# WITCHSPARK

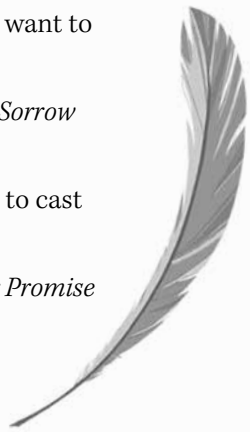
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*For anyone who ever loved stories about witches and magic and enchanted houses. This one is for you.*

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# WITCHSPARK



**DOMINIQUE VALENTE**

**ILLUSTRATED BY ELEONORA ASPARUHOVA**

USBORNE

# THE MAGIC ISLES

*Close to Europe lies a handful of islands, where a century ago, a great earthquake released a magical substance called isle-spark. This substance awakened mythical beasts from stone, like gnomes, gargoyles and even dragons. It changed some of the people too. Those who were "touched" by isle-spark were gifted with magic, and became witches and wizards and even sorcerers, able to use their abilities to power innovation across the land.*

*Soon these islands, once named Great Britain, instead became known as the Magic Isles.*

*In time, as magic began to change all aspects of society, the government set up the Department of Isle-Spark Regulation for the safety of all, and to ensure that those without magic were treated fairly.*

*But as the years passed since the Quake, increasingly it has become only the wealthy or well-connected who appear to have been touched by isle-spark... And some have begun to wonder if something or someone is preventing others from unlocking their powers.*

*And so rumours have begun to spread of another way to get magic.*

*It is something the Department have put at the very top of their Banned List.*

**IT IS MISS HEGOTTY'S COURSE FOR ASPIRING WITCHES.**

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# LONDON, 1833

The mysterious advertisement appeared in all the morning newspapers across the Magic Isles at eight a.m. sharp.

The editor of *The Times,* Siso Adisa, was just biting into a wedge of buttery toast and checking his paper for potential overlooked misprints, when he saw the advert materialize before his eyes and started to choke.

"Oh dear," he croaked. "Miss Hegotty has used wild magic on us. *Again*."

The last time she had done this – used illegal or "wild magic" to hijack the papers to announce that she was taking applications for her *banned* magical course – Siso (and the nation's other editors) had been warned by the Department that there could *not* be a next time.

Siso rose with one thought heavy on his mind: *RUN!*

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But just as an escape plan began to flicker inside Siso's imagination, several members from the Department of Isle-Spark Regulation shattered his fantasy – not to mention his office door – into a sea of splinters. The debris caused a dust cloud that settled over Siso as if he'd been dipped in flour, ready for the fryer.

Sorcerer Ragwort stepped through the wreckage in a smart three-piece suit and greeted Siso with a courteous smile.

If the Department had called in the military sorcerers, it really was serious. But then, Miss Hegotty's course was a headache for the government because, to everyone's surprise, *children* seemed most interested in joining it.

All children took their isle-spark test at the age of nine to see if they had been touched by magic. Those that had could become witches and wizards and even study at university to become sorcerers and win important jobs. But these days, increasing numbers of children were failing the isle-spark test. So now more and more children were buying newspapers like *The Times,* in the hopes that one of Miss Hegotty's notorious announcements might *appear* and they could somehow learn magic.

"Sorry about that, Mr Adisa," said Sorcerer Ragwort. "We will replace the door. Just wondered if we could have a quick word – no need to be alarmed."

Siso knew this was a lie. There was *every* reason to be alarmed.

"S-Sorcerer R-Ragwort, we have no control over these advertisements of Miss Hegotty's, n-none at all, as you may recall from the last time one, erm, *arrived."*

Sorcerer Ragwort's eyes flared like a lit match. "Mmm. Yes,



Editor, I recall only too well. I did hope you and the other spark-touched editors would have put your best efforts towards the problem, considering what is at stake if children are once again led astray this way."

Siso swallowed. They had *tried,* but their skills were no match for Miss Hegotty's magic.

Sorcerer Ragwort sighed. "Alas."

Siso's heart became a bird falling frozen from the sky at that "*alas".*

Sorcerer Ragwort continued through a tight smile. "Maybe a little time in prison would help you come up with a solution. Something has to be done, wouldn't you say?"

Siso opened his mouth to beg, only to find he *couldn't.* He was no longer in control of his own body. He gaped soundlessly.

"Sorry about that, Editor," said Sorcerer Ragwort, as if he'd merely bumped into him, instead of turning Siso into a human puppet.

