

From the author of **HOW TO TRAIN YOUR DRAGON**
CRESSIDA COWELL



Which Way
Round
the
GALAXY

What if there was a
child who could draw
maps that showed the
crossing points between
the worlds?



This book is dedicated to
the FACCINI family
Emily, Ben, Francesco, Delfina
and Bay

HODDER CHILDREN'S BOOKS

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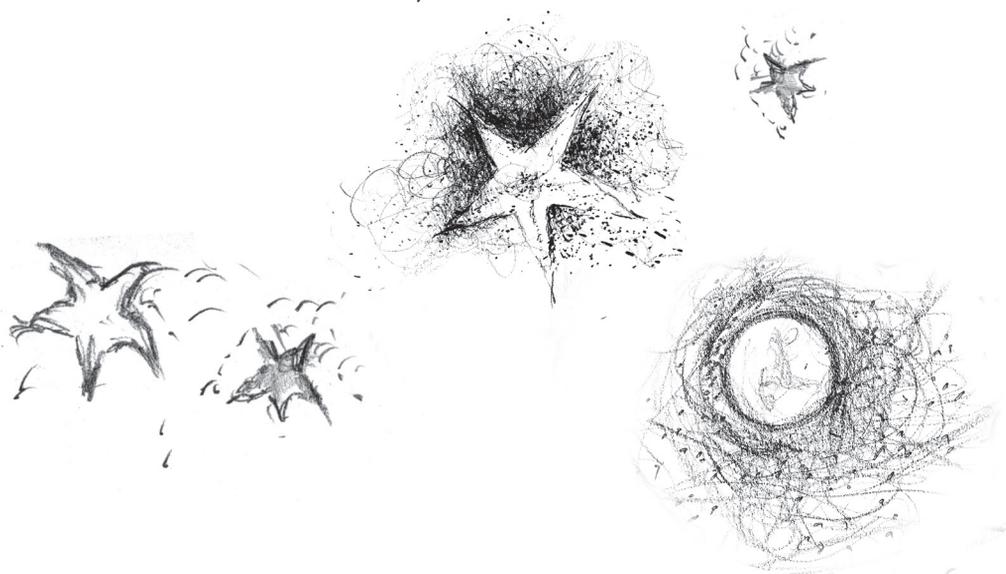
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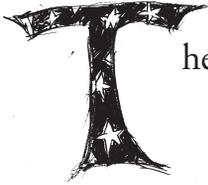
written and illustrated by
CRESSIDA COWELL



UNIVERSAL GOVERNMENT
ALTERNATIVE ATLAS

Planet Earth

Chapter 2 There is No Magic on Planet Earth



here is no Magic on Planet Earth.

Or there oughtn't to be.

But apparently nobody had told that to a small creature running for its life through a particularly ordinary part of the perfectly ordinary Planet Earth countryside on a joyously peaceful warm summer's afternoon in early July.

The rest of that countryside was minding its own business. Birds were twittering from tree to tree doing their whole July thing. Rabbits were hopping about, dashing across the pretty little winding lanes and into their burrows in the hedgerows.

Across the fields there stumbled a round little hairy thing, unsteady on its feet, running as fast as it could make its short legs move, out of its mind with fear.

It was as out-of-place as it could possibly be, and definitely a creature of Magic, because it was odd

colours all-at-once, but

mostly purple, a funny mixture of owl-like and impossibly fluffy, like an



exploding kitten, clumsy and falling over, and limping because it was dragging behind itself in the mud one leg, encumbered by a luminous manacle.

Across the fields it scrambled, letting out the odd squeak, like the hiss-squeal of a kettle. Down the hill, through the hedgerows . . .

The barking of dogs, the clink of keys, getting closer, closer.

Four gigantic Alsatians, leaping through the field behind.

Five large humans, swearing, calling, begging for the unknown creature to come back or it would regret it.

The creature let out a low moan and dived into the rows of wheat to hide.

Above in the sky, came the whine of a drone.
ZOOOOOOOOOOOM!

At the sound of the drone the little scrambling creature gave a particularly high squeak of alarm, which had the unfortunate effect of allowing the drones to pinpoint it more exactly, and they skimmed lower over the wheat, shooting tranquilliser darts into the crops.



A pause, and then the creature shot out of the cover of the wheat, on, on, poor little thing, balancing on the crumbling dry mud of the edge of the field, falling over, picking itself up again. It wasn't clear where it was going, and it might have been safer in the wheat. But the dogs would catch up wherever it went.

