

Chapter Two: The Source of the Sneeze

Pip rolled over and onto his knees in one swift movement.

'Who's there . . . ' he whispered, then the words died away in his mouth. He was staring into the corner of the tower where someone had carved a beautifully life-like pattern of leaves and flowers and fruit onto the stone of the wall. And there, from amongst the leaves, staring back at him, was . . .

. . . a gargoyle. A small gargoyle, made of stone, in the shape of a dragon, with claws and wings and a long tail and big eyes. The workmanship was so good that Pip could almost swear he saw the dragon's sides moving in and out as it breathed. He could almost swear he saw those big eyes blink.

Don't be stupid! he told himself.

And then it sneezed again.

'Tickly nose,' it said, as if that explained everything.

Something in Pip's brain registered the fact that the dragon's voice sounded . . . female.

'Who are you?!' he gasped.

The little gargoyle drew herself up to her full height – about 15 centimetres. 'My name is Perfect,' she said.

'Perfect Parting Gift.'

'Sorry?' said Pip.

'That's what my maker called me. That's his mark, there.' She pointed at a 'V' carved amongst the stone leaves on the wall. 'I remember the day he finished – he smiled at me and stroked my head and gave me my name. "You're Perfect," he said. "My Perfect Parting Gift." And then . . . I never saw him again.'

A tear trickled down her snout and she licked it away

with a long tongue.

‘I’ve just got one name,’ said Pip humbly. ‘The Brothers took me in when I was a baby and they called me Pip, because I was as small as a pip, you see.’ His voice got lower. ‘I don’t remember my parents at all.’

The gargoyle looked puzzled.

‘Parents?’ she said. ‘What’s that? Is it like your maker?’

‘Er . . . I guess. Yes. Pretty much.’ Pip rubbed his nose. ‘They died. That was a bad year for Fen fever, Brother Gilbert told me.’

There was a sad little pause between the two, but curiosity was stronger.

‘I’ve been with the Brothers - but what have you been doing all these years?’ asked Pip.

‘Well,’ said the dragon, ‘I’ve been staring, mostly. Have you noticed what a fabulous view you get from up here? And then, sometimes, I catch flies. And I sleep. But no, really, it’s been pretty much all staring.’

Pip was appalled. ‘Staring?! For years?!?’

Perfect looked surprised. ‘I’m a gargoyle,’ she said. ‘It’s what we do.’

Pip thought about this for a moment. ‘But – how do you know about what gargoyles do?’ he asked. ‘Did you ever meet one? Another one, I mean?’

The dragon shrugged a small stony shoulder. ‘I don’t know. I just do. Does it matter?’

Pip suddenly grinned. ‘No,’ he said. ‘It doesn’t matter at all!’

Perfect grinned back. ‘Come to think of it, though,’ she added shyly, ‘it has been a bit lonely . . . ‘

She was interrupted by a clumping noise from down on the ground.

‘It’s Brother Paul,’ said Pip anxiously. ‘He’s coming back for me. We were working on the roof before – I’ll have to go. I don’t think—’

There was a pause as the climbing sounds came closer. The dragon and the boy looked at each other, wide-eyed.

‘Don’t go!’

‘Come with me!’ Pip and Perfect said both at once.

‘But I’m scared!’ whispered Perfect.

‘Don’t worry - I’ll keep you safe!’ Pip whispered back.

‘Here, hide inside my hood.’

‘Coast is clear, boy!’ It was Brother Paul, calling from the top of the ladder. ‘Come down now. Hurry – it’s the Abbot asking for you now!’

‘Coming, Brother.’ Pip scooped Perfect up – she was surprisingly light, and warm to the touch – and let her pour over his shoulder and down into his hood. ‘Coming!’