ADVANCE READING PROOF

Twelve-year-old Eli is an apprentice librarian at the largest library in the world. But when his grandmother falls ill, he enters the Glorious Race of Magical Beasts to raise money for her treatment.

This annual race is always held in the most perilous places and is full of spiky dangers. Most participants seek out unicorns and dragons to help them on their conquest. But not Eli. He embarks on this journey with his trusted pet and friend, Humphrey, his moon tortoise. Moon tortoises aren't suited to racing and Eli is no natural adventurer. But he soon finds himself in an unlikely partnership with Raven, a rule-breaker and skilled archer, and her ice hare – one of the fastest animals in the world.

If the two children put aside their differences and work together, they might just reach the finish line!

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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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Tim McDonagh's work has been used everywhere in every way, but he's perhaps best known for his epic Star Wars book series and his award winning *New York Times* Kid's section covers. Inspired by old comics, gig posters and tattoos, the depth in Tim's work is truly mesmerising. He lives and works in Brighton.



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ADVANCE READING PROOF

The GLORIOUS RACE of MAGICAL BEASTS

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ALEX BELL

Illustrated by Tim McDonagh

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Chapter One

All sensible people know that libraries are wondrous and magical places. Not only are they bursting with words and stories, facts and figures, delightful glimpses into other lives, but they're also full of cosy corners in which visitors can tuck themselves away for an hour or two. Some might want to read, or study; others might just wish to be quiet for a while, somewhere warm, and friendly, and safe. All libraries are special, of course, but none more so than the Royal Library in the port city of Harmonia. It had the honour of being the largest library in the world, and was home to more than two hundred thousand books, which were carefully looked after by a dedicated team of fifteen librarians.

There was the Head Librarian – a much admired person at the very top of the hierarchy. Then there were two deputies, and below them were three managers,

followed by four higher and four lower librarians. And right at the very bottom of the chain was the apprentice librarian. The one currently in position at the Royal Library was a twelve-year-old boy named Elijah Cassius Dewey Fleet – but most people called him Eli. Getting accepted as an apprentice a month ago had been the happiest day he could remember. It was his dearest wish to work in the library for the rest of his life, perhaps even making it to Head Librarian one day.

That morning, just like every other, he arrived bright and early, before anyone else was around. In fact, it was *so* early that there was still a sliver of pale moon in the sky and the sun was only just beginning to rise. Eli didn't mind getting up at dawn. He liked being useful, and it fell to the apprentice librarian to perform a very important task at the Royal Library – namely, to tidy up after the library bats.

Most visitors never saw them because by the time the doors opened to the public, the little winged creatures had long since tucked themselves away and were fast asleep behind the stacks, or dangling upside down from their roosts in the library's courtyard.

Each time he arrived, Eli paused at the bottom of the steps for a moment, set down his briefcase and gazed up at the building to admire its beautiful marble pillars

and domed roof. From the corner of his eye he noticed a bat swoop in through one of the open windows. Most of them would be back by now, but it wasn't unusual to see one or two stragglers.

The doors opened to the public in exactly two hours, so there was no time to waste. Eli picked up his briefcase and climbed the steps. A pair of marble lions guarded the front doors, and he patted them both on the head before taking a heavy gold key from his pocket and letting himself inside.

The Royal Library was home to many rare and precious books, including the world's very first encyclopaedia, the largest bestiary of magical animals and an ancient scroll containing the original city plans for Harmonia. It was an impressive collection, but the problem with old books was that there was always a host of bugs and bookworms wanting to feast on them. And that was where the library bats came in. Each night they emerged to hunt among the stacks, gobbling up all the insects they could find.

It was an ingenious solution, but it had one significant downside – the bat droppings, or guano, left behind each night. Someone had to tidy up the mess, and that task naturally fell to the lowliest staff member – the apprentice librarian. It was a famously unpleasant

and time-consuming job, but Eli was perhaps the first apprentice in the library's history who didn't mind, and even got a sense of pride and achievement in making everything spick and span once again.

The front doors led straight into the library's famous Long Room, but the dimness made it difficult to see very well that early in the morning. Fortunately, Eli had a solution for this and was pleased that he didn't need to waste expensive fuel in the library lamps. After setting down his briefcase, he shrugged the straps of his tortoise bag from his shoulders and carefully put it on the floor by his feet. He had designed the bag himself. It was somewhat bulky and awkward, but there was no easy way of transporting a tortoise. The bag had to be large enough to contain a plastic tank, which in turn had to contain a little heat lamp, a tortoise cave, a shallow dish of leafy salad and one or two favourite toys. And Humphrey himself, of course. There was even a small mesh window, although this was currently covered with a knitted curtain.