Behind the dogs, the humans on foot were gaining.

The drone spun around.

The little creature was running out of strength.

Panting, whispering soft encouragements and endearments to itself in agitated 'peeping' noises, it staggered on a bit more, but this time it could not dodge the zooming drone.

PEOW! PEOW! PEOW!

Shots rang out, raining around the little creature, and one dart caught it on its shoulder.

The creature gave a terrible scream of alarm.

'They've got it! Over here!' cried a joyful human voice, the excitable barking of the dogs going wild now, straining on their leashes as the humans closed in, plunging through the wheat towards the creature that was now staggering in drunken circles on the edge of the field, quivering and in pain.

One of the humans, a woman restraining her snapping, yelping dog with one gloved hand, grabbed the creature by its leg.

'GOT IT!' she cried.

The other humans arrived, their snarling dogs frantic with excitement.

'We got it, Mr Spink!' said the woman again.

Mr Spink stepped forward. He was the largest of the humans, immaculately but rather inappropriately dressed for the countryside, in a dark suit and tie.

Mr Spink was rather
inappropriately
dressed for the countryside.



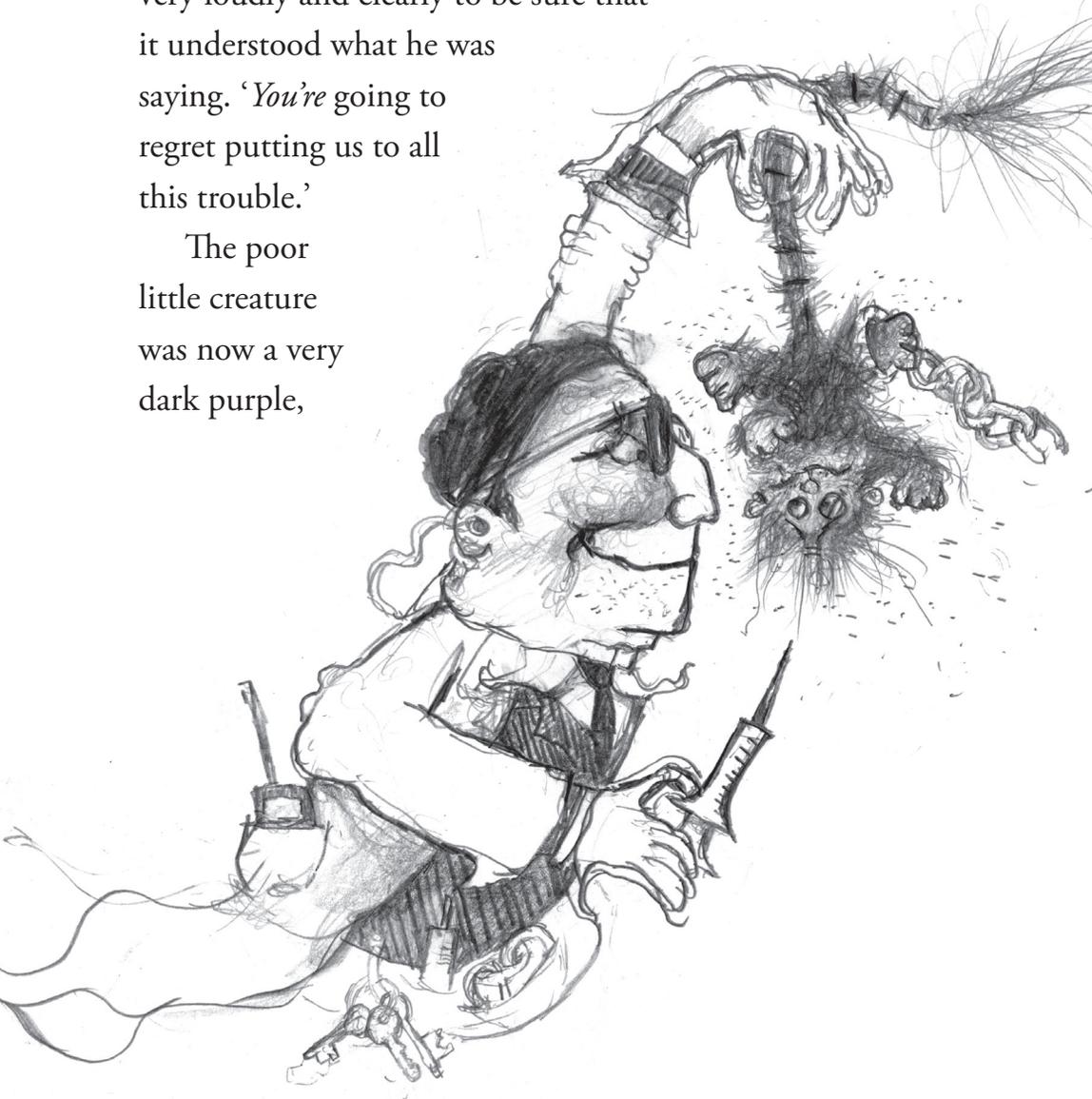
His eyes lit up with greed and excitement.

