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The
Cabinet *of*
CURIOSITIES



by
James Henry

Chapter One

The train shook a little, and Rosa Dew awoke to find her right foot tangled up in a carrier bag. Bending down to free herself, she cast a subtle look around to see if she was alone. Had she spoken or even cried out in her sleep? Fortunately, the carriage was empty, except for the conductor slowly making his way towards her, occasionally reaching out to a tattered headrest for support as the train lurched and rattled complainingly.

Rosa sat very still, staring straight out of the window as though trying to turn herself invisible. There was very little to see: just fields, growing darker as afternoon turned into evening. She clearly hadn't become invisible anyway, because the conductor nodded at her, and sat down in the seat opposite.

'No ticket, I suppose?'

Rosa shook her head. The conductor scratched a long nose with a long finger, and heaved a long sigh. Rosa couldn't help noticing the odd colour of the lank hair sticking out from under his cap: it was mostly grey, but with an almost greenish tinge. He clapped his hands together suddenly, making her jump in her seat.

'You'll be wanting to murder me then,' said the conductor. He looked almost pleased at the idea, rubbing his long hands together thoughtfully. 'That's your plan. Murder me, and take my ticket machine, and my money, and go on a spending spree. To Margate.'

Rosa didn't even know where Margate was. 'No, I didn't really plan to get on the train. I'm just sort of... here.'

‘Ah,’ said the conductor wisely. ‘Drugs.’

‘No!’ said Rosa. ‘Not drugs. Look, I’ll get off at the next station. You don’t need to call the police or anything. Honestly, I’m really sorry.’

The conductor looked at her for a long while, as though somehow... weighing her. Rosa looked straight back. His eyes were bright green.

Maybe she was a little over-dressed for a train journey. Was that why he was staring, Rosa wondered? She was wearing purple suede boots, a green flared skirt with little mirrors running around it in a complicated pattern, a pink shirt covered by a black jumper that was more holes than jumper, the entire ensemble wrapped in an ankle-length cream coat with thick fake-fur cuffs and collar, and topped off with a wide-brimmed green hat, a white feather sticking jauntily out of the band. Peeking out of her strawberry-patterned handbag was an oversized pair of silver sunglasses with rims shaped like stars. She was glad she hadn’t put those on. It might have looked a bit much.

The train was slowing now as it came into the next station.

‘Anyone worrying about you at home?’ the conductor asked, suddenly.

Rosa tried think of a single person who might be missing her, and couldn’t. Which was odd, but then she’d only just woken up. Her memory was bound to be a little bit fuzzy.

‘I don’t think so,’ she said. ‘I haven’t run away, if that’s what you mean. And I don’t have any money, but if you give me your address, I’ll send you the price of the ticket as soon as I can.’

Then, through the half-open carriage window she smelled something she had never smelled before, but recognised straight away: the sea. Somehow she knew this was where she had to get off.

The train stopped, and the conductor looked at her for a second longer, then swung out the carriage door and stood back.

‘Go on,’ he said, his face turning miserable again. ‘Out you get. Probably lose my job over this. Have to tell them you turned nasty, and overpowered me.’

Rosa picked up her bag and climbed down onto the platform. The conductor swung the door shut, and bent his tall frame down to look sadly out of the window after her.

‘I hope you don’t lose your job,’ she said. The conductor shrugged, and the train started to slowly pull away.

Rosa walked along the station platform. The small ticket office was closed. A sign swung slowly, creaking in the breeze.

‘Wilmington,’ she read to herself, and then turned, hearing a shout. The train was picking up speed now, but the conductor was waving a small crumpled piece of paper at her out of the window. Breaking into a run, Rosa was just able to catch up enough for him to thrust a five-pound note in her hand before she ran out of platform.

‘I’ll tell them you had a gun,’ he yelled. And then he called out something else, but the engine was too noisy now. Rosa stopped, and waved at the conductor, and he waved back, once. The train went over a level crossing, disappearing into the darkness, and suddenly all she could think about was how tired, and cold, and hungry she was.



Chapter Two

According to the large map on the wall, Walmington station was part way up a hill, on the very edge of the town itself. If Rosa continued uphill and on to the main road, she would have to walk for another six miles before reaching the next town. So she went downhill, towards Walmington. There might at least be somewhere open to buy food.

It took Rosa a little over five minutes before she was in the high street. In that time she was passed by only one car. It was long, silver-grey and sleek, and although it looked old in design, the engine purred and whispered as though it were brand new. Luggage was bundled up at the rear, and the windows were blacked out. As the car slid by, Rosa thought of underwater creatures like sharks, and large, hungry eels, and she shivered.

As she walked through Walmington, Rosa passed newsagents and record shops and clothes stores but they were all closed.

One pub was open, next to the war memorial. Its door was slightly ajar, and she could just make out a sliver of warm orange light, and quiet conversation, and the low insistent beeping of a fruit machine. But she knew she was too young to go in, and from somewhere further in town a sharp greasy smell was making her mouth water, so she kept going, putting one foot in front of the other.

And there, right through town and on the sea front it was, a solitary fish and chip shop, still open. Rosa headed towards its welcoming lights, only

noticing at the last minute that the entrance was blocked by a thin-faced boy in a tracksuit, swigging from a can of drink. There was a woman behind the counter, staring at a badly flickering television, on which a quiz show contestant was trying to answer a particularly difficult question.

‘Excuse me,’ said Rosa, politely. The youth ignored her. He had pale skin, marked with the craters of old spots, and the red pocks of a fresh crop. Rosa tried again.

‘Excuse-’

Without looking at her, he spat out a long stream of brown liquid that fizzed and splattered on the tiled floor. It missed the toes of her boots, but only just.

Rosa stood in frozen silence for a second.

What did I say? she thought, utterly bewildered. But the moment was broken by the tinny sound of applause from the television, and the boy pushed past her and sauntered out the shop. Rosa stared after him. The woman shouted something, but the boy had already gone, so she turned her glare on Rosa instead.

‘E’s barred,’ she said, arms crossed. ‘And don’t tell me you want as many chips as you can get for fifteen pence, or seventeen, or twenty-two, or you’re barred an’all.’

After showing the woman her note, and receiving a grunt of acknowledgement in return, Rosa bought a pasty.

‘Watch them seagulls,’ the woman advised. ‘They’s buggers for pasties. A kind of tree.’

Rosa found this last sentence particularly enigmatic, and it wasn’t until she was sitting huddled in a seafront bus shelter that she realised the woman had been talking to the television.

The pasty was large, and surprisingly hot, so Rosa just ate half, wrapping the rest for later and letting it glow warmly in her lap as she watched the sun set over the water. Tiny waves slapped against the pebbly beach before being sucked back again, almost apologetically.

‘Nice view, innit.’

The shell-suited boy from the chip shop was standing next to her. She hadn’t heard him walk up to her. Or the two other boys, dressed identically, standing behind him.

‘Very nice.’ Rosa stood, instinctively knowing not to let herself get surrounded.

‘*Very nithe.*’ One of the other boys was slightly taller, and it was he who was mocking Rosa, talking in a silly, high-pitched lisp, which didn’t sound even vaguely like her. Rosa started to walk away, heading back into town, but they moved quickly into a line, blocking her way.

‘We want to borrow some money,’ said the first boy, and again, he was staring just past her. Rosa wondered for a moment if he was short-sighted, and then she realised: this is something he has learnt; a way to intimidate people by telling them you weren’t even worth looking at.

‘Yeah,’ said the taller boy. ‘We want some ginger beer, innit?’ The shorter boy, who hadn’t spoken yet, laughed, an uncontrolled, slightly hysterical sound.

‘Yeah,’ he said. ‘*Lashings* of it.’ They were all sniggering now, but watching her carefully.

‘I’m sorry,’ said Rosa and tried to walk past them. They stopped laughing instantly, and the first boy shot out a hand, grabbing her arm.

This is bad, she thought, but her fear gave her a burst of confidence and she kicked him in the shin, very hard, then ran, not looking back even as she heard him hit the ground, squealing in pain.



Chapter Three

Shouts and swearing told Rosa the youths were seconds behind her.

An alley entrance was just visible in the darkness so she darted into it, and took a left, then a right, trying to avoid circling round and running back into her pursuers. The footsteps behind her slowed, then stopped, the boys clearly confused by the twists and turns.

Rosa was lightly built, and though her boots weren't designed for running, they at least had fairly sensible heels. She started walking again, quickly and quietly, looking in vain for some side exit. There wasn't one, and worse, Rosa was starting to feel as though she were being in some way *channelled*. She breathed heavily now, and her legs grew a little shaky. Around her were high walls, topped with vicious shards of broken glass, and iron gates too, which presumably led into people's back gardens, but none would open, even when she kicked them in frustration.

Rosa's stomach rumbled and she remembered the wrapped pasty in her hand; a little squashed, but still warm.

Ducking behind a battered old red van, she greedily tore into it, not caring that a little paper came with it. It was tasty, she thought, but a little salty, and she was already thirsty from all the running. Perhaps somewhere a corner shop would be open. She probably had just enough money for a bottle of water.

As she looked up, she saw the first boy, the one she had kicked in the shin, standing in front of her, grinning triumphantly.

He was leaning a little awkwardly on his bad leg, and looking directly at her now. His eyes were a brilliant blue, Rosa noticed. He actually had quite nice eyes, which somehow made things worse.

Even thinking about it later, Rosa had no idea why she threw the pasty at him. It wouldn't have hurt him, and it certainly wouldn't have distracted him for the time she needed to start running again. Maybe she just wanted to wipe that grin off his face for a second. For whatever reason, she threw it as hard as she could.

It never hit him, although there was nothing wrong with her aim. Instead there was a feathered blur from above her and something small and winged snatched the food out of the air, barely a foot from the boy's face.

The boy staggered back in shock. What stayed in Rosa's mind wasn't the look of surprise on his face, or the expressions of thuggish pleasure on the faces of the other boys turning to shock as they rounded the corner, but that her improvised weapon hadn't been snatched out of the air by a claw, or a beak, but by a *prehensile foot*.

The thing hovered in the air for a second, and though it was dark now, Rosa could see that it wasn't a bird. It had the wrong shape entirely. The foot passed the morsel up to a pair of disturbingly human-like hands, and a face turned itself to Rosa baring sharp teeth in what might have been a threat, or a warning, or even a triumphant smirk.

A monkey? wondered Rosa. By the time she had even thought that monkeys don't have wings, the thing, whatever it was, had already flapped its wings and gone.

While the boys were still staring, open-mouthed, Rosa seized her chance and ran. She hoped that there would be an unbolted door somewhere, or a space to hide, but instead there was just another alley, with a high brick wall on one

side and the green-stained glass panes of an ancient conservatory on the other, with not a door in sight.

But she had either taken the corner too fast, or her boots finally betrayed her, for she skidded, and stumbled, tottering clumsily for a moment, before her hand encountered one of the lower panes of glass, which shifted suddenly under her weight.

Looking down, she saw that she had pushed the glass cleanly out of its frame, leaving a gap just big enough to fit through. Converting her stumble into a dive, she shot through the gap and over the glass, landing on her front in something soft, and damp. There was just enough time for her to swiftly fit the pane back into place a second before the boys entered the alley. Their voices were cut off instantly, though she could still see their smeared shapes through the dirty glass.



Chapter Four

Rosa watched the boys looking around themselves stupidly. Then they must have decided that she had climbed the high wall, as, after threatening gestures from their leader, they clambered on to a wheelie bin and one by one disappeared over it. She peered out of the glass for a long time, trying not to steam it up with her heavy ragged breaths, but eventually the sound of their shouting died away altogether, and the boys were gone.

Rosa had landed in what she thought might be a flower bed, although there was more moss and weeds than actual flowers.

Eurgh, she thought, and getting to her feet, began brushing herself down.

Her coat had a large green stain from her dive, and the rest of her clothes were looking distinctly the worse for wear. Her jumper was almost completely shredded.

How do you mend something that was mostly holes to begin with? Rosa wondered. In the end, she just pulled at the wool, winding it around her hand and putting the ball in her coat pocket. There. *How To Take Off A Jumper Without First Taking Off Your Coat*, by Rosa Dew.

A light came on with a 'plink'. Rosa froze. But it was only a small old-fashioned lamppost, planted haphazardly in a patch of bare earth.

Now there was light, Rosa could see that the conservatory was larger than it looked from the outside. Much larger. There were overgrown shrubs here, and small trees, and broad steps too, leading down into a large sunken area, the glass

roof high above her head now. The further in Rosa went, idly touching leaves that seemed to reach out to her as she passed, the more it seemed like a small wood, hidden away under glass. From ahead, she heard the tinkling of water. A dragonfly hung in the air in front of her for a second, eyes glowing like jewels, then shimmered and was gone.

Odd, thought Rosa idly, that somewhere as dull and nondescript as Walmington has a place like this hidden away.

Nothing here was very well maintained. Spades and forks lay on their sides, ivy beginning to creep over them. Statues and large urns were shrouded with creepers, one large round object on a plinth so covered in green leaves it was impossible to make out at all. Rosa pulled away a great branch of ivy and uncovered an enormous skull, fully three feet high. She read a wooden sign on the plinth. 'Giant (Self-' but the rest had rotted away. Rosa reached out and touched the skull's forehead. It was slightly rough, and when she tapped it with a nail, it rang hollow. There was a bird's nest in one of the eye sockets, though the birds themselves had left long ago. The skull was grinning.

Not an unfriendly grin though, thought Rosa. It almost looked rather nice. She let the ivy fall back to cover it once again.

The sound of running water was louder now, as Rosa travelled deeper into the garden, following a path of broken, mossy paving stones that led her eventually to a large fountain, which bubbled happily to itself. The water was clear, and she drank thirstily from her cupped hands. At first, her teeth ached a little at the cold, though soon a warm glow spread through her. She splashed a little more on her face and looked around.

The glass panels ran out against a brick wall here, and Rosa thought she had finally found the house the conservatory was set against. Spotting a large wooden door, she quietly tried twisting the handle, but it was locked. No way out through here.

Flakes of snow were starting to settle on the glass roof. *That's that, then,* she decided. No point heading out into the cold dark night with no food, and no idea where she was even going. Stay here tonight, then sneak back out in the morning.

She wouldn't even have to sleep on the floor. A bench sat just out of sight from the door and a little back from the path. No-one walking past the conservatory would ever see her.

Carved into the bench's back were the words 'Donated by the Stanton family'. Rosa ran her fingers over the carving, then lay down, tucking her bag under her head as a pillow and pulling her coat more tightly around her. *Whoever the Stanton family were, thought Rosa, they made surprisingly comfortable benches.*



Chapter Five

‘I told you there was something out here,’ said a woman’s voice. Deep, and a little rough sounding, but female nonetheless.

Rosa awoke, but had the presence of mind to keep her eyes shut, and her breathing steady.

‘You did.’ A man’s voice this time, clear and crisp.

‘A nose knows,’ said the woman, sounding a little smug.

While they were talking, Rosa had moved her right foot very slowly off the bench and on to the ground. Twining her fingers around the strap of her bag, she suddenly sprang to her feet, ran straight into the biggest, blackest dog she had ever seen in her life, and fell sprawling to the floor.

‘Works better if you open your eyes *before* you start running,’ said the man mildly, squatting on his heels before Rosa. He was a little older than his voice had suggested, but not quite old enough to be properly elderly. He wore patched jeans, an enormous baggy cardigan, and, Rosa trying not to stare too hard at this point, an eyepatch over his left eye, barely covering a terrible scar that ran up into a thinning silver hairline.

Rosa looked for the woman, but could see no-one else around. Just the enormous black dog, sitting about three feet away and watching her calmly, panting a little. For all the impression Rosa had made on it, she may as well have run straight into the wall.

The man squatted on his heels and looked at Rosa dispassionately. 'I'm the Professor,' he said.

'Rosa,' said Rosa. 'Rosa Dew.' She struggled to her feet, aware of the dog shifting its weight slightly as it followed her movements. 'I know I'm trespassing. I'm sorry. I'll leave now, if I may.'

In her fall, she had put her right hand straight into a patch of gravel. It was starting to throb now, and she clutched it tight in her other hand to try and stop the pain.

'Well, you're far too polite to be a burglar,' said the Professor, 'And that hand needs cleaning up. So you can climb back out of the conservatory, or clean that hand up, and leave through my front door, which seems rather more dignified, but it's up to you.'

Rosa thought for a moment. The Professor seemed trustworthy, and had kept his distance, even when he thought she was asleep. And she probably did need to clean herself up a bit.

'I'll use the front door,' she said, and took a step forwards, then froze as the dog made a soft low growl.

'It's all right,' he said, 'that's for my benefit, not yours.' Reaching out a hand, he ruffled the thick fur around the dog's ears. 'T'Maugh's very protective. I don't think she's ever been quite convinced I can take care of myself.'

The dog stopped growling, though its dark eyes remained fixed on Rosa's. The Professor led them back through the garden to the door Rosa had seen the night before, though it was open this time. Just before they entered the dark, wood-panelled corridor ahead of them, something occurred to her.