Eli crouched beside the bag to unzip it, and long beams of moonlight immediately poked through the gap. He reached inside with both hands to take out Humphrey – who was currently asleep in his shell. He set him down on the library's marble floor, and at once

the entire space was bathed in a silver glow. The effect was both beautiful and ghostly. Eli doubted there'd ever been a moon tortoise in the Royal Library before he'd brought Humphrey. They were extremely rare creatures, with only a few hundred left in the world. Their shells shone with the pure silver light of the moon – a light strong enough to illuminate even this large space.

The Long Room was, indeed, long, lined with many dozens of bookcases that held almost half of the library's vast collection – some ninety thousand books. Each case was so tall that a ladder was required to reach the upper shelves. The books continued up to a second floor with an ornate wrought iron balcony running all the way around it. The ceiling had three domes – known as cupolas – decorated with astonishingly beautiful paintings, each depicting one of the three muses. And at the end of the room was the famous Book Spiral – a unique, twisting structure that contained the library's collection of forbidden books – because no books were forbidden in the Royal Library of Harmonia.

Eli loved it when the library was open to the public and some of the country's best writers and wisest philosophers and most eloquent poets wandered its

halls, looking for inspiration and knowledge. As one of the librarians, he was pleased and proud to share it with the public – but he also especially liked this early part of the day when it was only him and these thousands of ancient books.

'Good morning, Humphrey,' Eli said, giving the tortoise a little pat on his glowing shell.

Humphrey had been a gift from Eli's parents, and he treasured him greatly. Slowly, the tortoise's stubby legs emerged, followed by his head. He peered up at Eli with wise black eyes and stretched his neck out so Eli could give him a chin rub. Then his gravelly voice appeared inside Eli's head. 'If you need me, I'll be in the poetry corner.'

Eli was the only person who could hear Humphrey talk, and this was how he knew that his tortoise had an especial love of poetry. Ancient, romantic, classical, modern – Humphrey adored them all. He'd requested a poetry party for his hundredth birthday, which was coming up in a couple of months, but he was having a little trouble narrowing down the particular poems he wanted read out. So he stumped off to the poetry section to browse the shelves for inspiration. He wouldn't be able to take the books from the shelves, of course, but that didn't matter to a moon tortoise. They

only had to sniff a book to immediately know all the words contained inside.

'Remember not to try to climb the shelves!' Eli called after him. 'You don't want to flip yourself over again.'

'I won't,' Humphrey replied.

Eli snapped open his briefcase and took out an apron, a set of knee pads and a pair of rubber gloves. The apron was rather on the frilly side, having once belonged to Eli's nana. It was covered in a cheerful pattern of bright yellow rubber ducks all wearing different hats. Fortunately, no one ever saw Eli in his apron, or else he feared he might struggle to be taken seriously. There was no set dress code for the librarians, but Eli always took pride in dressing smartly in a tweed suit and tie. He had three other suits at home, all of which he'd found in second-hand shops. They were patched and mended, and a little shabby around the cuffs, but Eli made sure they were always clean and pressed. It may not have been a conventional choice for a boy his age, but Eli had always thought that a smart, orderly appearance helped lead to a calm and orderly life. He slipped his protective gear on over the top of his suit and set to work.

His first task was to remove all the leather sheets placed over the tables and chairs every evening. Several

of these were stained with guano and Eli set them by the door to be scrubbed outside later. The clean ones he folded up and put away in a storage cupboard, before taking out a bucket and mop, and starting on the floor.

There wasn't too much guano – after all, the bats were quite small, and spent a large part of the night out in the city – but their droppings stuck to the marble like glue, and required a great deal of scrubbing to remove completely. Eli would never dream of leaving even a trace behind, and always put in plenty of elbow grease. People tended to underestimate his strength and determination – in part, thanks to his thin frame, mild manners and quiet voice – but he was surprisingly strong.

For over an hour, he worked diligently, bit by bit over the marble tiles, until everything was spotless. Humphrey's light was no longer required by then because the sun had risen outside and was flooding in through the many windows. The pillars and balcony were drenched in white and gold, and the Long Room was airy and pristine. Sometimes it really felt to Eli that the air was purer here, lighter, easier to breathe. He was never happier than when he was at the library. Apart from seeing Nana, Humphrey and Jeremiah, he would have been quite content if he never needed to leave and

interact with the outside world at all.

