

The Map

THE MAP

*This story is for Katrina,  
who finds the best adventures.*

\*\*\* The Morning \*\*\*

I thought, perhaps, that my employer had forgotten. Hoped, I should say. Jackaby's enthusiasm, when it finds a direction, can be rather unsettling—and I would have given anything to see the day pass entirely unmarked. As I stepped down the spiral staircase to the now familiar breakfast smells of burnt toast, burnt bacon, and burnt hair, I allowed myself to imagine that I might get my wish after all.

Jackaby didn't seem to notice as I entered the room. He darted about in his usual manner, peeking into jars and sniffing their contents before adding them to a lumpy batter that might have been distantly related to pancakes. I would have felt better about Jackaby's experimental cooking if his kitchen did not share the same space as his laboratory, which was stocked with an ample supply of acids, explosives, and dried or pickled things that had once been animals whose names I can't pronounce.

I took a seat at the table across from my employer. "Morning, sir."

"Obviously," he replied without turning around. It wasn't that Jackaby was rude, exactly. Tactless though he was, there was an earnestness to the man. "I should expect you to have long

outgrown being impressed by the fact that the sun rises daily in the east, Miss Rook. Really. You can manage more impressive observations than that.”

Then again, Jackaby might have just been rude.

“Sleep well?” I asked, secretly happy for the condescension. At least Jackaby’s attitude signaled a normal morning—or as near to normal as mornings ever came in the company of a supernatural detective.

Then he turned, and I saw the bandolier.

Strung across his chest was a thick leather strap with eight slots containing tubes larger than any ammunition I’d ever seen. Each tube was coated in shining paper, the ends poking out on either side in bright, primary colors. I might have preferred that they were bullets.

“Please tell me those aren’t . . . ” I swallowed, “. . . party crackers?”

“If you insist. These are not party crackers.” He smiled broadly. “Happy birthday!”

I sagged in my chair. “You realize you’re a grown man dressed in children’s novelties?” I avoided his eye and picked at the tray until I found a piece of bacon that was slightly less charred than the rest. “I distinctly remember telling you not to make a fuss.”

“No fuss,” he said, “and you’ll find these little poppers are much better than the standard trifle.” He stirred his batter around, poking down with a wooden spoon the bits that rose to the surface.

“Ah,” I said. “They’re not standard. Somehow that neither reassures nor surprises me. Is there anything in this house that is?”

“Of course. I allow Douglas to maintain the archives in a highly standard way,” he replied. “Chronologically, I think—or alphabetically, or something equally tedious. I do believe he even keeps some sort of card catalog. Downright banal.”

“Yes, but Douglas is also a duck, which rather evens the score, I think.”

“Well he wasn’t always,” Jackaby rebutted. “But you’re right, I don’t like to associate with too much normalcy. It’s good to keep one’s mind wide open and one’s horizons expansive. Particularly at times of liminal celebration, eh?”

He raised his eyebrows and grinned at me, stirring his mixing bowl until the concoction grew so stiff that the spoon refused to budge. His storm-gray eyes flashed, and his eyebrows waggled in my direction like hopeful puppy-dog tails.

“I have no idea what the word *liminal* means, and as I said, I’d rather not have any sort of celebration at all.”

Jackaby looked at me a few moments, then shoved the bowl, batter and all, into the washbasin. “It’s high time we take a trip to the market.”

I eyed him suspiciously. “Just to the market?” I asked, not trusting the abrupt shift. “You’re suddenly in the mood to fetch groceries?”

“Certainly,” he said. “We can browse a few vendors as well, if you’re in the mood.” He had already pulled his ridiculous knit cap over his mess of dark hair and slung a mismatched scarf around his neck. He plucked his coat and satchel from the battered mannequin in the corner, slipping the long, bulky duster over his scrawny frame. At least the coat and scarf more or less covered his party-cracker bandolier.

“Are you going to wear those across your chest all day?” I asked, pulling on my own long wool coat.

He looked down as if he’d forgotten they were there for an instant. “Not all of them, no.” He plucked a bright-red tube from the top and presented it to me. “Come now, Miss Rook,” he coaxed with another grin. “It isn’t every day you celebrate a successful solar revolution.”

“And thank goodness for that,” I said. “Just one and then we’re off to the market? You promise?”

“That’s the plan. Now hold tight to your end, and I’ll hold mine.”

“I suppose one little party cracker won’t be the end of the world.” I slipped on my own wool hat and took hold of the party favor. “Three, two . . .”

We pulled on “one,” and with a weak crackle, the world came to an end.

\*\*\* The Zandermacht \*\*\*

It was a sensation not unlike running backward from a moving train car and landing on the tracks. The whole of the world we had been a part of whipped away behind us, and an entirely new one leapt up to crash into our feet.

My legs buckled on the landing, and I toppled to my back. The painful brightness of direct sunlight in place of a ceiling whitewashed my vision until a shadow inserted itself in my line of sight. Jackaby smiled down at me in what I have come to recognize as the expression he thinks is reassuring.

“Calibrating for ground level can be a bit tricky. You all right?”

I accepted his hand and climbed to my feet. “The cracker?”

“I told you it wasn’t a standard trifle.”

My stomach was very gradually coming to a rest. “Yes. You also told me we were going on a simple trip to the market.”

“And so we are!” He spun with a flourish and gestured toward an old, rusty, wrought-iron gate. It stood in a simple stone arch, and beyond it I could see a small lot, overrun with dry weeds.

“Looks like we’re in the wrong place.”

“Looks can be deceiving.” Jackaby ran a finger along the top of the gate, as if feeling for a hidden seam. “I’d have brought us directly inside, but recorporalization is strictly forbidden within the market grounds. Now if I can just remember the method to unfasten this barrier. It’s the simple things that often prove most vexing.” He bent himself sideways as he spoke, peering at the imperfections in the metal bars and sniffing the hinges.

“Well . . .” I looked at the old rusty latch that hung unfastened. “We could try opening it.”

“What do you think I’m doing?” he made a sort of huffing cough that might have been a guffaw. “I only need a moment. I’m sure I’ve got a bit of Ariadne’s Twine in here somewhere . . . or perhaps the Jericho Doorbell . . .”

As Jackaby rummaged in his knapsack I gave the gate a gentle shove. It swung open with a creak. Jackaby closed his pack and looked at me.

“Your mind is a testament to simplicity, Rook.”

I chose to take the statement as a compliment and carried on.

“It’s no real wonder the thing’s unlocked, Mr. Jackaby. There’s nothing here!”

“Not *nothing*, the *likeness* of nothing.” He took me by the shoulder and we crossed the threshold. “And this market is, indeed, *like nothing* else.”

An electric tingle sent goose bumps up my arms and put the hairs on my neck on end. With another footstep, the curtain of a bleak terrain fell away, and we were suddenly just inside the grounds of a bustling marketplace thick with stalls and tents and flapping banners.

## The Map

The mingling smells of frying meats and sweet perfumes wafted to my nose, and the sounds of haggling and hustling crept into my ears. Before me, an angular man with huge gossamer wings was speaking in a strange tongue to a brutish, leathery vendor nearly as wide as his stall. Across the aisle, a bushy-bearded man with pointy ears was showing his wares to a severe woman whose entire lower half appeared to be a giant chicken. In every direction were horns, scales, and wings buying and selling peculiar vials, crystal balls, and pelts of animals I had seen only in storybooks.

“Welcome,” said Jackaby, “to the Zandermacht Market.”

Green light flashed in a nearby window, and purple smoke billowed from another. As I gawped at the scene, a distant, muffled explosion sent a man in dark robes shooting across the skyline like a firework.

Jackaby was a fish in water, striding gaily into the crowd and taking in the sights as if every bubbling cauldron and Cyclopean skull was an old friend. I hastened after him, not wishing to be left behind.

As he marched through the aisles, leaning to admire a jackrabbit with antlers to his left or a dragon scale vest to his right, I began to notice something even more unsettling than the curious contents of the merchants’ stalls. All around, strange faces—faces with spikes and fins and fur—were turning to watch my employer. I thought I must be imagining things, until the articulated skeleton of what appeared to be a bird-bear turned on its suspension cables to point two empty sockets at Jackaby as he passed.

“Mr. Jackaby,” I said under my breath as soon as I’d closed the distance between us, “why are so many people—and *things*—watching you?”

My employer didn't bother glancing around to confirm my alarm but looked at me as though I had missed some glaring truth. It was his most common expression.

"Rook, I should think it obvious." He smiled broadly. "I'm famously important."

The serene, unapologetic arrogance was oddly reassuring.

"I forget that you only typically see me at work in town," he continued, "where my abilities are not always fully appreciated."

That was true. The last time my employer's work had crossed paths with the local police force, we had both spent the evening in a holding cell.

"You'll find that in this setting my reputation is rather different," he went on. "At any one time, as I've told you, there is only one true Seer, and I'm it, Miss Rook. Being able to see through the veil and perceive all manner of magical auras is an invaluable skill."

We arrived at a stall manned by a muscular brute with the head of an ox. He reminded me of the Minotaur from the stories. As we neared, he glowered with strangely square irises at Jackaby.

