

Bully or Bestie

By C. Jade Wyton

Dragged out of the orphanage by Edmund, Maggie finds herself exploring an abandoned house full of interesting bugs.

Contains descriptions of bullying, vomiting, bugs/spiders, and mentions of abuse. Reader discretion advised.

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One might have thought that stopping someone from drowning may have earned them some sort of respect from the person whose life they'd saved. Maggie thought so, at least.

She'd thought that maybe, after pulling Edmund from the lake and bringing him back to life (revivify magic, the doctor had confirmed; Edmund had actually *died!*) that he might have been a little bit kinder to her.... But Edmund was not that sort of boy.

Despite the five stitches in his head and the cocktail of antibiotics he had to take three times a day to ward off infection, his attitude towards Maggie had barely changed and he still went out of his way to track her down and bully her.

Yesterday, he'd come up to her from behind and pulled her tail, causing her to drop the laundry and trip on it.

The day before that he'd heard her shout herself awake after a bad dream and then, after finding out she'd wet the bed, loudly announced to all of his friends at lunch that she was still "basically a toddler!"

And the day before *that* he'd taken her in a headlock and dragged her around the orphanage, telling her she'd *never* be a hero if she couldn't even beat him in a fight!

And now, tonight, he'd caught her by the back door as she was sweeping (or, more accurately, *she'd* caught *him* trying to sneak out) and grabbed her by her wing to tug her outside before she could go and tell Fern what he was doing.

Maggie tried to put up a fight. Mostly she did. But she was tired from helping Fern do chores all day and it was hard. Struggling seemed like such an effort; it was easier to just let herself be yanked through the yard.

It was only when she realised that Edmund was heading for the back gate that she dug in her heels, firmly planting herself in the ground so that the boy stumbled and couldn't pull her any further.

'Maggie, come on!' he grumbled, giving her arm a tug and growling as she shook her head at him. 'Stop being a baby!'

'I want to go back inside, Edmund!' she told him. 'I don't want to go out of the yard! Fern'll get mad at me again!'

'Maggie—'

'You brought the tabaxi?' one of Edmund's friends asked as they peeked their head through the gate.

'Yeah I brought her!' Edmund snapped back. 'You got a problem with that?'

‘Nah, she’s a hoot!’ a different friend teased.

‘Heh, yeah, I wouldn’t be surprised if she was part owlin, too!’ said another.

‘Yeah, hahah. Anyway, hurry up! Before Fern does her rounds of the yard!’

‘Yeah, c’mon, Maggie!’

‘B-But Fern said I had to stay in the orphanage!’ Maggie told him. ‘She hit me *so much* last time I went out!’

‘Pfft, so?’ Edmund chided, yanking on her wing again. ‘She hits you softer than she hits me!’

‘Nuh-uh she doesn’t!’ Maggie leant back all her weight away from Edmund and stomped her foot. ‘After you got me in trouble last month she hit me so hard my nose bled! *That’s* how hard she hits me!’

Edmund paused at that, his grin falling slightly as his eyes darted to the end of Maggie’s snout. But then he frowned and gave her another tug towards the fence. ‘Oh, come on! That was different!’

‘No!’

‘Maggie!’

‘No, I won’t come!’

‘You *have* to come!’

‘No I don’t!’

‘Yes you *do!*’

‘No!’

‘But I want to *show you something!*’ it was Edmund who stomped his foot, this time, as he let go of Maggie’s wing and watched her tumble to the ground in a heap. ‘Haha! Loser.’

Maggie pushed herself up, frowning as big as she could to show Edmund she wasn’t happy, before what he had said clicked in her mind and she cocked her head in curiosity. ‘You want to show me something?’

‘Yeah.’

She glanced through the metal gate to peer into the thick woods beyond. ‘In the woods?’

‘Yeah!’

‘What is it?’

‘If you don’t come, you’ll never find out!’ he told her, before slipping through the gate to join his friends.

Slowly, Maggie got to her feet.

*Edmund wanted to show her something...? In the... woods? What could possibly be out in the woods?*

Should... *should* she go...? But that was misbehaving.... And she hated to misbehave....

But then, Edmund was her friend. And if she didn’t misbehave with him last time, when he went to the lake, he would have died—

‘Well?!’ Edmund’s voice called. ‘Are you coming or not?’

Maggie hesitated and then, with a quick glance back at the orphanage... slipped out the gate after the boys.

There was a quiet cheer of encouragement as she stumbled into Edmund’s side; and then a round of hooting as Edmund shoved her down onto her butt.

‘Ow, Edmund! That hurt!’

‘So? Get over it!’ he scoffed, turning away and starting into the woods. ‘And hurry up!’

Maggie frowned again, though she didn’t say anything as she scrambled to her feet and ran after the boys.