He whistled to himself as he dragged the stained leather sheets out to the courtyard to be hosed down. Once he'd finished, he made his way through the rest of the library, unlocking doors and making sure that everything was in order. Thankfully, the bats only had access to the Long Room. Eli shuddered to think how many hours it would take him to clean if they could get into the other areas too.

The next largest space was the polished wooden Philosophers' Hall, with its globes and rarity cabinets and marble busts of the world's greatest thinkers. Also contained within the library building was a manuscript restoration chamber, a planetarium, a music library and multiple cosy reading rooms.

Once he'd opened them all up, Eli returned his cleaning clothes to his briefcase and tracked down Humphrey in the ancient poetry corner. He groaned aloud to find him on his back, his stumpy legs kicking as he unsuccessfully tried to right himself.

'You tried to climb the shelves again, didn't you?' he said.

'I can't understand it,' Humphrey said. 'Usually, I'm an excellent climber. Why doesn't this place have a tortoise ramp anyway?'

Tortoises had been around, in one shape or form, for millions of years. They were one of the oldest surviving species on the planet. This fact never ceased to amaze Eli because it seemed like they had very little in the way of survival instincts. They were wise about things like poetry, but less so when it came to practical matters. Not only that, but once a tortoise was on its back, it was quite difficult for it to right itself without help. Tortoises could die that way. Plus, they couldn't swim, or regulate their own body temperature, or tell which plants were poisonous. They didn't realise that they weren't designed for climbing, or swimming, or jumping. And they had terrible memories too.

Eli scooped Humphrey up and headed to the library staffroom. As they walked down the corridor, Humphrey told him excitedly about a poem he'd read that morning.

'It's called *The Epic Song of Theodora*,' he said. 'And it's perfect for you or Jeremiah to read at my party.'

Eli gave a splutter that he turned into a cough. 'I know that poem,' he said. 'It's very fine, but … well, it's a bit on the long side. In fact, it's one of the longest poems in existence. It takes more than two hours to read it out loud.'

'What does that matter?' Humphrey replied. 'You

think Jeremiah won't like it?'

Eli said nothing. He was supposed to have had a party planning meeting with Jeremiah about Humphrey's party last week, but his friend hadn't shown up. Jeremiah detested poetry and probably thought the entire notion of having a party for a tortoise was a bit foolish anyway, but Eli had still been hurt that he hadn't bothered to come at all. And Humphrey was very fond of Jeremiah, so it was important he was there for the party.

'I just thought you might prefer to have a bit more variety,' he said. 'Rather than using up the whole time with one poem.'

'That's a good point,' Humphrey mused. 'A very good point.'

They settled themselves in the staffroom for a quick breakfast – a peanut butter sandwich, which Eli's grandmother had made the night before. No one made sandwiches like Nana. Not only did she carefully remove the crusts, and put in just the right amount of filling, she cut the sandwich into shapes too. One day it might be a dolphin, the next a train, or a sheep, or a monkey. She had her own restaurant in the Floating Quarter, and also organised children's picnic parties. It seemed like she was always coming up with new and

imaginative ways to make food fun.

Today, Eli's sandwich was violin shaped, and when he took his first bite, it began to play a lullaby from his childhood. Hearing it immediately transported him back to being five years old, bewildered and frightened in his grandmother's lap, her arms holding him so very tightly as she tried to explain things in a way that he would understand. Something dreadful had happened and his parents were gone. It was the only time in Eli's life that he had ever seen her cry. And for a while, his bright, happy world became dark and hopeless, but each night there was always that soothing lullaby that Nana sang as she tucked him up in bed. Bit by bit, her love chipped away at the terror and grief and brought Eli back into the light. Even now, after all these years, that simple tune brought a lump to his throat and made a great burst of love for Nana fill up his chest.

He shared the sandwich with Humphrey and then reached into his bag and brought out a little woolly tortoise jumper. When he'd first started looking, Eli had discovered that tortoise jumpers weren't easily obtainable in local pet shops – ordinary tortoises had no need of them, after all – so he had made this one himself. His grandmother had taught him to knit, and he found he very much enjoyed it – and was pretty

good at it too.

Strictly speaking, people weren't supposed to bring pets into the library, so Eli always brought a little jumper for Humphrey to disguise his light and make him less conspicuous when Eli put him out in the courtyard. Members of the public weren't permitted back there anyway, and if any of the other librarians had ever noticed Humphrey contentedly munching on a patch of grass, or snoozing under a bench, then they turned a blind eye. Librarians were good eggs like that.