'Where's the woman?' she asked. 'The one I heard talking before.'

'Excellent question,' said the Professor. Rosa waited for him to continue, but he just smiled at her and kept walking. She wondered if he was mocking her, or if this was some kind of trick, and stopped for a second, frowning. Then she

felt the dog's nose pushing her, between her shoulder blades, its breath warm against the back of her neck, and she had to half-jog to catch up again.

They soon came to a small angular kitchen. The Professor jerked a thumb down a corridor towards a heavy wooden door.

'The official exit,' he said. 'Once I've sorted out your war wound.' He pulled a tattered old stool up to the sink. 'You'd better get that under the tap.'

Rosa sat on the stool and stared around the room as the cold water gushed over her hand.

The kitchen was stocked from floor to ceiling with glass jars, no two the same size, and each one crammed with dried herbs, powders and odder things, some of which Rosa was sure didn't belong in a kitchen.

Were those nasty-looking spiky things dried scorpions, she wondered. Who ate scorpions?

The largest jar of all sat on the middle of the kitchen table in a mass of torn brown paper, having clearly just been unwrapped. It was fully a third as tall as Rosa herself, and held three long, lumpy, black and white striped vegetables. They floated sadly, like depressed marrows.

'They're a kind of cucumber,' explained the Professor. 'Although they taste rather revolting.'

Rosa frowned.

'I get sent things in the post occasionally, you see,' the Professor continued. 'I collect this sort of thing. Or they get drawn here, I forget where one ends and the other begins. Rather irresponsible though, if this jar had smashed... well it doesn't bear thinking about.' He peered at the address label on the paper. 'I do wish senders would include their details,' he said, 'Still, a rare find. A rare find indeed!'

The Professor smiled at Rosa as if she was expected to have a clue what he was talking about.

‘Right,’ she said, carefully. ‘Well, my hand’s clean.’

To distract herself, while the Professor started picking out tiny pieces of gravel with the smallest pair of tweezers she had ever seen, Rosa looked over at the enormous dog. It was lying down in the corner of the room, still watching her, though its expression seemed to have shifted from aggressive caution to a simple doggy mournfulness.

‘What did you say her name was?’ asked Rosa.

‘T’Maugh,’ he replied, not looking up from her hand.

‘Tamore?’

‘T’*Maugh*. Emphasis on the second syllable. It’s a very old name – there’s always been a T’Maugh the Dog, although she’s the last, as far as we know.’

‘Oh,’ said Rosa, and winced as he extracted a particularly sharp bit of stone.

‘Sorry.’

‘It really didn’t hurt that much,’ Rosa lied, then said ‘Has she always been able to speak?’

The Professor froze. ‘HMMMM?’ he said, although he said it just a fraction too late. T’Maugh hadn’t changed her expression a bit. There was a sudden stinging sensation in her palm, and Rosa gasped.

‘Bit of glass,’ said the Professor, and held out a plaster. ‘You’d better put this on. A talking dog you say?’

Rosa put the plaster on, and looked the Professor straight in the eyes.

‘There was a woman talking when you found me this morning,’ she said, more calmly than she felt. ‘And thinking about it, she sounded sort of snuffly, and, well... doggy.’

The Professor shook his head and laughed.

‘Drugs?’ he asked.

‘No,’ said Rosa, through gritted teeth. ‘Not drugs.’

‘Well, it seems like a very odd conclusion to draw,’ said the Professor briskly, ‘but I applaud your imagination, so rare in young people these days, and now I really must show you the door..’

‘I suppose it would have been an odd conclusion to draw,’ said Rosa, folding her arms, ‘if I hadn’t spent the night in a conservatory bigger on the inside than it is on the outside, after I’d just had my only meal stolen by a flying monkey.’

The Professor stared at her. From the floor, T’Maugh gave an enormous yawn, sneezed a couple of times, then fixed Rosa with a baleful gaze.

‘That Gary,’ said the dog. ‘Bloody monkey’s more trouble than it’s worth.’

‘I won’t tell anyone about Gary or T’Maugh, you know,’ said Rosa suddenly. The Professor had made a large pot of dark, smoky-smelling tea. ‘I just... thought it was worth mentioning.’

The big dog snorted, but it wasn’t entirely an unfriendly noise.

‘Well,’ said Rosa. ‘My hand’s much better now. And thanks again for the tea, but I suppose I’d better get going.’

‘Ah,’ said the Professor politely, ‘Of course.’ And then he paused for a moment.

‘Where to?’ he asked.



Chapter Six

Rosa was silent for a moment. T'Maugh worked herself carefully out from under the table and sat down at Rosa's feet, dark eyes looking up at her, sadly. Rosa stroked the dog's head.

Where *was* she going to go? She didn't know anyone, anywhere, *anything* really, other than her name. She tried to tell the Professor something, anything, but not a sound came out of her mouth.

The Professor frowned. 'Are you all right?' he asked. 'Are you ill?'

Rosa swallowed hard. 'I don't really know,' she said. Then she told the Professor and T'Maugh everything that had happened to her since she had woken up on the train.

'Amnesia,' said the Professor, when she had finished. 'No memory. Of where you came from, or where you were going.'

Rosa shook her head. 'Nothing. It's just gone, like-'

'Magic,' said T'Maugh. 'Or white plume moths – they can whip away a memory fast as lightning. Pointless asking if you remember seeing any, of course.'

Rosa stared at her. Magic? Magic *moths*?

The Professor shrugged. 'A blow to the head can have the same effect. Either way, I'll call the authorities. I'm sure we can get this all straightened out. We'll have your memory back in two shakes, you'll see.'

A telephone hung on the wall in the corner of the kitchen. The Professor dialled, and waited a few seconds, then smiled reassuringly at Rosa. ‘Missing Persons please,’ he said. ‘Oh good. Yes, I’ve got a young lady here, and she needs to talk to a police officer, if possible- marvellous. Probably best if she explains it to herself then. I’ll put her straight on.’

He handed Rosa the phone.

‘You have information about a missing person?’ said a voice. It was a man’s voice, and sounded exactly like you’d want a police officer to sound like: solid, maybe a bit heavy-footed, but reliable. Rosa felt better already.

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘It’s me. I woke up on a train, and... I don’t know where I’m from. Or anything. I’ve got amnesia, you see, and... I know it sounds stupid.’

‘Doesn’t sound stupid at all, miss’ said the police officer soothingly. ‘No reports of any missing young ladies locally, but don’t you worry miss, we’ll soon have this all straightened out.’

‘Oh good,’ said Rosa.

‘Now,’ said the voice, ‘Do you remember your name?’

‘Yes,’ said Rosa confidently. ‘It’s Rosa. Rosa Dew.’

There was a long silence.

‘Hello?’ said Rosa.

Eventually the policeman spoke again, but this time there was an edge to his voice.

‘Think it’s funny, wasting police time, do you?’ he said. He sounded annoyed.

Rosa blinked. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘That’s my name, “Rosa Dew”’

‘Of course it is,’ said the policeman. ‘Do you know what mine is?’

‘Er...’ said Rosa. ‘I’m afraid not.’

‘It’s “Mickey Mouse”’ he said.

There was a click, and then nothing.

Rosa stared at the phone, then at the Professor.

‘He hung up,’ she said. The Professor frowned, took the phone from her and redialled.

‘Someone having a bad day,’ he said, a little doubtfully, then spoke into the phone.

‘Missing persons,’ he said. ‘Yes, I’ve got a young lady here, name of Rosa Dew. I-’

He stared at the phone.

‘They hung up,’ Rosa guessed.

Quietly, he replaced the handset on the phone and nodded. ‘How odd.’

‘It’s my real name,’ said Rosa. ‘I’m sure it is. It’s the only thing I *am* sure of.’

‘Hmm,’ said the Professor. ‘Well, so much for the authorities. You really have no memories at all? Parents? Maybe the names of any friends? A school perhaps?’

Rosa shook her head.

‘Well we’re back to the ‘blow on the head’ theory,’ said the Professor. ‘Any soreness? Noticed any bruises lately?’

She shook her head again. ‘I haven’t even seen my reflection since...’ Her voice trailed away.



Chapter Seven

The house had a hall full of mirrors, though for some reason, the Professor thought it best for Rosa not to see her face for the first time in any of them. They were mostly covered with sheets anyway. Instead, T'Maugh led Rosa to the bathroom, while the Professor went off to wash up the tea things.

'Do you want me come in with you?' asked the dog.

'I think I'd rather you waited outside, if you don't mind,' said Rosa. She wasn't sure what she was going to see, and if there was someone around, she would have to be brave about it. And Rosa wasn't sure she had that much bravery left.

She took a shower first, watching the dirty water running past her feet getting gradually cleaner. Long hair brushed against her face as she dried herself, but she put a hand up and pulled it back, before wrapping herself in a large towelling bathrobe.

Now. Probably best to get the whole thing over in one go. Still Rosa took a few deep breaths before pulling up the stool and wiping the steam off the bathroom mirror.

Her hair was so black as to have a slight blue tinge, and very long, reaching down her back, slightly past her elbows. Her skin was pale, and her face a little rounder than she would have liked. Her eyes, she was disappointed to note, were a rather normal-looking dark brown. However, peering deeper she

noticed tiny flecks of green, and cheered up a little. Nose was quite small, ears... just ears. Rosa looked carefully for signs of bruising around the temples, or a telltale scar that would indicate... what? An operation? A blow to the back of the head? But there was nothing.

So, a normal face then. Pretty-ish, but not beautiful, though there was room for a lot of changes yet. Rosa realised with surprising calmness that she didn't even know how old she was. Twelve? Thirteen maybe? She hoped her nose would grow a little. Perhaps even some discernible cheekbones at some point. *Still*, thought Rosa, *I suppose I should be grateful for clear skin and no obvious deformities.*

Rosa stepped down from the stool and unbolted the door. T'Maugh looked up.

'I know what I look like now,' said Rosa confidently. 'And I think I'm probably about fifteen.'

T'Maugh grunted. 'You're thirteen if you're a day,' she said. 'Which you might be.'

Rosa suddenly noticed something. 'Where are my clothes?'

'In the nearest charity shop, if I'd had my way,' said T'Maugh, 'But I thought you'd probably want them washed – unless you're planning on sleeping on more benches and then rolling around in gravel again.'

'Not *specifically*,' said Rosa, puzzled.

T'Maugh nosed a bag of clothing forward into the steamy bathroom. 'Nieces from the right side of the family,' she said. 'They usually manage to leave something behind. Not sure you'll like them though. None of the Professor's family tends to dress like an heiress at a jumble sale.'

'Never mind,' said Rosa loftily, 'I'm sure I shall manage.'

T'Maugh looked at her, and frowned. 'Come back to the kitchen when you're done,' she said. 'We need to talk.'

Rosa barely made it into the kitchen before a small leathery hand pushed her rudely to one side and unscrewed the lid of the scorpion jar. Gary apparently liked eating three scorpions at once, and made sure to keep his mouth open so Rosa could hear just how much he was enjoying them.

‘Rude,’ she said firmly, frowning at him. The Professor had made another pot of tea, and put out a large spread of buttered toast. After Rosa had taken her third slice, the plate’s pattern had begun to emerge. It was very abstract, looking a little like a simplified picture of a flower. *Although from another angle*, thought Rosa, *it looks a little bit like the head of an owl...*

‘Sorry,’ said Gary insincerely, and tried to stuff a fourth dried black *thing* in his already-full mouth. Almost immediately, there was a sudden hacking cough, and to Rosa’s disgust, a piece of half-chewed scorpion tail flew across the table and caught in her hair.

Rosa sighed, and reached for a roll of kitchen paper. Bad enough the winged monkey had made off with most of the previous night’s food, she wasn’t going to let him spoil her breakfast as well. The Professor had made him apologise for taking her pasty, and they had shaken hands. Rosa had tried to be civil, after all, if the youths hadn’t been distracted, she might never have got away, but Gary had barely muttered an apology and grudgingly shaken Rosa’s hand with his small hairy paw before returning to what appeared to be some kind of space invaders game on the mobile phone that hung on a cord around his neck.

The Professor frowned, and Rosa suddenly realised he was looking at her clothes.

‘Are these all right?’ she asked, worried. Rosa had picked out a pair of jeans, and a baggy old t-shirt. It seemed to be the design on the t-shirt which had caught the Professor’s attention. It was a cartoon picture of a lion.

‘It’s from a film, I think,’ she told him, ‘Or a musical, I’m not sure which. Would you rather I changed it?’

‘Not at all,’ said the Professor quickly, although something about the t-shirt’s design seemed to have thrown him a little, leaving an odd expression on his face. At the time, Rosa thought he looked very sad, although later she realised it was more as if he had remembered something, which hurt to think about, but was a good memory nonetheless.

‘Anyway,’ said the Professor, with a sudden heartiness, ‘*someone’s* looking for you. Have you ever heard of the Earl of Dorincourt?’

An Earl’s looking for me, thought Rosa. Her heart leaped.

‘Is he my father? Am I rich then? Am I a-’

‘Princess?’ said T’Maugh, a little sarcastically, and Rosa realised with embarrassment that this was exactly what she had been about to say. Anyway, an Earl’s daughters wouldn’t be princesses, would they? They’d be... Earlettes. Earlesses? Earlinas? The Professor handed Rosa a slightly tatty roll of paper, which she unfolded.

‘They must have gone up all over town this morning,’ he said. ‘I popped out to get a paper, check for missing persons notices. Nothing in the papers, but on the way back these were all over the place.’

The flyer (it wasn’t quite big enough to count as a poster) was badly printed, with the text running at a slight angle to the edges of the paper, the words faded as if it had been copied many times.

‘LOST GIRL. ANSWERS TO THE NAME OF ‘ROSA DEW’. OUR LOVELY ROSA HAS A ‘QUIRKY’ FASHION SENSE AND A ‘CAN-DO’ ATTITUDE. SHE IS MUCH MISSED. REWARD. PLEASE CONTACT ‘DORINCOURT’ (EARL).’

Below was a phone number and crude drawing of Rosa, really more of a cartoon, although it perfectly depicted the clothes she had been wearing when she woke up on the train.

‘This one had been stuck up upside-down,’ said the Professor, ‘which was odd.’

“‘Quirky’?” said Rosa indignantly. The Professor shrugged.

‘It could have been worse,’ he said. ‘They could have said “wacky”.’

‘Or “zany”,’ said T’Maugh innocently from behind her. Rosa spun round to glare at her, but the dog’s large brown eyes met hers innocently.

‘Anyway,’ said the Professor, ‘the important thing-’

‘Or “stupid”.’

‘Yes, *thank* you Gary, the important thing is that clearly someone is looking for you.’

Rosa looked at the poster again. ‘Can I keep this?’

He nodded. ‘Of course.’

The Professor and T’Maugh knew a little about the Earl, it seemed, although they had never met him. The Earl was a recluse, the Professor told her, and had become even more so after the death of his mother, which gave Rosa a little pang of sympathy – *he was without a family too*. He was very wealthy, inheriting the Dorincourt family fortune at an early age (Rosa tried not to look too interested at that part, but T’Maugh sneezed again, so possibly she hadn’t quite managed it). The Professor went on to talk about the long family line, and their interesting history, and it was quite a while before Rosa was able to say:

‘So could I be... a niece? Or a great-niece?’

The Professor shook his head. ‘I don’t think you’re related. I spoke to his secretary. Sounds more like the Earl might be... your guardian?’

Rosa tried to contain her disappointment. ‘Did he say anything else?’

‘He wasn’t terribly forthcoming, to be honest. But he’s on his way right now. I’ll put on more tea.’

As the Professor went off, Rosa stared down at her picture. She probably wasn't royalty then. But she could be *anybody*. She could be a famous child actress, kidnapped for a ransom, then bashed on the head as she managed to escape. Or a model (*although I'm probably not quite tall enough for that*). Or some kind of prodigy, with a secret formula locked away in her head. Or...

'Do you think I might be a pop star?' she asked. Gary snorted and slouched out of the room, his wings not-quite-accidentally knocking a cup off a shelf near Rosa's head as he went. Rosa managed to catch the cup, carefully replacing it as T'Maugh looked on with a nod.

'There's your 'can-do' attitude,' she said approvingly. 'Won't-do, that's the problem with that monkey. Thinks the world owes him a favour.'

'T'Maugh!' said Rosa, annoyed, 'I said, do you think I might be a pop star?'

The dog sat on her haunches at Rosa's feet. Their eyes were almost level.

'Sing us a note,' she said. Rosa took a deep breath.

'Ahhhhhhhhhh,' she said.

'No,' said T'Maugh.



Chapter Eight

‘We’ve all been desperately worried about you, Rosa my dear,’ said the Earl. ‘Running away like that. You’ve led us quite the merry dance.’

The first thing Rosa noticed about the Earl, after the Professor had taken her through now-dark corridors to the comfortable map-lined room where their visitor was waiting, was his suit. It was sort of black, but that was like saying that the universe was ‘sort of’ big, or that having one’s arm cut off would ‘sort of’ hurt. There was a vague impression of a slim man, a little taller, and perhaps a little older than the Professor, although his skin was somehow pinker, and more expensive-looking. He was either bald, or his fair hair was cropped so close to his skull as to make no difference, but really it was all about the suit.

