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Opening extract from

Dragon's Fire

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CHAPTER ONE
Bad News

"No, no, Iggy, you're hopeless! How on earth are we ever going to convince the neighbours you're just an ordinary cat if you can't even manage to chase a ball like any normal kitten?"

Some new people had just moved in next door, and Iggy complained that the woman kept giving him funny looks, as if she knew more than she was letting on.

Iggy -- known in another world as Ignatius Sorvo Coromandel, or The Wanderer -- watched as Ben got down on his hands and knees and tried unsuccessfully to fish the last ball of screwed-up newspaper out from under the dresser where he had just hit it. All this paper ball chasing was getting really, really annoying. He'd played along with Ben for a while, catching the ball, juggling it, running around, batting it from paw to paw like some clever furry footballer; but now he was very, very bored. He'd managed to get rid of about a dozen of the irritating newspaper balls now – just out of Ben's reach beneath the carved Welsh dresser with all Mrs Arnold's best china on it – and Ben still hadn't worked out that he was doing it on purpose. Which was probably because he'd perfected the 'oops-nearly-had-it-that-time, what-a-butterpaws-I-am!' technique of knocking each new ball just a bit too hard so that it shot across the floor and under the dresser.

Games. Humans seemed to love them. He couldn't imagine why. Safely unwatched, the little black-and-brown cat yawned grotesquely, then stuck his tongue out at the boy's back.

"I'm not an ordinary cat," he rasped, his voice all sandpaper and vinegar. "And I ain't no kitten."

Ben pushed himself back upright and stared at his friend crossly with his mismatched eyes, one a sensible hazel-brown, the other an odd and vivid green. “Well I know that, and you know that, but you’re supposed to be undercover. Cats with special wayfaring skills from the Secret Country are a bit hard to come by. You might find yourself getting caught and sold off ... to some horrid petshop or something.”

Iggy sniffed. “That’s not funny, Sonny Jim.”

Ben had in fact rescued the little talking cat from Mr Dodd’s Pet Emporium, a strange shop full of peculiar and remarkable animals, many of whom had been brought from the Secret Country of Eidolon, where all the magical and extinct creatures live. But that had been before he had known anything about the shadow world; or Mr Dodds (who in the Secret Country walked eight feet tall and had the head of an enormous dog); or that his mother was Queen of Eidolon, which made him a halfling prince – half of this world (since his dad was human) and half of the other: hence his different coloured eyes.

“Look, just one more try, eh?” said Ben, trying to sound reasonable. It was for Iggy’s own good, after all.

“There’s no more newspaper,” Iggy growled. “You used it all up.”
He gave Ben a smug sort of look: though because of all their fur it can be a bit hard to judge a cat’s expression, which is probably why a lot of people think they are being standoffish, when in fact it’s just because you can’t see what their eyebrows are doing. Cats use their eyebrows a lot, and they have the gift of being able to see exactly how another cat is using its eyebrows, but humans are a bit stupid like that and find it hard to tell just where a cat’s eyebrows finish and the rest of its fur begins.

Ben laughed. “You don’t get off that lightly: there’s always more newspaper. It’s under the sink.” And off he went to the kitchen to fetch some.

Iggy watched the boy’s retreating back furiously. Under the sink. He might have known. Everything that didn’t have a proper place anywhere else in the house got kept under the sink. Sometimes he thought it was where he belonged. He sighed and ambled over to gaze boredly out of the window.

Something moved, fast, a movement he caught just in the corner of his eye. He blinked, then stared at where he thought it might have been, but all he could see was a falling leaf, a red and gold twist of fire, spiralling down out of the old oak tree where Ben had his treehouse, to join a thousand other autumn leaves on the shaggy grass beneath it. Time was passing, in this world and the shadow world. Who knew what might be happening in Eidolon now?

He stared at the tree, as if it might give up its secrets to him; but nothing else seemed to be stirring out there.

“Come on, Ig, pay attention!”

Ben held out another ball of newspaper and Iggy sighed. Turning his back on the window, he tried to look alert and interested, but it was pretty hard. The ball went up into the air and he batted at it half-heartedly.

“Oh, Iggy, honestly!”

The thing had got itself caught up on the little cat’s claws. Ignatius Sorvo Coromandel shook his paw in irritation, but all that happened was that the paper ball started to unravel itself. He stood on a corner and pulled at it with his teeth. Nothing happened. This was not very dignified, particularly for a cat of his prestigious heritage. His father had climbed the highest mountain in Eidolon, and his mother had been a great explorer; but here was their one

and only son, The Wanderer, with a piece of dirty newspaper stuck on his paw. He growled at it; but that did not achieve anything at all. He gave it an extra-hard tug, and with a sudden roar the paper ripped away from his grasp and lay there on the carpet, defeated at last.

"Grrr!" said Iggy, standing over it. "Grrrrr!!"

Ben shook his head. His friend had clearly gone quite mad. "Oh, Iggy, for goodness' sake, do stop it. It's only a bit of paper!"