Eli put Humphrey out there now and then dashed to the toilets to check that his appearance was in order. He carefully combed his light brown hair, straightened his tie and fastened it with his favourite tortoise tiepin – the one with the shining opal shell. It had once been a hair clip belonging to his mother. He spent the rest of the day attending to his librarian duties – cataloguing books, stacking the shelves, dusting the stacks and answering queries from members of the public.

These were all things that Eli enjoyed very much, and his day passed quietly and pleasantly, as it always did at work. Soon enough, it was time to lock up the doors, drape the leather sheets over the furniture and say goodbye to the library for the night. He put Humphrey back in his tortoise bag and drew the

curtain aside so that Humphrey could see out. As usual, Eli paused beside the library front doors for a moment and watched the bats swooping about up near the domed ceiling. The books, and the bats, and the quiet, and the dark were all like a balm to Eli's soul. He breathed in the hush and the peace, savouring it, trying to fill himself up with as much of it as he could. Because enjoyable as his day had been, Eli knew that the evening was going to be difficult. What he didn't know was that it was going to be even more difficult than he could have possibly imagined.



Chapter Two

The Royal Library steps were bathed in sunlight during the early evening, which made them a popular spot for people to hang out and relax, chat and eat pizza slices from the nearby cart. All Eli could hear from every direction was excited talk about the Glorious Race of Magical Beasts. The race took place every year, and each time the buzz around it got louder and louder. It seemed that the entire country got swept away in racing mania. Everyone except Eli and his nana, that is. The Glorious Race of Magical Beasts had cost them too dearly. Eli's parents would still both be here if it wasn't for the race.

But there was no avoiding it in Harmonia, especially as the event started there. The route varied every year, but it traditionally began in Harmonia, and there were always three checkpoints and three rounds. Spectators

could watch footage of the race on the big screens that were currently being erected in the square, across from the fountains. Some of the busier cafes and restaurants had them too.

As he made his way down the steps, Eli tried not to listen to the racing talk and to think instead of happy things, like books and stamps and tortoises. He was tired from his early start, and from being on his feet all day, but there was no time to rest because in the evenings he waited tables at his nana's restaurant.

Eli didn't mind the work, normally – he was proud of the restaurant and glad to be a part of it – but tonight he would have preferred a different job, one that didn't involve being around a lot of people talking about the race. It was even worse when customers realised or remembered that he and his grandmother were Fleets – related to the famous Lara and Theo Fleet, who had won so many races in their time. Before it all went wrong. Then they wanted to speak to Eli about them, asking questions and reminiscing about their best racing moments and asking Eli if he'd ever had any ambitions to enter the race himself. People always seemed disappointed when he said no. Of course the race had seemed thrilling and exciting to him once when he'd been very small, and perhaps

for the briefest time he'd had dreams of entering, but when his parents died he vowed he'd never go anywhere near it. Far better to live a life that was safe and sensible.

Eli straightened his shoulders and was hurrying across the square when Humphrey said, 'Eli! It's that boy. He's watching you again.'

The tortoise's voice appeared inside Eli's head, and of course, no one else would have been able to hear him speak, even if they were nearby.

'What? Where?' Eli stopped and turned around, his eyes scanning the crowds. About a week ago, he'd noticed a boy, perhaps sixteen or seventeen years old, with a mane of blond hair and a rainbow panther prowling around his feet. He was obviously a racer, with his big leather cuffs and an ostentatious studded belt and a holster carrying a pair of pistols. It wasn't unusual for racers to arrive in Harmonia a week or two before the race began, but Eli had noticed the same boy several times now, and he always seemed to be watching Eli. He'd even popped up in the library. Eli had seen him hunched in a chair, pretending to read a book. It was obvious he was pretending because he barely glanced at the pages and once the book was even upside down. The volumes he selected didn't seem likely to be

ones he could possibly be interested in either. Certainly, Eli had never seen anyone absorbed by *The Pampering and Perming of Pretty Pink Poodles* for more than a few minutes, yet this boy sat with it for almost two hours. He made Eli uneasy, especially as there was something hard and cold in his gaze.

'He's gone now,' Humphrey said. 'But he was there. By the fountain.'