"Take this booth, for example," my employer said. "I can tell you with certainty that those goblets are not, as advertised, goblets of plenty, but are merely enchanted with a temporary charm. That arcane scroll is a forgery, and those basilisk eggs were laid by a common ostrich."

A few of the browsing customers set down the goods they'd been inspecting and shuffled off. The Minotaur's eyes narrowed, and he snorted hot air as he glared at Jackaby.

"See? I've saved all those patrons from wasting their money," Jackaby prattled on. "People love me here!" I hurried away after my oblivious employer, darting glances back at the fuming vendor until he was out of sight behind several layers of tents and tables.

“Sir,” I said, “this is all incredible—but I wonder if you couldn’t slow down. It’s just a lot to take in.”

“Of course. Oh, how auspicious. Would you care for a cup of tea, Miss Rook? My treat.”

We had come to a small cluster of carts selling a variety of food and drink that looked suspiciously ordinary. Having had only the charred scent of a breakfast, I accepted a cup and sat down to drink with Jackaby.

“Thank you, sir. Mmm, this is actually lovely,” I said after my first tentative sip. It was a rich, dark blend, not unlike a strong Assam. “Very bracing.”

“Yes, I understand that the leaves gain that robust flavor as they pass through the digestive tract of a young troll. Fascinating process.”

I managed, against several powerful instincts, to swallow the last sip I had taken before setting the cup aside.

Our next stop was just beyond the stalls and stands, in a very old stone building whose entrance was all but blocked by the throng of peddlers. A woodcut sign above the door announced that we were entering the Cartographorium.

The proprietor, an elderly man with elfin features and a pair of wire-frame spectacles, greeted Jackaby with a broad smile. His shop was tall and was stacked floor to ceiling with shelves and cubbies, all brimming with books and scrolls. I could see why Jackaby frequented the place. My employer’s own substantial library of arcane literature and lore seemed paltry by comparison.

Jackaby introduced me to the owner, a man called Anaximander. He smiled politely, then eagerly dove behind the counter to show Jackaby a new arrival—a first edition of some sort with woodcut illustrations apparently not present in any subsequent printings. As far as I could see, the

images were all just inexpertly proportioned satyrs doing unspeakable things to startled nymphs. I left the two to their literary find and went off to browse the rest of the shop.

The Cartographorium had books in every language I'd ever encountered and in several I had never seen before. I passed scrolls written on sheets of pure gold, charts of vast underwater kingdoms, and detailed blueprints for exquisitely complex machines. The aisle split at a huge, finely detailed globe, which I set spinning lazily with a push of my finger as I passed.

The paleontologist in me spotted the image of a shovel in the corner of one map poking out of an overfull wooden chest. I freed the map and gave the page a quick examination. I had to smile. There was no mistaking the telltale dotted line, the skull and crossbones warnings, and of course, above all, the big red *X* of a child's treasure map.

I had drawn my share when I was just a girl, and had often dreamt of stumbling across an authentic one, no doubt inscribed by a dastardly pirate whose treasure horde was tucked away under a few feet of soil. I had long since put such romantic fantasies behind me, but it was that little girl within me, I think, who had convinced me to follow my father into paleontology. If I couldn't unearth piles of gold doubloons, then digging up giant, prehistoric beasts was a solid second.

"Find something?" Jackaby's voice over my shoulder made me jump, and I dropped the map back into the box.

"No, no—just some silliness. Ready to be moving on?"

His eyes narrowed as he looked first at me, a bit too intently, and then at the discarded bit of parchment.

"You're not interested in anything? It is your birthday, after all. What better time to treat yourself?"

“No,” I said. “No, it’s a bit of childish . . . nothing. It’s nothing”

Jackaby looked unsatisfied but thankfully let it drop. “Onward and outward then? Plenty more of the Zandermacht to see.”

As we left, I gave a polite nod of appreciation to the elfin shopkeeper, realizing only after our departure that he might very well be an actual elf. I looked around the crowded street to try to reestablish my bearings. The bustling scene seemed to have changed. A brilliant-red wagon with a polished cog emblem stood directly before us, loaded with shiny clockwork animals. I was quite certain we hadn’t passed by it on the way in.

“Have we come out a different door?” I asked, spinning around stupidly.

Jackaby chuckled. “No, no, the Zandermacht does that. Keeps things interesting. Gives you a chance to see vendors you might have missed.”

“What? Do they all pack up their carts and just move about?”

“Oh, heavens no, that would be impractical, everyone bumping into each other on the paths. No, no, the streets simply rearrange themselves from time to time. Oh, look! We’re across from Lutin’s Patisserie now! You must have some Gargoyle Gateaux before we leave.”

“That’s really all right. If it’s all the same to you, I’d rather we just . . .”

“Oh, confound it, wait here.” Jackaby slapped a hand over his garish knit cap and whirled back toward the Cartographorium.

“What?”

“I’ve just forgotten something. Anaximander had a little package I’d been waiting for. Just take in the sights. I’ll be right back.”

“But what if the streets decide to . . . to do whatever the streets do while you’re gone?”

“Nothing to worry about—I won’t be a moment!” And he vanished inside the shop.

I turned my eyes back to the lane. The sweet smells from the little pastry shop were enticing. A young boy with a mop of azure hair was winding up one of the clockwork figures beside me. I sidestepped so as to keep both the Cartographorium and the bright-red cart in my line of sight—just in case the building got any ideas about vanishing—and watched as a little brass squirrel squeaked to life and pranced around the table. The boy smiled and erupted with happy squeals.

I felt a tug on my skirt and looked down to see a little girl with enormous golden eyes looking up at me pitifully. She held a glass jar in one hand. “Please, Miss,” she said. “Have you seen my Sally?”

“Oh, no—I’m sorry.” I said. “What does Sally look like?”

The little girl’s eyes suddenly widened in fear and she scabbled away behind the table of clockwork toys.

“It’s all right,” I called, I won’t hurt—”

A sausage-sized finger prodded my shoulder, and I looked up into a face that was much less sweet and full of innocence and much more sour and full of teeth. The figure loomed over me by several feet, nearly as broad as he was tall. His skin was gray-green where it wasn’t coated in coarse black fur. He wore only a heavy belt, a loincloth, and a set of studded leather bracers. Two thick tusks stuck upward from his lower lip, and his scarred nose sloped upward like a giant mole’s. His heavy brow leaned hard over two small eyes. I had seen faces like his in storybooks, generally hunkering under bridges. He stared at me for several seconds and then grunted something that sounded like a dozen large dogs in a gunnysack falling out of the back of a wagon. The tiny eyes narrowed, and the heavy brow creased.

I froze. My mind began screaming orders—to back away, to speak, to turn and run—but my body mutinied, remaining anchored and unresponsive. The giant spoke again, deep and guttural, and definitely angry. I swallowed hard.

“I’m sorry,” I managed at last, “but I’m afraid I don’t speak . . . um . . .”

“Buggane.” Jackaby chirped behind me. “Hello, big fellow.”

The giant ignored my employer, his gaze fixed on me.

I remained rigid. “You said there was nothing to worry about here?”

“It’s all about perspective, I suppose. As a rule, all of the various ogre breeds are on their best behavior here at the market.”

“This one looks as though he would like to break that rule.” I swallowed. “He looks as though he would like to break it across my face.”

“Yes, but given that you’ve been standing on his tail, I’d say he’s been extremely patient and understanding. See? Perspective!”

I looked down and jumped backward, off the gray-green tail, which whipped back behind the hulking figure. He grunted and shook his head, then tromped away down the road. The crowd parted as the buggane’s thudding footsteps neared, but closed just as quickly, swallowing the figure into the chaos of the crowd. I brought up a hand to straighten my hat and missed the brim twice before I realized I was shaking uncontrollably.

The girl with golden eyes was suddenly in front of me again.

“Hello, small child,” said Jackaby. “Friend of yours, Miss Rook?”

The girl beamed. “Sally!” She took the lid off of the glass jar and inched toward me.

I followed her eyes to the hem of my skirt, where a coal-black salamander with brilliant orange spots was clinging. “Sally?”

And then my dress was on fire.

Jackaby was quick to act, scooping the jar out of the girl's hands and securing the salamander in one deft swipe. A kindly vendor leapt over and doused the flames with a bucket of slop before the fire had a chance to burn through the fabric and reach my legs. I stood in shock for a moment as girl trotted merrily away with Sally. My nostrils twitched as the smell of singed fabric mingled with the briny stink of whatever had been in that bucket.

“So, what next?” Jackaby smiled. “Harpy Traders? Gnomish Spellmongers? Cake?”

“Jackaby.” I looked my employer directly in the eyes. “I think I'd like to go.”

His smile remained, but his eyes flickered from incomprehension to understanding, and then to disappointment. “Oh.” The grin drooped, made a halfhearted effort to return, than fell. “Oh. Yes, of course.”

He led the way past unfamiliar stalls and out the little wrought iron gate in silence. I felt the faint tingle as we crossed the threshold again. A glance back revealed only an empty lot behind us, but I felt as though I could almost look past the mirage now that I knew what really lay on the other side.