It was so incredibly black, it almost embodied blackness, as though the Earl was rich enough to have had the suit made directly out of the very *idea* of black. The Professor had lit a couple of small electric lamps, but they barely seemed to illuminate the dark figure sitting neatly in a poorly-upholstered chair in the corner of the room. The shape of the Earl was like a hole cut out of the world.

Merry dance? thought Rosa. *Real people don’t talk like that! He’ll call me a cheeky young scamp in a minute.*

The Earl pulled a silk handkerchief from his breast pocket and Rosa leaned forward slightly, hypnotised as he gently flicked a speck of dust off his shoes. These too were black, but glossy, reflecting all the light that the suit

absorbed, shiny and deadly as an oil slick. The handkerchief vanished back into the pocket as if it had never existed, and the Earl coughed quietly. Rosa realised she had been staring, and flushed, embarrassed.

‘We?’ said the Professor mildly. ‘Us?’

The Earl sighed. ‘The servants and I,’ he said. ‘They’re the closest thing I have to family, these days. You must come and visit some time, Master S_____. My collection of oddments is a poor thing, no comparison to your own, but I’m sure you would find some of the pieces amusing.’

‘Indeed,’ replied the Professor, with no real enthusiasm. ‘I barely even make it into the town these days. I’m afraid this old place does keep me fully occupied.’

‘Must be a full time job just keeping it clean,’ smiled the Earl. ‘I’m surprised you don’t sell off a few of the smaller pieces, get some help in.’

The Professor said nothing. Rosa couldn’t bear it any longer.

‘Who am I?’ she cried, much louder than she had intended.

The Earl frowned. Rosa could see nothing on his face but honest surprise.

‘You don’t *know*?’

‘There’s been some memory loss,’ said the Professor.

The Earl leaned forward, concerned, and saw the plaster on Rosa’s hand. ‘Rosa, are you quite well? Have you been hurt?’

‘There’s nothing wrong with me.,’ said Rosa, ‘I just... don’t remember anything before a few days ago. I mean, I know that doesn’t *sound* good, but-’

The Earl shook his head, aghast. ‘S_____, I really must insist you let me take young Rosa back with me this instant. Clearly this whole episode has come about due to some awful accident. My child, let me look at you!’

He uncoiled in his chair suddenly and took Rosa’s chin in his hand, turning her face left then right, as if hoping to spot some terrible injury. His

fingers were long, and thin, and held Rosa like a vice. She found herself staring at a framed diagram of a ship just above the Earl's head. It had the head and tail of a great winged serpent.

T'Maugh was by Rosa's side in a second, but it was the Professor who reached out for the Earl's wrist. In an instant, Rosa felt herself freed, and the Earl was suddenly back in his chair, his hands held up in a placatory gesture.

'I'd like to speak to Rosa alone, if you don't mind. The situation is a little... delicate.'

The Professor frowned, and T'Maugh made a low growl, but Rosa nodded.

'Please,' she said to them. 'I'm sure I'll be quite safe. I just need to know.'

Reluctantly, the Professor nodded.

'We can wait just outside, I suppose,' he said, and opened the door. T'Maugh gave the Earl a long hard look before following him outside.

'Shout out if you need us,' she said, and the door closed. Rosa and the Earl were alone.

'Are my parents alive?' asked Rosa eagerly. 'Do I have brothers? Or sisters? Is there a school I go to? What about friends, or-'

The Earl held up a hand, and Rosa stopped gabbling, embarrassed.

'I can tell you *everything*,' he said. 'But there will be a cost.'

'I don't understand,' said Rosa. 'You want money?'

It didn't make sense. The Earl was rich, he had to be. But he was shaking his head.

'Your new friend, the Professor,' the Earl said, 'is playing a very dangerous game. He has an item I want. *I need*. And I believe you can help me get hold of it. Your help to me would be more valuable than any amount of money.'

‘Please,’ said Rosa. She could feel her heart pounding in her chest now. ‘I just want to know what happened before I got on the train. Where I came from. Who I am.’

But the Earl was implacable. ‘A red notebook,’ he said, as if Rosa hadn’t said anything at all. ‘It’s here somewhere in the Professor’s collection, I know it. You don’t need to tell the Professor you’re looking for it. He probably won’t even notice when it goes missing. But if you agree to help me in the matter, I will tell you everything you want to know, right here and now.’

Rosa stared at him. ‘You want me to lie to the Professor?’ she asked, bewildered. ‘And T’Maugh? And then steal from them?’

‘I wouldn’t have put it exactly like that,’ said the Earl. ‘But that’s the essence of the deal, yes. Agree to help me, and in just a few seconds I can answer all your questions. And I know *everything*, don’t think I’m bluffing.’

He leaned forward, staring at her intently. ‘What do you say?’ he said.

What a lovely voice he has, thought Rosa. *All soft and sweet. Like honey.*

‘No,’ she said. ‘Of course not.’

It would have been less surprising if the Earl had looked angry, or upset, or disappointed. Instead, he looked almost... impressed.

‘A brave choice, my dear,’ he said.

‘It wasn’t a *choice*,’ said Rosa. ‘It was a stupid thing to ask.’

‘Oh, there’s always a choice,’ said the Earl calmly. ‘A quick, easy path, or a long, difficult one. I’m afraid, my dear, you have chosen the latter. Let me wish you all the luck in the world. You’re going to need it.’

Rosa just stared at him. There was a knock at the door.

‘Are you all right, Rosa?’ came the Professor’s voice from outside. ‘Do you want us to come in?’

‘By all means!’ called the Earl. ‘I believe our business here is concluded, for now. I wonder if Rosa would mind waiting in the hall while I wrap things up?’

The Professor and T’Maugh entered. ‘Thinks he owns the place,’ the dog muttered under her breath. Both looked at Rosa, who was only able to shrug helplessly.

‘Don’t trust him,’ she whispered, as she brushed past them on the way out. She wasn’t even sure if the Professor heard her, but T’Maugh’s ears twitched, and her heavy tail thumped briefly against Rosa’s legs as they passed.

‘A book has gone missing from my collection,’ began the Earl, as though Rosa was no longer even in the room.

Rosa stared at him for a second, then left, quietly shutting the door behind her.

The entrance hall, like the rest of the building, was cluttered with objects: paintings of all sizes, vases and jugs crammed with dried flowers, and the covered mirrors stretching all the way to the front door. Every object here, thought Rosa, has some strange history to it, some weird tale about where it had come from, or what it had been used for in the past. She was the only thing that didn’t fit.

Sitting down on a bare wooden seat, Rosa waited for the Professor and the Earl to finish their discussion. On her lap she clutched her strawberry-coloured handbag and the holdall containing her freshly washed clothes. Everything she owned in the world, all ready to take with her when the Earl swept her off to her real life. But that wasn’t going to happen now.

Just to Rosa’s right was a stand made from what looked like scratchily-carved bone, supporting a large ball, made from green glass. Overcome by tiredness, and sick despair, she leant her head against it and closed her eyes.

‘- irreplaceable, of course.’

It was the Earl’s voice, loud and clear and sinister enough to be right next to her. Rosa jerked her head up, and the sound stopped immediately.

She stared at the glass ball. The dusty surface had been cleaned a little where she had leant her head against it. There was an emerald light at the globe’s heart that hadn’t been there before.

Gently, Rosa blew more dust away, then laid her hands flat against the smooth glass. The voice returned, this time with an image swimming to the surface: the Professor and the Earl, in the map room.

‘*Someone* stole it,’ said the Earl. The picture was greenish, and wobbled slightly, as though underwater, but Rosa could see he was sitting back in the chair now. T’Maugh and the Professor hadn’t moved.

‘I’m merely asking you to keep an eye out. I’m sure people send you all sorts of ... interesting items.’

‘I don’t deal in stolen property,’ said the Professor firmly. The Earl looked alarmed at the very idea.

‘Of course not! I’m not accusing you of anything untoward. Just informing you that if it were to come into your possession, you could make both a tidy sum, and sleep the healthy sleep of the just, were you to return it to its rightful owner.’

‘It’s odd,’ said the Professor, rather carelessly. ‘I thought you’d grown out of books, put them aside as childish things. Rather a shame I thought. From what I read, you seemed to enjoy them as a child.’

‘Then forget what you’ve read,’ snapped the Earl, suddenly annoyed.

The Professor’s expression did not change. ‘A sentimental attachment,’ he said smoothly. ‘I quite understand. Now what size is it? Quattro? Folio? Elephant?’

Elephant? thought Rosa to herself, and smiled a little for the first time. The Professor seemed to have very quietly got the upper hand of this discussion.

‘It’s a red notebook,’ said the Earl, through gritted teeth. ‘With an embossed “A” on the cover. In gold. Those are all the details you need.’

‘Or are those all the details you have?’ asked the Professor calmly. ‘You know, I would hate to think this book was never in your possession at all. That you were in some way using me to add to your own collection.’

The Earl stood, though he was careful not to get too close to T’Maugh.

‘I’ll have that book,’ he said.

‘But why do you want the girl?’ asked the Professor.

Rosa held her breath. The Earl shook his head, sadly. ‘I feel responsible for her,’ he said. ‘Her parents never wanted her, you know. She stole from them, regularly. So they threw her out.’

Rosa stared into the glass ball, feeling something nasty rising in her throat. She swallowed, and made herself focus.

‘I took young Rosa in,’ said the Earl simply. ‘My staff worked hard to look after her, gave her everything she could have wanted – and she stole from them too. Just little things at first, clothes, sunglasses, a ridiculous strawberry handbag-’

Rosa gasped. ‘It’s not true!’ she whispered.

But she had no memory, no way of knowing how she had got the things she had. In fact, what if *she* had taken the Earl’s book? Professor S_____ was clearly some kind of private collector, maybe she had planned on selling it to him. But in that case, where was the book? Rosa’s mind reeled with doubt.

‘Rosa Dew is a liar, and a thief,’ said the Earl, softly.

'I'm not!' shouted Rosa. 'I would never do those things!' But a small treacherous voice in the back of her head whispered: *you might. You don't know for sure, do you?*

The Professor frowned, looking directly into her gaze.

'Rosa?' he said. 'I...' Doubt crossed his face. It was just for a second, but it was long enough. Rosa picked up the holdall, took her coat down from the hook by the door and fled into the night.



Chapter Nine

It was no longer snowing, but the pavements were treacherous with ice. A long grey car was parked directly outside, right up on the pavement, and Rosa skidded slightly, slamming her hands on the bonnet to prevent herself running straight into it.

A small figure hunched in the passenger seat bared white teeth at her from the darkness. Despite the tendrils of long hair, she could see it was a boy, and at first Rosa guessed him to be about her own age. But she saw his eyes. They were far, *far* older.

Rosa took her hands off the bonnet, and backed slowly around the car. Then she turned and ran towards the sea front.

Stupid, Rosa thought, rubbing away tears with cold hands, to let yourself believe, even for a moment, that you might belong with the Professor and T'Maugh and Gary. And now they had been poisoned against her, and whatever the Earl had said, she didn't belong with him either. The terrible thing was, although in her heart she was sure what the Earl had said about him taking her in at Dorincourt, and her running away was a lie, in her head she knew there was no way to tell for sure. She had been foolish to expect the Earl to save her, to give her a home, and a past. No-one would care about her. She was on her own again.

But then something else occurred to her. What if the real Rosa, the person she had been before waking up on the train, wasn't like her at all?

‘I could be nothing to do with the Earl at all,’ she thought. ‘And still be a liar or a thief. Or worse.’

But right now, she had to take care of herself. With a final, decisive sniff, Rosa decided to head to the chip shop. There were a few coins left from the money the ticket-collector had given her, but barely enough for one more meal for tomorrow. The chip shop lady had seemed, well, if not exactly kind, not unkind anyway, and she might want a hand serving the food or cleaning up. Either way, Rosa just needed enough money for a train ticket away from this place, away from the Earl. The Professor would never want her in his home again, not after what he had been told, but she could send the borrowed clothes back to him, so he would know she hadn’t stolen from him at least.

Rosa jingled the sad handful of coins together, then put them back in her pocket. She knew this road. Things were looking up already, she told herself, and for a moment, she very nearly believed it.

The chip shop was closed, of course. Rosa pressed her face against the glass, and peered desperately into the darkness within, even banged her fist against the window, but to no avail. When she stepped back, she realised that a poster had been stuck to the very top of the window, about two feet above her head.

‘LOST GIRL’ it read ‘ANSWERS TO THE NAME OF ‘ROSA-’
The rest of the poster had been torn down. It was in a screwed-up ball on the pavement, half-frozen into the ice.

One place was open, a bar, brightly lit with a single long window stretching parallel to the seafront, so (Rosa guessed) people could drink their drinks watching the sun go down. The sun had gone down a long time ago, but inside the bar some people were still drinking: a group of seven or eight women, older than Rosa, but still young. They were dressed in brightly-coloured clothes,

and sipping brightly-coloured drinks, and although Rosa couldn't hear a word, they seemed to be talking lightly and cheerfully as though they didn't have a care in the world. A sign on the window read 'Help Needed'. There were no posters with her name on them, torn or otherwise. Rosa pushed the door open and went in.



Chapter Ten

‘You’re not old enough,’ said the barman, flatly. He was a young man, and seemed barely aware of Rosa’s existence at all. His attention was firmly on the young women sitting at the table by the window.

‘I don’t need to serve alcohol,’ said Rosa patiently. ‘Just do some tidying, or cleaning. I just need some money for a train ticket.’

‘I *told* you-’ said the barman, but one of the women had come over to the bar to get some more drinks, and his attention switched instantly to her.

The woman, however, looked down at Rosa, and smiled. She was beautiful – in fact all the women at the table were beautiful, but this woman was taller than the others and had a smooth grace to her movements that made Rosa feel small, and scruffy, and a little bit ashamed.

‘Aren’t you slightly young for cocktails?’ asked the woman, smiling. She had long blonde hair that flowed smoothly to her shoulders, where it ended in a perfectly straight line. *As though it had been cut off by someone using a steel ruler,* thought Rosa, awed, *or quite possibly a laser beam.*

The woman wore a simple strappy dress, which looked as if it had been designed specifically for her just moments ago, and long velvet gloves that reached to her elbows. Rosa particularly liked the gloves. They didn’t quite go with the dress, but in a way that looked as if the wearer knew that, but just didn’t care. Rosa looked into the woman’s bright green eyes and found herself tonguetied, and very slightly in love.

‘She’s a stray.’ The barman flashed an insincere smile at Rosa, and a more sincere one at the woman. ‘Ought to chuck her out really, but-’

‘You’ll do no such thing!’ The woman sounded outraged, and bent down to Rosa’s level – not patronisingly, but so they could talk as two women of the world, discussing grown-up matters. Rosa really wanted to ask her where she got her gloves.

‘Do you want something to drink?’ asked the woman. Rosa squirmed, embarrassed.

‘I don’t think I’m supposed to drink cocktails,’ she said, but even as she said it, she thought what a stupid rule it was. Why shouldn’t she drink what she wanted? But the woman smiled at her.

‘I was thinking more of a hot chocolate,’ she said. ‘Now why don’t you tell me all about yourself.’

‘Here you go,’ said the barman, placing the mug down in front of Rosa. It was frothy, and the marshmallow plonked in the top was already starting to melt. The barman reached out with a hand, as if to ruffle Rosa’s hair, but she stared at him so fiercely he changed his mind, and darted back behind the bar, where he continued to make pathetic expressions at the women. *That man*, Rosa thought, *might be just a little bit stupid*.

‘Rosa woke up on a train,’ said the blonde woman, very seriously. ‘She has no memory of where she came from, or what happened to her.’

The other women shook their heads sympathetically. Now she was closer, Rosa could see they were playing some kind of card game, although none of the designs on the cards looked at all familiar. She caught a glimpse of a cup, and what looked like a stick of some kind, before one of the women smiled at her and tucked the deck away into a metallic handbag. All the women were beautiful and each was dressed in clothes so simple and elegant that Rosa knew they must have come from the greatest fashion houses in the world.

‘You poor dear,’ said a dark-haired American woman. She put her hand over Rosa’s, and held it firmly. This woman wasn’t wearing gloves and her nails had an odd greenish tinge. The blonde woman shot her a quick look of what looked almost like annoyance, then smiled at Rosa.

‘Would you like some food?’ she asked. ‘Or more hot chocolate?’

‘Or some perfume?’ said an oriental woman.

‘Perfume?’ said Rosa, confused. Suddenly a silver spray appeared, and a cloud of scent enveloped Rosa. It was a little stronger than she would have liked, but not unpleasant, and it seemed to make all the women relax.

‘This is fine, thanks,’ said Rosa, trying not to cough. ‘So are you all fashion models?’

The women all looked pleased.

‘Oh, this vonn’s a keeper!’ said a woman in a thick German accent, and pushed a piece of gingerbread across the table towards her.

