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Lee Newbery lives with his son and dog in a seaside town in West Wales. By day he has a boring grown-up job, but by night he sits down at his laptop to write stories of adventure, magic and love.

His first book, *The Last Firefox*, won the Wales Book of the Year People's Choice Award and was shortlisted for the Waterstones Children's Book Prize.

Lee enjoys adventuring, drinking ridiculous amounts of tea, and giving his dog a good cuddle – or a *cwtch*, as they say in Wales.

BOOKS BY LEE NEWBERY

The Last Firefox

The First Shadowdragon

The Lost Sunlion

The Moonlighters

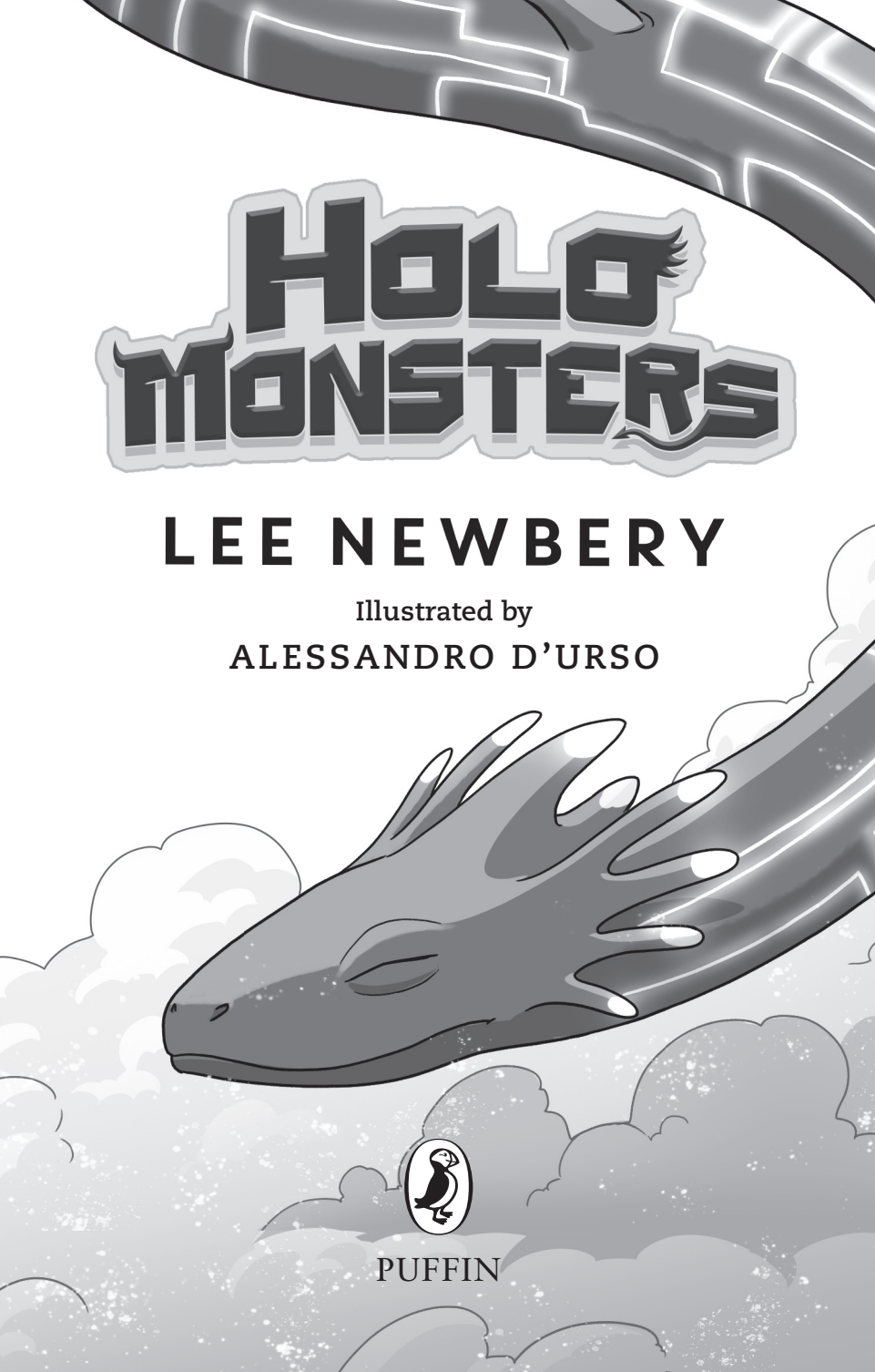
Holomonsters

HOLO MONSTERS

LEE NEWBERY

Illustrated by

ALESSANDRO D'URSO



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This one is for Indi, for always keeping me on my toes.

