EMBER SPARK AND THE FROST PHOENIX



PRAISE FOR

EMBER SPARK

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One



Like four-leaf clovers and shooting stars, magical beasts are hard to spot. Even if you happened to be told there was a baby dragon snoozing in a tree at the bottom of your garden, the chances are you'd never actually see it. Because magical beasts know that if they want to live in peace, they've got to stay hidden. They've got to remain the world's best-kept secret.

Now and again, though, creatures like dragons, unicorns and hippogriffs need to creep out into the open to seek help – when they're injured or unwell. Then things get a bit more complicated. Magical beasts might sense who they can trust, but they don't call ahead to say they're on their way. They don't message if they're

running late. And they certainly don't knock at the front door, then wait to be invited inside. They just charge on in – unannounced, uninvited and utterly unexpected.

Which is exactly what happened when ten-year-old Ember Spark, and her best friend, Arno Whisper, sat down in the kitchen one October afternoon to eat their tea.

It started as a perfectly ordinary teatime. Ember lifted two pizzas out of the oven. Arno tugged them off the baking tray onto plates and they sat down to eat – Arno with a knife and fork because he liked to be neat and tidy and Ember with her hands because she thought being neat and tidy was a waste of time. Then, without any warning whatsoever, the seagull shot through the open window and crash-landed on the kitchen table.

At least Ember and Arno thought it was a seagull, to begin with . . .

'What's a seagull doing in here?!' Ember cried as she and Arno leapt to their feet.

The panicked bird stamped on the prongs of a fork and Arno ducked as the cutlery zoomed over his head and clattered against a cupboard.

Ember stifled a giggle. 'See, Arno: even seagulls think eating pizza with a knife and fork is stupid.'

Then she cocked her head because after a moment's inspection, she was suddenly struck by how unlike a seagull the bird actually looked. Ember frowned. She had lived in Yawn, a sleepy seaside village on the east coast of Scotland, all her life, and the seagulls she'd seen strutting along the beach and flying over the rooftops had grey wings, webbed feet, blunt beaks and yellow eyes. But this bird had none of those features. It was the same colour all over – a sparkling white like snow falling through sunlight – with fierce-looking talons, a sharp hooked beak and eyes a blazing turquoise. Not only that but it had a long sweeping tail and feathers that tufted up on top of its forehead.

Ember's eyes widened. It was just six months ago that she and Arno had discovered Rusty Fizzbang, a Vet to Magical Beasts, living in a secret cave a little further down the coast. They'd helped him tend to all sorts of poorly and injured creatures that came his way – griffins with broken wings, unicorns with toothache, hippogriffs with chipped hooves – and before long, Rusty had sent Ember and Arno out on a special mission, as Apprentice

Vets to Magical Beasts, to cure the Loch Ness Monster's stomach cramps and reunite a baby dragon with its father! Ember blinked at the strange bird before her. Could it possibly be a magical beast here in her kitchen? One she'd not yet come across with Rusty?

The bird spun in a confused circle, ripping the tablecloth then knocking over a vase of flowers, which shattered on the tiled floor.

'Are you thinking what I'm thinking?' Ember asked.

Arno winced. 'That it's the first day of half term and we've already smashed a vase, ripped a tablecloth and invited some kind of magical beast round to tea?'

Ember's eyes glittered. 'Do you think a gust of wind somehow blew the magical beast, or whatever it is, in here? Or maybe it got confused while flying and took a wrong turn?'

Arno took a deep breath. He was used to the fact that when unexpected things happened, Ember found it exciting and very often funny whereas he found it stressful and very often alarming. 'Whatever the reason, we've got to get it back outside before it smashes up the rest of your kitchen.'

But the bird had other ideas.

When Ember and Arno moved towards it, it sidestepped their grasp. Then it flapped across the room, bashing into the lampshade hanging from the ceiling before landing, with a squawk, on top of the fridge. It stayed there, wings folded stubbornly by its sides, eyeing Ember and Arno guardedly. But Ember and Arno weren't looking at the magical beast. They were staring at the kitchen table. Because scattered across it, where the bird had been just moments ago, were snowflakes. A little pile of them glistening in the afternoon sun.

Ember glanced at the window. Where had they come from? It was October and the sky was a brilliant blue. Not a cloud in sight. It couldn't possibly be snowing! And yet there were definitely snowflakes on the table, and there was also, Ember noticed, a little line of them on the floor leading towards the fridge.

She looked up at the bird staring down at them with its piercing eyes.

'What kind of magical bird could trail snowflakes in its wake?'

'The long tail makes it look a bit like a phoenix,' Arno replied. 'But they scatter fire, not snowflakes. Rusty would know what it is. I remember him saying there



were even more magical beasts he hadn't had time to tell us about yet . . .'

Ember glanced at the clock on the wall then sighed. 'Five thirty. Mum will still be working in the garage but

only for another half an hour. We don't have time to bike to Rusty's cave.'

'Why don't we take it over the road to Mrs Rickety-Knees, then?' Arno said. 'She might be able to tell us what it is.'