‘No thank you,’ said Rosa, as the head had already been bitten off. Still, they seemed so *nice*.

Rosa felt herself grinning, rather stupidly. It was funny, the women were so pretty, she felt happy just being in their company. Maybe the perfume was making her a little dizzy.

Rosa looked over at the American woman. ‘You can probably let go of my hand now,’ she said politely. The woman smiled at her, but said nothing. Her hand continued to grip Rosa’s tightly, and the nails now felt just a little less like nails, and a little more like claws. Rosa was feeling the start of quite a bad headache.

Rosa opened her mouth to protest, then saw something that made her shut it again with a snap. On the back of the chair behind the American woman was perched a small brown mouse.

She looked at the mouse. The mouse looked back at her. And then, to Rosa's utter astonishment, the mouse gave her a wink.

After a moment, Rosa winked back. The American frowned.

'Bit of perfume went in my eye,' said Rosa innocently. Her head was starting to clear a little now, and she was beginning to realise that these women were much more dangerous than they seemed. It had been a mistake to hesitate in Walmington, even for a second. There was nothing here for her but danger. As soon as she had the opportunity, she had to get out of this place: first the bar, and then the town.

The mouse put a finger to his lips, or where a mouse's lips would be if he had any, then pointed up at the ceiling.

Rosa looked up. A second mouse was crawling down the electric cord to the light fitting directly above her table. A third was discreetly making its way along the picture rail, also to a position above the table. And a fourth, leaping from chair to chair, and a fifth, using the salt and pepper pots on nearby tables as cover.

The first mouse coughed once, loudly and deliberately. The women turned as one to stare at the creature, which held up one digit for attention, and began to tap-dance.

There was a moment of silence, as the women, and Rosa, and the barman all gaped, then the other mice hurled themselves from their hiding places, teeth bared. The effect was instant, as though an electric current had been passed through them. Chairs went everywhere as the women leapt to their feet, screaming not just with terror but also with absolute rage. Fashionable boots were kicking out, trying to stamp down on the creatures which were now running in and out of expensive wigs, biting at designer label clothes, and in one instance, sneakily drinking out of a cocktail glass. These mice weren't just brave, they had *style*.

‘Kill them!’ screeched the blonde woman. ‘Kill every last one of them!’

The American was holding firmly on to Rosa, her face moving like a mask, something beneath it rippling. She wasn’t really a woman, none of them were. They were something older and darker, something that had learned to take human form.

A mouse hurled itself at the woman-thing, burying its teeth in her wrist. The creature let go, howling, and the mouse jumped quickly on to Rosa’s shoulder as she ran for the entrance. She hesitated in the doorway, and it scuttled down her sleeve on to the back of a chair.

‘Go quickly ma’am,’ he said, in what was quite an authoritative voice for a mouse. ‘We’ll clean up here.’

Behind him, the American had caught the sleeve of her dress on a lit candle, and it went up with a whoosh. The barman, who had been gaping all this time, snapped out of his trance and threw a bucket of slushy ice-water over her. The flames went out, but oddly the woman continued to burn, her skin running and dripping even as the barman fell back with shock, the empty bucket falling to the tiled floor with a clang.

‘Cor, haven’t seen a good melting for years,’ said the mouse happily, and rattled off a snappy salute. ‘Sergeant Watkins of the Roving Operations Department of the Extra-Planar Neutralisation Taskforce at your service.’

‘Best get a wiggle on,’ the mouse continued, as the blonde woman looked over at Rosa and snarled. ‘We do have an exit strategy, but it’s really for your actual mouse-sized units, if you takes my drift.’



Chapter Eleven

Rosa ran back towards the train station. This time she was looking out for weirdness.

That group of burly men in short sleeves could have been just a bunch of local lads out for a pint. Or the tattoos, and glittering gold earrings, and the wooden stump one of them had for a leg, and the parrot the tallest one had perched on his shoulder, could have indicated a rather different line of business.

Those figures, huddled at the steps of the war memorial, could have been tramps. They wore odd, mismatched clothes, and were bundled up tightly against the cold. It made sense that Rosa couldn't see an inch of exposed skin: it was a cold night. But as they turned to watch her, surely she should have been able to make out at least one pair of eyes? The tallest of them wore an old pair of skiing goggles, but it wasn't the same thing at all. Scratched lenses tracked Rosa as she passed, carefully keeping to the other side of the road.

Perhaps she should go back and tell the Professor what she had seen? But he wouldn't listen to her now, and she couldn't blame him. She bit her lip to distract herself and thought about getting on the next train instead.

I hope it's not the same ticket-collector, thought Rosa. He had been kind to her, and the thought of getting on to his train, this time with the full knowledge that she was trying to cheat him, was too much. She would check the train first, she thought, and if he was on it, she would wait for another. And she would go wherever it took her. The train would be safe, and warm, and at least she would be moving. Then she could think about what to do next.

No trains were waiting at the platform when Rosa got there. She sat quietly on an iron bench and hugged the holdall to herself as she stared straight ahead, shivering and trying desperately to remember something about her past. Anything would do. She could read, and presumably write, so someone must have taught her, but the word 'school' was... just a word. It had no meaning. She knew her name, but *how* she knew it was a mystery. After a while she gave up. It was too cold to think.

A mouse crept on to the platform, just a few yards from Rosa's boots. It was smaller than the one that had talked to her in the bar, and greyer.

'Hello,' Rosa said to it. The mouse froze, although it didn't seem to know where the noise came from. Rosa bent towards it, wishing she had some food to give it.

'Do you-' she said, but as soon as she started talking, the mouse shot through a crack in the wall and vanished.

Just a mouse, she thought.

With a sudden rumbling sound, a train appeared round the corner, travelling at high speed. Rosa grabbed her bags and stepped to the edge of the platform – then had to leap back again as it became obvious the train wasn't going to stop.

The coaches flashed past. Only a few people were travelling this time of night, and the brightly lit windows flashed their lives up like a slideshow: a group of heavy-set men wearing brightly coloured sporting tops, clearly on their way back from a football match, some teenage boys, shoving each other around, a woman sitting alone, listening to her personal stereo, a mother and young daughter looking out of the window, waving.

Rosa raised her hand to wave back, but the train had already gone. She let her arm fall to her side and turned around.

The Professor and T'Maugh were sitting on the bench. Both looked at her calmly. T'Maugh's tail wagged once, then she yawned. Rosa stared at them.

‘A friend of mine, used to be a chief constable, retired a couple of years ago quite near Dorincourt’s estate,’ said the Professor conversationally, scratching the top of T’Maugh’s head. ‘Not that the Earl knows that. Anyway, said ex-policeman owes me a couple of favours. Used to bully me at school until I learned to stand up for myself. So I made a phone call, and he made some more phone calls, and the local police know nothing about young girls missing, or any theft of a handbag, or sunglasses, or a notebook. He drinks in the same local as a young McGregor, the head gardener there. Made some tactful enquiries, and the chap didn’t know what he was talking about. Never seen anyone fitting your description near the place.’

‘But he knew my name,’ said Rosa. ‘He knows *something* about me.’

‘He asked you to work for him, didn’t he?’ said the Professor. ‘I’m guessing he said he’d tell you everything, if you’d... help him, against us.’

Rosa nodded. ‘He said you had something of his. The red notebook. Do you know what he’s talking about?’

The Professor shook his head. ‘Not a clue. It must be important if he wants it that badly. Or wants whatever information is inside it.’

‘And if he wants it that badly,’ said T’Maugh, ‘And we find it first, I’m sure we could trade it to him for all the information he has.’

‘Agreed,’ said the Professor. Then he took something out of his pocket.

‘It’s a ticket,’ he said. ‘It’ll take you anywhere you want to go in England. A single, I’m afraid.’ He held it out to her.

Rosa looked at the grey strip of card. It was a kind thought. Of course, she couldn’t deny she had been hoping to be asked to come back with them, that her heart had leapt upon seeing them again, but this was better than nothing. Much better than nothing. So why did she feel that it was so much harder to leave them this time?

‘That’s... very good of you,’ she said. She didn’t know what else to say. She took it, then frowned.

‘There’s no date on it,’ she said. T’Maugh rolled her eyes.

‘It’s not for *now*, you plum,’ she said, although she didn’t say it unkindly. The Professor looked horrified at the thought.

‘Good lord no! T’Maugh and I would like it very much if you came back with us. We have plenty of spare rooms, and we’d like to help you if we may. Your situation looks increasingly like our area of expertise.’

Area of expertise? thought Rosa.

She stared at them. ‘Are you sure?’

The Professor nodded.

‘Of course you may leave if you want,’ he said. ‘It’s important you make the choice, and I must warn you, Walmington may not be the safest place for anyone to be right now.’

Rosa looked at them. ‘There are some weird people in town. I wasn’t sure if they’d always been here, or if...’

‘If the Earl brought them.’

Rosa nodded, and the Professor scratched his chin thoughtfully.

‘They’re not local. I should have spotted them sooner, but I’m afraid my collection takes rather a lot of my attention. Most remiss of me. No, I think the Earl has made himself some new friends, and has been quietly moving them into Walmington over the last few days. He doesn’t like to get his hands dirty if he can avoid it, I think. But I have allies too.’

T’Maugh walked forward, and sat at Rosa’s feet. She was able to look Rosa almost directly in the eyes.

‘Even Gary said he’d be delighted to help out,’ she said.

Rosa frowned. ‘Really?’ she asked.

‘Well, almost,’ said T’Maugh, and sneezed distractedly. ‘When I explained that his whole head would fit into my mouth, he sort of came round to the idea.’

Rosa paused, looked down the railway track, curving away out of sight, then tucked the ticket into her pocket. She felt warm suddenly, and happy, and alive.

‘I’d love to come back with you,’ she said.

The Professor’s car was small and purple, and barely made a sound as they headed out of the station car park. The Professor started to talk about the vehicle’s amazing electric engine, but the events of the day, coupled with the warmth of T’Maugh’s heavy head on Rosa’s lap meant that she was soon fast asleep.



Chapter Twelve

Next morning, the Professor was standing by the cuttings table in the conservatory, pruning a small tree with pale silvery leaves. He plucked a small brown fruit and popped it in his mouth.

‘Toffee,’ he said rather indistinctly. ‘A little late in the season, but good nonetheless. Would you like one?’

Rosa shook her head politely.

She had lain under the covers for a long time that morning. The spare room window was slightly open, and her big brass bed felt like a snug fortress of warmth against the chill air. A thin, almost skeletal leaf had blown through the window on to her quilt during the night, and reaching over to the small table next to the bed, Rosa had carefully placed it between the pages of a blank book the Professor had given her the previous evening. He had suggested she write down her dreams every morning in case they contained something of significance, but if she had dreamed at all during the night, Rosa had no recollection of it.

When she had finally hauled herself down the stairs to the kitchen, a large cooked breakfast had been waiting for her, complete with fried egg, tomatoes and mushrooms. The egg was green. Still, she was hungry, so she’d eaten the lot, wiping up the emerald yolk with a thick slice of bread. Gary had flapped in, crammed a handful of dried scorpions into his mouth, ignoring Rosa completely, and flown out again.

‘So,’ said Rosa, because there didn’t seem to be any other way of putting it.

‘What *is* this place?’

The Professor gestured to the plastic chair. Rosa sat, feeling rather as if she were about to receive a lecture. The Professor cleared his throat.

‘What you are standing in now,’ he said, ‘is-

‘Actually I’m sitting,’ said Rosa.

‘What you are *sitting* in now,’ he said, ‘is a museum.’

Rosa frowned. ‘I thought this was the conservatory?’

The Professor blinked. ‘Well obviously *this* bit is a conservatory,’ he said. ‘But the whole building is a museum. We call it the Cabinet,’ (he said, rather grandly) ‘Of Curiosities.’

There was a fluttering of wings, and Gary appeared, seemingly from nowhere. He settled about twenty feet away on top of an ornate sundial that was propped up by two winged stone figures, an old man and a young boy. He looked startlingly graceful for a moment, balanced perfectly with the other figures, three flying creatures all brought temporarily to earth. Then he glared at his tiny mobile.

‘Clock’s not working,’ he said disgustedly, and banged it against the old man’s stone head a couple of times.

Rosa turned back to the Professor.

‘A cabinet?’ she said. ‘I thought you just said it was a museum.’

‘That’s how museums began,’ the Professor said. ‘Private collectors would store a few interesting items in a display case, then the displays would start to grow, and soon you needed a whole building.’

‘And the conservatory,’ said Rosa. ‘This is a kind of museum too, isn’t it?’

She dipped her hand into a clay bowl full of acorns that sat amongst the cuttings. They felt warm against her fingers, and surprisingly heavy. Picking one

up, she felt it *humming* in the palm of her hand, as though it was just seconds away from exploding into a fully grown oak tree. The Professor suddenly made a worried sucking noise with his teeth.

‘They’re not exactly dangerous,’ he said, ‘But they do grow rather quickly, and if any of those got dropped into soil, I really can’t afford the new windows.’

Rosa carefully put it back in the bowl, and the Professor relaxed.

‘Some of the rarest Figments in existence are out here,’ he said. ‘I’m taking as many cuttings as I can, but botany’s not my thing, and it really needs a day a week just for weeding.’

Rosa peered at the cuttings in front of her. One was an entire tree, just four or five inches high. She looked at the Professor, who nodded, and Rosa stretched out one finger. Tiny golden leaves, so small she could barely see them individually, brushed her skin. The bark was a silver grey colour, and the shallow stone tray in which it sat was carved with a swirling inscription in an unfamiliar language.

‘Bonsai Mallorn,’ said the Professor. ‘I’m glad you like it.’

Rosa smiled at him. Gary yawned loudly and started picking through his fur for fleas. Finding one, he popped it into his mouth and crunched it up, grinning at Rosa. Then he shot through a gap in the ceiling where one of the panes had broken, and disappeared out of sight.

‘Now,’ said T’Maugh, although Rosa hadn’t even heard her enter the garden. ‘The next thing you need to ask the Professor is: what’s a Figment?’

Rosa turned to the Professor. ‘What’s a Figment?’ she asked, obediently.

‘A thing that shouldn’t be,’ he said. ‘From Earth, or sometimes from another world entirely.’

‘Other planets?’ asked Rosa.

The Professor shrugged. ‘Hard to say. Certainly other planes, what we call Otherworlds, only accessible to those who know the right doorways or

enchantments. I knew some myself, in my youth. Anyway, I started collecting Figments, trying to save them really, before they were broken, or the worlds they came from were... lost.'

Rosa thought she saw a flicker of pain pass over the Professor's face, and wondered for the first time what had caused the terrible scar that lay beneath his eyepatch.

'Of course a lot of people are embarrassed by magic in the family these days,' he continued. 'They don't want a lot of old *stuff* rattling around. So when word got out someone was willing to take it off their hands, no questions asked, things just started turning up. Eventually, I had to look for somewhere bigger, somewhere out of the way, and I found an empty old house that didn't seem to belong to anyone, tucked away in a nice quiet seaside town. Although I'm sure the Cabinet wasn't quite as big back then. Funny thing, no matter how many figments turn up, it never quite gets full.'

The Cabinet is a figment itself, thought Rosa.. *It has to be!* Excitedly, she opened her mouth to tell the Professor, then saw the amused look on his face and shut it again. He knew. He had worked it out long ago.

'Nowadays,' the Professor said, 'Things turn up that weren't even addressed here. At first I thought the figments had just enough magic to get themselves to a safe place. Now, I can't help but wonder if the Cabinet is somehow... drawing them here.'

Rosa looked at T'Maugh.

'And that's where you're from, too,' she said. 'You and Gary. I mean you're not *things*, but a flying monkey and a talking dog aren't exactly normal, no offence.'

‘None taken,’ said T’Maugh. Indeed she sounded more amused than offended. Rosa propped her elbows on the table, rested her chin on her palms and thought for a second.

‘So the Cabinet is a sort of... refuge?’

‘It was never supposed to be,’ said the Professor, softly.

‘But everything here is in some way... magical,’ said Rosa in wonderment, but T’Maugh sighed.

‘Not everything,’ said the dog, a little sadly. ‘Most have had their magic drain away over the years. Swords that once sang are now silent. Doorways that were open are closing now as this world draws further away from the others. People like their machines too much, you see. More reliable than magic, easier to throw away and replace.’

‘But there is still some magic here,’ said the Professor. ‘Otherwise people like the Earl wouldn’t be interested.’

‘His car,’ said Rosa. ‘That’s a machine, but it’s a Figment too, isn’t it?’

‘The Prototype,’ said the Professor rather dreamily. ‘Chain drive, seventy-five horsepower, and a six-cylinder engine strong enough to power a Zeppelin. There is another, but that is as a child’s toy compared to the Prototype. No, this is an older, darker thing, built for secret masters, who gave it hidden powers of its own.’

‘Right,’ said Rosa patiently. ‘The thing is, I’ve seen it before.’

The Professor, stared at her, as did T’Maugh.

‘When I got off the train and walked into the town, a car drove past me. An old one, silver grey, the same one I saw outside the Cabinet, although I didn’t realise till later. The windows were blacked out, so I couldn’t see who was driving. But there are two?’

