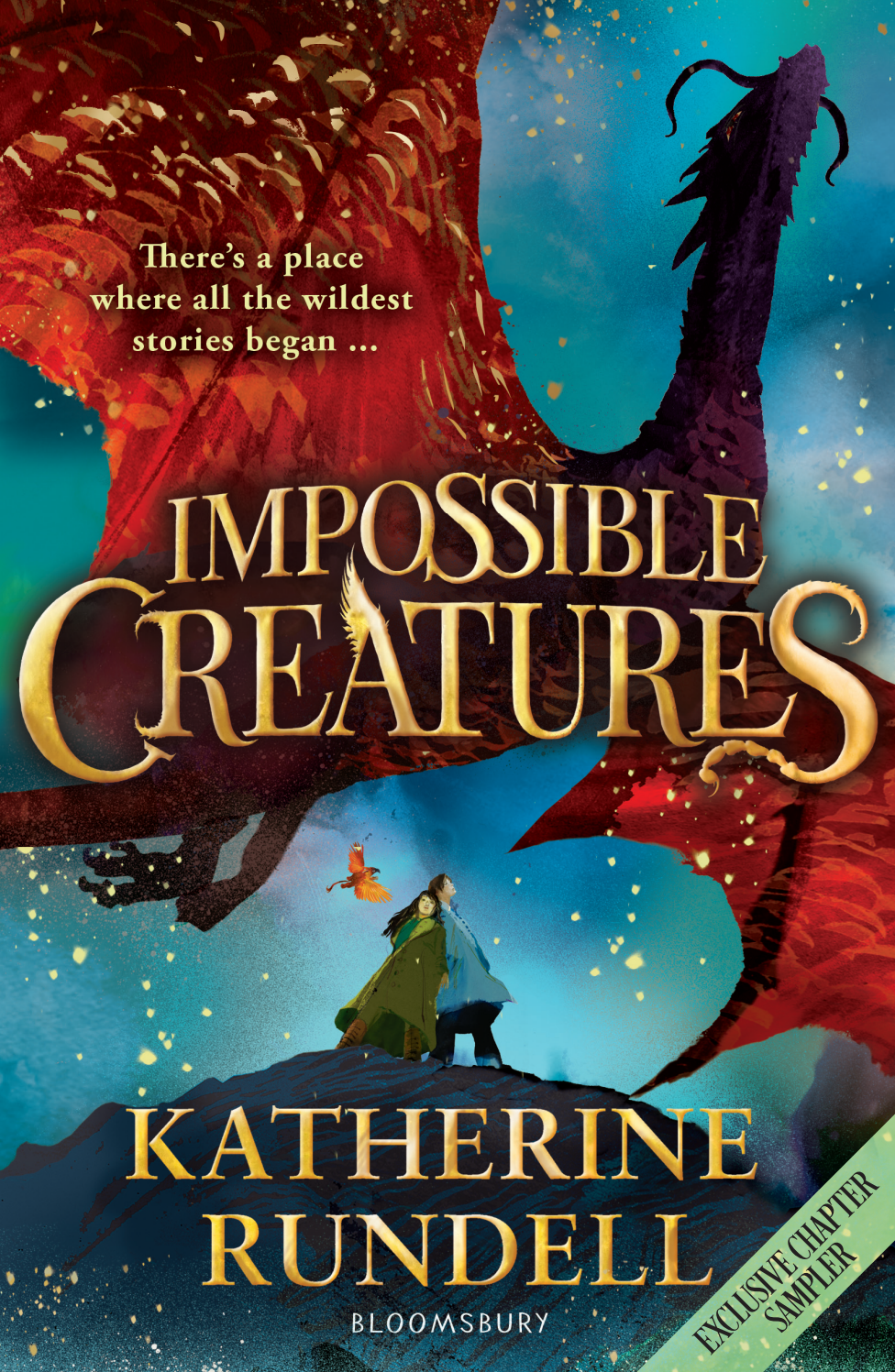

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KATHERINE RUNDELL
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Impossible Creatures

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Impossible Creatures

KATHERINE RUNDELL

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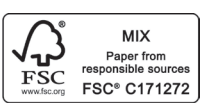
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'There's a secret place, Christopher, in our world – hidden from us, to keep it safe – where all the creatures of myth still live and thrive. The people who live there call it the Archipelago. It's the last surviving magic place.'