I promise I'll name a character after you one day!



The giant blue reptile rears up on its hind legs with a fearsome roar. The crowd is going wild, an ocean of cheering faces.

'*Go, Laserdile!*' they cry, feverish with excitement.

I'd give anything to be there. In the audience, sure, but I'd rather be on the battle floor.

Opposite Laserdile, Baboom bristles, drained from the Sonic Shockwave it just launched, and which Laserdile managed to dodge.

Mina Nightingale consults her hand of cards, eyes bright with triumph. She's got her opponent cornered. The electric baboon monster doesn't stand a chance. This battle's as good as over.

‘I’m going to use Laser Blast,’ she declares, and cheers erupt from every corner of the arena. The audience knows what’s about to happen.

Mina slots the card into the summoner device strapped to her left wrist. Laserdile adopts a combat pose, claws poised. Lasers burst from its eyeballs. Baboom is hit square in the chest and –

‘Newt, what have I said about using the internet in the car?’

I glance up with a jolt.

‘Eh?’

A moment ago, I was sitting in the front row of the studio audience, watching a duel between two of my favourite Holomonsters champions – not in the passenger seat of our clunky old car, watching the rain driving against the window as we head into town. The wipers don’t even work properly, so Dad has to really squint.

‘I’ve told you before to use free Wi-Fi when we’re out,’ he reminds me. ‘You’ve only got limited data, and once it’s gone, it’s gone.’

I look back down at my phone, where the duel has

come to an end. Mina is standing in the middle of the battle floor as the crowd applauds her.

One day, that will be me.

'But, Dad,' I groan, 'I need all the tips I can get if I'm gonna win today.'

'You watch those videos all the time. One more won't make a difference.'

He's got a point. If I'm not fine-tuning my own deck of cards, I'm watching the *Monster Slam* show or else studying the most famous duels on YouTube.

'Fine,' I huff, stuffing my phone into my pocket.

Besides, we're almost at the library. The regional tournament finale. If things go as planned, I'll be one step closer to striding out into those blazing lights.

I imagine the commentator's words: 'Making his way to the battle floor for his *debut* duel . . . *NEWT HAWKIN*!'



That's my name. Newt Hawkin. Newt, like the little frog-lizard. Hawk, like the giant murder-chicken. I'd like to think I'm more of a hawk, but most people

would probably liken me to a newt, because I'm small. Small or not, though, someday I'm going to be the world's best Holomonsters Card Master. It's a dream I've had since I was five years old, basically half my entire life, so it's pretty much *got* to happen.

But to become the world's best Holomonsters Card Master, first I need to win today. Dad pulls into the car park. My heart starts pounding.

This is it.



'You're going down, Hawkin. You're done.'

'No, you're done, Dodds. As done as . . . as . . . a slice of burnt toast!'

Burnt toast?! I'm gonna be cringing at that one later.

Still, the day has gone well so far. I've made it all the way to the final round. I can't lose now to Henry Dodds. He spits when he speaks, and there's a rumour that he can't tie shoelaces. Holomonsters has already lost most of its cool factor. The kids at school will think I'm even more lame than they already do if I lose to Dodds.

The duels have been brutal. I started off strong,

but then, in the semi-final, Olivia Santiago cornered my Swordhog (a cool hedgehog monster with swords instead of spikes) with her Settroller (a metal badger with a steamroller between its front paws) and for a moment I started sweating. But then I used my trusty Terrain Hammer artefact card to wipe the battle slate clean, and clawed my way back into the game.

See, that's what separates the Card Masters from the amateurs. A true champion not only knows their own deck inside out, but their opponent's too. They study their rivals' cards, learn their trademark strategies, and plan accordingly.