‘Only one on the road,’ said the Professor.

‘There was a person sitting inside as well,’ said Rosa. ‘A boy.’

‘We only saw the Earl,’ said the Professor. ‘But if he drove past you earlier...’

‘Why didn’t he spot me?’ said Rosa. ‘He slowed down as if he had, but never stopped, or said anything.’

‘Odd behaviour for someone who later puts up posters looking for you,’ mused T’Maugh.

The Professor lifted his eyepatch slightly and rubbed underneath, then let the patch return to its place.

‘Itches sometimes when it gets cold,’ he said. There was a long silence. Through the glass roof of the conservatory, Rosa could see the morning sun trying to break through the snow clouds. Against the odds, a shaft of sunlight broke through, illuminating twinkling particles of dust hanging in the air. Or maybe it was just more snow.

‘I really must get that window fixed,’ said the Professor absently. ‘If the weather continues like this, none of the plants will survive.’

‘You said you had... allies?’ Rosa reminded him gently. The Professor clapped his hands together, making a sound like a gunshot in the still air.

‘Indeed!’ he cried, suddenly enthusiastic. ‘Phone calls to be made, strings to be pulled! And, if what the Earl told us was even half-true, mysterious red notebooks to be found!’

Rosa found herself smiling, dragged along by his enthusiasm.

‘But first, I think,’ he said, ‘a cup of tea.’

‘I’ll make it,’ said Rosa.

‘Excellent stuff,’ said the Professor. ‘A willingness to make tea is the first step to a great adventure.’

‘No sugar for him,’ said T’Maugh, getting wearily to her feet. ‘It makes him go funny.’

‘Funnier, surely,’ said the Professor, and scratched between her ears. T’Maugh’s tail wagged, and for a moment, Rosa saw how affection and annoyance could blend together into a spiky kind of love. The Professor looked at her and winked.

‘Let’s make a start,’ he said.



Chapter Thirteen

The library was a small, high-ceilinged room, that was at least ninety percent book. Not a scrap of the original wall could be seen, and the only light that filtered in came from a strip of window twenty feet above Rosa's head. Everything else was a bookshelf. Even the high ladders that ran around the base of the walls on castors had bookshelves built into them. The Professor was up a ladder now, frowning at the endless rows of cloth and cardboard spines.

'It's not looking hopeful, I'm afraid,' he said.

It wasn't. They spent the entire morning going through every book in the library. There were red books, and notebooks, but not a single red notebook. At one point Rosa thought she had struck lucky by spotting a thin reddish spine, but it turned out to be an orange exercise book filled with drawings of worms. So she slid it back on to the shelf, between a copy of 'Jacob Wrestling' (Author: J. Mountmain) and 'Sea Gunner's Practice, with Description of Captain Shotgun's Murdering Piece' (Author: R. Blastem).

'Have you ever thought of arranging books alphabetically under 'author'?' asked Rosa.

The Professor blinked at her. 'Good lord,' he said. 'I never have. Do you think it's worth a try?'

'Just a thought,' said Rosa weakly.

They took a break for tea. The Professor liked something called ‘Masala Chai’, quite different from whatever they had drunk the previous night, apparently, although to Rosa it just tasted like... tea.

‘Now,’ said the Professor, ‘Odds are this mysterious red notebook is somewhere in the Cabinet. The Earl certainly seems to think so. He’s probably using a false claim of theft to try to get us to find it for him, and then hand it over and merely count ourselves lucky not to have been sued.’

‘Sounds the sort of thing he would do,’ said T’Maugh.

But every book in the Cabinet is here in this library, and though I agree my filing systems sometime get a little, um, *unorthodox*—’

T’Maugh and Rosa exchanged looks. The Professor pretended not to notice.

‘- I think we’ve been pretty thorough. And there’s not a red notebook to be seen. If we only knew something about the contents!’

‘Or who had written it,’ said T’Maugh.

‘Or... *what* had written it,’ said Rosa slowly. The others looked at her.

‘Well,’ she continued, a little defensively, ‘I’ve met enough talking animals in the last two days to think there might be some *writing* animals as well. Couldn’t the original owner of the notebook, this “A” person, be a dog, or a horse, or—’

‘A mouse,’ said Sergeant Watkins, from the top of the sideboard.

‘Good to see you, Sergeant,’ the Professor said, rising from his chair and executing a surprisingly neat bow. ‘Rosa, I believe you and the Sergeant have already met.’

Rosa tried to curtsy, although she was halfway through the process when she realised she didn’t know what a curtsy actually *was*, so she converted it into a bow instead. It wasn’t terribly graceful, but the mouse seemed to appreciate the gesture.

'R.O.D.E.N.T. send their regards,' he said to Rosa, and winked. 'H'extensive workout we had there, whole nest of the blighters. Most of them got away I'm afraid, but still, good experience for some of the young ones, what don't even know how to wash behind their ears.'

'Sergeant, any news on the notebook from amongst your people?' asked the Professor.

The mouse shook his head. 'Not one of ours,' he said.

The Professor let out a disappointed sigh.

'Although...' said Rosa slowly.

The others looked at her.

'Well,' she said, 'The notebook may not have been written by a mouse, but what's to say it isn't mouse-*sized*? I mean, it's just as likely to be giant-sized, I suppose, but that would be quite easy to spot, and...'

She stopped. The others were staring at her.

'What?' she asked, wondering if she'd said something particularly stupid.

'Small people,' explained the Professor. 'As in *really* small people – about the same size as the Sergeant. Not that he's... I mean, he's a jolly good size for a mouse...'

'No offence taken Professor,' said the Sergeant, although Rosa thought she saw something of a glint in his eye.

'They left this world many years ago,' continued T'Maugh. 'No-one knows where they went, or even why. But they haven't been seen since.'

'And their leader,' said the Professor, looking slightly annoyed at being interrupted, 'had been a great explorer in her youth, although her family were boot-makers by trade I think. Her name was Altimetra.'

'Then she could be the 'A!'' breathed Rosa,.

The Professor shrugged. ‘Maybe,’ he said. ‘Altimetra was a great writer. If she had kept a log of all her travels, it’s certainly the sort of thing the Earl would want for his collection. But if he doesn’t know who wrote it...’

‘He wouldn’t know how small it would be?’ asked Rosa.

The Professor nodded, his eyes shining. ‘Which gives us the advantage!’

‘But not the book,’ T’Maugh reminded him.

Rosa wanted to scream. They were so close, she could feel it, and now they had run straight into a dead end. For a moment, the only noise in the room was the tiny clicking sound of the Sergeant’s feet as he paced up and down the sideboard, paws behind his back.

‘I’d best be getting to HQ,’ the mouse announced finally. ‘Any objections to setting up a temporary base here in the Cabinet?’

‘I’d be glad to have you around,’ replied the Professor. ‘The more of us here, the more chance we have of finding the red notebook – if indeed it’s here at all.’

‘It’s here,’ said Rosa firmly. ‘I’m sure of it. The Earl knows it’s somewhere in the building, but we’re not seeing it.’

‘Agreed,’ said the Professor, and sighed. ‘I’m going to go through all the shelves again, just to make sure. Perhaps I could get Gary to show you round some more of the Cabinet? Wouldn’t do him any harm to stop playing games on his mobile for five minutes. Unless you want to help’

Rosa thought of the idea of spending an afternoon in the company of an annoying, pasty-stealing winged monkey. Then she looked at the dusty shelves, crammed full of books in no obvious order, stretching up to the ceiling.

‘I’ll go and find Gary,’ she said.



Chapter Fourteen

The monkey had agreed to the role of guide with some reluctance, and when Rosa had asked if there were any more animals in the Cabinet, he had heaved a heavy sigh. Still, apparently there was a Natural History Gallery, and it made sense that Gary be the one to take her to it.

‘Are there any more like you here?’ asked Rosa politely, as she strode down the corridor, trying to keep up with the monkey without actually breaking into a run.

‘Not exactly,’ he replied, a little sourly, banking again and heading through an open archway into the dark room that lay beyond. Wings fluttering, he landed on an umbrella stand. He flicked a light switch with his tail, and Rosa gasped out loud.

The gallery before her stretched as far as the Botanical Gardens had been long, with display case after display case thrown into illumination as a series of overhead lights came on. Rosa was able to count to six until the gallery was fully lit.

The first thing she saw was a group of winged monkeys, just a few metres into the gallery. They seemed to be hovering in mid-air, though none of them were making any sound. She opened her mouth to start arguing with Gary: there were five monkeys in all, and each was clearly of the same species as her reluctant guide, when she realised that none of the monkeys’ wings were moving. Then she saw the wires from which the monkeys were suspended, and the glassiness of their eyes.

‘Oh,’ she said.

‘Stuffed,’ said Gary. ‘Thoughtless, I call it. Imagine how you’d feel.’

Rosa could. Shivering a little, she pushed one of the monkeys with her finger. It swung easily on the wire, its shadow gliding over the grey and yellow brick patterned floor. Rosa felt Gary’s disapproving look and caught the stuffed monkey with both hands, gently moving it back into its original position.

‘Sorry,’ she said.

Rosa walked further in. In a large display case to her left, a spider was rearing up on its back legs, its head on a level with hers. Someone had made an attempt to recreate its natural setting: the back of the case had a number of fir branches piled up in it, and on the rock-effect floor Rosa could see a number of small unidentifiable creatures wrapped up in greying strands of web. The spider itself was very fat (or perhaps badly stuffed), and was missing one of its legs. Its fangs too, were rather worn-looking. ‘Spider (Giant),’ read the label on the case, reasonably enough.

The case on the opposite side held a large number of small humanoid creatures, each about a foot high, though no two were quite the same. They were rather dried out, like rows of tiny mummies, though by peering closely Rosa could see each of them had fragile-looking, beautifully-coloured wings. The label on this display read ‘Fairy Husks.’

‘Eurgh,’ said Rosa, drawing back from the case rather quickly.

‘Well where do you think fairy dust comes from?’ snapped Gary. He was perched on the head of an enormous polar bear, posed upright in a rather aggressive-looking posture. The battered iron breastplate it was wearing didn’t make it look any less intimidating, while the long-handled axe gripped in its right paw was fully twice Rosa’s height.

‘Never really thought about it,’ said Rosa, honestly. She peered at the next exhibit, which seemed to consist of very small and slightly tatty dragons floating in jars. Suddenly, a nasty thought occurred to her.

‘The Professor didn’t... kill any of these things, did he?’

Gary laughed, a short mocking sound. ‘Course not! Well, apart from this one.’

Rosa stared at him. ‘The bear? The Professor killed that bear?’

Gary shrugged, not seeming terribly interested. ‘Well, T’Maugh helped him. Anyway, it had gone mad, killed loads of people, so the Professor put it down, really. Sort of a mercy killing. The other bears didn’t mind. Said they’d have done it themselves if they’d got there first.’

Rosa took another look at the bear. There was a tear in the breastplate, just over the heart, as though someone had pushed a blade right through the armour. The fur around the bear’s arm was gashed with teeth marks as well. Rosa had a sudden vision of a terrible battle in the snow, blood spilling on the frozen ground...

‘Wow,’ she said, suddenly seeing the tall man in the baggy cardigan in a whole new light. ‘Is that when he got the eyepatch?’

Gary was picking through his fur, apparently in search of fleas. He found one, and, rather disgustingly, popped it in his mouth.

‘Nah,’ he said, chewing noisily. ‘Had that as a kid. Train crash or summink.’

Rosa frowned, but kept walking into the gallery. The next display was, like the spider, placed in an action pose.

‘That’s new,’ said Gary. He sounded puzzled.

An enormous caterpillar was reared up to at least twice Rosa’s height, its segmented body resting back upon itself, like a snake about to strike. Unlike a snake, however, stumpy legs could be seen on each segment, while its hide was a mottled greeny-blue. There was an odd smell in the air. Rosa leant forward and sniffed.

‘Eurgh,’ she said. ‘Smells like something nasty from the garden.’

She looked up at its head. It was bright red, with shiny yellow eyes, and a complicated mouthpiece that seemed to involve a large number of moving parts.

‘Don’t move,’ said Gary, very quietly, from somewhere behind her.

The great head angled down, very slowly, until the great yellow eyes, compound like those of a fly or a wasp, were looking straight into Rosa’s. The mouthpiece opened smoothly, like an intricate machine, revealing rows of sharp, knifelike teeth that stretched as far back into the creature’s throat as far as she could see. The creature hissed, a horrid bubbling sound, and Rosa felt the thing’s hot breath on her face.

‘Oh bum,’ said Rosa.



Chapter Fifteen

Rosa hurled herself to one side, and the caterpillar smashed into the baby dragon display, a slick of foul-smelling liquid from the shattered jars spreading quickly across the brick floor. Then it turned, sensing Gary trying to sneak quietly out of the gallery. It lashed out a great tail with terrifying speed, smashing him to the wall. The monkey slid down the wooden panels, coming to rest beside a display of stuffed goblin-like humanoids, each with backward-jointed legs like those of a chicken's. For a moment, Gary's eyes were as glassy and unfocused as the goblins', then he coughed, and shook his head in confusion.

The caterpillar reared hungrily above him, opening its mouth wide - then turned, hissing in astonishment as a jar exploded against the back of its head. Rosa was pleased to see Gary seizing the opportunity to crawl discreetly towards the entrance. One of his wings was outstretched at an odd angle, and he was having to slither through a puddle of oil, broken glass and bits of baby dragon, but at least he was alive.

Rosa threw another jar at the caterpillar, then another, the monster rearing and hissing at each one, until Gary was safely through the gallery entrance. Then the flaw in her plan became clear: she was now the sole target of the creature's attention, and it lay between her and the only known way out of the gallery.

Rosa picked up the last jar, and made as if to throw it, all the while backing further into the gallery. Seeming to know time was on its side, the

caterpillar dropped low to the ground, following her one short, stubby foot at a time, driving her further and further back.

Suddenly, Rosa felt something behind her: a small grey statue of a boy, holding in his arms a muddled collection of walking sticks, and other, stronger-looking staffs.

The caterpillar was raising itself up to strike now, and Rosa had to think quickly. Grabbing a long grey staff, she banged the end noisily on the ground. The creature hesitated, and to her surprise, a crystal, buried deep in a knotty tangle at the staff's point began to glow: dimly at first then so brightly Rosa could hardly look at it. The sudden bright light seemed to shift the creature's attention away from Rosa, and the huge head began to weave from side to side as she waved the staff in increasingly wider arcs.

The Professor and T'Maugh burst through the entrance to the gallery, T'Maugh barking fiercely, the Professor holding a sword and yelling some kind of battle cry, but they were too far away. The caterpillar attacked again. Rosa just managed to dodge it, but sent the statue crashing to the ground as she moved. Sticks and staffs and (she couldn't help but notice), one stuffed flamingo, spilled across the floor.

Desperately, Rosa plucked the nearest object off the floor. As the creature reared to strike for the last time, she was a little disappointed to discover all she had picked up was an umbrella, although it did have an attractive, parrot-shaped handle.

No strength left to dodge now. Compound eyes fixed on hers, the mouthpiece unfolded, sharp teeth glistening in the electric light...

Stepping forward, Rosa shoved the umbrella down its throat as far as it would go.

The monster froze in shock for a moment, then shook its head angrily from side to side. T'Maugh and the Professor were by the monster now, and

began desperately attacking its flank, with sword and teeth, but to no avail. The caterpillar just stared at her, weaving from side to side. It drew itself up to its full height to strike.

Rosa shut her eyes and waited for the worst.

There was an odd ‘whoomph’ sound, followed by a rattling. The caterpillar seemed to have suddenly sprouted an oddly-shaped ruff around its neck.

‘The umbrella must have opened inside its throat!’ the Professor shouted, as the creature went into convulsions, its heavy body thrashing around uncontrollably, reducing a couple more display cases to splinters in the process. The Professor had lowered the point of his sword now, but light flashed off the blade as though it was signalling its desire to be used.

‘This way,’ called T’maugh, and Rosa edged past the caterpillar, which was beginning to twitch and shudder as it choked on the umbrella.

Rosa looked away as the Professor stepped forward. There was the soft sound of metal entering flesh, a wrenching noise as the blade twisted, and then silence. The heavy body twitched once more, and was still. The Professor wiped the blade with a handkerchief before gently sliding it back in his scabbard.

Rosa was crying, and to her surprise, she realised it wasn’t entirely for herself. The Professor went to lend her his handkerchief, then thought better of it, and pulled a ball of crumpled tissues out of his cardigan pocket instead. Rosa blew her nose.

‘I’m sorry,’ she said.

‘Don’t be,’ said the Professor. He patted her on the shoulder, a little awkwardly. ‘It was just an animal, of a sort. There was no malice in it.’

He frowned then, and to Rosa's surprise, drew his sword from his scabbard once more, cutting a deep slit down the creature's side.

'Is it still alive?' Rosa's eyes were wide with fear, but the Professor shook his head reassuringly.