Oho. He poked the Magic Creature with one finger.

‘Lucky for *you*, Ms Right,’ snarled Mr Spink. ‘If we hadn’t caught it, I would have held you entirely responsible for its escape.’

‘And as for you,’ said Mr Spink to the Magic Creature, very loudly and clearly to be sure that it understood what he was saying. ‘*You’re* going to regret putting us to all this trouble.’

The poor little creature was now a very dark purple,

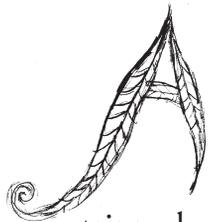


and passing out from the sleeping drug in the dart, but when it saw Mr Spink, and the look on his face, and heard these words, there was an expression in its slowly closing eyes of absolute despair.

One of the other humans moved forward with a small cage in his hand to put the creature into.



Chapter 3 Various Impossible Things Happen Very Quickly Indeed



And then, various impossible things happened very quickly indeed.

The man with the small cage in his hand tripped and fell flat on his face, inexplicably putting his own head into the cage along the way.

Startling one of the other humans, who momentarily lost his grip on the lead holding his snarling, barking, leaping dog.

Who bounded forward, dragging its human behind him, opened its mouth to bite the little Magic Creature, but instead clamped its jaws on the gloved hand of Mr Spink, who was holding it.

Mr Spink let out a small yell, stepped backward, put his foot on the drone behind him, crushing it to pieces, and dropped the Magic Creature, who bounced, once, twice, and was knocked unconscious for a second as it hit the ground for a third time.

Seconds later, the little creature shook itself awake again, rolled into a ball and then bounced down, down the field, which was on a slope, like an extra-fluffy hedgehog in a race.

‘After it!!!’ screamed Mr Spink.

All four of the dogs’ leads had become entangled, so the little Magical-Creature-in-a-ball had a good head start.

The dogs raced after the tumbling creature . . .

. . . But by the time they caught up with it, it had already rolled under the hedge at the bottom of the field, and out the other side into the dust and dirt of the lane behind, where it spun in three neat circles before coming to a stop, spreadeagled like a star, floppy as a slightly plump and squashy glove that somebody had just trodden on.



The dogs were too big to get under the hedge, but they wasted a couple of minutes sniffing wildly at the leaves, barking ferociously and trying to get through.

‘Go round to the gate!’ yelled Mr Spink, pelting down that field as fast as he could.

The dogs worked out they couldn’t get through the hedge and ran around to the gate at the edge of the field.

It would take them only a few extra minutes to reach the gate, vault it and get out into the lane to pick up the little creature, still dead to the world.

But at that second . . .

. . . round the corner . . .

Came four children on bicycles. Two girls, two boys.

This doesn’t seem like a good moment for introductions, what with all that’s going on and everything, and the urgency of the moment, but these children are, in fact, the heroes of this story, so I’ll tell you all about them in the next chapter, when I’ve got a bit more time.

The children were arguing, which is how I know it was *them*. The O’Hero-Smith children, I mean.

I’ve met these little humans before and they are always arguing.

They seemed to be searching for something. They were looking high in the hedgerows, and down in the ditches, as the older girl called, ‘Where are yo-oo?’

The older boy said crossly, ‘Why have you been

keeping a cat in secret, Izzabird? No reasonable person would do that! When did you say it went missing?’

‘This morning,’ said the older girl.

‘It will be so frightened,’ worried the younger girl.

And this was the moment that the older boy leading them came to a screeching halt in front of the Magic Creature, unconscious on the ground.

‘There it is!’ cried the older girl, pulling up eagerly beside him.

The four children leapt off their bikes. The older boy took one look at the creature lying spreadeagled in front of them and said exasperatedly, ‘This is not a cat, Izzabird.’