“I'm sorry, Jackaby,” I said. “I didn't mean to ruin your gift. I do appreciate the gesture, really. It's all so fantastic and exciting. I want to go on grand adventures. It's just . . . a bit much all at once.”

Jackaby nodded. “I understand,” he said. “One step at a time?”

I gave him a thankful smile. “One step at a time, yes.”

“I can do one step at a time.” He held out the end of a cracker.

## The Map

We pulled together, and as the little paper tube crackled, the world flew apart and back together again. I very nearly managed to keep my footing this time, but toppled in the ensuing vertigo. Jackaby hoisted me to me feet.

“Sir,” I said, looking around. “This is not New Fiddleham.”

“No indeed. This . . .” My employer gave me an impish grin and pulled a familiar piece of paper from his bulky coat, “. . . is step one.”

He handed the map to me. “You went back for it?”

He nodded enthusiastically. “Guess what? We’re adventuring!”

### \*\*\* The Pie \*\*\*

The map was very old and inexpertly drawn. In the water swam busty mermaids and serpentine sea creatures, and on land stalked beasts which might have been meant to look like tigers but had come out a bit more like stripy dachshunds. Forests of little lines and mountain ranges of upside-down *V*s gave contour to the page, and at every turn lurked stick-figure dangers. Skulls and crossbones were a major theme. The artist seemed to have tucked one in anywhere he had a spare inch of parchment. The words *Captain Farrell’s Treasure* were written in a swooping cursive in the top left, and in the lower right a monogram read *B.D.*

“This looks like it was drawn by an eight-year-old,” I said.

“Never underestimate the wisdom and intuition of children.”

“This bit here looks like a duck with pointy teeth.”

Jackaby leaned in over my shoulder. “Charts are never purely literal. Cartography relies heavily on symbolism and suggestion.”

## The Map

“What even is this? Is this a radish wearing a top hat?”

“I believe it’s a rutabaga, and that’s clearly a bowler. Perhaps I should be in charge of navigation.” Jackaby made a grab for the map but I pulled it away and surveyed the landscape around me.

We stood at the top of a tall hill overlooking a fertile valley. Below us a stream curled away into the trees, and behind us the branches of a huge, old beech tree formed a nearly perfect dome. A little black-and-white bird flitted onto a nearby branch to stare at us. There were no roads or trails, no signs of civilization.

“Lovely bit of countryside,” Jackaby remarked. “Definitely New England. North of New Fiddleham? Possibly south?”

“You don’t even know where you’ve taken us?”

He cocked an eyebrow at me. “Why, you’re right—we’re hopelessly lost! If only we had a *map!*” he intoned in mock distress.

“Do you really want to try to navigate an amateur scribble toward some unlikely treasure? It’s probably nothing more than the fancy of a long-forgotten schoolboy. Who is Captain Farrell, anyway? I’ve never heard of any dread pirate Farrell.”

“Not a pirate, a British official,” Jackaby answered. “You’ve never heard the story? Farrell was a captain of the guard, charged with distributing wages to the British soldiers in Ireland in the mid-seventeenth century. His caravan was robbed by a single audacious highwayman who made off with the entire payroll without firing a single shot. A silver tongue can be even more effective than lead rounds. The man called himself the Bold Deceiver.”

“The Bold Deceiver? Wait, are you talking about “Whiskey in the Jar”? That’s not a true story, that’s a pub song!”

“Tell that to Patrick Fleming.”

“Who?”

“The man they hanged for the crime in 1650. Captain Farrell got his man, following the advice of a disloyal lady and a nosy barkeep, but he never did retrieve the money. The Bold Deceiver hid his stolen loot before Farrell’s men closed in. It’s still out there, somewhere.”

I looked at the faded, dirty paper, and back to Jackaby. My employer waggled his eyebrows at me. I contained a grin, not wanting to encourage his insufferable enthusiasm. “Just because a treasure exists doesn’t mean this will lead us to it. Even if it was authentic, and I’m not saying it is, who’s to say the money hasn’t already been recovered?”

“Only one way to find out.” The eyebrows bounced again, wiggling that silly knit cap up and down with them, and I let a smile crack the surface.

“If you can just pop a party favor to take us wherever you want, why do we need to follow this at all? Why not just zip to the end?”

“Because, Miss Rook, that isn’t how this sort of thing works. I know you’re still fairly new to this, so trust me when I say that there is a right way and a wrong way to go about an adventure. One does not free the prince without kissing the frog, and there are consequences for cutting corners. The map goes out of its way to touch seven points before completion. Sevens are good. We start with number one.”

I scanned the map and found the start of the path. It was, in fact, at a depiction of a round tree beside a curvy line that could be the nearby stream. “I guess we’re right here . . .” I started.

“Now you’re cracking.”

“. . . but that would put us directly atop a giant pie with a key sticking out of it.” I held up the map so that Jackaby could see the drawing. “I don’t see any giant pastries about, do you?”

“Miss Rook, you deeply disappoint me. Come now, your keen eye for detail proved invaluable during our last case—well, somewhat valuable. Not entirely unhelpful. What would you look for if this were a crime scene?”

I thought for a moment. I would look for something out of place, something that didn’t belong.

“The bird,” I said at last, gesturing to the shape flitting about the beech tree. “That’s a magpie. I’ve seen them in Europe, but they’re not native to New England.”

Jackaby applauded, “Outstanding! I hadn’t even noticed the little fellow. I was hoping you might have spotted the bright, supernatural glow emanating from the nest, but I suppose pulsing golden light is a bit too obvious? You managed it your own way, all the same.”

“There is no golden light, Mr. Jackaby. Not for normal people.” Jackaby’s gift as a seer allows him to penetrate magical concealments, make impossible connections, and recognize the auras surrounding objects and people, particularly those with magical significance. I have the rather less unique ability to see the world the way it actually appears.

“No?” Jackaby tilted his head in mock sympathy. “It must be so dismal being you.”

“Only in present company,” I teased back. I tucked the map in the sash of my skirt and began looking for a branch or foothold. The tree was old, easily twenty feet around at the base, and the lowest limbs nearly as wide as I was, but I managed to hoist myself up onto the first branch and then the second.

“So, finding things by aura isn’t cutting corners?” I asked. “If we’re supposed to be doing this thing properly, then I imagine we were meant to figure out the map’s riddles. ‘Pie’ and

'magpie' are pretty obvious, now that I think about it." I had nearly reached the nest. The little bird hopped around ahead of me, chattering and squawking, but it kept its distance.

"It isn't cheating, it's just using one's eyes," Jackaby called up. "But that's rather good, about the pie. Fitting first task for the Bold Deceiver's quest, the magpie."

"How's that?" I called down, being careful not to shift the branches too much as I positioned myself closer. Already the messy cluster of sticks was beginning to look rather shaken.

"Kleptoparasitism!" Jackaby hollered cheerfully. "Magpies are known for it. Other birds can be thieves as well, of course, but magpies have a reputation for admiring shiny trinkets. Not an unfit totem for a highwayman. If that's our pie, what do you suppose the key signifies? The next clue? Perhaps a means to solve the subsequent clues, as in the key to the map?"

"That makes sense," I said. I felt inside the nest. At the center, thin twigs and bits of straw wove a finely knit bowl, and my fingers closed around cold metal. "Or," I said, tossing it down, "it means a key."

\*\*\* The Garden \*\*\*

The next point on the map was eight or nine miles south, through forest. Jackaby conceded that as long as we touched on each essential point along the journey, it would be acceptable to use the party crackers in between. He slid out a glossy, blue-papered tube and we gave the ends a tug.

The world at the other end of the disorienting crackle was still green countryside, but this time there were signs of habitation. An old wooden fence lay just ahead of us, and a soft, dirt

path led toward its gate and away. I could see no houses or barns nearby, but within the fence the earth had been tilled, and leafy stems were sprouting in careful rows.

“I assume we’re here for the garden,” I said, and began toward it.

“Wait,” Jackaby clasped my shoulder so quickly my feet nearly slid out from under me on the soft earth.

“What is it?”

“The vegetables,” Jackaby said, with intensity. His eyes narrowed. “Don’t eat them.”

“I think I can manage to control myself.”

We drew nearer and examined the garden from over the weathered beams of the fence. The crops looked exceedingly healthy, all the plants at least two or three times larger than average. A trellis of simple timbers had been erected to support tomato vines, the fruits of which were as large as a man’s head and brilliant red. Not far off, deep-purple eggplants grew with such heft that if I jabbed a few stocks into them, they could pass for bagpipes. Beyond were cucumbers you could fit a saddle over and pumpkins you could hollow out and sleep in.

“What do you see?” I whispered.

“Danger. Desperation.” He peered at the produce with uncertainty. “And . . . vegetation.”

“Perhaps we should just move on to the next—,” I began.

“No.” He cut me off. “Every step is recorded for a purpose. Tell me, what do *you* see?”

I tried to look beyond the obvious. The plants were the glaring spectacle, so I pushed them to the back of my mind and saw . . . dirt. The soil was freshly watered and looked soft and

—

“Footprints.” I traced them to the gate. “Several different sizes, too.”

Jackaby looked where I indicated. “It appears a great many people have entered this garden,” he said.