'Hold this a second,' he said, taking his cardigan off, and rolling one shirtsleeve up. To Rosa's revulsion, he plunged his arm deep inside the creature, apparently in search of something.

'You don't think anyone's in there, do you?' she asked. The Professor shook his head, but continued to grope around, with a series of increasingly unpleasant squelching noises.

'Aha!' he said, finally, and withdrew his now-rather-slimy arm to reveal a handful of what looked to Rosa like tiny green slugs, wriggling slightly. The Professor took an empty jar from amongst the debris on the floor and dropped them into it. They glowed faintly.

'Teratogens' he explained. Rosa looked blank.

'Monster-makers,' said T'Maugh, who was now scratching herself behind the ear as if nothing had ever happened. 'Reptile tongues usually. Boiled, and shrunk, and moonlight added, and you have something you can feed to the tiniest creature and turn it into... something like that.'

'Well to be fair, you often get a creature with which you can have quite an interesting conversation over a nice cup of tea,' said the Professor mildly. 'But I don't think this was that kind of insect. And if I had any of these things in the Cabinet, I'd keep them under lock and key. Someone put this thing in here deliberately.'

'They got in through my window,' said Rosa quietly,

T'Maugh and the Professor looked at her in surprise.

'I found a leaf on my bed this morning,' said Rosa. 'And another one in the corridor just outside. Whoever came in must have dropped them.'

T'Maugh made a low growling sound in the back of her throat.

'I can't see the Earl crawling in through windows,' said the Professor, 'or dropping leaves. But whoever did this was most likely in his employ. Rosa, I'm most desperately sorry.'

But Rosa was frowning at the jar in the Professor's hand. The glow from the wriggling creatures was stronger now, but turning to orange rather than green. Smoke suddenly billowed from the jar, the Professor hastily setting it down on the floor. But by the time he had returned with a fire extinguisher, the flames had gone out as quickly as they had appeared.

Hesitantly, Rosa picked up the jar, now full of greasy grey ash.

'Someone put a cantrip on them,' said the Professor, 'A spell, of a sort. Whoever did this didn't want to leave any clues behind.'

'Then it didn't work,' said Rosa. 'Because I know where the notebook is.'



Chapter Sixteen

The jar of vegetables was still sitting on the kitchen table. Taking a pair of plastic gloves from the sink, Rosa twisted off the lid.

The smell was unbelievable. Rosa's eyes filled with tears, the Professor staggered back with his hand over his mouth, and T'Maugh shot out of the room, yelping.

Breathing carefully through her mouth, Rosa tipped the jar upside down into a colander. Brown liquid gushed down the plughole, leaving bright silver streaks where it burned through the sink's enamel surface.

The last vegetable out of the jar was the one Rosa had been looking for. Holding it up to the Professor, she showed him a range of tiny, almost invisible stitches running around its centre, where someone had cut it open, then very carefully sewn it back together again. The skin was surprisingly tough, but by carefully inserting the point of a sharp knife into the already existing cut, and working it around to sever the tiny stitches, Rosa undid the join, and it fell apart in two halves: revealing a package the size of a small box of matches, wrapped in a plastic chocolate wrapper. The too-big wrapper had been folded over and over again, then sewn with tiny stitches to make it waterproof.

Rosa took the knife, and carefully cut open the wrapper, then turned to the Professor 'All those broken jars,' she said. 'They made me think, where better to hide something than in a jar no-one would ever want to open?'

Inside the plastic was an extremely small but perfectly dry red notebook. On the cover was the letter 'A', embossed in gold.

Gary crept into the room, holding his wing out at an angle. He climbed pathetically up on to the kitchen table, looked at the book, then looked at the Professor.

'My wing hurts,' he announced sulkily.

'So,' said the Professor, once Gary's wing had been bandaged. 'We have the notebook. Rosa, would you like to make a call to our friend the Earl?'

Rosa stared at the tiny notebook. She would have liked that, very much. But something had occurred to her.

'Perhaps we should find out what's inside it first,' she said. 'Just to be on the safe side.'

The Professor grinned, and revealed the enormous magnifying glass he had been concealing behind his back.

'I'm so glad you said that,' he said. 'I'm afraid nosiness is one of my worst qualities. And it wouldn't do to just hand over, I don't know, a map of the Crown Jewels, would it?'

He opened the book and held the glass over it. 'Most of this isn't even in English,' he said, and smiled at Rosa's expression. 'It's all right, Rosa, I can translate Early Tribe, it will just take a little more time, that's all.'

'Everything takes so *long*,' moaned Rosa to T'Maugh, as they headed back to the Natural History Gallery. 'And these gloves are too big. And they smell.'

T'Maugh just rolled her eyes.

The Professor had given Rosa a pair of leather gauntlets, so she could help pick up the pieces of broken glass without cutting herself. They smelt rather... sporty.

As they rounded the entrance to the Natural History Gallery, Rosa stopped in her tracks. A whole regiment of mice had assembled in a perfect rectangle. There must have been over a thousand of them, all standing neatly to attention, On top of a nearby display case, holding what its label described as a bandersnatch, stood Sergeant Watkins.

‘Fifth Amalgamated Rodentians at your service, ma’am!’ said the mouse, who had a match tucked under one arm. ‘Heard you were having pest problems, and thought we might h’assist in the removal of said h’item.’

‘I think out in the conservatory would be best,’ said T’Maugh. ‘Take what you want for provisions of course, but the rest can bring a bit of pep to the compost heap.’

‘But how will they get it all the way out there?’ asked Rosa, bewildered. ‘It must weigh a tonne!’

‘Don’t you worry about that, ma’am,’ said Sergeant Watkins. ‘Reason being that of organisation, see, what with the awesome power of a number of small things when they’re all lined up in the correct direction AND NOT SLOUCHING LIKE A BUNCH OF FIELDMICE BECAUSE THEY THINK MY H’ATTENTION IS H’ELSEWHERE!’

A guilty shuffle ran through the mice, and they straightened up noticeably.

‘Lovely bunch of lads and lasses,’ said Sergeant Watkins, wiping a sentimental tear from his eye. ‘But without appropriate supervision they’d be up clocks and tangling tails and blind, like as not, and I’d never hear the end of it from their mothers- RIGHT YOU DISGUSTING RODENTS LETS GET THIS ‘ORRIBLE THING SENT GARDENWARDS, SHALL WE?’

He smiled as the regiment marched neatly towards the caterpillar, forcing their way underneath the creature until not a single mouse could be seen.

‘Pleasure to watch,’ said the Sergeant. ‘APART FROM YOU, JEREMY MOUSE, WHAT SEEMS TO BE FACING THE WRONG DIRECTION FROM EVERYONE ELSE!’

‘orry,’ said a small voice, and Rosa could just make out a tiny movement under the caterpillar’s enormous head, as the unseen mouse turned around one hundred and eighty degrees.

‘How do you know he’s facing the wrong way?’ asked Rosa.

‘H’experience,’ said the Sergeant, grimly. He stepped neatly off the display case, causing Rosa’s heart to jump into her mouth, although he landed perfectly safely. Straightening up, the mouse strode to the front of the caterpillar, and peered into its mouth.

‘There appears to be some kind of foreign h’object a-caught in its gullet,’ he noted. ‘I’m guessing that’s what has given it such an h’unusual neck shape.’

‘The umbrella!’ said Rosa. ‘I’d better get that back.’

Very carefully, and suddenly rather glad for the heavy gloves, she reached into the creature’s mouth, and pushed in until she could feel a button, set into the curved parrot-head handle.

Rosa’s face was now only inches from the caterpillar’s huge blank eyes. Swallowing, she pressed the button. The neck collapsed with a sad, sighing sound, and she knew it really was dead. Pulling the now-closed umbrella out of the creature’s throat, she shook it slightly. It seemed undamaged by the encounter.

‘Nicely done,’ said the Sergeant, approvingly, and turned back to the now-hidden army of mice.

‘All right there, mice?’ asked the Sergeant, a perfect model of gentle, avuncular concern. From under the caterpillar, a thousand mice squeaked a muffled ‘Yes Sir’s.

Sergeant Watkins straightened up, and rapped the base of the match against the brick floor.

‘THEN WHAT THE BLIMMIN’ ECK ARE YOU DISGUSTING LOT WAITING FOR!’ he shouted. ‘ONE TWO ONE TWO ONE TWO ONE TWO!’

The caterpillar’s body began to flow smoothly across the floor, in an unpleasant parody of its former self. Rosa stared as the mice negotiated the corpse neatly through the door, down the steps and out of sight, though the faint echo of Sergeant Watkins’ threats, recriminations and harangues could still be heard for some time.

‘Well *there’s* something you don’t see every day,’ said T’Maugh.



Chapter Seventeen

It wasn't until that evening that the Professor called Rosa and T'Maugh into the map room, where he sat surrounded by scraps of paper and ancient textbooks. The books' pages were thin and delicate, and even smelled old, a comforting, not-unpleasant smell of dust and cloth. The tiny red notebook lay open in the middle of the table, looking almost embarrassed at the fuss.

'I've translated it as far as I can,' said the Professor, rubbing his face tiredly. *Is reading harder if you only have one eye?* wondered Rosa. Then something else occurred to her.

'Is it a travel journal?' she asked, suddenly excited. Maybe it said where all the Tribe had gone. Maybe once she had traded the information for her identity, she could go on an expedition, become Rosa the Explorer, hacking through jungle undergrowth in search of the Lost Tribe of Very Small People...

But the Professor shook his head. 'It's more a description for... as far as I can make out, some kind of ritual.'

Rosa's eyes opened wide. 'A spellbook?'

But the Professor looked unsure. 'If it is, it only contains the one spell. And it's a summoning ritual, one of the most dangerous spells there is. Usually, if something lives outside our world, there's a very good reason for it, and it takes a great deal of power to move from one to the other. Those creatures you met in the bar for example, the ones that look like women. They use most of their energy just getting here, then go through bodies like we use batteries.'

T'Maugh put her large head on the desk and sniffed. The pages fluttered slightly, and Rosa could see more tiny writing and what looked like sequences of instruction, odd-looking directions and...

'The umbrella!'

There it was: a neat drawing about the size of Rosa's thumbnail of the parrot-handled umbrella.

The Professor nodded. 'And that's not all.' He turned to three more pages, showing in turn a jar, a sword, and a coin.

'Four Figments in all. More than normal Figments though. 'Treasures' the book calls them. The umbrella we already have in our possession, and the jar is kept in a secret place not far from here. The sword and the coin... I've seen before. But not here. Gather these Treasures together, say the right words and *something* happens. Where the place is, and what happens... I don't know. But I doubt it's anything good.'

'The Earl knows,' said T'Maugh.

'Agreed,' said the Professor. He and T'Maugh turned to look at Rosa. The room grew suddenly very quiet.

'I shouldn't give him the book, should I?' said Rosa. 'At least, not yet.'

The Professor sighed. 'I'm afraid the choice is yours,' he said.

A quick, easy path, the Earl had said, *or a long, difficult one*. Of course she could contact the Earl now, tell him she had what he wanted, and was willing to swap it for the truth about where she had come from, who she really was. But what would she be giving him in exchange?

'I want to know who I am,' said Rosa quietly. 'I really really want to know.'

'Well,' said T'Maugh, 'You're the sort of person who risks her neck to help a flying monkey she doesn't owe any favours, kills a monster caterpillar with an umbrella, then feels nothing but compassion for the poor dumb thing that tried to eat her. Could the Earl have told you that?'

Rosa looked at the notebook for a long time.

‘So what about the other Treasures?’ she asked finally. ‘The sword, the coin and that jar thing. If the Earl even knows about them, can we find them before he does?’

The Professor nodded quietly.

‘Rosa, are you sure about this?’

‘Yes,’ she said. ‘I’m going to get the truth out of the Earl. But I’m going to do it my way. So let’s find the rest of the Treasures.’

‘The jar next, then,’ said the Professor. ‘You’ll want to wrap up warm.’



Chapter Eighteen

Rosa took her coat, which now smelled faintly of mothballs, out of the wardrobe. Suddenly there was a movement behind her, just visible in the mirrors set into the back of the doors. Rosa gasped, but it was only the sentry mouse on the window sill, going through some complicated stretching exercises.

‘Sorry to alarm you, miss,’ said the mouse. It was a female, with pale brown fur and attractive jet-black eyes. ‘Sergeant Watkins likes us to stretch regular, like. Keeps us alert.’

‘Can I get you anything to eat?’ asked Rosa. She noticed that the Professor had put a shiny new bolt on the window, to make doubly sure nothing else could get in, and felt relieved.

‘Still got a bit of caterpillar, miss,’ said the mouse, pointing to a grey chunk on the window between a carved woodpecker and a T-shape, made from a single twig.

‘You’re eating the *caterpillar*?’ asked Rosa incredulously.

‘Plenty of meat on one of them,’ said the mouse. ‘Besides, there’s a fair handful of us, and we didn’t want to eat the Prof out of house and home, like.’

Rosa peered at the lump of dried meat, and then back at the mouse.

‘You’re not worried it’ll turn you into a monster?’ asked Rosa.

‘Oooh, I’d love that,’ said the mouse dreamily. ‘I’ve got a list of cats with three slaps waiting. But it hasn’t happened yet.’

Rosa didn't quite know what to say to that. So she said farewell to the mouse, rather weakly, and went downstairs to the Professor.

There was period of negotiation with T'Maugh before they were allowed to go, but once Rosa had promised to run straight home at the first sign of trouble, and the Professor had buckled his sword under his tweed coat, and put on his stout walking boots, they were finally ready to set off. But to Rosa's surprise, the Professor didn't head to the front door, or even to the conservatory. Instead, he took stairs down past the map room, and along a long corridor that, if Rosa's sense of direction was correct, ran directly underneath the Natural History Gallery.

'How big *is* the Cabinet?' she asked curiously, as they got to the end of the corridor. The Professor began searching through his ring of keys.

'I've never really been sure,' he answered absently. He seemed to find the right place on the iron ring, although Rosa couldn't see a key at all. But the Professor twisted something in the lock, and the heavy wooden door swung open.

'I think it grows as I need the space,' he continued. 'Every time I needed to expand, I'd find a door I never knew was there, or a stairway that hadn't been there the day before. This section took the longest to find, of course.'

The Professor flicked a switch, and a whole gallery was illuminated; easily the largest room Rosa had seen so far, yet there didn't appear to be much in it: just a huge empty display case in the centre of the room with a few bare cabinets and clothes dummies scattered around it .

'This is the biggest exhibit in the gallery,' said the Professor, 'if you can call it that. Terrible cost in glass of course, but one has to do these things properly.'

The Professor was standing right up to the enormous glass case. Its floor, what Rosa had at first taken to be a rockery, or some kind of rather dull stony garden with odd bits of greenery, now turned out to be a carefully constructed

representation of a section of rocky coast. The scale altered towards the back, where a miniature lighthouse, only a foot or so high, blinked silently on and off.

‘It was never evil,’ said the Professor sadly, one hand pressed against the glass. ‘Just easily led. And not always lucky in its choice of master.’

But I can't see a thing, thought Rosa, and peered more closely.

‘The lighthouse?’ she asked.

‘The dragon,’ replied the Professor.

Squinting carefully, Rosa could just make out four depressions in the heather, each in the shape of a large clawed foot. The distance between the front and rear pair was the length of around six cars, end to end. She shivered, although not necessarily with fear.

‘I had a tape made,’ said the Professor, ‘a loop of sea noises, and birds and a foghorn that went off every now and then. I had to turn it off in the end.’

He turned away from Rosa suddenly and the handle of his sword banged in the glass, making both of them jump. The Professor laughed suddenly, a startling noise in this silent, seemingly empty place.

‘I’m getting old,’ he said. ‘One of the problems with this place, Rosa. It does tend to drag one back to the past, when one should be going forwards. Come on, this way.’

The gallery ended in a heavy metal door. Once again, the Professor jiggled what looked like nothing at all in the lock, and the door swung open.

‘Now stay close behind me out there,’ he said. ‘You’ve probably got the general theme, but this next bit can be a little...unnerving.’



Chapter Nineteen

On the other side of the door was... nothing. Or more accurately, a fifty-foot drop straight into a chasm of raging, churning seawater. Rosa instinctively stepped back, as much from the deafening noise and salty smell, almost overwhelming after the previous musty silence, as from the drop.

They were still underground, in some kind of natural cavern, the rocky ceiling a good eighty feet above their heads. To the left, she could just make out the opening where the sea came in, and a small patch of the night sky over the stormy waters, dusted with cold bright stars.

The Professor was shouting something over the noise of the surging seawater, and pointing to a spot on the other side of the chasm, at least as far away as the drop was deep. Rosa could just make out some steps carved out of the stone, stretching up out of sight. But there was no way of reaching them, or at least none that didn't involve plunging to certain death, which Rosa was fairly sure wasn't part of the plan.

'I can't hear you!' she shouted, but the roar of the waves snatched her words away as soon as they left her mouth.

Now the Professor was pointing down at her feet. Rosa heard herself gasp as he stepped out over the edge and stood in thin air, suspended above the thrashing water.