Sorcerer Ragwort made a circular motion with a finger and Siso turned stiff and began to swirl sharply and sink through the floor, like water down a drain, unable to release the silent screams that tore through him.

Despite the government's *best efforts,* a week later the damage had been done. Letters from children who wanted magic were being sent to Miss Hegotty's Correspondence Course for Aspiring Witches and began to trickle into post offices she had cursed to



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deliver her course all across the Magic Isles. In a fortnight, that trickle became a river, and in a month, it was a sea.

It was always the same after one of Miss Hegotty's advertisements appeared – children were the only ones brave enough to apply for something that was banned.

For over ten years the government had tried to put a stop to Miss Hegotty and her advertisements – not to mention ending her curse on the postal system – and for over ten years they had failed.

However, they *had* succeeded in sending each child who dared to apply a *gulp-worthy* letter that made it very clear that there would be Serious Consequences if they went any further than applying to her course. As no child actively wants to be in trouble with the government, particularly one that could turn people who misbehave into worms – or worse, *food for worms* – so far there hadn't been anyone really foolish or desperate enough to actually go through with Miss Hegotty's course.

Well.

*Until now…*





# 1

# THE HOUSE, THE GIRL AND THE WYVERN

## 1833, HUSWYVERN, FELIXSTOWE

Above a sleepy Suffolk fishing village, a once-grand, gothic house clung to the sea cliffs by its teeth.

Its name was Huswyvern and it was *worried*.

Worried enough to shake twelve-year-old Eglantine's bed until she fell onto the floor with a thud.

Being woken up by Huswyvern wasn't that uncommon, but this insistence was.

"W-what's going on?" Eglantine muttered with a yawn, still half-asleep, a curtain of long blonde hair falling over her face.

She'd landed hard on her little arm and she winced in pain. The floor beneath her lifted to help her get up. Eglantine had been born with one hand (her other arm ended just past her elbow)



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and sometimes the house remembered its manners. Even when it *was* desperate for her attention.

Eglantine rubbed her little arm, while she glanced at the clock on the mantelpiece with a frown. It was after midnight. Hus never usually woke her up in the middle of the night for no reason. She could feel its anxiety and it made her stomach clench. "Hus, what's wrong?"

In answer, a pair of fluffy grey bunny slippers hopped across the floor and put themselves on the wrong feet. Then her world turned pink as a bathrobe was flung at her, and the floor began to rise so fast that Eglantine had no choice but to set off at a run just to keep her balance. "Whoa, okay, I'm coming," she gasped.

Whatever Hus wanted her to see, it could not *wait*.

Eglantine bounced into her robe as the ground moved beneath her, tripping over her slippers before finally managing to put them on the right feet, while she hurtled towards the grand double staircase.

Along the corridor, the long line of Saxon masks didn't pull faces at her like they usually did, which was odd. They all looked too frightened.

Her throat turned dry.

What was going on?

The enchanted spark-lights in the enormous chandeliers flickered off, then on, and she saw the shadow of a vast dragon-like creature swooping towards her in full flight.

This should have been terrifying.

But it wasn't. It was only Arthur, the butler.





Arthur was a midnight-and-emerald wyvern. He was also far smaller than his looming shadow suggested. He was about the size of an Irish wolfhound – which is to say, a head taller than Eglantine.

Ordinarily, Arthur was a rather dapper figure who took pride in his uniform – an ivory silk cravat and royal-blue waistcoat sporting the house's crest along with brightly polished brass buttons. But right then, as he came in to perch on the banister, he appeared uncharacteristically dishevelled, his cravat undone and his slitted pupils narrowed to pins of concern.

"Arthur! What is it? Hus woke me."

"Lady Eglantine, thank goodness it did – it's your Uncle Lichen!"

One of Huswyvern's stairs below bobbed up and down, like a head nodding in agreement.

Eglantine felt her stomach drop horribly at the news.

The last time she'd seen her uncle he had caused a rift between them when he had said he didn't believe that Eglantine should ever inherit Huswyvern.

At first, he'd claimed that the reason he was concerned about the house passing on to Eglantine was because she might not develop magic.

"The house needs a witch to bond with so that it can stay alive," he'd pointed out, while selecting a tiny egg sandwich from the tiered tray in front of him in the pink drawing room. "Perhaps, if she fails her isle-spark test, it is worth rethinking your will, Heliotrope…" he'd told her mother, who'd turned stiff in her chair.



Eglantine had felt her insides twist at his words and she'd set down her own sandwich, her appetite vanishing. The thought of not being able to give her beloved home what it needed – a magical bond – was like a stone inside her heart, weighing her down.