Read on for an extract of Katherine Rundell's epic new novel, *Impossible Creatures*

THE STAMPEDE

The sun had come out and it was very fine, as Christopher walked up the hill. Fine, at least, until the ground began to quake.

He was nearing the top of the slope with Goose at his heels, when she stopped short and gave an anxious whine. He bent to stroke her. 'What is, girl? Are you hurt?'

Then he heard it too: a rumbling, deep in the earth. He bent to touch the ground, and felt it shake under his palm. An earthquake? He looked up the hill; the trembling under his feet grew. Goose's hackles rose along her back and she began to bark in high, terrified yaps.

Then there was a great whinnying cry, and a huge green horse covered in shining scales thundered straight towards him. Christopher yelled. He tried to pull Goose, but she was rooted to the spot, flattened against the dirt, so he lifted her in his arms and ran. She was heavy and

cumbersome, but terror gave him speed; he darted behind an oak tree, his heart roaring, and crouched over Goose. The horse tore down the hill, its eyes wide and staring with distress. He could see the muscular gleam of its green-scaled flank as it came; he pressed himself against the tree. It passed by so close that it kicked dirt up into his face. As he watched, the horse spread vast scaled wings, and took flight, flapping above the tree line.

And then came the stampede. Down the slope came a cascade of shrew-like creatures with canine fangs, soaking wet, a dozen of them, and then a great horde of what looked like large green-horned squirrels, wailing and crying out – 'Run! Run!' – as they went. Goose struggled in his arms, but he held on to her.

It was impossible. Wild incredulity rose in him. But the dog's tug against his hands was real, as were the scratches she gave to his chest as she reared, trying to run down the slope and away.

Before he could move there was a great whinnying, and down the hill came a horse with a horn of pure-bright silver. It went charging past him, eyes rolling with fear, hurtling down towards his grandfather's house. Its tail, white as moonlight, was tangled with weeds.

'A *unicorn*,' he breathed to Goose.

As fast as they had come, the creatures had gone,

vanished into the trees below. Christopher's hands and feet were ice-cold despite the sun.

His first instinct was to sprint down the hill to tell his grandfather. But then from the top of the hill there came a noise: a high, peeping cry. It was a desperate, terrible noise: the noise of something struggling to live.

He hesitated only for a second; and then he sprinted, faster than he had ever run, up the forbidden hill.

He could not have said what he expected to find – but it was not what he saw. The hill flattened at its peak into a small lake. It was forty paces across, and a blue so dark it was almost black. The shallows were spotted with bulrushes. There was nothing extraordinary about it – except that in the centre of the lake something was drowning.

The water was churning and white, and something with wings and a tail was flailing: shrill peeps of terror came from it as it paddled desperately.

Christopher didn't stop to let himself think; if he stopped to think, the madness and impossibility of it would envelop him. He threw his jacket on to the grass, and tore his shoes off and ran in.

The cold was like leaping into a brick wall: it kicked the breath from his lungs. The creature let out another cry: a cheeping like a chick, but far louder and more afraid. Its

short forelegs were not made for water, and though its wings flailed hard, it was going under.

The water was deep, and Christopher swam fast. The splash of the lake was in his eyes, and when he reached the place he thought the creature had been, it wasn't there.

He dived under, kicking hard, but could see only the black of the water. He came up, eyes raking the surface: but it was nowhere to be seen. He spat out water tasting of mud and silt, and dived under again, deeper.

And there it was: its eyes and beak closed, sinking fast. Christopher's heart lurched and he kicked downward – the pressure tightening on his ears, the cold burning on his skin – and seized it by the back leg.