In a direct line from where he was standing, two short iron posts had been planted at the edge of the chasm.

Right then, thought Rosa, and very very carefully, reached out for the gap just beyond a hole in one of the iron posts. Her fingers closed in mid-air on what felt like a thick strand of cold metal, twisted like rope. She put one foot tentatively out into space. Something that felt a lot like old wooden boards, a little slippery with salt spray, took her weight. Knowing if she didn't do this straight away she wouldn't be able to do it at all, she gripped the handrail tightly and put her second foot on the unseen bridge.

'Invisible, you see!' shouted the Professor. 'Or rather you *don't* see. Come on!'

Rosa swallowed.

Does he absolutely have to be this excited all the time? she thought, as the Professor began inching his way across the bridge.

Rosa fixed her gaze on the back of the Professor's tweed coat and made herself follow it, one step at a time. Whenever he turned round she had to look up at the roof, or close her eyes altogether, anything but see her feet apparently hovering in the air above the boiling black water.

'How was that?' asked the Professor cheerfully when she finally reached the iron posts on the other side of the chasm.

'Fun actually!' said Rosa just a little too brightly, as she clutched the nearest post and waited for her head to stop spinning.

The Professor grinned at her.

Kneehigh Taxis was in a part of town Rosa hadn't seen before. She had trotted along behind the Professor as he had headed up the stone steps and then climbed some metal rungs set into the wall before opening a manhole cover in the roof. They had come up in the middle of the road quite a way along the coast, where the pebbly beach turned into sandhills. The Professor had been

careful to check no cars were coming before opening the manhole cover and helping to pull Rosa up after him.

The Professor put the metal lid back quietly, making sure the words ‘Wilmington Council Property’ lined up with a mark on the rim, then moved quickly to the pavement, turning his face away from the road as a car passed.

The houses more or less ran out here, turning into boarded-up buildings and empty shops with ‘Closing Down Sale’ posters in the windows. This was probably the furthest out of Wilmington you could get, whilst still calling it part of the town. The sign that said ‘Kneehigh Taxis’ was small and scruffy, and quite low down, almost obscured by the sacks of rubbish piled up beneath the meshed-over window.

The Professor knocked once on the door of the taxi company (there were two handles, Rosa noticed, the second one a little low, even for her), then immediately pushed the door open and went in.

Lolling around a main seating area, full of tattered magazines and chipped coffee mugs were three men, and one woman. The woman had strikingly thick red hair tied back in two heavy-looking pigtails. Even as Rosa and the Professor entered, one of the men pushed past them and out of the door, not saying a word. Rosa couldn’t help noticing the tenseness of the atmosphere. And the fact that none of the people in the room were over three feet high.

The woman glared at them.

‘Busiest night we’ve ever had,’ she snapped, ‘so imagine how pleased I was to have you ring me up talking rubbish about some old vase.’

‘Agnetha, this is Rosa,’ said the Professor, ‘Rosa-’

‘Dew,’ completed Agnetha.

Rosa stared at the woman, who was staring back at her.

‘You know me?’ she asked. But after squinting at her for a good long while, the woman shook her head.

‘You look familiar,’ she said. ‘But no, I never met you before. Know your name though, for some reason. You been on telly before? Something like that?’

Rosa shrugged. ‘I don’t know,’ she said.

The woman frowned.

‘She’s lost her memory,’ explained the Professor. ‘The police aren’t interested, and we think there’s magic involved.’

‘Well, *magic*,’ sniffed the woman. ‘There you are then. Sorry love, can’t help you.’

Rosa half stepped, half jumped back as the small woman bustled past them, heading for what looked like a small, scruffy, but well-equipped kitchen.

‘Well come if you’re coming,’ said Agnetha. ‘Buttered eggs, and so on.’

Which meant nothing at all to Rosa, but the Professor seemed to catch the urgency, and strode after her. Behind them, the dark-haired man scribbled something on a scrap of paper and handed it to one of the drivers, who headed off immediately out of the front door without a word.

‘I imagine you’ve got a lot of custom from all those new people hanging around,’ said the Professor lightly, as Agnetha pulled a stool from under a counter and started rummaging around in a high cupboard. Rosa opened her mouth to ask if she could help, but caught a warning glance from the Professor just in time, and shut it again with a snap.

‘You’re joking,’ Agnetha snorted. ‘Brought their own taxi service with them, didn’t they?’

The Professor looked taken aback. ‘They did?’

‘Clumsy great things. Cobbled together from two chassis each, I’ll be bound.’ Agnetha’s hands were sorting deftly through the canisters of tea and

coffee while she talked. Rosa liked the way her fingers moved, quick and nimble, belying the surliness of their owner.

Agnetha passed the Professor the jar. It didn't look like much, just an old, slightly battered clay container. Someone who wasn't very good at spelling had tried to label it as 'honey'. They hadn't got it quite right.

'Had a bang on the head, have you?' she asked Rosa.

'Um,' said Rosa, still looking at the jar. 'Not exactly, no.'

The Professor hesitated.

'We don't really know what happened, but we think the jar might be a clue,' he said finally. 'Wanted to see if it jogs her memory.'

'Well does it?' asked Agnetha, not unreasonably.

'It doesn't *look* familiar,' admitted Rosa. 'But do you mind if I hang on to it? Just in case?'

'Chasing round after bits of crockery,' Agnetha said. 'Sounds a roundabout way of finding out someone's identity if you ask me.'

'Well,' said the Professor, 'If you have any better ideas, we'd be-'

'You want to get on that internet,' said Agnetha.

The Professor's mouth fell open.

'What's the internet?' said Rosa, interested.

Agnetha sighed.

Kneehigh Taxis' computer sat in the corner of the office, half-buried under piles of timesheets and empty sandwich wrappers. The screen display showed an old castle on the edge of a dark lake. *Spooky*, thought Rosa.

'The embarrassing thing is,' confided the Professor, as he tapped carefully at the keyboard after Agnetha had set it up for them, then marched out to

answer a ringing phone, 'this technically belongs to the Cabinet. Should have thought of it earlier, but I never had much truck with the things, and Agnetha thought it would be just the thing to help her set up the business... ah! Here we go!'

The landscape on the monitor shimmered and vanished, a cursor appearing blinking at the top of a form.

'We just type your name into here,' he said, the words "Rosa Dew" appearing in a small box in the middle of the screen, 'and press enter...'

The screen froze for a second, then the screen filled with lines of text, while a small message appeared below the box.

'1,447,521 matches found,' it said. 'Please consider revising your search criteria.'

On the first page were Rosa Dew coffee mugs, t-shirts, toys, baseball hats and badges. All of them had either Rosa's face on them or an intertwined 'R' and 'D'.

'I *am* famous!' breathed Rosa. 'Or famous-*ish*. That's why the policeman put the phone down on me! He thought it was someone playing a stupid joke.'

The Professor was still scrolling down the page. There were jewellery kits, boardgames, carrying cases... the list went on and on.

'But what about *me*?' said Rosa. 'The real me I mean. Try further on.'

But there was just more of the same. Even a jigsaw.

'Too much information,' said the Professor. 'The curse of the modern age. We need to refine the search a little.'

Rosa leaned forward and typed 'The Real Rosa Dew' into the box. A second's pause, and then... nothing.

'No matches found' it said.

They tried ‘Rosa Dew The Person’, ‘the real Rosa Dew’, ‘Who is Rosa Dew?’ and even ‘I am Rosa Dew’. Nothing.

Rosa slumped back in defeat.

‘I’m so sorry,’ said the Professor. ‘I thought we were getting somewhere for a moment, I really did.’

But Rosa had spotted something.

‘Who are “DI Inc.?”’ she asked. ‘Looks like they make all this stuff. Maybe they’ll know.’

“DI Inc.” typed the Professor into the search box. This time the computer came up with less than eighty matches, but each one had the same title.

‘Dorincourt Industries,’ said Rosa and the Professor together.



Chapter Twenty

The Earl's own personal company didn't just make cheap plastic things with Rosa's face on them. It had factories all over the world, making everything from cars to electronic components, and laboratories that invented new kinds of textiles, metal alloys and even plant hybrids. The Earl must be a very rich man indeed.

'And he owns all the patents himself,' mused the Professor.

'What does that mean?' asked Rosa.

'It means he's come up with at least a hundred different inventions – ways to make grain grow quicker, cars lighter and cheaper than anyone else can make them...even new kinds of plants no-one has heard of before. So either he's the greatest inventor in the history of the world or...'

'Someone's been busy,' said Agnetha, from behind them. Neither of them had heard her return. Rosa reached out and smoothly turned off the computer. The Professor looked startled, but didn't complain.

'We'd better be going now, I think,' said Rosa. 'Thanks for letting us use your computer.'

'Sorry if I was a bit snappy beforehand,' said Agnetha, who didn't appear to have noticed Rosa's sudden movement. 'Those incomers might not want our cabs, but everyone else does. Half the town seems to be selling up and heading to the station, though no-one'll say why.'

‘Moving out?’ said the Professor. He sounded shocked.

Agnetha frowned. ‘Spend too much time in that museum of yours, fussing and tidying. This has been going on for weeks.’

‘Odder and odder,’ said the Professor. He took a piece of paper out of his pocket and handed it to Agnetha.

‘There’s your receipt,’ he said. Agnetha caught Rosa’s interested gaze and looked a little defensive.

‘Part of my heritage,’ she explained. ‘Dad was a red dwarf, mum was a Winkie. Left me with a suspicious nature. And short legs’

‘But wonderful colouring,’ said the Professor smoothly, wrapping the jar in layers of old newspaper and placing it in a carrier bag.

‘Can’t even offer you a lift back,’ said Agnetha, sounding more annoyed than sorry. ‘Booked up till about three this morning.’

‘No matter,’ said the Professor shaking her warmly by the hand. ‘We can go back the way we came.’

But they couldn’t. When they got back to the manhole cover, the words ‘Wilmington Council Property’ no longer lined up with the mark on the lid. Someone was waiting for them.



Chapter Twenty-One

‘Shall we go back and get a taxi?’ suggested Rosa, but the Professor pointed discreetly at the sacks of rubbish piled beneath the cab company’s window. Rosa gasped. What she had previously taken to be a pile of old clothes now clearly had arms, legs and a head. Scratched ski goggles caught the cold streetlight, turning to track them as they headed steadily into town.

‘Do you think Agnetha told them about us?’ asked Rosa in a low voice.

‘Red dwarves did have a bad reputation in the old days,’ said the Professor. ‘Specialising in betrayal, and deceit, it was said. But I’ve known Agnetha for a long time. No, I think we were spotted the minute we climbed out of the manhole.’

‘Do you think the Earl-’ Rosa started to say, then stopped. Someone was walking along towards them, on the other side of the road, staggering slightly, like a drunk, or someone not quite in control of its body. It was wearing an odd mishmash of clothes: a hooded top, shiny running shorts over grey leggings, and mismatched boots.

‘Professor?’ asked Rosa quietly.

‘I see them,’ he said, quietly.

Them? Looking around, Rosa spotted a couple more, still on the far side of the road, walking in slow circles amongst the bare flowerbeds of what a painted board proudly described as The Marine Gardens.

‘They’re clothes all the way down, aren’t they?’ asked Rosa nervously, as they increased their pace. The shops were more prosperous-looking as they got closer into town, but were still closed. Rosa looked in the window of a toyshop called Magicraft, and saw yet another lumpy figure reflected amongst the chemistry sets and pink footballs, stopping to watch them go.

The Professor nodded. ‘They’re called Wurglah,’ he said. ‘Not very strong on their own. You just have to make sure you don’t walk into a group of them.’

‘What happens then?’ asked Rosa.

‘Never stuck around to find out,’ he said. He didn’t *sound* particularly worried or scared. But they were still walking quickly, and Rosa noticed him reach beneath his coat to loosen the blade in its scabbard slightly, then flex his hands a little, warming them up. She pulled her coat closer around her, and risked a quick look behind. There were more of them now.

Rosa felt a hand on her arm and jumped, but it was just the Professor.

‘We’re going to have to make a run for it, up that road,’ he said.

She looked in the direction he was pointing.

‘The road with two more of those things coming down it?’

‘Yes,’ said the Professor.

The two stumbling things were faster than they looked, and were upon them in a second. The Professor drew his sword, almost casually, and slashed at the nearest Wurglah, a gloved sleeve suddenly wriggling on the icy pavement. The other one made a lunge straight for Rosa.

She put her own arm out instinctively, trying to knock it off balance. To her horror, she found her fingers slipping inside the eyeholes of the balaclava mask the thing wore underneath its hood. The space inside felt empty, and warm, and Rosa pushed harder, as much with revulsion as anything else. The Wurglah went sprawling to the ground.

Rosa and the Professor ran to the park entrance, only for Rosa's heart to fall: the gates were chained shut and eight feet high, the iron railings to each side topped with sharp spikes.

'The bin!' shouted the Professor.

To the side of the entrance was a large rectangular wheelie bin, pushed up against the railings. The Wurglah were only a few paces behind them now.

Rosa scrambled up on top of the bin and dropped down into the park, skidding slightly on the frozen ground. The Wurglah were nearly upon the Professor now, gloved hands reaching out as he climbed on to the bin, then dropped down next to Rosa. Reaching back through the railings, they pushed until they felt the bin's weight beginning to shift, then it suddenly rolled away down the road, wheels rattling as it picked up speed. More shuffling stragglers were turning up into the side road, and Rosa was delighted to see a couple more knocked over as the bin shot down the hill.

Rosa and the Professor stepped back into the park and watched the Wurglah pressing themselves against the railings, clutching feebly just out of reach. For a moment, it seemed as though they were safe. But the Professor's expression had already turned to concern. Following his gaze, Rosa saw the first rank of boneless creatures squeezing themselves between the iron spikes, like toothpaste coming out of a tube.

'Damn,' said the Professor quietly.

The first Wurglah was through the railings now. One of its feet had been twisted backwards, and it limped badly, leaving a ragged trail in the snow-covered grass, but it was moving at a steady pace. Most of the others were at least halfway through.

Rosa and the Professor ran across the park. The corner of the Cabinet was visible, through yet another set of railings. This time, no wheelie bins were to be seen.

‘Hoy!’ shouted the Professor suddenly, and waved. Up in the kitchen window, a tiny figure was perched on the windowsill. Sergeant Watkins, staring out into the night. But in the wrong direction.

‘Gary!’ exclaimed Rosa. There he was, perched on the roof of a nearby house. But if he had seen or heard them, he showed no sign of reacting.

‘Over here, you ghastly simian!’ yelled the Professor angrily, but the monkey was holding his phone out into the night air, then squinting at the reading, and holding it out again.

Rosa made a small, hard snowball and squinted, judging the distance carefully.

The snowball hit the back of Gary’s head, and he leapt up into the air with a screech, glaring all around him.

‘Yes!’ thought Rosa, pleased.

‘Oh, good *shot!*’ called the Professor. Rosa turned to him, grinning, then saw the dozen or so Wurglah behind them, spreading out to cut off any avenue of escape, the moonlight casting sharp angular shadows on the snow as they limped and staggered across the park.

‘Get T’Maugh!’ shouted the Professor. ‘Tell Sergeant Watkins to come, and-’

But Gary had shot across the rooftops and away. Rosa looked back at the kitchen window, hoping to see the mouse again. But Sergeant Watkins, if it had been him, had gone. Suddenly Rosa felt very cold, and very tired.

They were backed up against the railings now. The Professor stood in front of Rosa, sword drawn and handed her the jar.

‘You’d better run,’ he said. ‘There must be another way out of this park, and the Earl can’t be allowed to get his hands on any of the Treasures.’

But Rosa shook her head. She twirled the handles of the carrier bag around her hand, and let the jar dangle. It had a solid, reassuring weight. 'I'm staying with you,' she said. 'I'll break it on them if I have to.'

Then, Rosa felt something brush past her foot. She jumped, thinking that perhaps more Wurglah had circled round on the other side of the railings. But it was a small black mouse. It shot past her, climbed swiftly up the leg of the nearest Wurglah and started chewing on the chocolate brown beanie hat that was pulled down over its face.

Rosa wondered if there was time to reach forward and pull the apparently suicidal mouse off the thing, which had stopped and was turning from side to side in a puzzled manner, when another mouse ran past, and then another, and another. The snowy ground was suddenly covered with the small creatures, and Rosa had to lean back and grab the railing to prevent losing her balance.

One by one the Wurglah sank to the ground, and disappeared under the sheer volume of mice still flowing between the railings and past Rosa's boots. Scraps of clothing rose in the air from the ferocity of the mice's attack, fell again to earth and were chewed and shredded once more.

'Slower than our usual targets,' said Sergeant Watkins. T'Maugh was sitting on the other side of the railings, the mouse perched on top of her head. 'But you need a lot more on your side to take them down.'

'What are they?' asked Rosa, as she watched tiny shreds of cloth floating up in the breeze, joining the flurries of snow that were starting to fall again.

'Leftovers from a wish spell,' replied the Professor. 'It happens sometimes. I tried to take one apart once, but all that was left was a pile of empty clothing.'