She struggled to keep up with their brisk pace and quickly felt herself growing winded. But she ignored her pounding heart in her chest as she walked as fast as her aching legs would carry her.

She was *not* used to walking so much. Especially not on such uneven ground! She felt prickles and rocks jab into her talons and squeaked and jumped every time... and every time the boys would laugh at her— One time, Edmund even threw a pebble at her before grabbing her wrist and tugging her along faster.

She had no idea how Edmund and his friends had the energy to walk so fast. Or how they had the energy to playfully grab at each other and wrestle and shout as they did. And she *certainly* had no idea how they knew where they were going; everything looked all the same, out here!

She was so, so exhausted and out of breath. She wasn’t sure she was going to make it! She’d never walked this far before in her entire life, she was sure of it.

*She couldn’t keep going!*

She had to though, she had to—

A horrible wheeze escaped her and she stumbled, her hands slamming into her knees as she doubled over and was sick on the ground.

‘Oh, sh— She okay?’

‘Whoa, you good?’

A hand met Maggie’s back, and Maggie glanced up to meet Edmund’s eyes— Looking kinder and more concerned than she’d ever seen them look before. ‘Maggie?’

She spat out the bile that stuck under her tongue, but didn’t answer as she tried, desperately, to catch her breath.

‘Come on, you *can’t* be tired already!’ one of the boys rolled their eyes. ‘It’s only been what? Five Ks?’

‘Yeah, there’s still another five to go!’ jeered another. ‘You *can’t* give up, now!’

‘*What’s a K?!*’ Maggie managed to wheeze out before flopping over entirely and gasping for air. ‘I can’t do five more of them! I can’t! I just can’t!’

‘Do you need a break?’ Edmund asked, sounding genuinely concerned as he crouched at Maggie’s side.

‘No, come on! We’ve wasted so much time already!’

‘Yeah!’ one of Edmund’s friends scoffed. ‘I didn’t even *want* to go back to that stupid house! I’m not waiting around for feather-brain to catch her breath!’

‘Yeah! Forget this,’ another boy rolled his eyes. ‘I want to go to town!’

‘Yeah, town sounds good!’

‘Yeah we can throw rocks at—’

‘I’m not *allowed* in town!’ Maggie exclaimed. ‘I can’t go to town! Fern would *kill* me!’

‘Then Edmund can take you home,’ another eye roll, and the boys all turned and started back in the opposite direction. ‘If you’re going to be a baby about it!’

‘*Guys!*’ Edmund hissed after his friends. ‘Don’t— Ugh, whatever. We don’t need you! We’ll go to the house on our *own!*’

‘We’re going to a house?’ Maggie panted, trying to swallow the dryness in her throat away.

‘Hm, yeah,’ Edmund heaved a sigh and sat beside Maggie. ‘It’s a really cool house, though.’

Maggie didn’t reply, and instead focused on her breathing.

When she was quiet Edmund let out another sigh and grabbed her wrists, forcing her up to sit. ‘Come on,’ he told her as he turned around and pet his own back. ‘I’ll carry you.’

‘You’ll— *Can* you carry me?’ she asked, hesitantly putting her hands on his shoulders. ‘I’m not too heavy?’

‘Nah, you’re not too heavy,’ Edmund said as he shifted back and scooped her up. He struggled to his feet and, for a moment, Maggie thought he might have been lying to her... but then he adjusted his grip and started through the woods, in the opposite direction his friends had left, and quickly found his pace. ‘See? I’m fine! You’re as light as a feather.’

It made Maggie giggle, as she wrapped her arms around him and rested her head on top of his.

He carried her for a long time. All the way to a worn-down old road with no lights or signs, which he then began to walk down.

Then, just as Maggie was catching her breath, there was a loud scream and she felt her wings stiffen and her fur stand on end.

‘What was *that?!*’ she squeaked, almost slipping from Edmund’s back in her surprise.

‘Relax,’ Edmund rolled his eyes as Maggie scabbled for a grip on his shoulders. ‘It’s just a fox— *Ow!* Keep your claws in, you idiot!’

Maggie was barely able to sheath her claws as another scream sounded. ‘It sounds like a woman screaming!’

‘Yeah, that’s just what foxes sound like!’ Edmund scoffed. ‘Why do you think it’s called the *Screaming Woods?*’

‘It’s called the Screaming Woods?!’ Maggie echoed, her voice breaking in fear.

‘Ugh, you’re so stupid,’ Edmund huffed, dumping her heavily on the ground. ‘Get brave, *hero!* You can’t be scared of foxes if you want to go on adventures!’

Maggie swallowed, feeling her tail slip between her legs as she rose to her feet and scratched her talons along the ground.

She knew Edmund was right, but she was still scared....

‘Anyway, come on,’ Edmund turned and waved a hand, beckoning Maggie to follow him. ‘We’re almost there!’