Her mother, meanwhile, had only frowned at her brother, a shrewd look on her face. "Rethinking my will…so that Huswyvern would go to you instead?"

He'd nodded. "That might be a solution, yes."

Her mother had snorted. "I don't see how, brother, considering you yourself do *not* have a power."

Lichen had shrugged, shameless. "Well, yes, but there are ways around that. I could marry a witch…"

Her mother had looked at him incredulously, raising a dark brow. "And if Eglantine is found not to have been touched by isle-spark next year when she does her test, she could *likewise* marry someone with magic when she is older," she'd pointed out.

Lichen's face had coloured – he had clearly not thought that through properly. "Yes, b-but, Sister," he'd said, unwilling to let the matter drop, "the thing is, you know…" His eye had fallen onto Eglantine's little arm. "Huswyvern is a powerful home, and the person who gets it needs to be strong to maintain its legacy."

Eglantine had drawn in a breath. She had always known her uncle wasn't fond of her but, until then, she hadn't realized that he thought of her as *weak*, or that he actually seemed to despise her.



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Tears pricked at her eyes.

Arthur, who was usually rather prim and proper and professional at all times, swore violently in ancient wyvernish.

Lichen coloured.

Her mother's eyes were like skewers fixing him in place. "She *is* strong enough to look after Huswyvern. Power, brother, is not simply a matter of brute force; Eglantine's is the strength built from being different in this world."

Eglantine raised her chin. She wouldn't give him the satisfaction of knowing that he'd hurt her.

She knew that sometimes there were those, like her uncle, who saw her little arm and could not see *past* it. They couldn't see that different didn't mean incapable or weak, it just meant *different*. Sometimes that meant finding another way to do things, even if it was hard. As a result, Eglantine didn't expect things to be easy and she didn't give up until she succeeded. That was a power all on its own.

But to be able to really see that, Lichen would have had to open up his mind, and his had long been fixed in *cement*.

He started to laugh at her mother, like the idea of Eglantine being anything resembling powerful was a joke…which was when things took a decidedly worse turn for him.

Huswyvern clenched like a fist, just as Eglantine's mother rose to her feet in fury. No one could be sure afterwards if it was her mother or Huswyvern who had actually blasted Lichen from the house, as several broomsticks came hurtling into the room to sweep her uncle rather violently off his feet at exactly the same



time as magical vines sprang from her mother's wrists, wrapped around him and swung him out through a newly opened window. Either way, he'd landed in a heap in the dirt outside. Which, when Eglantine's father heard the sorry tale afterwards, was where he said her uncle's opinions belonged: "*In the dirt.*"

The house had clearly agreed, as the door knocker had blown a loud, wet raspberry at her uncle when he dusted himself off and limped away, a rather grim set to his face.

That had all happened three years ago.

Eglantine hadn't seen her uncle since, not even when her mother had died eighteen months ago. Or when, not long afterwards, she had gone for her magic test and had *failed*.

Eglantine sighed. And now her uncle was here!

She always felt the loss of her mother like a dull toothache that never truly went away. But it was in times like these, when Huswyvern needed her, when it needed *a witch*, that she felt the loss all the more keenly.

Her mother would have known what to do.

"He's in the parlour with your father," said Arthur. "You'd better come."

The thought of seeing her uncle again after all this time made Eglantine feel a little ill…

Just outside the parlour, she caught sight of herself in the mirror on the wall. Huswyvern reflected back an altered version of her – she was still in her pyjamas, but she was now carrying a battle shield. She let out a soft, nervous chuckle, and opened the door.



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## 2

# Tricks and Disguises

Eglantine took a deep breath and gathered her courage around her like a well-worn coat as she entered the navy-and-gold parlour. Inside she found a cosy scene with a crackling fire in the hearth, but the reality was anything but cosy.

Her uncle looked just the same as she remembered. Same long, silvery blond hair, same deep-set black eyes and the same sour expression marring his handsome face. It soured even further as Eglantine neared the green antique card table where he was sitting opposite her father, toying with an ace card.

On the wooden panels behind him, the carving of the one-armed battle hero Sorcerer Nelson pumped a fist in her direction in an encouraging sort of way. She set her jaw as she met her uncle's cold eyes, feeling a tiny flutter of victory when he was the first to look away.



Her father was twirling the back of his dark hair, the way he usually did when he was nervous about something.

"Father, Hus woke me – what's going on?" asked Eglantine, coming to stand by his chair.