‘Maybe it’s not completely a cat,’ admitted the older girl.

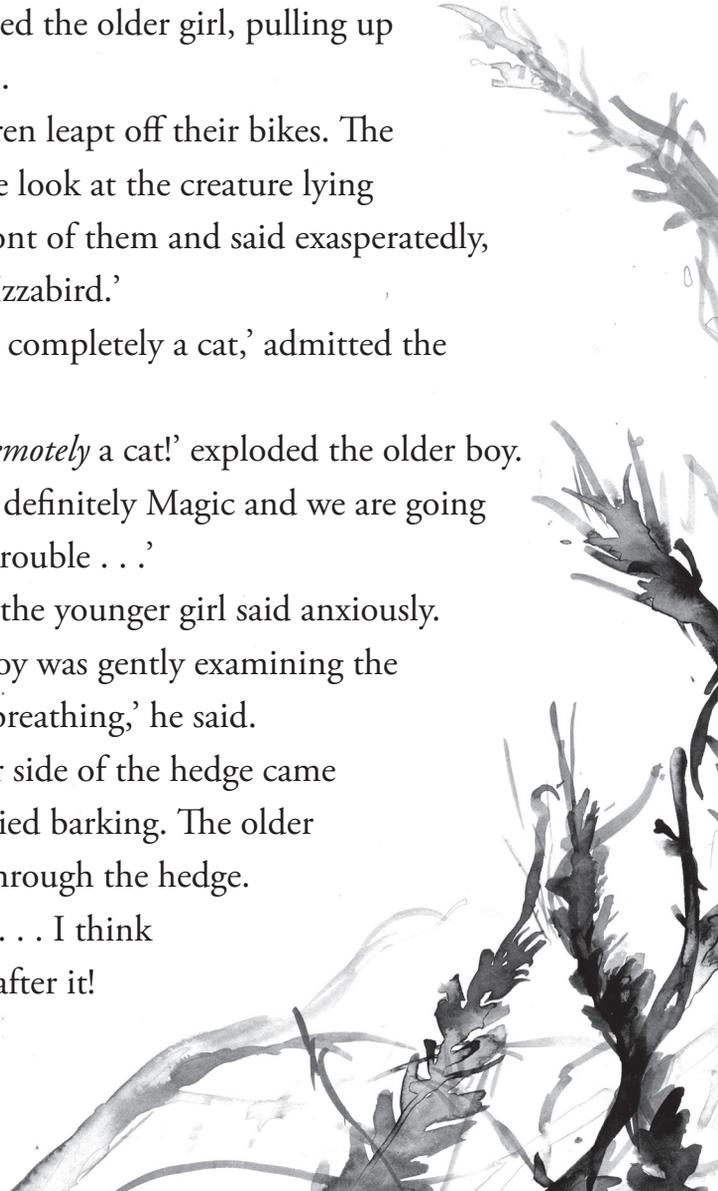
‘It’s not even *remotely* a cat!’ exploded the older boy. ‘Those colours are definitely Magic and we are going to be in so much trouble . . .’

‘Is it all right?’ the younger girl said anxiously.

The younger boy was gently examining the creature. ‘It’s still breathing,’ he said.

From the other side of the hedge came the sound of frenzied barking. The older girl tried to peer through the hedge.

‘Oh my goodness . . . I think there’s some dogs after it!’



Maybe they think it's a fox or something?'

The barking was getting even more savage.

The children didn't hesitate.

The older boy scooped up the creature and put it carefully into the younger girl's arms, because she was wonderful with animals.

The barking was getting closer, closer. The wheel of the younger girl's bicycle had mysteriously fallen off, so the younger girl got on the back of the younger boy's bike, and the children turned their bikes around, pedalling desperately in the other direction.



So when the four humans and Mr Spink and the four Alsatians vaulted the gate into the lane they saw . . . no Magic Creature.

And no children, thank the stars.

They had disappeared round the corner in the nick of time. There was nothing in the lane, just a small damp patch where the little fluffy thing had lain.

‘Where’s it gone?’ shrieked Mr Spink, as the madly barking Alsatians dragged the humans towards it.





Mr Spink
stabbed the
small damp patch
three times with his
tranquilliser apparatus just in
case the thing had turned invisible,
but no, there was nothing there, he just
blunted the needle slightly.

The dogs were going out of control, sniffing
around the patch and then whining, crying, trying to
drag the humans towards the corner.

Mr Spink's eyes narrowed.

