
The Lonely Lighthouse of Elston-Fright

FOR MUM, AS PROMISED.



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The Lonely Lighthouse of Elston-Fright

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ILLUSTRATIONS BY ELEONORA ASPARUHOVA

USBORNE


ELSTON-FRIGHT
THE MANOR
N
W
E
S
ELSTON-FRIGHT
ANGLER ROCKS
THE CEMETERY
THE LIGHTHOUSE
WRECKING HAZARD
Do not approach
Rock-That-Doesn't-exist

The Not-a-Chapter

Far to the south and a long way from all that's good is a place that, luckily, few people have ever had the misfortune to visit. It's a bitter place, a tall and craggy mountain, resting at the very edge of the inhabitable earth. A bleak and barren landscape, nothing grows there save for the blackfrost berries whose bushes huddle in hidden spaces, and the creeping wintertide vines, heavy with sour pods, which thrive in shadow – savouring the dark.

The mountain is a solitary one, and perched upon its side is a solitary stronghold with a solitary purpose. Built from the same black stone as the mountain, the

fortress enjoys near-perfect camouflage. Indeed, the only living creatures to know about it – save for the ones imprisoned inside its walls, plus a handful of well-informed villains – are the rats that take cover from the cold there.

At night, when the sky and everything else turns dark, you can hear two prisoners inside the fortress. In hushed voices, they speak softly to one another, remembering something that happened long ago. Remembering somebody they left behind.

But this story doesn't take place in the icy stronghold on the desolate mountain. The events of *this* story happen far, far away from it, on an entirely different continent and in a town where – for now, at least – the sun is beginning to rise, bringing with it the false promise of a perfectly pleasant day. Soon, flocks of broad-winged seabirds will circle in the sky, on the lookout for breakfast, and local fisherfolk will be out on their trawlers, pulling in empty nets with confused looks on their faces.

The town in question is little more than a tumbledown collection of faded-white houses, winding

streets and a well-worn wharf, and off its coast rests a rock – a rock that had once been rusty red but which over time turned dull and grey. Inside the rock is a cave, and inside that cave sits a shack, haunted by a ghost made of wax. She's not alone. Another ghost, this one not made of wax, haunts the shack too, and together the pair share their home with a spider. An extraordinarily *large* spider.

Until recently, the shack had been home to three Witches too – but not any more.

Not even a month has passed since the ghost made of wax banished the Witches with a magic spell. They're long gone now, and in the time that has since passed, the rock has turned from grey to white. These days, reaching up from the depths of the ocean, the rock appears as if it's made of bone.

Across the water and back on dry land, a lighthouse stands on a point. Sturdy and weathered, the lighthouse was built at a distance from the town, and the townsfolk themselves rarely think about it. This very moment, though, something is happening there. With the sun peeking over the horizon and the sky lit up orange,

a boy is peering out from his window on the lighthouse's third floor, rubbing his eyes in disbelief.

He snatches up an old brass telescope and presses it to one eye, trying to get a closer look at the strange movement he spied. Then, once absolutely certain he didn't imagine it, the boy turns and sneaks stealthily from his bedroom. After listening for the sound of snoring from above, he ignores what would be the faster way to the bottom of the lighthouse and creeps down its stairs instead. The boy slinks out the front door, heading to investigate what it was that he saw from his window.

It's *here* that this adventure begins. Here that this story takes place.

Here, by the lonely lighthouse of Elston-Fright.

1 Flip

If there's one thing I know, it's this: being a Lightkeeper is Very Serious Business. Protecting an entire town from dangerous magic? That's a big responsibility. *Seriously* big. But somebody's got to do it. After all, you can't just let your home become overrun by wickedness and shadow, can you? You can't allow briny bogey people and wily wraiths to roam about freely, hurting people as they go. No, you have to *defend* your home. You have to protect it from harm. And when it comes to the fishing town of Elston-Fright that I call *my* home, the person who's always protected it from bad magic has been a Little.