"Your Uncle Lichen and *his friend* are attempting to hold me to a bet I did *not* make," he exclaimed, distressed.

Eglantine scowled. "*What?*"

"I don't even recall agreeing to play a round," continued her father, frowning in confusion as he stared at the table and their discarded cards.

"Except, of course, you did," said an even, pleasant voice from someone Eglantine hadn't seen.

Eglantine startled, then peered around the room, trying to locate the mystery voice with little success.

Her father widened his eyes meaningfully at her, pressing his lips into a thin line, as if to say he'd had the same problem. Then he waggled his fingers to indicate the end of the table.

Eglantine knitted her brows in concentration. After a while, she saw someone shrouded in shadow, which should have been impossible thanks to the light of the fire. But the more she squinted, the more she saw that it was a slim woman dressed in shades of grey.

As she stared, Eglantine realized that everything about the woman in shadow should have been *standing out* not fading away. Especially the vast magical hat on her head.

How had she not noticed that *hat* the minute she entered the room?



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Magical hats had become fashionable across the Magic Isles and the witches who made them were talented. Their creations were fantastical works of *moving* art, showcasing the nation's progress in all areas from technology to exploration, transport and medicine since the discovery of isle-spark.

When she'd been to Claridge's in London for high tea the year before her mother died, Eglantine hadn't been able to stop looking at the fabulous hats many of the women wore. There had been one with a miniature spark-train that raced around the brim, while another housed a tiny spark-powered factory where cotton was being turned into fabric. Another showed the spectacular collapse of Stonehenge.

*This* hat, however, wasn't as grand as some Eglantine had seen.

But it was *chilling*.

It featured a pinprick moon, a fog-filled sky and a shadowy ghost ship with threadbare sails riding a series of vast, smoky waves. A giant moth-bitten squid was attempting to drag the ship below with its slithery tentacles.

Everything about this was making Eglantine feel uneasy.

She was also beginning to understand why Huswyvern had summoned her downstairs.

"That is Mrs Whistle," whispered her father, shooting Eglantine another look as if to say he understood exactly how she felt.

Mrs Whistle's dark lips curved into a smile. "Come now, Lord Bury," she said, addressing Eglantine's father. "Let's not delay any



further by playing more games. I doubt some magic-less child will be able to help you out of your predicament," she said with a scoff. "You agreed to the bet and now you've lost – there's nothing else for it." Her eyes were black holes that pulled them all towards her. "Now we intend to take payment."

Lichen smiled. "Precisely."

The word "payment" made Eglantine's heart jolt uncomfortably.

"What payment?" she breathed, shooting her uncle a glare.

"Why, this house, of course," he said.

Eglantine gasped.

Her father clutched at his hair in despair. "Mrs Whistle cast some kind of a…a *charm* over me. It was like I was in a dream and I had no control over my own body, and the next thing I knew words were coming out of my mouth. But the words were *not* coming from me! I won't let them get away with this."

Eglantine whirled around to face her uncle in anger. "It's illegal to use magic like that – you can't cheat someone into giving up their home!"

Using isle-spark to trick someone out of their property could result in a major prison sentence, as the government took the misuse of magic very seriously indeed.

Lichen laughed as if they hadn't just committed a crime. "My dear, you'll find it's almost impossible to *prove* that's what we did – we made sure of it," he said, winking at Mrs Whistle, who smiled slyly in return. "As far as the law is concerned, Lord Bury has simply signed over custodianship of the house to me. Which



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means that *I* will now be managing things," he said, holding up a piece of paper Eglantine hadn't noticed on the table until then. Eglantine saw her father's signature scrawled along the bottom in still-wet ink and she felt the blood drain from her face.

"B-but the house doesn't belong to Father, it belongs to me, so you have wasted your time."

"Oh no, we have not," said Lichen. "It is only yours *when you become eighteen*. That's six years away, which leaves plenty of time for our plans," he finished with a crooked grin.

Eglantine gasped.

Huswyvern was one of only three magical properties that had come to life when isle-spark had been released – and thus was incredibly rare. It belonged to her mother's family line and so when her mother had died, the house had not automatically become the property of her father, but instead it became Eglantine's. This was how the law worked for old and enchanted houses – they went to the firstborn child. This meant that Eglantine's father became Huswyvern's caretaker, and it was his job to look after it until Eglantine was old enough to take over.

At least, it *had been* his job. Now, it seemed, that job had become Lichen's.

"This can't be happening," she whispered, feeling her knees turn to rubber.

