

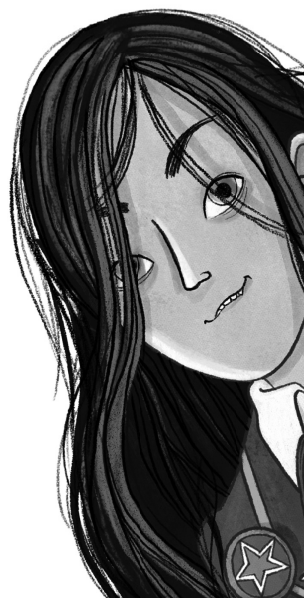
# SCHOOL *of* DOOM

BE THE WORST.

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*For my husband, Si*  
*And my boys, Dion and Logan*



IN WHICH THE  
POST FLIES

**A**t six months old, Eddie Harp had a full set of teeth and could walk without help.

At a year, she could throw the postman over the fence, and fall off the roof without breaking a single bone. And she ate anything she could get her hands on.

Chicken bones, cat litter, the bath plug, kitchen utensils, shoes . . .

Nothing was safe.

When she was two, she drank a tin of bright-red

paint, turning a streak of her hair the same colour, permanently.

When she was four, she ate a wheelie bin.

But by the age of five – when it was time for Eddie to start school – her aunts had taught her to eat like a human. She enjoyed cheeseburgers and chips with half a bottle of ketchup, and a gooey chocolate cake for afters if she'd been good. Only occasionally, if she was very hungry or very anxious, did she forget herself and eat the bowl.

And with each passing year, Eddie learnt to hide her non-human behaviour a little better.

But fitting into the human realm was easier said than done – and it all came to a crunch on her twelfth birthday . . .

Eddie sat at the kitchen table that day after school, thinking how dreadful it had been. The anger had subsided, and now, she just felt sad.

‘Out with it, then. What happened today – the thing that wasn't your fault?’ said Aunt Hettie. She rubbed her face and Eddie noticed how tired she

looked, her wild hair stuck up on one side, her dark eyes red-rimmed. As usual, her socks were odd.

‘It *wasn’t* my fault and I swear I didn’t—’

‘We guessed that part, Ed, but what *actually* happened?’ said Aunt Roo, narrowing her eyes.

Eddie glanced from one serious face to the other. ‘I overheard two girls talking about a secret tuck shop in the basement. But when I went down they laughed at me and told me to go away. They called me names.’

‘What the blazes did you do this time?’ asked Hettie with a hand on her forehead.

‘What *didn’t* she do might be easier to answer,’ said Roo.

Rather menacingly, Eddie said, ‘I didn’t go away.’

‘But did you *accidentally* break anythin’, like . . . someone’s leg, for instance?’ asked Hettie.

Eddie blew her bright-red streak of hair from her eyes. ‘No! Emma’s leg got broke coz the wall just . . . fell down. Then the water pipe burst, and Judith screamed she could smell gas and made everyone panic – and I swear on Marilyn that

everything happened by itself.

Marilyn, the fluffy white Persian cat sitting on the breadboard, looked affronted.

Kona, the one-eyed black-and-white Persian cat, looked smug.

‘It was like *something else* was down there, smashing the place up on purpose . . .’ Eddie groaned in frustration. ‘Oh, what’s the point trying to explain.’

‘What do you mean, *something else*?’ asked Roo.

‘It was like . . . an invisible weirdness.’

Her aunts shared a worried look.

‘I don’t think I’ll ever fit in, will I?’ said Eddie.

‘Sometimes it’s best to stand out,’ said Hettie, encouragingly.

‘Not if everyone laughs at you and thinks you’re weird.’

‘We’re all weird in this family,’ said Roo. ‘But you were doing so well, love . . .’

‘I know. I know! I don’t mean to mess up.’

‘Is somethin’ worrying you?’ said Hettie as she plated up the roast dinner.

Eddie stared at her one birthday card on the worktop (which was from her aunts). ‘I don’t have any friends . . . everyone’s scared of me. They think I’m loud and clumsy with weird hair and no mum or dad.’ She glared at her plate. ‘I’m not hungry.’

‘Just try a bit,’ said Hettie. ‘It’s your birthday tea.’

After two roast dinners and three helpings of sticky toffee pudding and custard, Eddie changed into her comfiest blue cat pyjamas and snuggled under a blanket on the sofa with the two cats. She and her aunts watched *The Fellowship of the Ring* for the millionth time, and when it ended it was almost midnight. As Eddie drank the last of her birthday hot chocolate before bed, Hettie turned the telly down and leant forward.

‘Roo, can you ’ear that?’ she said, ears twitching.

All three of them strained to listen, and Eddie thought she could hear a gentle whirring sound.

Her aunts shared a dark look, but Eddie grinned and jumped up from the sofa, scattering the cats.

‘It’s the Flybs?’ she cried, running to the



window to look.

‘But we ’aven’t ’ad any Outer Realms delivery for months,’ groaned Hettie.

Eddie peered out and squealed with delight. The Flybs – or the Fly by Nighters, to use their full name – deliver Outer Realms mail to folks in the Earth Realm like Eddie and her aunts (but not to the demon realm of Haldritch, who use deliver bats).

Sure enough, a long, elegant bicycle with no spokes and a glittering silver parcel box on the back was outside their front door. The letterbox clanged and a moment later the flycycle rose into the air, glossy black wings unfurling from under the seat, before its invisible rider took off at lightning speed.

With a thrill of excitement, Eddie found a single letter with her name on it lying on the mat by the door.

‘A birthday card! I wonder who it’s from?’

Eddie noticed her aunts share another uneasy look as she sniffed the strange envelope. It smelt of

coffee and charcoal. The thick paper was petrol blue with a shimmer, and the jagged writing was the same bright green as the wax seal. In the top left corner was a silver stamp: a black ship with navy sails. It wasn't a birthday card, Eddie suddenly realized.

'You'll need these, love,' sighed Roo, handing her an old pair of blue spectacles.

'You can't read Outer Realms mail without 'em, lass,' said Hettie. 'We ain't told you till now coz it's never been for you and, well, you've got no respect for privacy.'

With one last frown at everyone but Kona – who also had no respect for privacy – Eddie put on the offensive spectacles and read the letter.

*Dear Edifina Harp,*

*It has come to the attention of the Outer Realms Education Bureau that the ordinary life of an earth-realmers is simply not suited to you.*

*Therefore, you are summoned to attend the School of Doom in the seventh hidden realm of Gilden.*

You are to report to your local gateway to the Outer Realms - Speke Hall in Liverpool - at midnight on 13 February and follow the included instructions.

Beastly regards,  
Mertha Marbles  
Outer Realms Elder