Like me. I'm a Little – Flip Little.

And Littles are Lightkeepers.

My family's been doing it for ever – taking care of Elston-Fright, that is – ever since my great-great-great-grandfather Lionel Little built the lighthouse where, these days, I live with my nan. The town wasn't much more than a handful of cottages back then, and the wharf was no more than a single crooked jetty. The fish mill hadn't been built yet, and the town hall didn't even have its bell. The lighthouse was one of the very first buildings to crop up in Elston-Fright, and it quickly became the most important. It was from the lighthouse, at its far-flung place on the point, that Littles would fulfil their duty to protect. Ever vigilant, Lightkeepers would keep an eye – both eyes, actually – on Elston-Fright, ready to respond to whatever magical threat might be the next to arrive on its shores. That's why, after seeing the very-weird-and-totally-not-normal thing that I saw from my window this morning, I knew it was up to *me* to investigate. Strange things don't just happen, after all. Mysteries don't solve themselves.

Somebody has to look into it – who better than a Little?

Bertie's motor growls loudly. My hand is squeezed so tightly around the tiller that if I looked back at it, I'm sure my knuckles would be bone white. I don't look back, though. I look forwards, towards my destination, with my eyes narrowed against the morning sun. The wind whipping off the ocean is icy, and every now and again Bertie's bow crashes into a wayward wave and kicks water up in my face. It gets in my mouth, salty and sharp, and it goes up my nose too, but I quickly wipe it away with my free hand and urge Bertie to move faster. My heart thumps in my chest.

Bertie is my little yellow dinghy, by the way. Or, well, it's my *nan's* little yellow dinghy. I'm only borrowing it.

Does it count as borrowing if Nan doesn't know about it?

I shake the thought from my head. There's no time for thinking about all that right now. It's one of the first rules of Lightkeeping: there are times for thinking, and there are times for acting. After spotting the

mystery-in-question from my window, now definitely counts as a time for acting.

Besides, I'm about as used to breaking rules as a person comes.

But before I can investigate the very-weird-and-totally-not-normal thing, there's something else that I need. Every hero needs their sidekicks, and so that's why right now I'm racing across the water at full speed, headed for backup. Directly ahead of me, breaching the waters like some kind of supersized whale, is the rock where I'll find it. It's the rock where my very best friends live.

Come to think of it, it's where my only friends live.

I guess if I'm going to get technical about it, only one of them really *lives* there. The other two are dead. I suppose it's more correct to say that they haunt the place.

As I approach the reef that circles the rock, I raise the propeller from the water. Once Bertie is done gliding over the reef and has come to a stop beyond its fringes, right at the place where the rock flats and the tide pools begin, I kill the motor. Moving as quickly as

this morning's Very Big Discovery demands, I drop the anchor over the side of Bertie's hull with a *splash!* and don't pause to watch it vanish into the depths. I spring from the little yellow dinghy and land on the rock flats.

My blood begins to fizz a little, like it's been pumped full of sherbet. My shoulders tingle and the blood rushes behind my ears. I'm a Little, after all, and it's only natural for a Little to be a bit excited at the prospect of an adventure.

I was born for stuff like this.

Hurrying, my feet carry me towards the main part of the rock – the big bit that reminds me of a woolly mammoth except without any tusks and made entirely of stone. It has a lightning-shaped crack zigzagging its way down the front like a scar. I move quickly, my duty as a Little spurring me on, noticing as I go how much paler the rock has become since the last time I was here – which was only yesterday. It's been turning whiter by the day for a while, but today the whole place looks as if it's been carved from chalk. As I run, I notice it crumble under my feet.

No time to question that right now, I think. *I've got bigger blowfish to batter.*

It's a funny saying, especially given that blowfish aren't really an eating fish around here. Still, my nan has always said it – she has lots of funny sayings – so I do too.