"That's despicable!" spat Arthur the wyvern, unable to remain silent a moment longer, smoke beginning to curl from his nostrils in anger. "You can't get away with this! I will report you to the Department of Isle-Spark Regulation!"



Mrs Whistle chuckled. "Oh, you silly little creature. We are *from* the Department."

Eglantine wasn't the only one to gasp this time. Hus made a sound like a thousand floorboards creaking all at once. Her uncle was now working for the government? Did that mean there was no one they could turn to for help?

"Well, *he* is anyway," continued Mrs Whistle, fluttering a hand in Lichen's direction. "I, on the other hand, come from slightly higher up."

Lichen's smile tightened. "The idea of being your guardian doesn't fill me with joy either, Niece."

Eglantine felt her knees give way and a chair rushed forward for her to hold on to. She couldn't bear the thought of the house, and as a result, *her*, being controlled by Lichen.

"You can't be serious!" her father shouted.

Mrs Whistle looked at her father with an almost pitying smile. "We are," she said, tapping the paper where a new line of text appeared instantly. "From now on, we control everything."

Eglantine felt like she might throw up. Yet another trick!

Her uncle smiled as he explained. "I thought it would be best, and certainly more legally binding, for it to be a simple swap, Lord Bury – you for me. So I will be able to look after all things concerning Huswyvern, including Eglantine, how I see fit."

Eglantine felt a chill enter her spine. That sounded distinctly… *threatening*.

"No!" cried Lord Bury and Arthur at the same time.

Eglantine glared at her uncle. "Huswyvern still belongs to me;



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that piece of paper doesn't change that. You might have tricked Father, but that doesn't change the fact that I will own Huswyvern one day and I won't let you trick me out of it too."

The coat stand stepped forwards and waggled a hook like an angry finger at Lichen, as if to say, *So there.*

Her uncle's face turned purple in his rage and he tossed the coat stand aside.

"It might be yours for now," he admitted with a low hiss. "But there are ways around that too. Let's just say that becoming caretaker was simply part one of our plan… Part two will be making Huswyvern mine, *permanently*."

"I won't let you!" shouted Eglantine.

Mrs Whistle was at her side in an instant, and she grabbed hold of Eglantine's face between her fingers, her long, black nails digging into her cheeks painfully.

Eglantine's heart stuttered in fear.

"You have no choice, *silly girl*, you have no power to stop us – and that's the problem. This house needs a witch in order to stay alive," growled Mrs Whistle. "It's fading without one – can't you even tell? It's *why* I agreed to help Lichen. Huswyvern shares a similar magic to my own. But you…*you* cannot give it what it needs."

Beyond her mounting fear, Eglantine felt a familiar pang at the woman's words. Only a witch could create the bond with an enchanted house that would keep it from turning back into lifeless stone.

"Let her go this instant!" commanded her father.



Mrs Whistle ignored him.

"Mrs Whistle is right though," pointed out Lichen, turning to her father. "The house is fading! I saw it on the walk up here. The lights flicker and don't always stay on, and the doorknob didn't even try to eat me like it usually does, the pesky thing. It needs our help now."

"It's not *fading*. Not yet. I would know!" Eglantine protested, her throat turning dry at the very thought. "And the only reason the doorknob didn't try and gobble you like it *should* have," she spat, wrenching herself out of Mrs Whistle's vice-like hold, "was because you tricked it into opening up for you, so it was being *nice!*"

The coat stand on the floor nodded, then got up, dusted itself off, and went to kick Mrs Whistle in the shins.

Mrs Whistle snapped her fingers and an oily blue flame appeared. "Everlasting flames burn for ever. Just one slip, and you will be in pain always, House – so if I were you, I would consider going back to being hospitable, hmm?"

Eglantine gulped, taking a step backwards.

"That's awful!" cried her father. "Why would you threaten Huswyvern with such a thing!"

Huswyvern's walls shivered, but it got the message loud and clear. The coat stand seemed to slump somewhat.

Mrs Whistle smiled cruelly at the coat stand. "You are a quick learner. But there's a stubborn streak too, House. One I shall enjoy stamping out."

"Stamping out?" whispered Arthur.

"Discipline does wonders for improving one's character. Your



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house has been allowed to get a bit too wild, but that can be corrected with a firm hand. It just needs a little *encouragement* to behave," she said as she made the blue flame reappear, "for when we turn it into a school for the most senior military witches – sorcerers."

Eglantine went cold. So *that* was why Lichen was working with Mrs Whistle. They planned to turn her home into some horribly strict school for the military! Huswyvern's walls shivered again and the green velvet chair ran to hide behind Eglantine like a frightened dog.