I knew that Olivia favours hard-hitting monsters, and that I might need a few spell and artefact cards that could turn the tables if I found myself in a sticky situation. Now Olivia is sitting by the refreshments table with her mum, nursing a dry flapjack and a bruised ego. *Sayonara*, Olivia Santiago.

So here I am in the final. If I win, I'll get a nice little trophy and a write-up in the local paper. It's not much, but maybe somebody will upload our match to YouTube and a Holomonsters scout will see it. I

imagine the headlines: *Regional winner catapulted to superstardom*.

An invite to this year's Holomonsters Youth Development Squad summer camp would be nice. And by nice, I mean *incredible*. I imagine myself shaking hands with Lark Atlas, the longest-reigning Holomonsters champion. He's hung up his summoner now and is instead the Holomonsters Director, overseeing the YDS and inviting young players to train before they turn professional. That's where the serious cash is – sponsorships from big brands as well as tournament prize money.

Yeah, an invitation to the YDS would get those kids at school off my back. They all poke fun at me because I'm so into Holomonsters, even though *everybody* was playing it a few years ago. Now the obsession has faded. The game's still got an army of hardcore fans, but to everybody else it's yesterday's trend – something they say I should have grown out of by now. Well, they can't keep saying that if I end up a Card Master, can they?

'Gentlemen, shuffle your decks and draw your hands,' says the referee.

I take my deck, sixty cards painstakingly selected after years of tweaking and experimenting, and draw the seven cards that will make up my hand for this match.

Drillhawk. Not bad . . .

Sawshark. Pretty good . . .

Some useful spell cards: Lingering Fog, Sleep Stunner and Blinding Light . . .