I pass through the lightning-shaped crack and enter the rock's cave. Ahead of me sits my friends' shack. I can't see it, because it's got a cloaking glamour over it to turn it invisible. I know it's there though. As I approach, I begin to feel queasy, but I expected that because there's also a turnaround charm filling this cave, designed to make trespassers go back the way they came. Sometimes, like today, the charm makes you feel sick; at other times it might make you desperately need to pee, or else suddenly remember an important appointment that you'd forgotten about.

It's very effective magic for keeping unwanted visitors away.

I'm not unwanted here, though. It's my friend who put the turnaround charm in place, and I know how to

block out its effects. I'm used to it by now, and in a few strides I'm through.

The shack appears before my eyes.

It's a crumbling old thing made of wood, metal and rot, and despite my friends patching it up in places, the shack still feels just about ready to give in and collapse into a pile of rubble. Panting, I raise my fist—

KNOCK-KNOCK-KNOCK.

"Flip?" says a familiar voice from inside. "Is that you?"

The door swings open and I come face to face with a patchwork cape, suspended in mid-air as if it's being worn by some big invisible bird.

Which it isn't, of course. It's being worn by a ghost.

"Hi, Girl." My words escape between pants and puffs. Gasps and wheezes.

Over the place where I assume her shoulder is, I can see all the parts of the shack that I know well. I only came here for the first time three-and-a-half weeks ago, but it's not often you come across a shack that used to belong to Witches, and so that's more than enough time to remember it by heart. I spy the

familiar fire pit in its centre. The wooden bench that stretches along one wall. The hundred candles, lined up on shelves.

"You're soaked!"

Girl says it as if me being drenched from sea spray is a completely delightful turn of events. A welcome discovery. Maybe even like I *chose* to get this wet. And even though I can't see her face, I can tell from Girl's voice that she's beaming.

"Have you been swimming, Flip?" she asks me. "Did you meet any nice fish?" The cape wriggles, and I know that she's shaking her head. "No, of course you didn't. I keep forgetting that you're not a ghost and so can't talk to animals like I can."

"Wasn't swimming," I say between lungfuls of air. "Came quickly. Bertie kicked up a bit of spray on the way."

I put on my most serious Lightkeeper voice when I tell her: "We have an emergency."

"An *emergency*?"

I nod. "I'm afraid so."

Girl can Fly, which I happen to think is pretty cool.

She glides back from the open doorway and I step inside. The cape, which is tied up under the place where her chin must be, dances and sways from the sudden movement. It's made of little patterned squares in the colours of the rainbow. Some squares are decorated with tiny orange goldfish, others with seascapes and little sailing boats, and others still with grand seabirds, wings outstretched. Girl also wears two delicate white gloves, one of which grips the door handle.

She pushes it shut behind me.

The gloves and cape were gifts from me. Ghosts don't remember their lives at all, and Girl has no memory of birthdays or Christmases or anything like that. That made me feel sad, so I asked Nan to sew the cape (I told her it was for me) and then I wrapped it and the gloves in brown paper (I couldn't find any of the nice glossy stuff) before tying a bow on it with fishing wire (I also couldn't find any ribbon) and giving them to Girl. Now she wears them all the time, which turned out to be super helpful for me too because, since Girl is invisible to living people, I've never

actually been able to see her. And not being able to see someone is confusing, especially when they're one of your best friends. At least now I can tell where she is.

"What's the emergency?"



Before I can answer, a huge mass of shaggy grey-brown fur and segmented legs launches itself at me. I'm knocked off balance and topple to the floor.

"Whoa – hey, Simon!"

Simon lands on top of me, eight huge glossy eyes centimetres from mine, and the giant huntsman spider nuzzles his pincers into my face like an excited golden retriever.

Despite the Seriously Serious Nature of my visit, I can't help but feel a smile bubble up somewhere deep in my belly. It swells, moving to my chest and then all the way up to my mouth, and suddenly I find myself

grinning widely. Because really, how many people can say that one of their best friends is a magically enlarged spider? Not many. Simon is very, *very* cool.