Eglantine glared at the witch. "I will NEVER let you change Huswyvern – never, EVER!" she hollered. Eglantine loved her wild, mischievous house – its sense of fun, its playfulness. The thought of Hus losing its spirit and living in fear sent cold chills through her.

Lichen scoffed. "You have no say in the matter, child. I will just place you somewhere out of the way…a home for rebellious girls perhaps?"

Eglantine blanched. He couldn't. *Could he?*

"Or we could consider a more permanent solution," said Mrs Whistle, a wide smile parting her red lips as she drew a black fingernail across her throat. "If she tragically died before her eighteenth birthday, then you would automatically inherit the house, Lord Lichen."

Eglantine felt her world begin to spin as blood rushed to her ears.

They were rather *casually* considering killing her.



"No!" cried Lord Bury, his face turning bone-white. The table jumped forward so he could fall against it in his horror.

"I will never let you do that," hissed Arthur.

Mrs Whistle smiled. "Oh, little wyvern, your kind might have small powers, but how could you possibly stop *me*?"

A glint of something hard and fierce flashed behind her eyes. The squid on Mrs Whistle's magical hat, which Eglantine had thought was stuffed, suddenly blinked and looked at them, and its glance was almost…pitying.

Eglantine swallowed.

The squid began to grow, till it looked as if Mrs Whistle had tentacles for hair and two sets of eyes. Sinews of seaweed from the ship began to swell too and snake around her like fierce green rope – rope that had a mind of its own and began to reach towards Eglantine, her father and Arthur.

"Oh dear," whispered her father.

Because he knew now, too late, who Mrs Whistle really was.

They all did.

Lichen hadn't partnered with just *any* witch. She was the infamous Whistlewitch, a terrifying sorcerer who was in a top position at the military, and who had inspired countless penny dreadful stories thanks to the way she could command the ocean using unique sounds she made with her throat. Which sounded a bit like whistling.

And she was whistling now.



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# 3

# Huswyvern Fights Back

The Whistlewitch's whistling grew louder and louder as the objects on her hat came to life – spilling out towards Eglantine, her father and Arthur, who were frozen in fear. Huswyvern, however, rolled up its figurative sleeves and prepared for a *fight*.

Till then, Eglantine had only seen one side of its personality, but now a far more ancient, far more powerful side took over.

Hackles raised, the carpet fibres stood on end. The walls began to ripple and expand like an overfilled balloon, and then there was a sound almost like a hiss as Hus released a mixture of air and magic with a slam that knocked *everyone* over.

The Whistlewitch fell backwards with a crash, a look of shock on her face.



Eglantine scrambled to her feet, holding out a hand to help her father up.

"You forgot one thing," shouted Eglantine as the Whistlewitch and Lichen righted themselves, their triumphant air fading fast. "Huswyvern isn't some ordinary house, it has its own voice. Its own mind!"

At those words, the carving of the one-armed battle-hero Sorcerer Nelson on the parlour wall shouted "Charge!" and the coat stand rushed at Lichen, while Sorcerer Nelson reached out from his panelling to grab hold of the Whistlewitch in a vice-like grip. She fought against him, and only managed to break free when the ship from her hat steamed towards Sorcerer Nelson, who looked suitably outraged and ducked.

Then, to Eglantine's horror, the giant squid on the witch's hat turned towards them and reached out a monstrously undulating tentacle to grasp Lord Bury around his middle.

"No!" cried Eglantine, trying to prise him loose. The squid regarded her with a resigned expression.

"Huswyvern, do what you have to!" cried her father. "Expel the intruders, keep Eglantine safe. You heard how they were considering *murdering* her. They cannot be allowed to carry out their plan – you cannot bond with the Whistlewitch!"

The coat stand, which had now pinned Lichen to the floor, nodded fast, then shuddered. Clearly it felt the same.

Suddenly Huswyvern's floorboards rose up, then began to wrap themselves around her uncle, the Whistlewitch and the giant squid holding her father, making a kind of large wooden



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cage. No matter how hard the Whistlewitch fought, she could not break free of its hold.

"If the house expels us, I will take you as my captive, Lord Bury! I will not let you go," the Whistlewitch shouted, as the squid held on even more tightly to Eglantine's father.

"So be it!" growled Lord Bury.

"No!" screamed Eglantine.

But it was too late.

Huswyvern honoured her father's wishes. The wooden cage flung itself up towards a large window, which flew open to reveal the night sky, where a faint moon glowed beyond the sea.