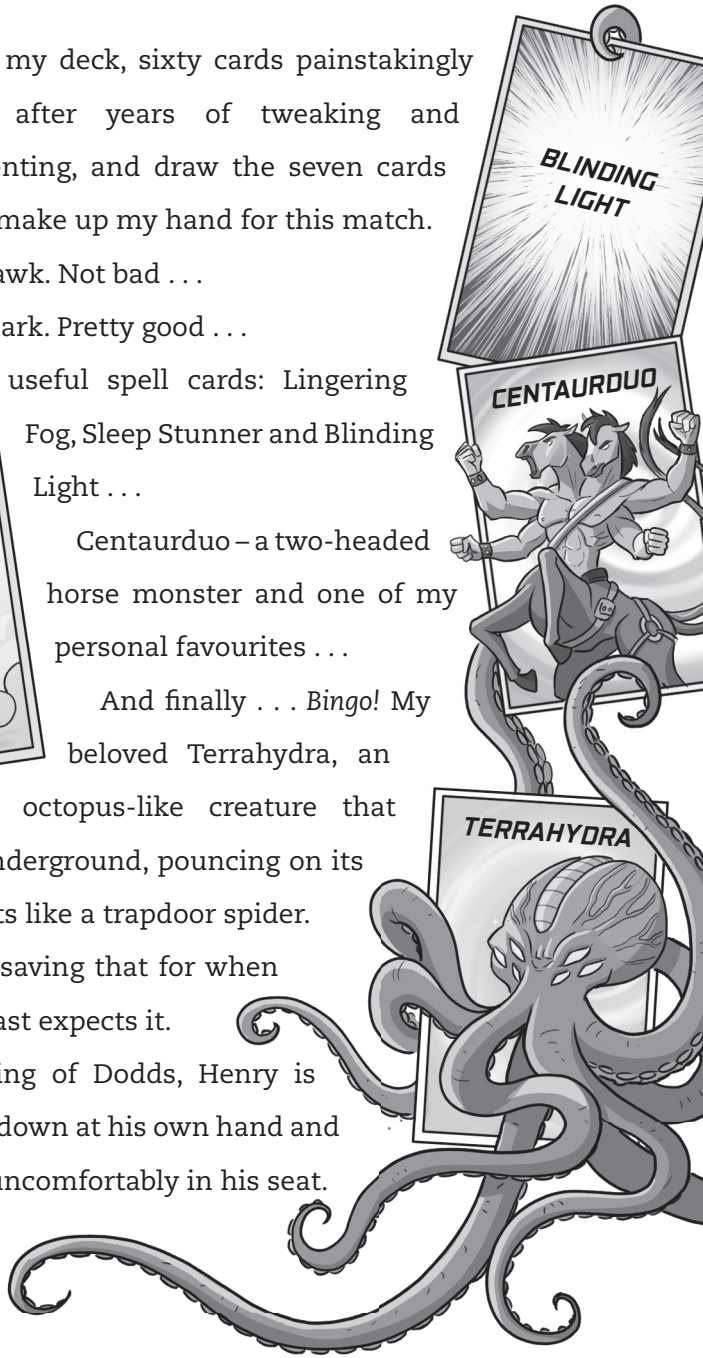


Centaurduo – a two-headed horse monster and one of my personal favourites . . .

And finally . . . *Bingo!* My beloved Terrahydra, an octopus-like creature that dwells underground, pouncing on its opponents like a trapdoor spider.

I'll be saving that for when Dodds least expects it.

Speaking of Dodds, Henry is glancing down at his own hand and shifting uncomfortably in his seat.



He doesn't look happy. He could be bluffing, but I refuse to believe that somebody who still has to wear plimsolls to school has mastered the art of deceit.

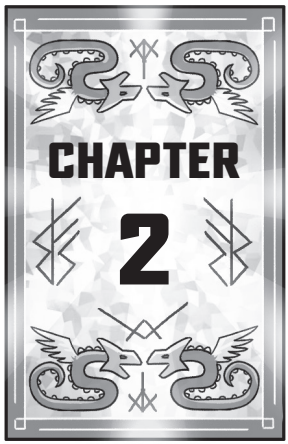
The room has fallen silent. I glance over the crowd, spotting Dad clutching the flask of tea he brought from home because we can't afford to buy snacks at the tournament. The room is full of fans of every age, background and ability. Dozens of people coming together, eyes wide with anticipation.

Holomonsters may have fallen in popularity, but this is what the game is supposed to do: bring people together. That's what Silas Davey, its creator, imagined when he launched the world's first-ever holographic trading card game. He even made sure the game's slogan was stamped on to the back of every card: *Light Up Your Living Room*. That's what this game is all about. Bringing adventure and magic into everyday places – living rooms, libraries and playgrounds.

Dad smiles encouragingly at me. Behind him, against the wall, stands a tall figure, head dipped so I can't see their face. Nobody else seems to have noticed them.

I return my attention to my opponent, brows knitted in fierce determination.

I'm sorry, Henry Dodds, but you really are as done as burnt toast.



Sliding the first card into the summoner on your wrist never gets old. I go for Sawshark, dropping it into the slot, and it feels like typing the first word of a story I've been itching to write. Opposite me, Henry nods to the ref that he's ready. He doesn't *look* ready. Is that a bead of sweat on his forehead?

The ref raises his arm.

'For the regional championship . . .' he says. '*Summon your monsters!*'

Henry and I both press the buttons on our summoners, and the battle begins.

In a flash of light, Sawshark leaps out on to the table before me: a shark with a saw for a head, about the

size of my shoe, its body shimmering as if underwater. I grin as it does a confident corkscrew in mid-air, its stats appearing on the screen of my summoner:

SAWSHARK

Heart Power: ♥♥♥

Attack Moves:
Tail Smack (80% Accuracy, 0.5 Heart Damage)
Fatal Bite (60% Accuracy, 1 Heart Damage)
Saw Vortex (40% Accuracy, 2 Heart Damage)

The only sign that the creature in front of me is a hologram and not a real-life shark is the occasional flicker that passes over its body. I silently curse the second-hand summoner Dad gave me for Christmas a few years ago. I think he got it off eBay and the projector's a bit glitchy. I can't wait to get a new one once my career takes off.

Henry's first monster jumps out to meet my Sawshark. It's Invisilynx, a ghostly cat that lands on the table and starts prowling immediately, its silvery fur sparkling as if it's made from moonlight.

Hmm. Not bad. Three hearts, just like my Sawshark.

I won the toss for first strike, and I feel a shiver of excitement as my Sawshark's attack options appear on the screen. I tap out the words *Fatal Bite*. It'll knock off a whole heart if it hits the mark. I could have gone for Saw Vortex, but the accuracy stats are low and there's no point starting off too strong. I need to learn what sort of battle Dodds is going for first.