He shot to the surface and gasped for breath – but the creature did not breathe. He waded out of the lake, grabbed his jacket and wrapped the creature in it. Its eyes opened, and it vomited a quantity of half-digested whatever-it-ate on to his sleeve.

Christopher let out a burst of laughter that was also a choke. 'Nice,' he said. 'Thanks for that.' His teeth were chattering so badly he could barely speak. But his whole body was shining with relief; and with a dizzying, unbelieving awe. Because he knew, now, what he was holding in his arms.

The creature had the hind legs of a lion cub, and the wings and forelegs of an eagle, white feathered and tufty.

His face was that of a young bird, with large green eyes, but his ears were like a horse's, brown and pointed and much too big for him.

'You're a griffin,' Christopher said.

There was no question but that it was real, because it twisted in the coat and scraped panickily at him, with two different kinds of claws. The lion's hind claws were sharper, and dug further into his skin.

'Hey, hey!' There was blood coming from somewhere; warm, new blood. He caught with difficulty at its forelegs and turned it over, checking it for wounds. He lifted its tail, turning over its soft hind paws in his hands; there it was, a deep cut on its left back leg. He wrapped his sock around it and tied it. The creature writhed in protest, but did not bite.

He pulled his shoes back on to his soaking wet feet, fumbling. His fingertips were blue with cold. Then he picked up the griffin again. 'Let's get you somewhere warm, quick,' he said.

The griffin seemed soothed by the sound of his voice. It nestled its beak into the crook of his elbow and breathed deeply. It smelt of wet fur and wet feathers, and under it the musky, soft, growing smell of young animal. It was, he thought, the most beautiful thing he had ever seen in his life.

'I'll protect you,' he said. 'Don't panic. I won't let anything happen to you.' The creature bit him lightly on the thumb.

This was, some might say, a foolish and dangerous promise to make to any living thing, given the chaotic unpredictability of the world. But, equally, that's the thing about griffins: they are persuasive.

THE GUARDIAN'S SECRET

Most men, if their grandson burst into a room dripping water and clutching a mythical creature to their chest, would begin by asking questions. But Frank Aureate was not most men.

His grandfather was dozing in an armchair by the fire when Christopher flung open the door. He sat up, took in the scene – Christopher, blue at the lips and a wild look in his eyes, and the bundle in his arms, and Goose at his heels – and rose to his feet.

'I need a bandage,' said Christopher. 'For the griffin.'

'You went to the lochan, then,' said Frank. 'To the lake. When you were told a dozen times not to.'

'I had to,' said Christopher, and he held out the bundle in his arms. 'He was drowning in it.' As fast as he could, he told his grandfather what he had seen.

Frank stood in the centre of the room, breathing hard. Then he crossed to kitchen. He came out with a glass of red

wine and a roll of bandage. 'Give me the griffin. Go and shower, as hot and fast as you can, and come back down.'

When Christopher returned, Frank was tying off the end of a bandage around the hind flank of the griffin. There was a cup of hot chocolate by the fire.

'Come,' he said. 'Sit. You can feed him.' He looked very old, and his body creaked as he sat down. He gave Christopher the griffin, and a tin of sardines. 'Aye. So. I see that an explanation has become necessary.'

'But – there was a *unicorn*. Aren't you going to—?'

He was quelled with a look from Frank that almost frightened him. '*Sit*,' said the old man. 'Listen.' It was a look that made clear, for a moment, the force his grandfather had once been; and still was, under the old paper skin and the crooked hands. 'It won't have gone far – there are fences. It's more important that you hear what I need to say.'

Christopher sat. He opened the tin of sardines, and the griffin pecked at his hand in excitement.

Frank sighed. 'I would've told you eventually, Christopher. But you're too young. Your father and I agreed on that.' He drank deeply from his glass of wine, as if for courage. 'We were going to wait till you were at least eighteen; your father was arguing for twenty-one, or twenty-five. In truth, I think he'd rather you never knew.'

'Tell me *what*? Never know *what*?'