“Yes,” I scanned up and down the soft earth. “But no sign of any of them leaving again.”

I stepped hesitantly up to the gate. A rough hand had carved into the post: TURN BACK—a small pen knife still jabbed into the wood after the unfinished caution. The letters looked old and had long since worn to the same color as the wood around them. A hearty green bean vine had wound its way up the post and clung to the knife’s handle.

“Right. That’s not unsettling in the least,” I said. Jackaby plucked a set of colored lenses from his coat and gazed at the plants through each disc in turn, *humphing* and *humming* unhappily as he did. “So, where did they go?”

I looked out over the garden while he worked, tracing a line of footprints down a nearby aisle. The indentations led between rows of carrots and potatoes and then stopped, suddenly and entirely. In a mound of dirt, one hefty potato had been mostly unearthed, its scarf and cap sliding back to the ground. My mind lurched back. Scarf and cap? I looked again up the aisles. They were there, the tips of a worn pair of boots amidst the rhubarb, a patched vest wrapped around a butternut squash, and broken spectacles at the base of a cabbage.

I whirled around as Jackaby leapt to his feet. “They didn’t go anywhere . . .” he began.

“The people *are* the vegetables!” I exclaimed.

“These vegetables are *people!*” Jackaby pronounced at the same time. We stared at each other. Jackaby scowled. “I’ve just used a seventeenth-century Scottish scrying stone to detect and confirm undeniable evidence of involuntary vegetative transfiguration, how did you . . . ?”

“I found a hat.”

“Your mind is both fascinating and infuriating, Miss Rook.”

“So what now?” I said. “If we go in we become ingredients for a salad. Why are we here?”

“We’re on a quest designed by a notorious thief,” said Jackaby. “So what would the Bold Deceiver do differently than those poor souls did?”

“I don’t know,” I admitted.

“This.” Jackaby stepped over the threshold, took a few long, confident steps, and plucked what must have been a five-pound turnip from the soil. He examined it closely and smiled in satisfaction.

“What are you doing?”

He looked around, then down at himself. He patted his chest experimentally, nodded, and then dropped the purloined root into his satchel.

“What were you thinking?” I burst as he sauntered back to my side of the fence.

“Miss Rook, what would entice you to steal from a garden as ominous and clearly unnatural as this one?”

“Nothing! That was insane!”

“Precisely. Those who did must have been absolutely desperate, deprived. In short, they were starving.”

“So?”

“So, if you were driven to theft out of dire hunger, what’s the first thing you would do with one of those ill-gotten greens?”

My stomach growled involuntarily at the thought.

## The Map

“Right again. You would eat. But a man driven by the thrill of the theft itself would not. Those poor, decent folk took only what they needed, but the Bold Deceiver didn’t leave his map for their sort. He left it for someone like him.”

“The Bold Deceiver wanted us to steal a human vegetable?”

“Not human, but yes. He wanted us to steal one of the forbidden fruits, so to speak. Steal it, but not eat it. Brilliantly biblical. The sly snake is playing God and the Devil in one.”

I eyed the garden uneasily. “Perhaps it’s best that we move on?”

### \*\*\* The Pond \*\*\*

The next stop on the map was marked by a cross-looking mallard. All around it were the swirly lines of water, scattered with little bones for good measure. The crackle of the next party favor brought us with remarkable accuracy into a tiny, ancient rowboat. I toppled to the stern, and Jackaby wobbled to find his balance at the bow.

“Good aim,” I said.

Jackaby looked out and frowned. “But bad timing.”

I pulled myself up to peer over the boat’s edge, half expecting a toothy swarm of ducks to barrage the vessel. Instead, as I leaned out, the dry, rotted side of the boat gave way and dumped me roughly onto cracked, dusty earth. We were in a brown, desolate bowl, half a mile across, bordered by grasses and a few thin trees.

“So much for step three,” I coughed. “This pond looks as though it’s been dry for decades.”

Jackaby nodded. “This challenge may prove more difficult.”

## The Map

“What do you suppose we’re meant to do here?”

Jackaby felt the air as if tracing invisible threads. He followed one of them to the end of a rusty chain dangling at the boat’s prow and gave it a tug. It was fastened to a bucket, which he emptied of sandy soil, stirring up a horrific cloud of dry dust. Holding one end of his scarf over his mouth, he confirmed that the bucket, like the key and the vegetable before it, was an object of significance to this place.

“Do you suppose we’re meant to refill the whole pond by the bucketful?” I asked. I vaguely recalled reading a story about a group of women given a similar task and a sieve.

“No, this place was brimming at the time this map was drafted.” Jackaby took a pinch of gritty soil between his fingers and watched it with interest as he let it sprinkle back to earth. He tasted his fingertip for good measure. “I do believe we were meant to collect the water itself, which, for obvious reasons, is an unlikely prospect at present.”

“Well, that’s that, then. On to number four?”

“Not so hasty. Each task serves a purpose, Rook.”

“Jackaby,” I said, “none of this seems to have any real purpose. Water that has evaporated doesn’t seem any more important than a key without a lock or a turnip we can’t eat.”

Jackaby conceded the point and withdrew our next party cracker without enthusiasm. How was I to know that the crux of our next challenge—a matter of life or death—would hang upon the timely use of a turnip, after all.

\*\*\* The Front Gate \*\*\*

The pop of a cheery purple party cracker brought us just outside the broad gate of an old castle crawling with vines and moss. The front face was hewn of massive stones with a wide tower at each corner, and the slightly caved-in roof of a central structure was visible just beyond. A few remnants of rotted beams appeared to have been part of a once formidable portcullis, but now they lay crumbling in the dirt at the feet of the wide stone arch. A thick chain hung from just behind the keystone, looping off into the shadows of the fortress. Whatever mechanism it might once have activated was long since out of commission.

“We seem to be a few hundred years late for this treasure hunt, sir” I said to Jackaby, pitching a lump of cracked masonry into the darkness beyond the gate. The chunk of brick clacked and echoed through the dead chamber.

“There is something alive in this place.” Jackaby’s fingers played along invisible threads in the air, and he squinted into the darkness, sniffing. “Alive and ancient. I can see the tint of an enchantment saturating the whole area. This is very old magic.”

I stepped into the archway with him, ducking past the heavy chain and willing my eyes to adjust to the darkness of the inner chamber. The whole thing looked more like a medieval stronghold than an American fort. The entrance split into two narrow paths leading left and right. It had been designed to bottleneck potential invaders, forcing them to serpentine past tall, thin arrow slits, where defenders could easily pick them off as they came. Now the portals were blocked by creeping vines, letting only narrow shafts of dusty light cut unevenly across the hallway.

Jackaby trod in to the right, sniffing the area like a greyhound. “Rodent?” he asked.

I glanced around my feet. “Should I be looking out for magic rats?”

“Hm. No . . . Not rats,” Jackaby drew a finger along the dusty stone as we walked.

“Something . . . bigger.”

“How much bigger?” I stopped walking.

The chain behind us *clank-clank-clanked* to life, and the darkness deepened several shades. The arrow-slit shafts of light blinked out one by one as tremendous shape eclipsed them from the other side.

“Miss Rook,” whispered my employer, “run.”

We exploded forward, heading to the light at the end of the passageway. The sound of the creature faded behind us, though the echoing rattle of the heavy chain betrayed its steady movement. Jackaby reached daylight moments before I did but skidded to a halt at once. He whirled around and barreled back into me.

“What are you—?” I began, but in an instant the bright mouth of the hallway where he had stood went black as the ragged, wooly form of a great beast leapt before it. I could hear the snap of jagged teeth and see wild, bloodshot eyes peering after us. It cocked its head back and forth, trying to gain a better view into the tunnel, then ducked and lunged after us, grunting and wheezing as it did. Two scraggly black ears dragged along the ceiling as the beast closed the distance with uneven bounds.

We scrambled out of the archway and back over the crumbling portcullis where we had come in, but the creature was too fast. I felt its breath on my neck and threw myself forward just as the chain rang out in protest, and the beast was pulled abruptly backward with a strangled whine. I crawled several feet farther before finally turning to survey the animal. Jackaby caught his breath and let out a relieved laugh, marveling at the figure before us. Its black fur was long, but thin and patchy, and its frame was all bony muscle and no fat. It was ten feet tall at its skull,

though a pair of scraggly ears reached another two or three feet into the air. I blinked. Chained by the neck to the crumbling castle wall was a massive bunny.

“Spectacular,” said Jackaby. “It must have been bound all this time by an enchantment. You’re a very long way from home, aren’t you?” My employer leaned in, fascinated. The gargantuan rabbit pulled at its chain, reaching to snap at Jackaby with a pair of yellow incisors. When its manic efforts proved fruitless, the creature shook its head and hopped back to the castle gate to collapse to the ground, resting its head on the curve of the great archway. For all its ferocity, it looked sickly and exhausted.

“Why on earth would anyone magically enlarge a rabbit to use as a guard dog?” I sputtered.

“Not a rabbit, and not enlarged,” Jackaby corrected. “A Brobdingnagian Hare. He began this size—well, a bit smaller as a young leveret, obviously, but proportionate in his infancy to the lagomorph you see today.”