"Good to see you too," I tell him.

"What's going on?"

The voice belongs to the *other* ghost who haunts this shack. My third and final friend. Once Simon scrambles off and I drag myself back to my feet, I see that she's sitting cross-legged on the floor, at the far side of the room, with a heavy book resting open on her lap. I recognize it as *Magikal Maledictions*, her book of spells that used to belong to the Witches who lived here. My friend's hand is raised, her fingers are wriggling, and I'm certain I've interrupted her in the middle of her daily spell practice. It might be early, but ghosts don't sleep. She's probably been practising all night.

"Corpse," Girl says to her seriously. "Flip says there's an emergency."

Girl and Corpse are very different kinds of ghost, by the way. For one: Corpse can't Fly like Girl can. She's different in other ways, too. While Girl is

invisible and made of nothing, Corpse has built herself a body made of wax. She's got seaweed for hair, polished abalone shells where her eyes should be and two rows of pebbles for teeth. Right now, the bottoms of her bare wax feet are all grubby and, as always, she's wearing her favourite overalls.

Beside her sits an oval-shaped something. *The Cemetery Stone*.

Another gift from me, the Stone is the only reason I can hear Corpse's voice. Just as Corpse can't Fly, she also can't talk to people like me (*living* people) the way Girl can. Not without the Cemetery Stone, anyway. The Stone allows her to do it.

"What kind of emergency?" Corpse asks.

I step closer, readying myself to tell them about what I saw from my window. I clear my throat and puff my chest out, the way you do when you're about to say Something Very Important. Then, with my most serious voice, I announce: "One that requires our *immediate* investigation."

2

Corpse

Flip is standing in the middle of our shack, his white hair dusted with glittering specks of seawater. His usually pale cheeks are flushed, and his jumper is drenched. His favourite braces hang loose like they always do because they're too big for him. The expression in Flip's silver eyes is serious – but also kind of excited, like maybe he's a tiny bit pleased with himself – when he announces that there's an emergency.

Reluctantly, I rest *Magikal Maledictions* by my side.

If I'm honest, I'm not really in the mood for

interruptions right now. I don't have time for another one of Flip's adventure plots. I'm *so* close to mastering this hastiness hex I've been practising, and I can't have any distractions. I've been working on it for days, and I think I've almost got it down pat. I can feel it. Magic behaves for me almost every time I do the spell.

That means I'm getting close.

Girl, Simon and I could really use this hex. We've needed to outrun things in the past, and it would have been a whole lot easier if we'd been able to move at super-speed.

Still, Girl is looking at me in a way that says she thinks we should hear Flip out. She gives a tiny shake of her head – it doesn't need to be tiny, since Flip can't see her and so there's no need to be subtle – and it makes her springy hair bounce around. It's clear from the look in her topaz-coloured eyes that she thinks whatever Flip has to say is important. I've learned by now not to ignore Girl's looks. Not if I want to avoid getting more of them later.

I put down the spell book and pick up the Cemetery Stone instead.

(Smooth. Cool. Hard to the touch.)

As always, I feel something humming inside it. It's something you wouldn't normally expect to feel moving through polished stone. The memory of a ghost, long since gone.

The ghost whose headstone the Cemetery Stone was carved from.

Etched across the top of the Stone is a picture of the Elston-Fright lighthouse because *technically* the Stone is a Little family heirloom. Flip snuck it out from under his nan's nose one day, wrapped it in paper and fishing wire, and gave it to me just like he gave Girl the cape and gloves she's currently Spooking.

Spooking, by the way, is the first of three special ghost powers called the Ghostly Acts. It's what lets Girl wear her cape and gloves as if she has a body, even though she's made of spectral nothingness. It's also what lets her talk with fleshies – people who haven't died yet. As for me? I can't Spook. Not without the Stone, anyway.