Frank took a key from his pocket and unlocked a tall wooden cupboard. From it he took another key. He took down from the wall the oil painting of the man in uniform.

'Hideous picture. I chose it to hide the safe on the reckoning that nobody could possibly want to steal it.'

Christopher gave the griffin a sardine; it swallowed it whole, trying to take his fingers with it. 'Steady,' whispered Christopher. 'My fingers aren't on the menu, thanks.'

Behind the painting there was a metal safe. Frank Aureate unlocked it, and drew out a scroll and a small booklet. He thumbed them both on the table, and spread out the scroll. Christopher leaned forward. It was a map, painted in exquisitely small brush strokes on vellum.

'This is the Archipelago.'

Frank Aureate ran his fingers over the map, slowly, lovingly. He drew breath.

'There's a secret place, Christopher, in our world – hidden from us, to keep it safe – where all the creatures of myth still live and thrive. The people who live there call it the Archipelago. It's thirty-two islands – some as large as Denmark, some as small as a town square. Across these islands, thousands of magical creatures roam, raise their young, grow old and die and begin again. It's the last surviving magic place.'

'Magic? You can't really—' said Christopher, incredulity rising in his voice. Frank held up a hand.

'Stop. The world has always had magic in it, Christopher. Aren't you holding a griffin in your arms? It grew with the Earth's first tree: from the tree it flowed into the soil, into the air and the water. In the Archipelago, they call it the glimourie.'

Christopher felt the weight of the griffin; its animal warmth. He gave it another sardine, and felt its small tongue flick against his fingers. 'And that's the magic? The glimourie?'

'Glimourie, aye. Or glamarie, some of the islanders call it. Glawmery, glamry, glim, glimt. It's all the same: it's the name they give the first magic. Long ago, it was everywhere. For thousands of years, magical creatures lived freely over the whole earth. But gradually, as we humans began to build our civilisations, we realised we could use the creatures; that we could farm and kill and trap them, for the ease they could give our lives. And they became rarer, and rarer. It's not a story to make you admire humanity.

'But there was one place – a cluster of islands, in the North Atlantic Ocean – where that first tree grew. There the glimourie in the earth and air was at its strongest. And one day, a few thousand years ago, those islands disappeared.'

'*Disappeared?*'

'Aye. And everywhere else in the world the creatures died out, as we hunted them to extinction. As the next thousands of years passed, we forgot, slowly, that once the world had been lit by the shining of a unicorn, or the dragon's fire – and we came to believe that the true accounts we had were in fact myth. Just children's stories. Nothing important. We're a forgetful people, humanity.'

'Where are the islands? The Arki— what did you call it?' The griffin tried to bury his beak in the tin; Christopher gently fended him off, and gave him the remaining fish.

'Ar-ki-pe-la-go. An old word, for a cluster of islands.'

'Where did they go?'

Frank's face shone: like the fire beside him, it glowed. 'That's the thing, boy. They're exactly where they always were.'

Something was rising in Christopher's body: a hot flush, from his face to the soles of his feet: a burning swell of excitement. And yet still – even with the griffin, who was scratching his feathered ear with his hind leg, heavy in his lap – it felt impossible. It felt *too much*. It was too much what he'd always longed to be true.

'But if they're there, why don't we know about them? With radar, and surveillance drones, and all that?'

'No boat can get close; the glimourie pushes them

away, so gently that they never notice. In the same way planes cannot fly overhead; but they never know it. It is unchartered and unchartable.'

The griffin seemed full now, and its eyes were fluttering with tiredness. He buried his beak under Christopher's jersey, up against his chest, and Christopher stroked his tufty wings, calming him. He leaned over him to look at the map. 'Show me?'

Frank pointed. 'This one – Lithia – is larger than Britain – that's the centre of it. This one – Arkhee – is the furthest north: that's where that first tree grew. Twelve are inhabited by a mix of humans and creatures, the others by creatures alone.'

'Unicorns?'

'Unicorns, aye. Primarily on the island of Ceretos, and on Atidina.'

'Centaurs?'