Eli didn't doubt what Humphrey had seen, but there wasn't much he could do about someone looking at him, even if the boy had still been there. He pushed the racer out of his mind and walked over to where the hot-air balloons were transporting people up to the Floating Quarter. There were three balloons today and they were beautiful, with their pale blue and cream stripes and smart wooden baskets. The Floating Quarter was a popular spot at night, offering restaurants and spectacular sea and city views. It was already getting busy as Eli joined the queue. Fortunately, the balloons could carry fifty people at a time, so it wasn't long before he was ushered on to one. The journey only took a few minutes and Eli always enjoyed standing by the side of the basket and looking down at the square as it dropped away. If he looked up he could see the

underside of the Floating Quarter, a collection of floating wooden planks that formed the boardwalks. It had been his home since his parents died seven years ago, and sometimes it was almost hard to remember the cottage where he'd lived with his parents on the outskirts of Harmonia.

It had been a hot day, and the evening still felt warm, so a couple of balloon staff were walking around the basket handing out chilled towels for people to freshen up. Around Eli, the balloon was filled with guests dressed for dinner, all talking about the race and who they thought was going to enter and who might drop out at the first hurdle – and who might die.

People always seemed keen to speculate about who was going to die. Nobody had been killed last time, but it had been the first race in many years that had not had any fatalities. Eli got the sense that people were a bit disappointed by this – that it somehow made the race less thrilling if everyone survived and returned home safe to their families.

It was this sort of thing that made him want to disappear back into the library and not come out until the race was over. But it would go on for several weeks and Nana always said that it did no good, in the long run, to try to hide from difficult things. She was always

so strong, and matter-of-fact, and no-nonsense, and this made Eli feel a tiny bit better and a tiny bit stronger himself. They would get through this year's race, like they had all the others, and then everything could go back to normal.

The balloon soon arrived at the quarter, and suddenly the view switched to picturesque restaurants, splashing fountains and a network of wooden skywalk bridges. People began filing out of the basket, and Eli thrust away unhappy thoughts and unwelcome memories, deliberately straightening his shoulders the same way he'd seen Nana do.

'Sometimes,' she would say, 'you just have to give yourself a stern talking-to and get on with things, whether you feel like it or not.'

Eli followed everyone on to the bridge, the wooden planks glowing golden as spilled honey in the evening sun. The most luxurious and prestigious restaurants formed a crescent around the hot-air balloons. Leading away from these were more skywalk bridges winding their way higher and higher into the sky. The further up you went, the quieter everything became.

Eli was glad to leave the hustle and bustle of the lower levels behind and climb the bridges to the top of the Floating Quarter. There were no fancy restaurants

here, only cosy cafes and family-style food. Nana's house – which was also her restaurant – was at the top of the sky street, surrounded by fireflies and stars. There wasn't room for any tables inside, so they were placed on the decking outside, beneath strings of glowing lights.

An illuminated sign over the door read *Nana's Kitchen*. The checked tablecloths were all slightly different sizes, and none of the cutlery matched, but people didn't seem to mind that the restaurant was humble, or that it only served desserts day and night – in fact, that was part of the appeal. Customers often came to Nana's for their pudding after eating their main meal in one of the other restaurants below.

Eli quickly removed Humphrey's jumper and set him down to stump about on the decking. Then he went into the kitchen, where Nana was already hard at work, alongside two other chefs. She paused for a moment to greet Eli, pulling him in for a quick hug. As always, she smelled of milk chocolate and pancake mix. Eli still couldn't quite get used to being almost as tall as her. He'd shot up during the last year and could now look Nana in the eye. Today, her grey hair was tucked neatly away beneath a chef's hat, and she wore her usual red lipstick, which always matched

her nails.

'The penguins have just gone outside,' she said, handing him a bunch of tiny aprons. 'Take a cookie before you go, too,' she added, thrusting one at him.

It was still warm from the oven and Eli took it with a grin. He was always rather proud of the fact that tragedy hadn't left too much of a mark on his nana. She smiled often, laughed loudly and seemed to enjoy life about twice as much as the average person. People flocked to her restaurant because she made the best desserts in Harmonia, but also because Nana's Kitchen was the only place in town with chocolate penguins for waiters.

They rushed up to him as soon as he went outside, honking, and flapping their stubby wings, and hopping up and down on their webbed feet in excitement. The penguins each had their own names and distinct personalities, and Eli was fond of all of them, although Barnaby was his favourite. He was the smallest penguin, but also the most determined and the most tireless, still working hard long after the other penguins had gone on their fish break. They were all excellent waiters, never getting an order wrong or spilling a single drop of pudding.