'Something's taken it,' whispered Mr Spink. 'LET
THE DOGS OFF!' he yelled.

ROARRR...!

The humans let the dogs off their leads and four
leaping, growling Alsatians bounded after the bicycle
tracks, followed by Mr Spink and his team.

Round the corner, the children could hear shouts and
running boots on the lane.

The children were already exhausted. Hot in the face,
knees scratched, desperate. Four bounding Alsatians now



appeared around the corner, baring their teeth.

The lead dog quickly caught up with the younger children's bicycle, weighed down as it was by the two people riding it.

'Mabel!' cried the older boy, looking over his shoulder in horror.

As the dogs closed in, the one in front gave a great le-e-eap forward, mouth open . . .

. . . and the larger boy reached for something hanging from his belt, hidden underneath his T-shirt. With one hand he unhitched a small garden spray bottle, and turned round and sprayed the younger children's bicycle.

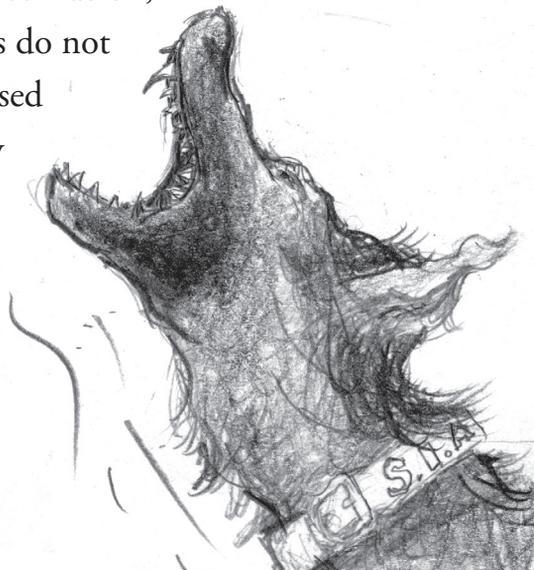
The bicycle gave a last wild wobble, the tyres screeched on the road . . .

And the bicycle launched up, up into the air.

The older boy sprayed the bicycles belonging to himself and the older girl as well, and they followed the younger children. Low over the hedge, up, up, up.

The dogs halted, barking in confusion, leaping up after them. But dogs do not have wings, and once they realised that they could not follow, they landed down on to the ground again.

And when Mr Spink and the other humans arrived



at where the dogs were barking, they gazed with open mouths at the four children disappearing low over the next field, dissolving into the heat haze of the summer afternoon, still pedalling, such an unexpected sight that it was as if they were a mirage in a desert.

Low over the field, pedalling steadily over the ears of the corn as if it were a road on solid ground, the younger children's bicycle wobbling from side to side, so they were in imminent danger of falling off. Into the trees beyond. And out of sight.

The humans gazed after them, astonished. For children on flying bicycles are not supposed to happen on Planet Earth.

'Impossible,' breathed Mr Spink.

'Impossible,' agreed Ms Right, shaking her head in awe. This *job*. You got to see some incredible things in this job.

Mr Spink had his tranquilliser apparatus in his hand. In a moment of annoyance, he pressed it into the arm of the human next to him, who fell to the ground, quivering.

That seemed to make Mr Spink feel better. He wiped his sweaty hands on a handkerchief he pulled out of his top pocket.

Mr Spink took off his sunglasses and looked around him. The perfectly gorgeous Planet Earth countryside all about him seemed to offend him in some way, as if he had an

allergy to joyful little blue-tits and frothy meadow parsley.

‘Where are we?’ said Mr Spink. ‘Remind me. What a dump.’

One of the humans checked on his phone.

‘It seems to be called . . . Which Way Corner, Soggy-Bottom-Marsh-Place.’

‘Interesting,’ said Mr Spink, who worked for the government on Planet Earth. On second thoughts, maybe this mistake could turn out to be leading him to a very big capture indeed. And a promotion that Mr Spink felt he richly deserved. ‘Ve-ry interesting.’

‘OK. Send the drones after them! I want this whole area put under covert observation while we find out exactly what is going on round here,’ said Mr Spink.

Who were these children, where did they live, why were they on flying bicycles and what did they have to do with this Magical Creature? And shouldn’t they be brought in for interrogation and investigation and testing and rigorous scientific experimentation, I mean, silly me, examination? In the national interest, of course.

Mr Spink was going to make sure that happened.

Because there is no Magic on Planet Earth.

Or there oughtn’t to be.