'I'm using Fatal Bite,' I declare, and my Sawshark leaps into action.

It lunges forward, jaws opening . . .

. . . and slides right through the spectral cat without dealing any damage at all.

The crowd gasps.

'Invisilynx dodged your attack,' announces the ref, and Henry smiles smugly.

Urgh. That's the annoying thing with ghostly monsters: high evasion stats, what with them being ghosts and all. I should have remembered that.

Now it's Henry's turn.

'Lethal Swipe!' he cries.

I wince as the cat pounces, swiping at my shark

with its claws, sending my monster spinning through the air. A whole heart disappears from my summoner screen, and I grit my teeth.

Maybe Dodds *was* bluffing after all.

After that, things go from bad to worse. Henry's Invisilynx finishes off my Sawshark in the next turn with a Phantom Blast. Sawshark disappears, having only shaved one heart off its opponent's health using a Fatal Bite that finally landed, and then I send out my Drillhawk.

I don't feel confident. Why did half the monster cards I've drawn have to be creatures that cats naturally eat? Fish and birds. I need something extra if I'm gonna put Invisilynx away.

When my turn comes, I slide a spell card into my summoner, next to Drillhawk. My monster has already lost one of its four hearts, and if my spell doesn't find its target, I'm a goner.

'I'm going to use Sleep Stunner,' I say, and there's no hiding the wobble in my voice.

A swirly purple mist leaches out of my summoner, heading directly for the Invisilynx. Within seconds,

its feline form is swaying as it breathes in the sleepy spores.

I feel a gush of relief. It's working!

'Invisilynx has fallen asleep,' confirms the ref.

That means Henry misses a turn and I take the chance to finish off Invisilynx. Henry sends out Sabreape, a primate monster with a pair of long, sharp tusks. It makes quick work of my Drillhawk, knocking off three hearts with a killer combo of a Dazzling Uppercut attack and an Amplifier spell card. My poor bird didn't stand a chance.

I pick Centaurduo next. It's got four thick human arms and four horse legs, rippling with muscle, and it finishes off Henry's Sabreape with a Jupiter Kick.

We're down to two monsters each. But then Henry chooses his next cards: Fire-Bellied Imp, and an Iron Cage artefact. I'm not worried about the monster – centaurs eat imps for breakfast – but the Iron Cage spells trouble. Iron trumps magic, and if Henry uses that on my Centaurduo, I won't be able to use any magical attacks. I'll be useless for a whole turn.

And use it he does, locking my Centaurduo

inside a gnarly metal cage. The centaur flickers as it hammers against the bars, as if its distress is causing my summoner to glitch. I feel kinda bad for it, but of course the illusion isn't real.

Henry defeats my centaur, and I'm down to my final monster.

The crowd has fallen silent. I'd almost forgotten they were there. I imagine Dad clutching his flask so tight it crumples underneath his fingers.

'Terrahydra,' I say, and every mouth in the room drops open.

Terrahydra is my strongest and rarest card. Six whole hearts, with a signature attack capable of knocking three off its opponent: the dreaded Trapdoor Takedown. It looks like a brown octopus, with inky-black spider eyes and eight rock-crushing tentacles. I've seen it on *Monster Slam* a few times, being used by the Card Masters, and in full scale on the battle floor it's downright intimidating, about the size of a big cat. Amateur projections are bite-sized, of course, but it's still pretty scary.

Henry swallows.



'Uh-oh,' he says.

I grin as I punch my attack into my summoner. His Imp only has one and a half hearts left, so I finish it off with a weaker move: Tentacle Crush. Henry stares down at his remaining cards. He's on his very last monster.

'I-I'm sending out my Clavalam,' he says, slotting his final beast into his summoner. The Clavalam jumps out on to the table, a giant red-shelled monster that looks like it inhabits volcanic caves rather than the ocean floor. Capable of belching out fatal lava spouts, it's a respectable beast – but it won't stand a chance against my Terrahydra.

I'm quivering with excitement. Victory is mine for the taking. All I have to do is . . .



'Trapdoor Takedown,' I say simply.