Eglantine watched as the cage thumped down hard onto the lawn on the cliff outside, the impact breaking open the cage. The Whistlewitch and Lichen climbed free, but her father was still struggling against the squid's tentacles. The Whistlewitch had clearly meant what she said about keeping him prisoner.

"Father, no!" cried Eglantine helplessly.

There was the sound of windows and doors being bolted firmly shut.

*Wham, wham, wham.*

The Whistlewitch looked slightly the worse for wear; her hat and its magical display were crooked. She made a sound like a tea kettle as she began to swell with fury. Perhaps she hadn't expected the house to put up such a fight. Her face contorted in rage as she raised her arms to the dark sky and began to pull the clouds towards her. Thunder boomed and lightning crackled, and she fashioned a spear from them with her bare hands,



which she flung at windows.

Huswyvern flinched, but the glass did not break.

Eglantine felt the ground shudder beneath her feet from the blow, and her heart clenched horribly, but she was powerless to do anything to stop the Whistlewitch's assault.

She heard a moan outside and saw her father on the lawn below, still struggling against the massive squid's tentacles.

Her heart split in two, divided between worry for her home and fear for her father.

"Hus, please, I know you're in pain, but I…I need to go get Father! Open the doors!"

The coat stand drooped. Sorcerer Nelson's profile looked full of regret as he shook his head. The door remained sealed. Hus was doing what her father had asked, and keeping everyone out, *including him*.

"Please, Hus," she begged, but it seemed nothing would change its mind.

From the grand staircase, there was a heavy clanging sound as if something monstrous was making its way towards them.

Eglantine and Arthur spun around to the parlour door in time to see a battalion of armoured metal suits making their way to guard the doors from being breached. Soon it was clear there was no way the Whistlewitch and Lichen could cross the threshold.

The Whistlewitch began to howl in frustration and the sound was like a wailing banshee; and despite surviving the lightning that had been thrown at them, the shrill noise caused several windows to shatter all at once.



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Eglantine and Arthur took cover behind the green velvet chairs.

They crept back to look out of the window when they heard a strange scuttling sound outside. Thousands of neon jellyfish that glowed in the dark began to rise from the sea below the cliffs Hus stood on. They created a deadly force field in the air to block the Whistlewitch's path and protect the now open windows.

"I think the house is using the witch's powers against her," breathed Arthur.

Wyverns had a sensitivity to magic, and Eglantine guessed that Arthur could feel what was happening somehow.

Eglantine realized that this was what the Whistlewitch had meant about her and Huswyvern sharing similar ocean magic. Thankfully, for now, Huswyvern was stronger.

From the open window, they saw the Whistlewitch and Lichen huddle together, deep in conversation, as the squid kept Eglantine's father firmly bound in its slithery clutches. He had even given up struggling. Lichen looked angry as they argued, but after some time Eglantine saw him nod. Suddenly the Whistlewitch looked up towards the window, to where Eglantine and Arthur were watching, and a determined look stole across the witch's face.

A dark whirlwind full of ocean waves and tentacles grew around her and lifted her up into the air. One of the tentacles still clutched Lord Bury, who was lashed by the wind and water.

"Let my father go, please!" begged Eglantine.



"I *could* do that," said the Whistlewitch coyly, "but I want something in return."

"What?" breathed Eglantine.

"You to make a choice," said the Whistlewitch, grinning widely as if she could see straight into Eglantine's fast-beating heart.

"What choice?"

"Give us the house and you can leave quietly with your father, *or* we take your father with us," said the Whistlewitch.

Eglantine looked down at the lawn to where Lichen nodded. "That's right," he called. "Who knows when you'll see him again."

Eglantine swallowed.

*Huswyvern for her father?*

If she let her uncle and the Whistlewitch take Huswyvern, they would change it, and remove all the bits she loved about it. But…this was her *father*…she couldn't let the Whistlewitch just take him hostage!

"You know what you need to do, Eglantine! It's not a difficult choice, now, is it?" shouted Lichen.

Eglantine's throat turned dry and she felt tears threaten to overwhelm her. Her heart felt like it was being ripped in two, but he was right.

Her father shook his head furiously, still struggling against the tentacles that were holding him fast. "No! It will be another trick, Eglantine, I promise you!"

"No trickery, child," said the Whistlewitch. "Just a fair exchange – your father for the house, that's all."

"Don't listen to her," shouted her father. "Look at how she has



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behaved tonight. That's all she knows – tricks and lies. This is just another one. Do not give them Huswyvern!"