'Yes, centaurs, on Antiok. And many, many more – all the less-known creatures that were in the stories of old – karkadanns and manticores, krakens and kappas and sea-bulls. It is a riotous, glorious place.'

Christopher's heart was beating so hard in his chest that the griffin, disturbed by its racing thump, backed out of the jersey and cast him a look. 'Is there any way to get there?'

'Not unless you know how.'

Christopher rocked backwards, dizzy. He looked up at the mustachioed Belgian. 'But – how do *you* know all this? And how do you have this map?'

The griffin clambered on to the cushion next to Christopher and closed his eyes. The old man's eyes, though, were very keen.

'Haven't you guessed? Because I am a guardian of the way through.'

'*You*?'

'No need to look so jaw-dropped,' Frank said drily. 'I was a strong young man before I was a weak old one, you know.' He smiled. 'Aye, me. Though you cannot get there by boat, yet there are routes – at least one, and there may be more. The way opens once a year, for a single week, at the fourth full moon, when—'

'The lake! Is it the lake?'

'Exactly so. The lochan.' He pronounced it lock-en. 'At the bottom of the lochan is an ancient fossilised wood, heavy as stone, grown from the seed of the apple of the glimourie tree. It is my job to protect it from theft, from ruin, from time. My Charlotte – your mother – would also have been a guardian. She –' and there was only a single second before he said – 'cannot, of course. So it will go to you.'

'To me?'

'To you. Did you ever wonder why animals flock to you?'

'I thought maybe it was – I don't know, something in my skin.'

'That's not so far off the truth. They feel that you are a place of safety. Living so close to the waybetween, some small part of the island's glimourie has got in the blood of this family. When I was a boy, I would wake to a flock of crows on my doorstep every morning. They would bring me gifts, pins and buttons.'

Christopher put his hand to his necklace, and his grandfather smiled a dry smile.

'And your mother, Christopher – your lovely mother was suspended from school for keeping a nest of shrews in the pocket of her winter coat. There was a fuss about fleas. It's a *pull*: between the guardian, and living creatures.'

'But nobody told me!' His felt his astonishment turning to anger. 'Why didn't anybody tell me? All this time?'

'It was your father's idea.'

'But why should he get to decide?' To his shame, furious tears were rising in his eyes; he forced himself to push them down again. 'He doesn't trust me with *anything*! He never will! You said yourself! He wanted *never* to tell me.'

'No, Christopher. He's right, that you're too young. It's not a job for the young.' Frank handed him the book. 'Here. Take this. This is the *Guardian's Bestiary*. My great-great-grandfather began it; each generation adds to it. It's an account of some of the wild creatures of the Archipelago. Read it.'

His lungs and eyes were question marks. His heart beat like it was talking: as though it was saying: *What? What, how, what?* It was impossible that this was true.

'But—' There were a thousand things he wanted to ask; a cacophony, rising in his throat. Who else knew? How did it work? What did a guardian do? So he said the most practical. 'It's not a full moon. There was no moon, last night. But the griffin came through.'

'I know.' Frank folded up the map. He pinched the bridge of his nose, and the wrinkles on his face compressed and deepened and darkened. 'That's the bleak root of my fear. The waybetween shouldn't be open. And there's worse too – I've heard stories, these last years.'

He put the folded map on the table, on top of the book.

'There is some darkness passing over the islands. Something bleak, unknown and unseen. The creatures are dying.'

Christopher flinched towards the griffin, as if to protect it. 'Dying?'

'Aye. It seems – and only God knows how, because it should be impossible – that the glimourie is fading. And it's the glimourie that all magical creatures depend on. It's in everything – in the air, in the water, in the creatures' food. But the creatures are suffocating in the water. There've been stories of longmas eating each other.'

'What's a longma?'

'A flying horse, bedecked with scales.'

'I saw one!'

Frank nodded. 'You said. I'll fetch it. That'll be a job, that will. Longmas are in our oldest tales, but they've largely been forgotten. They're related to dragons. But the worst is the griffins. I couldn't believe it when you came in, boy, with that bundle in your arms: there've been no sightings of griffins on the islands, now, for more than two years. I thought we'd lost them.'