Turning it over in my hand, I feel its deathly power rush through my wax fingertips, all the way up my arm.

It reaches my neck, then settles behind my pebble not-teeth. They buzz and pulse with something like magic.

Only, it's *not* magic. Magic is different to the Ghostly Acts. Magic can be shaped into spells. Spells that can be learned and practised. You can't do that with Acts like Spooking and Flying. As a ghost, you've either got the ability to do the Acts, or you haven't. The ghost whose headstone the Cemetery Stone was carved from must have been able to Spook. Some trace of who they were still flows through it, letting me draw on their ability.

"Yes, but what *kind* of emergency?" I ask Flip again. "What happened?"

Flip shakes his head. "Not sure yet. I saw something from my window. We should take a closer look."

My eyes flit to *Magikal Maledictions*, then back to Flip. "I'm kind of busy."

Girl ignores me. "What was it, Flip?"

"It was a breeze," Flip declares – kind of dramatically, if you ask me.

That's Flip for you. I've only known him for three-and-a-bit weeks, and he's become a pretty good friend

in that time, but he does have a habit of finding adventure everywhere he looks.

"The breeze was behaving *strangely*," he adds.

…*click-click*, Simon says, taking my side.

(As he should. Simon has known me longer than he's known the other two, and we've been through a lot together. I'm his best friend.)

"I agree," I reply, thinking about the spell practice I need to get back to.

"Agree about what?" Flip says. He can't hear or understand Simon's clicks like Girl and me because he's not dead. Ghosts are able to communicate with animals – fleshies can't.

"Simon said that doesn't sound like an emergency," I tell him.

"It was *behaving strangely*," Flip repeats, as if I might have missed that part. "I could see it. It was like the breeze had edges and corners. Like the sky was folding and wrinkling."

Click.

(Silently, I agree with Simon. That part *does* sound a bit weird.)

I lift my chin a little. "Okay, Flip. I'm listening."

He smiles – happy, I guess, that his words have had the effect he wanted them to. "I could hear it, too," Flip says. "It's like the breeze was laughing. It carried all the way across the water from town to the lighthouse. I could hear it through my bedroom window."

(Okay, laughing breezes *definitely* aren't normal. I'll give him that.)

"Where did you see it?" I ask.

"Right near the edge of town. It's probably gone by now. I mean, it's not like breezes stay in one place very long, do they? Still, we should go see if it left any clues."

Right near the edge of—?

That settles it.

I slip the Cemetery Stone into the pocket of my overalls, and my hand grazes the old, folded-up map of Elston-Fright I keep there, along with a little black button that is special to me. I pick up *Magikal Maledictions* again. "No."

Flip looks taken aback. "No?"

"No," I repeat. "We can't go anywhere near Elston-Fright. I've told you that."

I shake the book. "I've been learning these new spells to keep fleshies *away*, remember? I've been trying to stop them from finding our shack. From finding *us*."

It doesn't seem to matter how many times I explain it to Flip, he always forgets that Girl and I can't simply head into Elston-Fright like he can. We're *ghosts*, and I know for a fact that fleshies aren't particularly welcoming of ghosts. "We can't go wandering into town just because you've seen a breeze behaving strangely."

"But—" Flip starts.

"I reckon Corpse might be right," Girl interrupts. "It all sounds too dangerous."

It catches me by surprise. Normally, Girl sides with Flip whenever he comes up with one of his big ideas for adventure – though to be fair, they usually only involve gallivanting about the tide pools.

"After the Witches were banished," Girl continues, explaining to Flip what I've already told him a hundred

times, "the spell they were using to keep the rock-that-doesn't-exist a secret from others melted away. The rock is a Spellspring, remember? Full of magic that can be turned into spells. Or…maybe it *was* a Spellspring. I dunno. It doesn't *look* very magical any more." She pauses, and I know she's thinking about how the rock has turned white and crumbly. "Anyway, the Witches had to keep their hiding place a secret, but now they're gone and the spell that used to be over the rock is gone. Corpse has worked really hard on the cloaking glamour and turnaround charm to keep us safe."