“I swear you just make up every other word sometimes.”

“This hare comes from an island of giants, Rook. His enchantment has nothing to do with his size and everything to do with his suspended senescence.”

“That last bit in English?”

“I’m beginning to think a dictionary would have been a far more advantageous birthday gift for you.”

“More advantageous than being eaten alive by a giant, carnivorous bunny? Yes, most things fall in that category, I think.”

“This hare cannot age,” Jackaby stated flatly. “That is the enchantment, which explains why it has survived long after the other denizens of this place perished. Then again, it may very

well have been the *reason* the others perished. It is a good deal more aggressive than your standard specimen but still a fascinating beast.”

“It looks . . . miserable,” I said. The humongous hare had begun beating a slow rhythm on the stones with its forehead. “So what do we do?”

Jackaby shrugged. “Consult the map?”

The map depicted a broken clock with long whiskers, obviously the hare. Two human figures stood before it, and beyond it only one. I looked at the castle and then at Jackaby. The grim realization hit me.

“Two paths,” I said. “The rabbit can only go after one person at a time. I think he intended for the holder of the map to find a willing sap to go through one end while he slid through the other. Two enter, one survives.”

Jackaby nodded. “Yes, I suspect you’re right. It would certainly be in keeping with his outlook on trust, I suppose. Fortunately for us, we don’t need to make it through this particular trap the way the Bold Deceiver planned.” He slid a pink party cracker from the bandolier. “We have our own route to the tower.”

I frowned.

“It’s all right, Rook,” Jackaby said. “I want to play by the rules and do the adventure properly, but I won’t have you jump into a fatal trap—not on your birthday.”

“It isn’t that.” I looked at the hare. From a safe distance, when it wasn’t snapping its incisors at my neck, the thing was truly pitiful. Through its mangy fur, the creature’s skin was stretched tight across its ribs. Its tall ears drooped and its eyes were cloudy and bloodshot. There was a madness there. Not the madness of fury, but of absolute fatigue.

Jackaby followed my thoughts. “I can’t reverse it,” he said at last. “It’s old magic. There are a few mages at the Zandermacht who might have been able to undo the effects after a decade, maybe two, but the spell is a part of him now. I’m sorry. There’s nothing we can do.”

“Can you see . . .” I faltered. I have never been quite certain of the nature of Jackaby’s vision, and he has never been particularly straightforward or coherent in explaining it. “Can you see its mind? See how it’s feeling?”

Jackaby breathed in, slowly. “It has sentience,” he said at length. “It is aware of itself, and it is deeply discontented.”

“And the villagers at the garden?” I asked darkly. “Are they sentient, too?”

Jackaby answered gently. “No, Rook. They show no more awareness than an average artichoke. They were taken by the garden, but they didn’t suffer. The people they had once been were gone.”

“Then there is something we can do for him.”

Jackaby knit his brow for a moment, and then his expression bloomed in comprehension. He pulled open his satchel and handed me the turnip.

The hare’s whiskers twitched, and its head shot up as I stepped forward. I came to the edge of the creature’s range and pitched the vegetable at its feet. The hare sprang up and inhaled deeply. It took an experimental nip, and then hungrily devoured the entire thing.

The change was almost instantaneous. The creature glanced down at itself as one quick wave of color turned its fur a blend of purple and white. It perked up at the sensation, and then bowed down again, ducking its head into its chest as its ears sprouted into leafy green stems. Before I realized it was done, I was staring not at an animal, but at a bulbous plant more massive than any we’d seen in the garden.

“That last meal was a very long time coming,” said Jackaby. “He’s gone. You’ve put him out of his misery.”

I nodded, still looking at the enormous vegetable, and swallowed against a lump rising in my throat. It was frustrating to feel so sad for something as ridiculous as a ten-foot tall turnip. “Giant rabbit—giant vegetable. It . . . it was just the obvious thing.”

Jackaby put his hand on my shoulder. He waited until I met his gaze to speak. His eyes were soft and full of respect. “Rook,” he said with quiet earnestness, “it was a hare, not a rabbit.”

\*\*\* The Curtain Wall \*\*\*

Budging the heavy turnip out of the way proved as daunting an obstacle as the hare had been, and in the end we employed the pink party cracker after all. The fifth step on the map brought us into the towers bordering the castle. We were inside what Jackaby called the “curtain wall,” the castle’s first line of defense. It was stark and utilitarian, but the architect had tucked occasional accents into the brickwork. Little cherubs with chipped wings hung about here and there, and accents of stone leaves carved along the interior walls echoed the living ivy of the exterior. In the chamber before us, three iron cannons had been bricked into place with heavy mason stones. The base of each cannon was completely encased, blocking access to the gunpowder chambers, rendering them essentially useless. They stood immobile, aimed out of three openings only slightly larger than the weapons’ muzzles.

“Jackaby,” I said. “How much do you know about Patrick Fleming?”

“Not a great deal,” he admitted, running a finger along a groove in the masonry. “Just the basic story. Shibboletta’s *Songs, Sagas, and Survivals* includes a short chapter on the man. Why?”

“He was human, right? Just a highwayman?”

“That’s the general consensus.”

“Then how did he do all this? The enchanted garden, the cursed hare—an entire castle erected on the far side of the Atlantic? Quite a feat for a mortal man to pull off on his way to the gallows.”

Jackaby frowned. “That’s an excellent question, Miss Rook.”

We walked along the top of the wall to the next tower, which was identical to the first. I pulled out the map and examined the miniature version of the castle. Each tower surrounding the central keep was marked with the same simple symbol: a teardrop.

“What do you suppose we’re meant to do here?” I asked. “Cry?”

Jackaby frowned. “The bucket,” he said. “Back at the lake, we were meant to fill the bucket and bring it with us.” He pointed to a pair of chubby stone cherubs who held a basket aloft near the doorway. I stood tiptoe to peer into the basket, and sure enough, it opened into a hole in the wall, inviting water to be poured in, like rain-spout gargoyles in reverse.

We paced around the towers, searching for hidden mechanisms or any significance to the water-trough sculptures, but their function, if any, was inscrutable. At length we descended the stairway to the sixth step, but our failure to carry out another one of the Bold Deceiver’s tasks left Jackaby unsettled.

I reassured him that if we met with difficulty, we could always head back to the towers and try again. The next destination on the map would not even require the use of a party cracker. We were headed for the castle keep.

\*\*\* The Keep \*\*\*

Across a small stretch of unkempt, grassy grounds, which Jackaby informed me was the bailey, we found an entrance to the central structure. The keep was constructed of the same heavy stones as the curtain wall, but seemed to have fallen into greater disrepair. Thick roofing tiles had tumbled from high above to litter the base of the building, and the foundation had settled unevenly over time, spreading some of the solid blocks apart in wide cracks.

We reached the entrance, a thick door with a heavy iron lock. Jackaby did not need to withdraw the magpie's key to see that it was no match—the lock was much too large. He stepped toward the door anyway. Though imposing, the wood had suffered insects and the elements for three hundred years, and with a liberal shove of his shoulder, the wood crumbled around the lock and the thick door swung open.

The keep had no ground-level windows. A stairway wound up to the right, and a passageway curved off to the left. A trickle of light snuck clumsily down the stairs from the second floor, but the passageway on the left only darkened further as it rounded the corner. Torches had been fitted on the wall every seven or eight feet, but they hung unlit and dusty.

“I don't suppose you have any matches in one of your countless pockets, do you?” I asked.

Jackaby's coat contained a straw doll, several silver charms, a deck of tarot cards, and a bronze gyroscope, but no matches.

I pulled out the map and looked closely at the sixth point for any hints. Seated between the four teardrop towers, the keep was marked with a simple pair of spectacles not unlike those Anaximander had been wearing back at the shop. Perhaps they were a warning that we would scarcely be able to see a thing inside. A nervous prickle crept up my neck. Something about the castle felt wrong.

Jackaby stepped up behind me.

“Any mystical insights?” I asked.

“I’ve told you before,” he said, peering around, “what I do is not mysticism; it is observation and analysis.”

“Right. Have you observed or analyzed anything helpful?”

“The air is anathematic, laden with an aura of untold danger.”

“Untold danger. Charming. That seems to be the unifying theme of today’s outing.”

“Left. We are meant to go to the left.” Jackaby stepped through the doorway. “Coming?”

I peered into the inky darkness, trying to shake the uneasiness creeping over me. “What do you suppose the water was for?”

“I don’t know,” he said. “To turn some wheel that’s long since rotted away, perhaps—or weigh down a dumbwaiter whose chain rusted through half a century ago. Maybe that was how we were supposed to open the door to the keep, but the termites got to it before we did. Nothing in this place is really as functional as it once was, I’m afraid.”

I took one last glance at the tall watchtowers looming above us. Their bricks were sun-bleached and crawling with ivy. The useless cannons jutted out of the side like broken limbs on a long-dead fir tree. Warning bells rattled in my head.

“Jackaby, wait . . .” I began, but he had already vanished into the dark hallway.

I trod inward cautiously, keeping close to the wall as the light fell away behind me. The curving hallway was nearly pitch black. “Jackaby!”