Eli tied a small white apron with red frilly bits

around the edges of it on to each of them and then handed out some notepads. After that, he set the tables and lit the candles in their glass jars, finishing off just as the first customers started to arrive. Eli and his nana worked together to welcome guests, and before long, the restaurant was full. From his position at the meet-and-greet podium, Eli saw that several diners had magical beasts with them. Pegasi and dragons weren't permitted, of course – the dragons tended to set fire to things and both creatures were too big for such a small space, and prone to knocking over furniture and generally causing a ruckus.

But Eli spotted a ninja starfish on one of the tables, occasionally breaking into an energetic spin. And there was a hurricane ostrich at another, batting a puff of wind across the restaurant every time it blinked its incredibly long and pretty eyelashes. And there, right on the edge of the decking, stood a graceful star gazelle, silver and sparkling, just like the type Eli's parents used to have.

It made his heart ache to look at the gazelle. He thought of Hero and Hera, his parents' gentle pets, and how he used to love watching them walk around the garden at their old cottage, mesmerised by their sparkling light. You could immediately tell who the racing humans were too. They all wore clothing

designed in some way for physical activity. Or else made to withstand a particular weather element. There were windproof jackets, and snowshoes, and leather riding trousers, and cowboy boots with spurs.

He was glad that the restaurant was busy, because being rushed off his feet gave him less time for thinking melancholy thoughts. He put a sign on the podium saying the tables were fully booked, and then went back to the kitchen to help with the washing up. All evening the penguins hurried back and forth, carrying out platters of pancakes and waffles, along with tall glasses of ice cream sundae, and generous slices of gooey chocolate cake dripping with hot fudge sauce.

None of the desserts themselves were magical – not like the ones Eli's nana sometimes made for him at home. She said the chocolate penguins were more than enough to draw people in. Magic was as strong as it had ever been in the animal world, but everyone knew that it was dying out in the human one for some reason. There might be the odd person, like Nana, with a bit of picnic magic, but all the powerful wizards and mages and witches had long since gone. At least, that was what most people believed – despite Eli almost giving the game away at school back when there was that business with Tom Penman . . .

Eli's hands were pink and wrinkly from the constant washing up, so he was quite glad when Nana appeared and told him to take a break outside. It was hot and noisy and bright in the kitchen and the decking was always pleasant in comparison, with cool breezes and sleepy fireflies. Plus, his little free library was out there too. Eli dried his hands and was about to head to the door when his eyes fell on Nana and he paused.

'Are you okay, Nana?' he asked, thinking she looked tired.

She seemed startled by his question. 'My dear boy, of course.'

He hesitated, not entirely believing her. It would make sense if she was feeling a bit blue, what with all the chatter about the race, but there had been odd moments like this – when she seemed sadder, or more tired, or just not quite herself – for several weeks now. Before he could say anything else, Humphrey's voice suddenly appeared faintly inside his head from the decking.

'Eli! It's that boy again . . .'

'I'll just take a quick break,' Eli said to his nana before hurrying outside.

He gazed around the decking. He couldn't see Humphrey but his eyes soon landed on the blond boy who'd been following him around Harmonia. He sat

alone at one of the tables, his rainbow panther wedged awkwardly underneath. Eli hadn't noticed him earlier, so it must have been Nana who'd shown him to his table. For a moment, Eli considered ignoring the boy and slipping back into the kitchen, but he was getting a little tired of looking over his shoulder all the time and this seemed like a good opportunity to find out what was going on. The racer probably wanted to talk to him about his famous parents. Feeling a bit nervous, he forced himself to walk over to the table. The boy didn't look up, so Eli cleared his throat and said, 'Can I get you anything else?'

The racer glanced up and immediately narrowed his eyes at the sight of Eli. Then he scowled and said, 'About time someone came out. I've been trying to get one of those penguins to bring me a coffee for the last half hour.'

'I'll fetch you one,' Eli said pleasantly. He paused. 'How many pink poodles do you have, then?'

The boy gave him an offended look. 'I *beg* your pardon?'

'Poodles,' Eli said, pronouncing the word very clearly. 'I thought you must have at least one as you spent quite a long time reading that book in the Royal Library the other day.'

A flush crept over the boy's face, but he seemed irritated rather than guilt-stricken.

'Why are you following me?' Eli asked quietly.

The boy snorted. 'I'm not.'

Eli opened his mouth, but there was the sound of breaking glass from behind him, followed by a shout and a commotion.