I nod. "See? Even Girl agrees."

"Sorry, Flip," Girl says.

The Witches she's talking about are the three horrible men who used to live in this shack. They're a big part of why I'm a kid ghost in the first place – Girl too – and back when they lived here, they magicked the rock, its cave and its tide pools to be un-rememberable to fleshie eyes. Nobody knew about it. Nobody *could* know about it. If anyone in Elston-Fright had gazed out to sea, they would only have noticed the

rock for a moment. Then, as soon as they turned away again…

…all memory of it would vanish.

That's why we call it the rock-that-doesn't-exist.

Only, everything changed when I banished the Witches with a spell.

The rock became rememberable again, and suddenly every nosy fisherperson was anchoring nearby, trying to understand how it might have appeared from nowhere. They would walk across the rock flats and inspect the tide pools. Some of them even made it *inside* the cave…

…before my magic would turn them right back around again.

"The cloaking glamour and turnaround charm keep us hidden," I remind Flip seriously, "but *only* while we're here inside the shack. Adventuring with you on the rock-that-doesn't-exist is one thing. Actually going into Elston-Fright? No way."

I wonder for a moment whether I need to explain to him – *again* – that apart from those two spells, I'm only good at four others. Spells need practice, and

practice takes time. The Witches have only been gone a few weeks. I still have so much magic to learn.

"Fleshies like me can't hurt you," he says. "You're—"

He stops. His pink cheeks turn pinker.

"Dead?" I finish for him.

"Well…yeah."

"The Witches were fleshies," I point out, "and they had plenty of ways to hurt us. Ways to send us to Death Proper." I shiver, thinking of the place you go after you're done being a ghost. The Witches very nearly sent Girl there. "They're not all like you, Flip. You never know what a fleshie might be capable of."

I pause. "Or what else might be out there in Elston-Fright."

"That's exactly my point!" Flip says. "Something *is* out there. And we need to—"

He's cut short by a sound like thunder. His mouth snaps shut. He turns towards the door.

"What's that noise?" Girl asks – worried.

A few dark sparkles dance over her skin, below her topaz-coloured eyes, then fade. That's what happens when Girl is feeling something big. She glitters. Only I

can see it. I'm pretty sure that dark sparkles mean she's fearing something bad is about to happen.

I shake my head. *I don't know*. The sound is coming from outside, like a storm rolling in, and it's quickly growing louder. Soon, it's so loud that it makes the walls of the shack quiver. The ground begins to shake. It makes my not-belly feel like soup and my knees wobble like jellyfish. I jump to my feet, dropping *Magikal Maledictions*.

The rumbling underfoot grows stronger. My knobbly knees threaten to buckle from the force of it.

(Flip's too, by the look of how he stumbles.)

Something like laughter rings out.

"That's it!" Flip says. "That's the laughter I told you about!"

The sound is a mean one. Hungry, even. It sends a shiver up my not-spine and floods the shack – as if coming from every direction and none of them, all at the same time.

Thunk!

Thunk-thunk!

The candles that line the shelves along the walls

begin to fall, sent toppling from their places by a series of shudders passing through the shack. *Thunk-thunk-thunk!*

"We should get outside," I warn.

The walls groan loudly.

"Quickly!"

3



Candles are rolling this way and that along the floor, reminding me of a picture I saw in an old book once. It was a picture of mice scampering and scurrying about the hallways of a sinking ship, trying to escape before they drowned. The shack's walls are straining loudly. The beams that hold its roof in place begin to rattle like a decrepit skeleton.

"We gotta get to the rock flats!" Girl shouts over the noise.

We hurry for the door as somewhere deep beneath us, the rock-that-doesn't-exist lets out a tired groan.

Again, I'm reminded of a ship. *A ship about to go down.*