Mrs Rickety-Knees was a teacher at Yawn Primary School but she was also Rusty's closest friend, having stumbled across his cave as a child. She'd learnt how Rusty's ancestors had begun looking after magical beasts when they discovered a phoenix nesting nearby several centuries ago. Rusty had inherited the job and Mrs Rickety-Knees had tended to numerous injured unicorns and poorly dragons with him over the years. But Mrs Rickety-Knees was much older now, and her knees had packed in, so she had sent Ember and Arno to help Rusty back in the spring – partly because she had had a hunch that Ember possessed a rare bond with magical beasts but also because she knew that Ember and Arno would make a fabulous team.

'Worth a shot,' Ember replied, making to move towards the bird.

Arno held her back. 'We can't rush this. Remember Rusty's rules . . .'

Ember bit her lip. She wasn't a fan of rules – she considered them about as important as cutlery – but Rusty's mattered, if you wanted to avoid being gored by a unicorn or eaten by a dragon.

'Rule Number One,' Ember whispered, 'let the magical beast make the first move.'

She looked up at the bird and the tuft of silver-white feathers on its forehead twitched.

'It's okay,' she said softly. 'You're safe here. We're not going to harm you. We're going to stay exactly where we are until you know that you can trust us.'

The bird kept its turquoise eyes locked on Ember.

'You don't look injured,' Ember murmured, 'but maybe you're feeling unwell? If that's it, though, why didn't you head straight for Rusty's cave? Every magical beast in need seems to know how to find him when they need him.'

The bird stood absolutely still, its feathers glinting in the sunlight. Ember and Arno stood still, too, and then they heard what they had been waiting for: an unmistakable whisper deep inside them.

Dazzle, Dazzle, Dazzle, the whisper went. On and on like a second heartbeat.

Ember and Arno grinned at each other. They'd spent enough time around magical beasts to know what this meant: the creature trusted them enough to share its name.

Ember dipped her head at the bird. 'Hello, Dazzle.'

She knew that magical beasts couldn't communicate with humans, beyond sharing their name, but she could tell the bird had understood her because, very slowly, he dipped his head back at Ember. She knew, somehow, that he was male – and there was something in the creature's expression that made Ember feel that he was also very young indeed.

Arno took a small step closer. 'Rule Number Two: offer snacks. Meringues for unicorns, doughnuts for griffins, chocolate éclairs for hippogriffs. But,' he faltered, 'we don't know what you are so we've no idea what you might like to eat.'

Ember tore off a slice of pizza and held it up hopefully but Dazzle regarded it the same way a dog regards its first bath: with a mixture of outrage and disgust.

'Not pizza, then,' Ember muttered.

The bird glanced towards the window and let out an agitated squawk. Then he squawked again and again, as if willing Ember and Arno to understand what he meant,

before ruffling his wings and launching off the fridge. Ember wondered if he was going to sail back out through the window. But he only made it as far as the table where, to Ember and Arno's surprise, he landed with an exhausted thump then fell fast asleep in a little pool of snowflakes.



Ember and Arno peered over him. He didn't sleep like a seagull would have done, with his head tucked beneath his wing. Instead, he slept curled up in a ball with his long tail wrapped around him. He looked sweet, and harmless, but Ember and Arno had learnt enough about magical beasts to know they could be wild and unpredictable. Especially if you knew next to nothing about them . . .

'If he's that exhausted,' Arno whispered, 'maybe he's travelled a long way to get here.' He paused. 'Maybe he

somehow sensed your bond with magical beasts, Ember, and he wants help with something only *you* can fix.'

Ember felt a shiver creep beneath her skin. There was somebody else who wanted her help because of the bond she shared with magical beasts. But for altogether more sinister reasons . . . Jasper Hornswoggle. One of the most dangerous criminals in the country, a man famed for being able to track down and get rid of anyone or anything, if paid the right price. Magical beasts were his latest target. And back in March, Ember had witnessed Jasper's gang snatching a phoenix to sell on to their network of wealthy collectors. He would have taken a baby dragon, too, had Ember and Arno not rescued it from Jasper's clutches and reunited it with its father.

There had been no sign of Jasper and his gang since March, thankfully, but Ember and Arno knew they were still up to no good. They might have given up the search for Rusty's cave but Jasper's last words before he vanished had been very clear: he'd be back . . . Not only for magical beasts but also for Ember because it was slow work tracking down these creatures himself.

But magical beasts were drawn to Ember. Jasper had watched a creature called a nibblesqueak reach out to her

for help. He'd seen how speedily Ember had gained the Loch Ness Monster's trust. He'd even witnessed a mighty dragon come to her aid. Beasts sought Ember out for help and seemed to want to protect her in return – so Jasper reckoned that if he could find a way to force Ember to lure the beasts in for him, it would make things a whole lot easier, and him a whole lot richer.

Ember pushed all thoughts of Jasper Hornswoggle from her mind. Right now, all that mattered was getting Dazzle to Mrs Rickety-Knees without anyone else seeing.

Slowly, carefully, and with all her breath pent up inside her, Ember scooped the magical beast into her arms. Dazzle's eyes flickered open for a moment then closed again. He was heavier than Ember had expected him to be but despite the snowflakes that slipped from his tail feathers, he felt warm. Like holding a hot-water bottle close to your chest when there's snowing falling outside.

'Great,' Arno said. 'Now, I'll grab your coat and zip it up over you so nobody suspects anything when we cross the street, then –'

Ember and Arno froze. Footsteps were approaching down the paving stones that led through Ember's front garden.