“Just ahead of you, Rook,” came my employer’s voice from a few yards in. “There’s another door here.” I heard the rattle of a knob and then a click. As I hurried to catch up, Jackaby gave the door a push, and a shower of sparks lit the black ceiling above him, followed by

a muffled hiss. One by one, the dusty torches sputtered to life. Some flared brightly as flames played amid shrouds of cobwebs, dying down quickly to a steady glow.

Jackaby blinked at the flickering torches. “Well, it looks as though a few things in this place still function! That was a clever bit of work.”

He stepped through the door. The flickering lights within outlined a wide chamber, empty except for a sturdy writing desk. Jackaby smiled.

“Jackaby,” I said. “We shouldn’t be in here. This whole castle is backward.”

“I’ll be quick. How do you suppose they managed it? Steel and flint fitted in the corner of the door, I assume. Then what? Hidden streams of oil within the walls? No, oil would have long since dried. Gunpowder?”

He began rummaging through the drawers in the old desk. My nerves were already ringing, but something about the word *gunpowder* set them further on edge. There was a bit about gunpowder in the old song, wasn’t there? A verse about pistol charges?

Jackaby discovered two dusty glass tumblers in the desk and held them up in the lamplight. “That’s it.” He said. “Just the glasses. Not even a flask to go with them.”

My thoughts arranged themselves abruptly. Charges . . . yes, that was right. When Farrell and his men came to ambush the Bold Deceiver in the song, the cornered criminal drew his pistol, but he couldn’t fire the charges because . . .

My eyes widened, “Get out!” I yelled, but my voice was lost in the deafening sound of the first volley of cannon fire hammering into the keep.

Debris rained down from the ceiling, and behind me a massive section of the stairwell collapsed into the hallway, billowing up a cloud of stale rock dust. My ears were ringing, but I could see daylight over the top of the rubble. I turned back to see if Jackaby was behind me

when booming shots rang out from the second tower. The doorway above me buckled, and I leapt back into the room just as the entire entry was engulfed in a cascade of masonry. A hand grabbed my wrist and hauled me swiftly under the sturdy desk. Jackaby and I were a tight fit, but we sat out the barrage as rocks and beams thudded above us.

When the shuddering explosions subsided, we pushed our way out into what was left of the keep. My ears rang. Jackaby's satchel was pinned under a wide chunk of a broken column, and pulling it free loosed a small rockslide. We had to shove past boulders and splintered scraps of wood, but we soon reached daylight. Where once a three-story structure had towered above us, now the tallest surviving wall reached scarcely higher than my shoulders.

"What sort of cretin points his cannons at his own keep?" Jackaby demanded, shaking bits of brick out of his knit cap.

"You were right," I said, trying to catch my breath in the dusty haze.

"Generally true." He glanced back as we picked our way up and out of the wreckage slowly. "About what, in this particular instance?"

"The water was important. We skipped a step. In the song, the Bold Deceiver is undone because a woman fills his charges with water, rendering his pistol harmless. We were meant to do the same to the cannons."

"Oh, yes. Of course! Good connection, Rook."

"Not much help now, though, is it? I doubt we'll be salvaging anything from this rubble."

"Well, that's not completely accurate," he said. "I did manage to snag the glasses before the building capsized on us. I've got them tucked safely away, right here." He patted his satchel happily.

“A pair of glasses—oh, for pity’s sake, that’s what the spectacles on the map were about. They were glasses. Do you realize, sir, that you have them safely tucked away in a bag that was recently crushed under a building?”

Jackaby nodded, unfazed. “Remarkable craftsmanship, this. It was bequeathed to me by a fellow who believed that it once belonged to Rhiannon herself. Have you read the Mabinogion? No? Marvelous stuff. Welsh. I’ve never been entirely convinced of the artifact’s authenticity, but all the same . . .” He tossed back the flap and withdrew the two glasses, complete and unharmed, with a clink. “It is excellent for storage.”

\*\*\* The Cliff \*\*\*

A cheerful orange tube split with another world-scrambling crackle, and this time I was able to actually enjoy the sensation. It was still disorienting, but as our penultimate destination materialized around us, I didn’t mind the familiar dizziness, which was something like the spin of a childhood carousel.

We were near the shore, and the salty ocean air was a welcome and bracing change from the cloying dust of the now-ruined castle. We stood only a few paces from an abrupt edge, below which stretched forty feet of cliff and a frothy surf. Behind us lay a hilly forest spotted with rocky outcroppings. Jackaby gestured ahead, and I followed his gaze to where a strange patch of feathers and bones had been bundled together and strapped by a leather cord to a scraggly tree. Beyond it a dirt path seemed to lead right off the cliff’s edge.

“What on earth is that?”

Jackaby smiled at the discovery. “It’s a ward. They use that sort of cluster for marking entrances or passageways. It’s meant to bring some small degree of protection to the area.”

“They?” I asked.

“What does the map tell you?” he responded with an impish grin.

I pulled the thing out again. It had several new rips and one of the corners was missing entirely, but I found the seventh point. Along the shoreline was a drawing of three little figures with pointy ears and sharp teeth.

“It looks like some sort of goblins,” I said. “Which could mean anything, I suppose. A play on the word ‘gob,’ maybe. I’ve heard miners call scrap materials gob, and, of course, it’s slang for ‘mouth.’ Maybe the mouth of a cave? It looks as though there might be caves down there, set into in the cliffside. Hard to see from here. What do you think?”

“I think you’re right, Miss Rook.”

“About which bit?”

“I think it looks like goblins.”

It took the horde mere moments to surround us.

The goblins were sallow creatures, freckled with blotchy greens and browns. They wore stained, tattered clothing, all various shades of dirty brown, but each uniquely attired. Some wore little more than loincloths with twine for belts. Others wore complicated outfits, shirts layered with burlap vests and leather straps studded with dark metals. Some wore simple skullcaps, and others went bareheaded, their bald scalps dotted with freckles of dark green. The one accessory no goblin appeared to go without was a weapon. I looked from a long-handled spear on my left to a wide-barreled blunderbuss on my right.

“Jackaby?” I gulped.

“We’ll be fine,” he chirped a little too merrily as we pressed back-to-back. “Just raise your hands slowly to show them we’re unarmed. Don’t insult them in any way, and try not to look too tasty.”

The circle broke and a goblin in a coal-black top hat with a spray of vivid red cardinal feathers tucked along the brim strode toward us. The top of his hat barely came up to my chin, but he walked with the authority of a born goblin chief.

He eyed me through a suspicious squint as he approached. A scar etched a forest-green line down one cheek and through his upper lip, splitting it just off center. He looked me up and down slowly and sneered before turning his attention to Jackaby. Still smiling his ridiculous, cheeky smile, Jackaby faced the chief. Neither spoke for what felt like an eternity, and then, inch by inch, the goblin’s mouth spread. Sharp canines glistened as his scarred lip pulled back in a grimace. He chuckled with a voice that sounded like wet gravel, and then, at last, he spoke.

“Baen a long time.” The chief’s accent was hard to place. It sounded like it would have been more at home in Britain—not quite cockney, but perhaps a rugged Welsh or Scottish layered with something not quite human at all. He jabbed a finger at me. “Oo’s thas? Y’ dinna gave Douglas th’ sack, di’ya?”

“No, no, Douglas is still very much a part of the team.” Jackaby answered. “He is, however . . .” he cleared his throat, “. . .waterfowl, just at the moment. You know how it is.”

The goblin nodded, sagely. “These thins ’appen.”

“This is my associate, Miss Abigail Rook. Rook, this is my good friend, Nudd, high chief of the Western Tribes and ambassador to the Goblin Territories of the Annwyn, the fairy Otherworld. Say hello, Rook.”

I waved faintly, my hands still raised in the air. “Very nice to meet you, sir.” I said.

Nudd's smile fell from his face like wet slush from a drooping branch. He eyed me again with uncertainty.

“And may I say,” I added hastily, “that is a particularly fine hat.”

Nudd pursed his cracked lips and nodded in approval. “All righ’ then. C’mon dow’.”

The goblin crew led us down an impossibly narrow path, which wound around and down the rocky cliff face. More than once, the ledge, which was thin at best, proved too narrow to navigate and my balance failed me. Each time, before I could plummet to my death on the rocks below, a goblin at my rear gave me a steadying smack with the butt of his spear, driving me back against the wall. He seemed to take great pleasure in this helpful task, occasionally administering the blows even after I had found my footing. By the end of the trek I was a bit bruised but alive and whole.

We stepped from the path and out onto a broad platform. The rocky hillside curved over us, completely concealing the landing from above. Just ahead, a wide cave was scooped out of the mountain, and from this vantage point I could see countless other landings all across the rocky wall. Ladders and pipes and all manner of scaffolding crisscrossed from one cave to another, with metal braces buried into sheer rock face for support. A complex system of chains and pulleys supported a sort of hanging elevator, which rattled diagonally between two uneven platforms. A system of cogs clanked to life beside us, pulling into motion a zigzagging staircase, which swung itself up, end over end, folding and collapsing until it settled to a stop with a series of loud clacks, having completely re-formed into a gangplank above us. Steam boilers chuffed, cables and pulleys whirred, and all around there was the smell of engine grease and coal fire.