Maggie heaved a breath and hurried after her friend, catching up with him just as he veered down a small and obscured side-road.

It didn’t take long for them to get to the house, and Maggie gasped when she saw it. It was almost as big as the orphanage! Though it was falling apart, with no windows and a front door that was hanging dangerously off its hinge.

She was so distracted by her awe that she didn’t notice as Edmund stuck out his foot, and she tripped into the unkempt garden with a squeal as he laughed and threw another rock at her.

‘EDMUND!’ Maggie squealed as a second rock hit her in the side. ‘Edmund, why are you *like* this?!’

‘Like *what?*’ he challenged, leaping up the front steps and strutting into the house.

‘You’re such a *bully!*’ Maggie called after him. She struggled to pull herself out of the bush without losing feathers, and took a moment to pick out several prickles from her fur before giving another sigh and twitching her ear to listen to Edmund mocking her from inside.

She shook her head to herself before following him inside and, immediately, feeling her eyes go wide as he pointed to a *ginormous* spider web that sat in a corner.

‘Check out this monster!’ Edmund told her, holding out his hand to compare it with the spider that sat in the web’s centre. ‘It’s even bigger than my hand!’

‘*Whoa!*’ Maggie breathed, hurrying over to look at the creature. ‘It’s a nephila! Uh— Uh, a golden silk orb weaver! I’ve read about them! They can get so big they can eat *birds!*’

‘Cool!’ Edmund grinned. ‘I saw it last time I was here, and was hoping it hadn’t left! Cos I know you really like bugs and stuff.’

‘It’s so cool!’ Maggie breathed. ‘Did you know only the females get this big? The males are small and red. Sometimes, they’re only the size of the female’s pedipalps!’

‘No clue what that means,’ Edmund chuckled. ‘Wanna see something funny?’

‘Yeah?’ Maggie twitched an ear, though she didn’t look away from the spider.

And just as well, as the tip of a very long stick came from the corner of her vision and poked at the spider; which reared up aggressively and did a threat display that made Maggie gasp in awe.

‘I don’t wanna poke it too much,’ Edmund admitted. ‘I’m kinda scared it’ll chase me if I do.’

‘Nuh-uh, they’re harmless!’ Maggie told him. ‘I read that their bite barely even hurts!’

‘Really? But they’re *huge!*’ Edmund looked like he didn’t believe Maggie, though he gave a shrug and discarded his stick. ‘There’s another spider in the backyard that you might like.’

Maggie leapt up, her tail lashing wildly as she hurried after Edmund to a tree in the backyard.

He bent down near its roots and shifted a rock, and a very *very* large tarantula reared up at him and angrily flashed its fangs.

‘*Selenocosmia stirlingi!*’ Maggie exclaimed, her hands smacking loudly against her sides as she jumped in excitement.

‘What’s *that* mean?’

‘A barking spider!’ she clarified. ‘Cos they make a barking noise when they’re upset!’

‘Oh. I should have brought my stick!’ Edmund joked as he carefully replaced the rock beside the spider and watched it run back under. ‘That one *did* run at me before, actually. So I don’t wanna upset him.’

‘Her! That was a female,’ Maggie corrected without thinking. ‘They’re one of the Theraphosidae family, and are a type of bird-eater, though the name doesn’t really fit cos bird-eaters actually eat less birds than orb weavers do. Oh! Their lungs are kinda like gills, so they need to live places that are really humid! It’s—

It's actually *really* weird for one to be here, cos they usually live in deserts. Did you know they can survive underwater for a long time, cos the hairs on their legs trap air bubbles for them to breathe?'

Edmund just laughed, shaking his head. 'There're cockroaches in the kitchen, too,' he told her. 'You like cockroaches, right?'

Maggie nodded, rising to her feet and letting Edmund take her hand and lead her through the house.

He spent hours showing her all the bugs and nooks and crannies in the house. They moved rocks and found worms and slugs and isopods, and each time they did Maggie told Edmund about them and all the things she'd read in her books.

Eventually the pair, still tired from their long walk to the house, laid down together on in the overgrown grass in the front yard to talk and completely lost track of time. It was only when the sun began to peek through the trees in the distance that the two realised the mistake they'd made and, Edmund scooping Maggie onto his back so she wasn't left behind, hurried back to the orphanage as fast as they could.

Fern was waiting for them, pacing at the gate; though Maggie thought she saw her breathe a sigh of relief when they stumbled onto the road and froze. Though it was only a brief one before her worry turned to anger and she scolded the pair all the way to breakfast.

Maggie was very surprised when Edmund took all the blame. He'd never done that, before, for *anyone!* Not even his friends!

She decided, as she ate her eggs and rubbed the sore spot on her cheek where Fern had hit her, that it meant Edmund was her best friend.

And so, when Edmund pushed her to the floor and stole her bacon from her plate, she simply laughed it off and took his toast in turn.

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