Frank turned to Christopher. 'I wrote to your father, two years ago, to tell him; I thought he should know. He replied telling me not to write to him again. He was worried you'd see the letter. But something, somewhere in the Archipelago, has shaken the safety and the peace out of it: something has gone darkly wrong. I don't know what, but I'll have to work in every way I can to find it out. It's something worth your fear, lad.'

THE DOG IN THE WATER

Half an hour later, Christopher had the griffin in his arms. His own jacket was covered in griffin vomit, but he had found a spare one – deep navy waxed cotton, lambswool-lined and with good pockets – in a cupboard.

He was walking up the hill, as fast as the griffin would allow him to go, which was not fast. The griffin writhed and scratched in his arms. But if he set it down, it climbed up his ankle and dug its talons into his knee through his jeans until he picked it up again.

'I'm trying,' he said to the griffin. 'I promise. But you're not speeding things up, are you?'

'I need to find the smaller creatures, and the unicorn,' Frank had said. 'The unicorn will be simple – they crave fresh mint; she'll be easy to lure. But the others will take some time; and I'll have to take them up to the lochan to return them. Wait here and watch the griffin.' He took a jar

of dried mint from the larder, and his walking stick from its place by the door. 'Don't leave the house – do you hear me? God only knows what else might have come through. The griffin will be fine, as long as he sleeps.'

But shortly after Frank had limped out, the griffin had woken, his eyes settling immediately on Christopher. The creature's whole bony little body shook. He had refused to settle. He tore at the sofa cushion with his beak and claws, and, when Christopher picked him up, at Christopher's clothes and arms.

Christopher carried him to the door, and called – 'Frank? Grandfather?' – but he was nowhere in sight. He could be hours.

The griffin let out a cry, and launched himself into the air. He flew into a glum-looking painting of a horse, and landed on the windowsill, peeping in pain.

'OK!' said Christopher. 'Stop! I'll take you!'

The griffin appeared to understand. He returned to Christopher's feet, and bit hard on his shoe.

So it was that Christopher found himself walking up the hill, the griffin in his arms. His head was whirling; his heart seemed to be beating at twice the usual pace as he came in sight of the lochan.

The water was still, and dark. The ground around the water was marked with two-dozen different prints.

Christopher looked around. The earth was still; no rumbling shook it. 'If I put you in the lochan,' he said to the griffin, 'will you know what to do?'

But as he spoke, the griffin froze, his ears flat against his skull.

'What is it?' said Christopher. And then he heard it too.

It was a noise; something dark and ugly: the sound of metal screeching on metal. It was coming from the long grass and reeds. As he turned, the reeds shook.

Christopher looked around, frantically, for somewhere to hide the griffin. There was a big patch of bracken: he thrust the griffin into it, and the creature curled into a ball, quivering.

The noise came again, and from the reeds stalked a creature as large as a wolf. It was black, built like a fighting dog, its teeth bared – but where it should have ears it had two sparks of blue flame, and its breath, coming hard and fast, was a shrieking metallic rasp.

It crouched low in the grass. There was no mistake: it was hunting. There was a limit, clearly, to the sympathy between himself and living creatures: the limit was here, and it had more teeth than was ideal.

White-hot fear flooded through him. Without moving his head, Christopher's eyes darted sideways: there was a stick, but it would do as much damage as a toothpick. There

was a large rock at the lochan edge, sharp and as big as his two fists.

He stepped towards the rock. The dog paced closer. Its breath came again, like broken glass down a blackboard. Slowly, barely breathing, Christopher bent to the rock.

Instantly the dog leaped at him, its breath rising to a screech as it sprang. Christopher ducked and twisted away, and as it shot past him he hurled the rock at it, hard, furious. It grazed skin off the creature's back flank – it twisted its head towards the wound – and a voice came from behind Christopher, high and quick –

'The flames! You have to put out the flames!'