Everything about the place was preposterous. An entire mechanical world clung to the cliffside, whirring and creaking and buzzing. For all the fantastic ingenuity at work, every

incredible contraption seemed on the verge of falling to pieces. Bridges swung and sagged as goblins jogged carelessly across them, and I could see that the rhythmic pumping of a pair of heavy pistons was rattling the screws out of an already precarious aqueduct system nearby.

“Sir,” I whispered to Jackaby as we approached the entrance to the great cave. “How is it you came to be friends with Mr. Nudd?”

It was the goblin chief who answered. “Jus’ *Nudd*, lassie—y’ kin scrap th’ *mister*. An’ yer boss has me friendship ’cause e’s a dirty swindlin’ knave.”

“Is that so?” I turned my eyes to Jackaby again, who nodded. “And just what did my employer swindle from you?”

“I jus’ told ye. Me friendship!” The chief laughed, “I’m nae chopsin’ the mannie ’bout it, mind ye. I got nae but respect fir ’im.”

Jackaby acknowledged the compliment with a nod. “The sentiment is mutual, my friend.” He explained to me, “Nudd and I became acquainted when he contracted my services to retrieve a certain item of some importance.”

“What sort of item?” I asked.

“Th’ sort an outsider like yerself should nae gae askin’ too many questions abou’.” Nudd shot a dark look my way, and I swallowed hard. Jackaby continued cheerily.

“Oh, the details aren’t important. The fact is, goblin tribes acquire some of the most remarkable artifacts, due to their notoriety as barterers. If there’s something you need but cannot acquire through traditional channels, goblins can make it manifest. You’re likely to lose more than you gain, of course, but that’s just business. You won’t meet a more savvy salesman than a goblin.”

“Aye,” Nudd said. “But there’s nuffin’ a goblin hates more’n red in a ledger. We settle our debts, nae matter what’s owed.” We drew up to a brass panel in the cave wall, and Nudd gave it a bang with his fist. Cogs spun, and a wide table swung downward, stools unfolding out of the metalwork as it settled to the ground. He plucked three rough ceramic goblets from a hanging rack and filled them with a dark-brown liquid. “That’s ’ow yer boss bamboozled me outta me kinship. ’E agreed t’ take our case in exchange fer somethin’ that woun’dn’ae cost me a thin’, an’ that he would happ’ly return the momen’ it was given. Was only after he’d done the deed tha’ I found out I’d been hustled into a friendship wi’ the bastard.” He cackled at the memory, and drained his goblet with one swig.

“He won your friendship . . . in a shady business deal?” I marveled.

Jackaby smiled. “Seemed the best way to go about it.”

“Aye, tha’ it was. But let’s cut righ’ tae the meat,” Nudd straightened up. “Friend or no, yer nae here fir me good comp’ny. Wha’ brings y’ tae th’ tribe?”

Jackaby and I exchanged glances. My employer spoke first. “We don’t know.”

Nudd looked unimpressed.

“How long has your tribe been here?” Jackaby asked.

The goblin thought a bit, “Me dad brung th’ first tribe oe’r in th’ year o’ th’ manky basilisk. Whassat in human?”

“The manky basilisk . . . let’s see—yes, that’s about the mid-seventeenth century, I think. The time line fits. Rook, show him the map.”

I laid out the map, and Nudd pulled it across the table.

“Treasure, then?” He grinned as he perused the parchment but froze as his eyes locked on the final destination. The last point on the map was a small island not far from the coast. “Wai’ a

tick.” He hopped from his stool, whisking the paper over to a nearby work bench, where he pulled down a wide magnifying lens and scrutinized the map.

I was about to take a sip from my goblet, but Jackaby put a hand over the lip before I could put it to my mouth. He shook his head silently, and poured the beverage into Nudd’s goblet instead. The goblin chief turned back to us a moment later, his expression dark and brooding. “Nae.” He said, when he reached the table and sat down again.

“No?” I asked. “No, what? We haven’t asked for anything.”

He pushed the paper toward me, a finger locked on the small point just off the coast, the end of the Bold Deceiver’s path. “Tha’ island shouldn’ae be on any human map. It kinna be reached wi’out Goblin magic, ’cause t’isn’t an island o’ yer world, now, is it?”

“Isn’t it?” I asked.

“Huck up, lass. Tha’ island is moored tae a part o’ th’ Annwyn. Another thin’ an outsider shouldn’ae be askin’ about.” Nudd’s eyes drifted from drilling suspicion into my skull to noticing the liquid in his goblet. He tossed it back with a gulp.

“How fascinating,” Jackaby said. “You see, Rook? Had we not made this stop before dashing off to the end of the hunt, then we’d never have known what we were looking for.” He turned back to the chief. “Strange that a mortal highwayman from Ireland managed to know about your distant little piece of the Otherworld all the way over here, isn’t it?”

“Nae a chance,” Nudd growled.

“He knew we’d need to come through you to reach it, as well. See? You’re on the map, too, just there.”

Nudd looked where Jackaby was indicating and squinted his eyes. He lifted his top hat to scratch his head. "Hm. 'Old on." He trotted off again, disappearing into one of the smaller, connecting caves. When he was gone, Jackaby emptied his own goblet into Nudd's as well.

"Do you think they're poisoned?" I whispered.

"What? No, of course not. This is top-shelf stuff. What I think is that you are not a goblin, and that certain flavors can never be untasted."

Nudd returned quickly, holding a scroll with scarlet endcaps. He sat down at the table and pointed to the picture of the three little goblins on our shoddy treasure map. "Ye know wha' tha' is?"

"It's a little picture of . . . well, of you and your tribe, isn't it?" I offered.

"Yea and nae. Tha's never me, but it is me dad."

"Your dad?" Jackaby asked. "Isn't it a little rudimentary to be sure?"

Nudd unrolled the scroll. At the top was the same picture: three goblin heads, forming a sort of triangle, each with pointy ears and sharp teeth. It looked almost identical to the map.

"Aye. Tha' was nae jus' a drawin'. T'was me dad's sign." He scanned the roll of paper, which was written with some form of pictographs I didn't recognize. When he reached what he was looking for he frowned, then laughed. "Look like we'll be helpin' each other, after all," he said.

"Planning to explain?" Jackaby asked.

"Tha's more'n a map. What ye've go' is a contract. Me dad signed fir th' tribe. Musta bin near t' start o' th' settlment, or he'd nae'er 'ave agreed. It appears I'll be helpin' ye reach th' island after all. And ye'll be helpin' clear a very old bit o' red from th' books. We pay our debts."

He tossed the last of the brew into the back of his crooked mouth and slammed the goblet back onto the table with a bang.

\*\*\* The Ship \*\*\*

The chief led us over swaying scaffolds and along narrow bridges as we crossed to the far side of the goblin village. Along the way he told us about his tribe's origins in the western world. Hearing of riches and vast tracts of untamed land, Nudd's father, Ludd, had sought to establish a goblin empire on the shores of the new continent, but he needed money. The goblins were resourceful, but wits and grit would not build a vessel or stock it with rations and supplies, so Ludd struck a deal to gain in one single night all the capital they would need. Their financier would never see the goblins again. He would, in fact, be hanged within the week.

"So that's how the Bold Deceiver managed it," I said, ducking under a spiderweb of brass pipes as I kept after the chief. "Fleming never set foot in America. Your father set up all the challenges. He drew the map, and he buried the treasure at the end of it."

"Aye, and on an island only one o' our own ships could reach. Tha' rock is on a . . . what'sit? Thrash hold."

"A threshold?"

"Aye, t'win this world an' the Annwyn. Humans kinna find it withou' help. Don't y' fret. Goblin craft have more'n a little goblin in 'em. She'll get y' there."

We rounded a bend and I could see several vessels moored in a crowded dock. The ships bobbed in the choppy breakers, looking about as reliable and seaworthy as a pair of worn-out old boots. "We aren't traveling in one of those, are we?" I asked, nervously.

“Nae! Those’d na’er get ye where ye’re goin’.”

I relaxed a fraction, and then Nudd chuckled and pointed upward.

“Ye’ll be needin’ her.”

Forty feet up, tethered to a rocky outcropping, hung a huge, oblong balloon, roughly the shape of a massive, lumpy pickle. It was a patchwork of canvas and leather scraps held together with jagged stitches. Suspended beneath it by a series of thick ropes was a basket, roughly the size and shape of the rotted rowboat where we had landed several quests back. Brass fittings lent a regal air to the goblin dirigible, in much the same way a bit of gold trim might lend a sense of dignity to a pile of horse droppings.

“Splendid!” Jackaby clasped his hands together, beaming like a schoolboy at Christmas. “We’ll have her back to you by morning!”

The airship sagged and creaked in protest under our feet. We were barely on board when Nudd snapped the tether with a flick of a crooked dagger, and we drifted away from the rocks.

With Jackaby at the helm, the vessel swayed wildly with every gust of wind, and within a few minutes of our departure, one of the ropes securing the basket to the balloon simply slid away, twisting like a snake as it plummeted into the waves below. “Are you quite certain this is safe?” I called over the rush of wind.