Terrahydra jumps into the air and seemingly burrows into the wood of the table. The projection gives the illusion of earth churning as Terrahydra swims beneath the surface, and then blasts into the open through a trapdoor, wrapping its tentacles around an unsuspecting Clavalam before dragging it under.



The whole room holds its breath.

Henry's summoner glows red as Clavalam's hearts all vanish. He looks up at me, aghast.

'I thought I had you,' he groans.

'Well, you didn't,' I reply, as the referee steps forward to take my hand. I glance out over the crowd. Dad has barged his way to the front, his fists punching furiously at the air as though I've just won us a million pounds.

He looks so *proud*.

Beyond him, I see a flicker of black as the figure

I noticed earlier whisks from the room, before my attention is brought back to the present.

'Ladies and gentlemen, I present the winner of this year's Holomonsters regional tournament . . . *Newt Hawkin*!'



I did it.

I mean, I knew I would. This has always been my destiny. For a moment it was touch and go, but here I am, clutching my plastic trophy, emerging into the town square, where the sun has miraculously appeared to mark my victory.

'So where are we celebrating?' I ask, spinning in a circle as it warms my cheeks.

Just ahead of me, Dad stops short, his shoulders suddenly tense.

'Pardon?' he says.

'Where are we going?' I repeat. 'There's that new

burger place down the road, or . . . or . . . ooh, how about sushi?'

Dad turns to me, his face tight. 'Newt, you don't even like sushi.'

'All the Card Masters eat sushi. Can we get sushi? Please, Dad?'

'Newt, I . . .'

He shuffles uncomfortably from foot to foot.

'What is it? It's fine if you've already booked somewhere else.'

'I haven't booked anywhere, Newt.'

I blink. 'Oh. OK. Well, then, let's go find –'

'I haven't booked anywhere because we're not *going* anywhere, Newt. I'm sorry. I just can't afford it.'

I shouldn't be surprised, really. Dad works hard but money's been tough since Mum left.

Thinking about her still makes my heart tighten. I thought we were happy. It didn't seem like there was anything *wrong*. Mum worked as a professor at the university, teaching archaeology. She was fascinated by historical cultures, venturing off on field trips to dig sites. She dragged me and Dad along a few times,

in our wellies and waterproofs, planting dirt-specked kisses on Dad's cheek whenever he complained.

She even took an interest in Holomonsters. It was quite random, really, because she was always more interested in ancient technologies than modern ones. But one day she came home after a field trip and started asking me all these questions about the game. From that moment on, she was almost as obsessed as I was, shepherding me to Holomonsters clubs at the weekend and giving me extra pocket money for cards.

That's the amazing thing about Holomonsters. It brings people together. *Anybody* can play it, no matter their age or ability. Mum and I spent hours watching *Monster Slam* together over buckets of popcorn, cheering on our favourite Card Master, Mina Nightingale. Then one day, she was just . . . gone, leaving nothing behind except a house full of memories and a letter saying that she was sorry.

It's been just me and Dad ever since.

Dad tries not to show it, but I can tell he's broken inside. Her leaving just didn't fit with the happy family story he'd thought we were living in. We had to pack

up our old house in the smart part of town and move to something much smaller. He's tried to make it as nice as he can, planted giant daisies – Mum's favourite flower – in the back garden, but it's still nowhere near as good.

Even now, a year later, I still can't shake the feeling that something must have happened to make her leave like that. I just don't know what that thing could have been.

Anyway, everything Dad does, he does for me. I know he hates his job, but he keeps going anyway.

It still stings when he tells me we don't have enough money to go for even one celebratory meal, though.

'There's pizza in the freezer,' he says sheepishly. 'I know it's not much, but I thought we could watch a film. Make a blanket fort in the living room.'

He's on about the £1 pizzas he buys from Iceland. The disappointment must be stamped plainly on my face, because Dad looks guilty.

'I'm sorry, Newt,' says Dad.

I swallow. 'Don't be silly! That sounds great. Sushi tastes horrible anyway.'

Dad puts his hand on my shoulder as we cross the road to the car park.

'I'm proud of you,' he says. 'I knew you could do it.'

'Thanks, Dad.'

As we climb back into the car, I vow that something needs to change. I'm going to become a Card Master and be rich and famous. But I'm not just going to do it for me. I'm going to do it for Dad. For *us*.