There was a girl, soaking wet, standing in the grass.

He heard, understood, bent to the water of the lochan – but she cried, 'Not water, idiot! It's a kludde! Earth – wet earth!'

She ran to him and dug her hands into the wet soil of the lochan: he did the same. The kludde turned, hackles raised in fury. It sniffed. It stalked three slow steps towards them, its tail low and angry. The shrieking of its breath rose, piercing, agonising, reverberating across the hill. The creature sprang – and as it launched itself, Christopher hurled the soil.

One handful went wide, spattering on the grass, but the other caught the creature in the eye, mid-air, and

on the left ear-like flame. The flame flickered: went out: and the creature thumped to the ground with a howl of fury and pain.

The girl ran shin-deep into the water and threw handful after handful – some went wide, but a spattering caught the right flame; Christopher threw again, and again, bending to kneel in the wet dirt and hurl mud at the creature.

The kludde stumbled, its eyes turning bloodshot and red; then it dropped over, with a harsh thud, its side bleeding into the weeds at the edge of the lake.

There was total silence. Even the birds were stunned into abnormal hush.

'Are you OK?' he said. She nodded; she was gasping for breath. She seemed winded.

Christopher stepped closer. The creature was not moving. He nudged it with his foot, half expecting it to turn and lunge at his leg. 'It's dead,' he said. And then: 'What would have happened if there was no wet earth?'

She swallowed, caught her breath. 'I've never seen one – but we'd be eaten. Face first.'

'Face first? Is that deliberate – like, the face as a starter?'

'That's what I was taught. Legs as the main course, I guess. Toes for dessert.' Her eyes swept over the hillside, the

forest, the house down below. 'Listen – please – I'm looking for a griffin,' she said. 'He's very young, and he'll be scared.'

Christopher's head was still swimming. He looked at her face, to see if she could be trusted with the griffin, the finest living thing he'd ever met. She was, he saw, raw with panic and with love. He nodded.

'He's here,' he said. 'He's OK.' He parted the bracken, and there was the griffin, which huddled, shaking, in the greenery. He stroked him between the ears – 'You're fine,' he whispered, 'you're safe' – and lifted him out.

'Gelifen!' She was small but strong, and she clutched the griffin to her chest so hard that it gave a shriek of pain and clawed at her cheek, drawing blood.

'I'm sorry!' She spoke to the griffin, her face buried in the feathers atop its head. 'I didn't mean to hurt. I didn't know what to do. If you had died – I couldn't bear it.'

She softened her grip enough for the griffin to move, and he began pecking at her in joy: at her ears, shoulders, hands, fingertips.

'Thank you,' she said, 'for finding him.' All the creature's unease had vanished: he gave a guttural *burr* in his throat, a turbine of delight. Christopher saw that she was covered in tiny bite and scratch scars, on her hands and wrists, on her olive-skinned neck and cheek.

She was, he thought, about his age or a little younger,

and a full head shorter. She had long black wet hair down her back, threaded with gold, and olive skin. She was grass-stained and mud-stained and something that looked like blood-stained. Her look had a ferocious kind of focus to it. She looked at him, her chin high.

'What's your name?' said the girl. He told her. She held the griffin close, and it rested the side of its head against her jaw. 'Are you the guardian?' There was eager hope in her voice. 'You are, right? I was taught, at school, the waybetween has a guardian?'

Christopher wanted to say yes – but he had no idea what it meant to be a guardian. So he said, with perfect truth, 'My grandfather is.'

The girl nodded. She pulled at the neck of her jersey, tucked the griffin inside, put back her shoulders. And then she spoke the most powerful and exhausting, the bravest, most exasperating and galvanic sentence in the human language.

Some sentences have the power to change everything. There are the usual suspects: I *love you,* I *hate you,* I*'m pregnant,* I*'m dying,* I *regret to tell you that this country is at war.* But the words with the greatest power to create both havoc and marvels are these:

'I need your help.'


It was a very fine day,
until something tried
to eat him.
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your wildest imagination in this epic new
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