Eglantine trembled. "Father, I hate this, too. But…" Tears slipped down her cheeks. But what other choice did she have?

Perhaps her father could see the turmoil in her eyes, because a resolute look appeared on his face. "Huswyvern," he called, "you know I am right. You and Eglantine can protect each other – you are stronger together."

The coat stand nodded.

Eglantine wanted to believe that too. Except right now, she didn't feel like she could do anything for Huswyvern, but she *could* do something for her father – and that was to get him away from the Whistlewitch.

She turned to Arthur. "M-maybe if I *pretend* to give up Huswyvern, you, me and Father can leave now and find someone to bring back here to help us fight the Whistlewitch and Uncle Lichen?"

Arthur shook his head sadly. "You heard your uncle – you don't have proof that they used magic to get the house. And if you let go of Huswyvern now, they'll have the chance to make a bond with it and that will be impossible to break. You can't let that happen."

Eglantine bit her lip.

It was an impossible choice.

Her father could see it in her face. He struggled against the tentacles holding him and turned to look at the wyvern, who was wringing his claws in his anxiety.



"Arthur," cried her father, "you can help them both. You know my child. You know Eglantine will never agree to let me go, but she *must* in order to stay safe herself. Do what needs to be done – you know of what I speak. I would not ask it of you if I believed there was any other way."

Arthur seemed to pale. But he nodded. "Yes, My Lord."

Eglantine looked at Arthur in growing trepidation. What were her father and Arthur talking about?

Arthur turned to her and whispered, "I'm so sorry, Lady Eglantine," then he pulled her away from the windows and held her firmly within his wings. After a moment she felt something change within her, as if her blood had turned to water. She tried to shout but she couldn't; no words seemed able to come out of her mouth. He'd *done* something to her voice. She couldn't speak. *She couldn't agree to the Whistlewitch's terms.*

Tears ran thickly down her cheeks, pooling silently on Arthur's scales as she struggled against him. *He'd used his powers on her.*

The Whistlewitch roared. She had sensed what had happened – magic always leaves a trace for those who know how to read it. Especially magic like *that*.

"That is a dirty trick, wyvern, to take a voice!"

Arthur whispered hoarsely, "I know."

There was a deep sigh from the Whistlewitch. "Very well, you have won this round, for now."

"What? No!" Eglantine heard Lichen cry from the ground below as the Whistlewitch hovered up above with her father. "We are so close!"



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The Whistlewitch held up a hand. "A temporary ceasefire, My Lord, that is all – not defeat." Then she turned to address Eglantine once more. "On the first of September, we will be opening our school for military sorcerers here. Eglantine, I will give you until the end of the summer to make the right choice and hand over Huswyvern without a fuss. I promise to look after your father and to treat him as a guest until then. You have my witch-vow on that.

"Your house and your wyvern-butler might be protecting you, but Huswyvern's magic will fade even quicker now that it has used this much power to fight us. As today is the first of June, you have three months to say your goodbyes. But when I return, you must do what is right. As your guardian, Lord Lichen doesn't just have the power to send you away to be cared for by others, he can also exterminate any creature who tries to control you against your will…"

The Whistlewitch glanced at Arthur, her lips curling in distaste. "Think of *that*, wyvern, the next time you cast such a spell over the child. You do so at your own risk."

"I will always risk my life to protect her," hissed Arthur, who was still holding Eglantine firmly.

Arthur shifted and, through a gap in his wings, Eglantine could see the strain on the Whistlewitch's face as she fought against the house's magic that was pushing her back. But her father, still trapped in the squid's tentacles, looked determined.

"Use this time, Eglantine, to find out who you are. You've never let the idea of something being impossible stop you before – don't let it now."



Eglantine stared at her father in puzzlement. Find out who she was? What did he mean? Before she had a chance to ask though, the Whistlewitch snapped at her father.

"You're speaking as if there's another solution to the choice I have given her, but there isn't. You'll see that in time, child. I am sure you will make the right decision when next we meet."

Then she crooked a hand, and a wave was sent to sweep Lichen from his feet on the ground below and they all departed in a cloud of sea mist.

When Arthur finally released Eglantine from his wings, she sank to the floor, her heart feeling as if it had been ripped out of her chest, and she cried silent, heartbreaking sobs. Her father had been taken, and Arthur, her beloved friend, had been the one who had let it happen. She had never felt more hurt nor more alone than in that moment.

The only thing she was sure of was that she would be spending the next three months trying to get her father back.



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