Jackaby gave me a wink from the helm. “I am quite certain this is an adventure! Come hold the wheel steady for a moment while I check on the engines.

I crawled warily toward him as the basket leaned and creaked in response to my slightest motion. The dirigible was controlled by a wide ship’s wheel, such as I had seen many times before, and if I held my gaze very carefully above the horizon, I could just imagine that we were in a quiet boat, drifting along the surface of the ocean.

Once I had a firm grip on the wheel, Jackaby swung himself up on a low rope and hopped into the back of the basket with a thud. “Oh, Rook, look at this! Marvelous tinkering. It’s been retrofitted with a compact boiler to run on coal and steam rather than the usual goblin fuel.”

“What’s the usual goblin fuel?” I asked.

“Smaller, less popular goblins, generally.”

“You have interesting friends, sir.”

Jackaby fiddled with a few compartments, tapping gauges and dials behind me. After a minute he mumbled something which sounded an awful lot like “Oh, dear.”

“What?” I called. “What is it?”

“Nothing! Nothing, just admiring the steamworks.”

We rode on for several hours, Jackaby and I taking turns at the helm. The sun crept toward the horizon behind us, its light brushing the clouds ahead with golds and oranges, reflected brilliantly in the calm ocean waves below. At times a low cloud would drift beneath us, and our own shadow would ripple and dance across its billowy surface as we passed. It was quietly breathtaking.

“We may have a small problem.” Jackaby’s voice shook me out of my serenity.

“What is it?”

He flipped open a little iron grate, revealing the last, dying lumps of coal in an ashy heap. He flipped it shut again with a clink.

“We’re out of fuel?”

“I was hopeful that it might last long enough to manage the trip out, and then we could use this for the return journey.” He pointed to the single cherry-red party cracker in his

bandolier. “But the engine burned through our stores faster than I had anticipated. It seems increasingly unlikely that we will reach our destination.” As if to confirm my employer’s doubts, the boiler sputtered and the airship shuddered and rocked. “Such a shame. This is closer than anyone’s come in three hundred years—which is something, I suppose.”

“What? No!” I said. “I know you want to do the thing properly, but we’ve hit every point on the map—surely you can’t object to using that cracker to finish the trip?”

Jackaby pursed his lips. “Nudd knows the magic of his people. He said that the island rests on a pocket between our Earth and the Annwyn. We need the dirigible. Think of it as our compass. Even a carefully aimed transapparative hop without it would likely leave us on this side of the veil, dropped in the middle of the Atlantic without a rock to cling to. I don’t know about you, but I doubt I could manage the swim back to shore.”

The mechanism behind him hissed, and with another rumble, the airship began to sink and lose altitude. Jackaby sighed and glanced at the approaching waves. He walked toward me and held out the lonesome red tube. “Even if we could manage it, this is the last popper. I’m afraid it’s over. You finally get your birthday wish, Miss Rook. We’re going home. I’ll let you do the honors. Just think of where you’d like to be, and our destination will appear.”

“But . . . but we’re so close!” I said. I peered out over the waters. On the horizon I could just make out the shimmering silhouette of a patch of land creeping into view. It wasn’t fair.

“I am sorry, Miss Rook.” Jackaby held out the tube. “But it really is the last one.” The patchwork balloon deflated rapidly above us, flapping wildly in the rushing wind. My feet lifted off the floor and my stomach lurched as the airship completely fell from the sky. I gripped the rickety basket with one hand and clasped the cracker with the other. Just as the sparkling waves threw themselves at the plummeting dirigible, I tugged.

\*\*\* The Island \*\*\*

The darkness smelled of wet leather and smoke. I pushed the lifeless balloon off of me and blinked into the light. From a lump in the mess before me came a muffled grumbling as Jackaby attempted to free himself from the same.

“You brought it along? I do *not* have the space in my offices to accommodate a craft this size. I hope Nudd can send an envoy to pick it up as soon as . . . Oh.” He fell silent as the material dropped away from his face. “Oh, Miss Rook. What have you done?”

The island was small. The whole space could have fit easily within a city block, and it was occupied only by rocks sparse vegetation. A border of pearl-white sand defined the perimeter, and a single leafy tree stood in the center. I glanced behind me. Although we were surrounded by water, the island was not technically in the ocean at all. The rippling waves lay thirty feet below us with the circle of land hanging above them like a balloon.

Jackaby stepped up to the island’s edge and peered over, sending a spray of sand drifting down in the wind. “Hmm. A touch ostentatious, but the effect is impressive,” he said.

“We’re floating!” I said. “Is this goblin magic?”

“There appears to be a dual-dimensional suspension matrix woven through the framework of the landmass.” He scowled at the dirt beneath his feet. “On the Anwynn side it likely manifests as deviations in directional energies, while on our end we experience a pronounced gravitational anomaly.”

“So that’s a yes,” I nodded. “It’s marvelous!”

Jackaby looked up at me and a curious glint crept into his eyes. “Well, Miss Rook?”

“Well?”

“With the last of our resources, you have bypassed any hope of a safe return in favor of this chance at a final step. So? We’re here.”

The burial site was not difficult to find—a convenient spade had even been left at the base of the lone tree. Its handle had long since crumbled, but the head was sufficient to scoop away the sandy soil. Within a matter of minutes, I struck something solid. I pushed aside the earth until I had outlined a rectangle of metal.

“This is it,” I said.

When the artifact was exhumed and the last clods of dirt knocked free, we found ourselves looking at a simple lockbox made of hammered pewter or tin. With a little coaxing, a circle of silver on the top rotated to reveal a keyhole.

“A bit small for the payroll of an entire army, don’t you think?” I held the box and tilted it to blow the dust from the keyhole. Something inside clunked heavily. At least it wasn’t empty.

“Gold?” I guessed.

“Fleming had to pay the goblins with something,” Jackaby said. “The constructions and enchantments we passed were not erected cheaply. There’s no telling how much of his loot was even left to bury.”

Jackaby produced the magpie’s key and I took it reverently. It fit smoothly in the hole and turned with a gentle click. I opened the lid and we stared into the box.

“Huh,” Jackaby said. “Well. It’s gold *colored*.”

Inside the box was a stout glass jug. It was filled with a liquid that was really more amber than gold, and plugged with a cork sealed with wax. Beneath it was a single piece of paper with handwriting on it. I pulled out the note.

## The Map

The writing was cleaner than the map had been, but the ink had dripped in several places and the whole job looked a little rushed. It read as follows:

*The word that lives, lives only to be read  
So purpose grants new life unto the dead  
By daylight mine own heart will cease to beat  
Yet my heart's purpose ever was deceit  
In this pursuit thou hast become my last  
So raise a glass to bold deceivers passed  
Thou shalt find little else at journey's end  
Yet there is whiskey in the jar, my friend.*

I read the poem twice before handing it wordlessly to Jackaby.

We might have been killed. This mad quest had nearly turned us into turnips and reduced us to rabbit food. It had dropped a castle on our heads and dropped us out of the sky. Now we were stranded on a remote island in the middle of the ocean, one that no earthly ship could find even if it wanted to, and it had all been a cheeky bandit's last laugh.

"Oh." Jackaby said soberly. "Oh, I see. I suppose an apology is in order."

"It's all right, sir."

"No, you were quite explicit in your request for a birthday without fuss, and I seem to have gotten us into quite a lot of it for nothing. I assure you, I—are you laughing?"

I wiped a tear from my eye and sat back on the sand, smiling. "Thank you, Mr. Jackaby," I said, "for the treasure hunt. I honestly cannot think of a finer way to have spent my birthday."

He looked skeptical.

“Purpose, sir. It’s nice to have purpose. It’s not about the treasure—it’s about the hunt.”

“That, Miss Rook, is an irresponsible and irrational sentiment, and one of your finest qualities.” He plucked the glass tumblers from his sack and nestled them into the sand. “Shall we drink to the Bold Deceiver, then?” He took the bottle out of the lockbox and wiggled loose the cork.

“How about we drink to adventure, instead?”

“After my own heart.” Jackaby gave me a proud smile.

My father drank whiskey. He used to say it tasted smoky, like a fine cigar. Fleming’s whiskey tasted like turpentine and rotten shoe leather, and it sucked the moisture from my mouth as though I had swallowed a sponge. Jackaby managed to stop coughing before I did, but he kept smacking his lips and rubbing his teeth with his tongue.

“I’m no connoisseur,” I croaked when I could feel my face again, “but I think perhaps these spirits passed their prime after the first hundred years or so. Oh, lord, I’m still tasting it.”

<#>

In the morning, the goblins—as meticulous about collecting dues as they were about paying debts—would come searching for the borrowed dirigible, and I would never again be so grateful to repay a loan. Chief Nudd would invite us aboard, polishing off the rest of the bottle and cackling as he listened to our story, and Jackaby and I would be back in New Fiddleham by teatime. For that one night, however—my night—we lay on either side of a campfire on a magical floating island, watching the setting sun cast ripples of amber across the vast Atlantic.

## The Map

My birthday did not pass unmarked, as I had hoped. Far better, it was marked with a big red *X*.