But the little cat's muzzle was screwed up in an expression of sheer loathing. Ben sighed and bent to pick up the offending scrap.

"Oh no..."

There, squarely in the middle of the newspaper, on what had clearly been the front page of the *Greening & Bixbury Times*, the rival paper to the one on which Ben's father was deputy editor, was a grainy black and white photograph of someone horribly familiar. And under it ran the story:

LOCAL MAN ESCAPES FROM PRISON

"That's the beast who hit me over the head when I came through the wild road!" Iggy growled. "Grrrrrr!"

The wild roads run between our world and the Secret Country, and only a few folk know where their entrances can be found, or how to travel them. Ben had travelled the wild road into Eidolon through the great stone in Aldstane Park many times now, more or less safely.

"Yes, that's Awful Uncle Aleister," Ben concurred, studying the photo with a sinking heart.

"What does it say?" the little cat demanded in his gravelly voice. "He's still safely in prison, isn't he?" The fur had started to bristle on his neck.

Ben started to read:

> "Ardbar Prison was last night the venue of a dramatic jailbreak. At around nine o'clock inmates report hearing a tremendous noise. "We thought it were a gas explosion at first," said Rodney Lightfoot (serving eleven years for cat-burglary), "because the kitchens're in a right dodgy state here. Then someone said, 'It must be a bomb!' and then the power failed and all the lights went out. It were mayhem."
>
> The Prison Governor Collier takes up the story. "We implemented emergency measures and my officers immediately sealed the perimeter and encouraged the men to return to their rooms, where we locked them in for their own safety. However, when the back-up generator kicked in and the floodlights came on, we found there was a huge hole in the east wing and that one of our inmates was missing."
>
> Prison officer Mr A. Tookey had come off duty earlier in the evening and headed as usual for the Red Lion public house. On returning to Ardbar to retrieve items he had left in the staffroom there, and made a bizarre sighting: "There was smoke and dust everywhere; but out of the middle of it came a massive great ugly woman – at least I think it was a woman; I mean, some of the girls around here are pretty big, but even by local standards she was a real monster, about nine foot tall, with a load of orange and black hair and great big... er—"

"Grizelda!" exclaimed Iggy. "That's got to be a description of that awful ogress who hangs around with the Dodman!"

Ben nodded grimly. “It does sound rather like her.” He read on:

> “Anyway this, um, thing came out of there with a portly-looking chap tucked under her arm. Then all the smoke and dust and stuff swirled out on the perimeter field, and I thought it was a helicopter or something. Except it was really quiet, and those choppers generally make quite a racket. But when the smoke cleared I got the shock of my life: it was a bl***y great monster with a pointy head and these huge, batlike wings, just like this picture of a dinosaur I used to have on my bedroom wall when I was a lad! And then the woman-thing sticks the chap on the dinosaur’s back and off they all go, up into the sky.”
>
> There were no other witnesses to this strange account, and other regulars at the Red Lion report that the officer had “been really hammered” and was prone to exaggeration when “under the influence”.
>
> “Last year it was flying saucers,” said barmaid Sally Ellery, rolling her eyes.
>
> However, the *Gazette* can report that our reporter spotted some enormous footprints in the grounds outside the walls of the east wing that did not resemble anything he had seen before. We called in dinosaur expert, Professor Hugh Juggley-Twitt, to examine the evidence.
>
> “Professor Twitt was initially circumspect in his assessment. “They look rather similar to casts made of footprints found in the Mid West of America which may date back to the late Cretaceous period. But those prints belonged to a species of flying dinosaur called a Pterosaur which has been extinct on this planet for the best part of 150 million years. So, obviously, these can’t belong to anything like that! It must be a hoax.”
>
> We pressed the Professor for his opinion of what else might have made the marks, but he laughed nervously and said something about his reputation going up in smoke if we quoted him further, and left in a hurry; but not without taking several photographs of the footprints, “for future reference”.’

“Wow!” said Ben. “A dinosaur! Do you really think it is?”

“It’s probably all a big mistake.” Iggy wasn’t to be drawn on the subject. “What does the rest of it say?”

But there was no rest, for here the report was torn.

Ben glared at Iggy accusatorily. “What have you done with it?”

Iggy glared back, then spread his empty paws at Ben. “I haven’t got it! That’s the whole of the bit you screwed up to make a stupid ball for me to chase.”

“Well, where can it be, then?”

The little cat shrugged. “I haven’t eaten it, you know.”

“That’s where disappeared things usually go in this house,” Ben said crossly. Then he stomped off through the door into the kitchen and rootled around under the sink till he found the rest of the newspaper. He brought it back, and got down on his knees beside Iggy. Smoothing out the paper ball, he matched it up to the torn front page, and read on:

> ‘The missing prisoner is Mr. Aleister Creepie of King Henry Close, Bixbury, jailed earlier this year for selling dangerous animals. If you see him please do not approach him but contact the police at Bixbury’s Incident Room at once.’

Ben and Iggy exchanged anguished glances.
“Oh, Iggy. Awful Uncle Aleister’s escaped!”