Rosa reached through the railings and scratched T'Maugh's ear. It felt warm and soft, like velvet.

'There's a gap in the fence, down on the left,' the dog advised. 'Looks like someone was driving too fast, skidded on the ice.'

Rosa nodded. The Professor sheathed his sword with a neat click, and they started walking. Behind them, a single black woollen glove reached up out of the swirling mass of fur and shreds of fabric, fingers twitching randomly as though something inside was desperately trying to escape. Soon, the only sign the Wurglah had even existed in the first place were a few scraps of wool and cloth settling across the snow. Rosa shivered, then turned to follow the Professor.

‘I thought of something,’ she said, as they made their way round to the front of the Cabinet. ‘When you cut the Wurglah’s glove off, and it was flopping about. What if the Earl’s been getting hold of Figments, and then taking them apart? He could sell any useful bits and pieces and claim he invented them himself.’

The Professor whistled, impressed.

‘Reverse-engineering,’ he said. ‘Makes sense. And according to the computer, the number of patents he’s filed have dropped in the last five years. Nothing at all in the last six months. Looks like the Earl needs to get his hands on some more Figments.’

‘So why hasn’t he just attacked the Cabinet?’ said Rosa puzzled. ‘And how come his company makes all those ‘Rosa Dew’ things?’

‘This is bigger than the Cabinet,’ said the Professor, unlocking the front door. ‘Whatever happens when all these Treasures are brought together... it must be pretty special. As to how you’re involved... I think until your memory comes back, the only person who knows that is the Earl himself. And if we manage to get all the Treasures together, we might just have enough leverage to make him tell us what’s going on.’

Finally the last of the mice returned, streaming from all across the park. Rosa followed them inside. When she finally bid goodnight and wearily

climbed the steps to her room, the female mouse was back on her windowsill as if nothing had happened.

Rosa nodded to her, and the mouse politely turned her back as Rosa undressed and climbed into bed. The last thing Rosa saw before closing her eyes was that small furry figure staring patiently out into the falling snow.

If anyone pulled me apart, layer by layer, she thought, would there be a 'Rosa Dew' inside? If so, would it be someone she would even recognise? But of course, there was no way of knowing, and so, entirely sensibly and practically, she fell asleep.



Chapter Twenty-Two

The next morning, Rosa went down the stairs to the map room to find it full of people all talking angrily over each other, while the Professor tried in vain to bring them to some kind of order.

At least twelve people were crammed into the room, a few of whom Rosa recognised: the woman from the chip shop, Agnetha and four of her drivers. The others looked like locals. People from Walmington, Rosa had noticed, tended to be below average height, even the ones who didn't work for Agnetha. Ears were often rather on the pointed side and clothing leant towards the shabbily comfortable.

'If someone could just tell me-' shouted the Professor, but to no avail. Agnetha was the closest to him, and shouting the loudest, but Rosa's attention was distracted by the silver laptop computer the red-haired woman was waving around.

There was a sudden low WOOF, which Rosa felt as much as heard, followed by complete silence. T'Maugh had entered the room without anyone noticing, although all eyes were on her now.

'Now,' said the large dog, with surprising mildness, 'perhaps one of you would care to tell us what exactly is going on?'

'We've all had someone trying to buy our homes off us in the past few weeks,' said one older man, who had a hunched posture, and, Rosa couldn't help

noticing, a heavy forehead with one thick eyebrow running almost from ear to ear.

‘The same person each time?’ asked the Professor.

Agnetha shook her head. ‘All sorts, they were.’

‘Smart city types,’ continued the man with the heavy brow. ‘Said he was looking for a home in the country. Asked me not to tell anyone else, offering me silly money, especially if I went quietly and didn’t mention it to anyone else. Course *some* of us wouldn’t sell at any price. Not like them as were holding out for more cash.’

He cast an accusing look at the chip shop woman, who opened her mouth wide in indignation, and would undoubtedly have started shouting again, if T’Maugh hadn’t made a low rumbling sound in the back of her throat.

‘Young man in a suit, mine was,’ added Agnetha. ‘Said he was a venture capitalist, but them tattoos and gold earrings didn’t fool me. Distinctly piratical, I thought.’

‘I had some fashion model,’ said the chip shop woman ‘Told me she was done with the high life, wanted some peace and quiet. Pretty young thing.’

Rosa and the Professor exchanged glances.

‘Course, I’ve got a business to run,’ she continued. ‘And my boys to look after. Not like Carlos can work in the factory with his family, not when he swells up and can’t breathe at the very smell of chocolate.’

Agnetha gestured at the smallest of the taxi drivers, perched on the Professor’s leather armchair, although his feet were at least a foot off the ground. Catching Rosa’s gaze, he smiled sadly at her through his long dark hair, then looked back at the floor, clearly embarrassed at the attention.

‘So,’ said the Professor. ‘Are you thinking of taking these people up on their offers?’

There was silence for a moment, as they all stared at him.

‘We’re the only ones who *didn’t*,’ said Agnetha. ‘Everyone else in the town, they’ve sold up and moved on, all in the past few days. And then this morning, each of us that was left got one of these.’

She handed the Professor her laptop. It had the letters ‘DI’ embossed in a smart-looking logo on one corner.

The Professor opened the machine, and waited. There was a whirring noise, a click, then Rosa felt herself flinch as the Earl appeared, smiling out at them all from the glowing screen.

He was wearing a different suit this time: a blue pinstripe, with a sober black handkerchief tucked into his breast pocket. He was sitting in an overstuffed leather armchair, next to a roaring fire.

‘Friends,’ said the Earl. The sound coming out of the tiny computer speakers, should have been flat and tinny. But it wasn’t.

‘Let me tell you first how much I have come to cherish and respect your charming seaside town.’ The words flowed around them like honey.

‘I have a home already of course, a place in the countryside, and a fine setup it is too. But there comes a time in a man’s life,’ the Earl continued, ‘when he requires more of a home than just a building with some servants in it. In my autumn years, I find myself hungering to be part of something greater. A community. Dare I say it, a family. Changes will have to be made, of course, ensuring it’s the *right sort* of community, but for too long have I been dashing around like a mad young thing, acquiring a company here, stripping an asset there. But now it’s time for core values like ‘stability’ and ‘respect’. Inspirational qualities. Beacons of hope. Points of light in a darkening land.’

‘He’s gone mad,’ muttered T’Maugh, but the Walmingtonians shushed her. Grumpily, the dog sat down at Rosa’s feet. Rosa reached out a hand and scratched behind T’Maugh’s ears, but felt for the first time as if she was giving the dog reassurance rather than the other way round.

‘Which is why I’ve decided to buy Walmington,’ said the Earl, calmly. ‘I’ve always fancied a quaint little second home by the sea. And when I came across your town, well, I simply couldn’t help myself.’

Clearly the others had seen the little film before, as they registered no shock, just a resentful mumble that ran around the room. The Earl raised his hands placatingly.

‘Now I’ll admit to trying a few rather basic tactics to separate the wheat, as it were, from the chaff. Sending in emissaries in an attempt to get a reasonable market price, that sort of thing. Yet some of you chose to hold out.’

The Earl had taken something out of his pocket, and in a strangely familiar movement, was running it back and forth across his knuckles.

‘I am a man who is often told emotion has no place in business. But I say to you it is the only reason for business. To each of you who has held firm, for reasons of financial astuteness, or simple sentimentality, I say “well done.”’

As he spoke, the metal disc spun and flickered across the back of the Earl’s hand. Suddenly it was as if some spark had gone off in Rosa’s brain.

‘The coi-’ she started to say, but the Professor shook his head quickly. Rosa cursed herself for being so stupid. Of course, the Earl had spies everywhere. The Professor didn’t seem able to bring himself to think of Agnetha as a traitor, but *someone* had told the Earl they were going to pick up the jar from her taxi company...

The Earl was coming to the end of his speech now.

‘But,’ he was saying, ‘this part of the game has concluded. I was trying to avoid anyone finding out the mover and shaker behind this venture, of course. Burdened as I am with the unfortunate combination of a sensitive, sympathetic soul and simply *scads* of money, it’s all too easy for people to take advantage. But you have played your hands well, and you will be amply rewarded. In your bank accounts, you will find an amount equivalent to ten times the value of your property. My men will help you with the... ah, *technicalities* of the move.’

He smiled into the screen, which suddenly went blank. The Professor closed the laptop and looked back at the Walmingtonians.

‘They came into my place this morning,’ said the man with the heavy brow. ‘Gave me an hour to pack, said they’d forward the rest of my belongings on to me. Not that I even know where I’m supposed to go.’

‘This happened to all of you?’ asked the Professor, shocked. They all nodded, muttering with anger.

‘Told me they’d bought my company out from under me,’ spat Agnetha. ‘Took all the keys to my cars, handed train tickets to my drivers and told them to get the next train out.’

The Professor looked bewildered. ‘And instead you came here because...’

‘Because we ain’t got nowhere else to go,’ said Agnetha bluntly. ‘And you’ve got stuff in this place, stuff that can help us, and rooms to spare. You don’t think we know about it, but we do. We’ve always kept to ourselves in this town, prided ourselves on it, but that’s not helping us now. So what we want, I suppose I’m saying, is refuge. And then we can work out what to do. About time this town started acting as a community, and it’s a shame it took that toffee-nosed Earl to make us see it, but there it is.’

Agnetha glared at the floor after what Rosa suspected was the longest speech the dwarf had ever made in her life.

‘I brought food,’ the woman from the chip shop added. ‘None of us wants charity. But them streets ain’t safe.’

The Professor opened his mouth, and for a selfish moment, Rosa wanted him to say no, that they already had a mouse army in the place, and besides, how did they know just who was really on their side anyway? But of course he didn’t.

‘You’re all most welcome,’ the Professor said graciously. ‘It might be a bit of a squeeze, but I’m sure the Cabinet can accommodate us all.’

The Walmingtonians nodded, as though this was the only possible way things could have worked out, and began bustling around, the woman from the chip shop commandeering some of Agnetha's drivers to carry the boxes of food.

Suddenly the Cabinet no longer felt like somewhere Rosa had her own special place. She knew it was wrong, but she couldn't help feeling just a little upset.

'Mind out,' grunted Agnetha, barging past her and bashing Rosa's shin with her heavy boots as she did so. 'If you're not helping, you're in the way.'

'Rosa, I think we have matters to discuss in the library, if it's convenient,' said the Professor, smoothly. He held the door open, and grateful for the opportunity to leave the sudden influx of people behind, Rosa followed him through.

T'Maugh joined them shortly afterwards, as did Sergeant Watkins, and, to Rosa's surprise, Gary. The splint was off his wing now, although he still chose to enter the room on his feet. His limp, Rosa noted, had now shifted to the other leg.



Chapter Twenty-Three

The Professor was sitting on one of the lower rungs of a ladder, T'Maugh lying at his feet, head on her paws.

'I ain't giving up my room,' said Gary firmly. 'Or sharing with dwarves.'

'Rosa spotted something on the Earl's video,' said the Professor, ignoring him completely.

Rosa nodded, then felt herself blushing as all heads turned towards her. 'The trick the Earl was doing with that coin,' she said. 'Well, it was the coin itself I spotted. It's an old fifty pence piece, from nineteen seventy-three.'

Gary looked startled. 'How can you tell that?' he asked, too surprised to even sneer.

'Because it's one of the Treasures,' said the Professor taking the notebook from his cardigan pocket and opening it up. They all gathered around the tiny open book, T'Maugh to Rosa's left, Gary hopping on to her shoulder for a closer look. Rosa felt the monkey's small paws digging in through her t-shirt, but decided not to say anything.

Sure enough, the fifty pence piece in the book was a twin for the one that had flashed and twinkled between the Earl's fingers as he had first told Rosa that she was, more or less, his property, and then later when he was telling the people of Walmington in a polite, regretful way how he had ruthlessly taken their houses away from beneath their very noses.

Sergeant Watkins didn't look so sure. He had walked down the Professor's arm and was peering at the drawing from almost an inch away.

'It could be a similar coin,' he admitted, 'but surely there's no h'way of telling if h'it's the same one.'

But the Professor shook his head. 'He's taunting us,' he said. 'I think the Earl has guessed we have some of the other Treasures. Or he knows somehow.'

'You think he wants us to know he has the rest?' said Rosa, but she already knew the answer, even as the Professor nodded. Despite his smooth, friendly exterior, the Earl did nothing unless it was to his advantage, she knew that.

'The ritual can't be performed unless all four of the Treasures are in one's possession. Not that I even know what the ritual is yet. And even if I did, this is the kind of magic it's best to stay away from.'

Sergeant Watkins was turning the pages of the notebook now, although it took him both paws to do it.

'There's still much to translate,' admitted the Professor. 'And all the excitement this morning has put me even further behind. This may even be exactly what the Earl planned.'

But the Sergeant was still looking at the book.

'This is a street map,' he said. In fact the whole back half of the notebook looked like a series of maps –all scribbled in the same tiny hand, all the names in the same alien language.

'Agreed,' said the Professor tiredly. 'But with no landmarks, no recognisable streets, I'm afraid it's impossible to work out where they're a map *of*.'

He pointed to a street at random. Rosa could see what he meant. It could be any street in any town or city in the world. One of the houses was circled in red.

'Where's that, for example?' he asked.

‘Seventeen, Cherry Tree Lane,’ said the Sergeant.

They all gaped at him. T’Maugh was the first to recover.

‘You can read Tribe?’ she asked, surprised. The mouse shook his head.

‘Not a word,’ he said. ‘But I recognise the shape of the street – houses down one side, lovely open space on the other, h’eforementioned fruity foliage down the middle. I’d know it anywhere.’

The Professor was flicking enthusiastically through the notebook.

‘That’s all I need to get to work on the rest of the book!’ he cried. ‘This should shorten the translation time considerably.’

‘Which could be just what the Earl wants,’ said T’Maugh slowly. The Professor looked at her, then back at the book, then back at the dog again.

‘Go on,’ he said.

‘If I was the Earl,’ T’Maugh said thoughtfully. ‘And I liked other people doing my work for me, I’d let someone with perhaps just a bit more enthusiasm than common sense find a book, translate it for me, and then carefully accumulate all the magical items necessary. Then I’d step in and take over at the last minute. And I’d probably plant a spy in the Cabinet while I was doing it.’

The Professor looked sadly down at the book in his hands.

‘So you’re saying if I translate this book, I’m simply doing the Earl’s work for him?’

‘Not if we steal the coin off the Earl,’ said Rosa, simply. There was a silence, then a yelp, as Gary fell off her shoulder.

‘No,’ said the Professor. He’d said a lot more, for about an hour, but it had all been along the same theme. The idea of letting Rosa out on what he

described as ‘some hare-brained scheme to pilfer what may even be the Earl’s rightful property’, wasn’t one he seemed able to embrace with full enthusiasm.

‘Even if it were the right thing to do,’ he continued, ‘Rosa certainly wouldn’t be the right person to do it.’

‘But according to the Earl,’ Rosa pointed out, ‘I’m already a thief, and a liar. So that would make me the perfect person to do it.’ She was rather proud of her logic.

Again the Professor shook his head. ‘If anyone was to go on this kind of mission, it would be me.’

‘We need you to translate the notebook, with Sergeant Watkins,’ said Rosa, reasonably. ‘I can be spared. It’s not like I’m doing anything useful here.’

The Professor rubbed underneath his eyepatch. He looked worried, and old. Rosa couldn’t help feeling they were ganging up on him rather. She certainly hadn’t expected T’Maugh to come in on her side, especially after her reluctance to let the two of them head out to pick up the jar.

‘It’s time to act,’ the dog announced. ‘We’ve been fielding attacks from the Earl ever since he got here.’

‘But we can’t simply adopt the tactics of the enemy,’ moaned the Professor.

‘It’s only a small bad thing,’ said Rosa, ‘And it’s in a good cause.’

But to her surprise, T’Maugh shook her head.

‘Good try,’ she said, ‘but if we do a bad thing, we do a bad thing. Best not to try and sugar coat it.’

‘It’s a fifty pence coin, correct?’ asked Rosa. ‘So it’s worth fifty pence.’

The Professor looked at her, uncertain where she was going. ‘We-ell,’ he replied cautiously, ‘the coin itself is no longer legal tender. So from that point of view it’s actually worthless.’

Rosa reached into her jeans pocket and took out three twenty pence coins, all the change she had left from the money the conductor had given her.

‘So I replace it with these,’ she said. ‘That way, he’s even made ten pence profit.’

The Professor stared at the coins in Rosa’s hands. He was weakening, she could see it.

‘I suppose I could write a receipt,’ he said grudgingly, then suddenly flung his arms wide in desperation.

‘What am I saying!’ he cried. ‘We don’t even know where he is, let alone how anyone could get to him without being spotted! Rosa, the conversation is over.’

‘It’s not,’ said Rosa firmly. ‘Because I’m going to go anyway, with or without your permission.’

The Professor blinked at her, and for a moment Rosa felt herself crumbling. The last thing she wanted to do was to hurt the Professor’s feelings. But for too long the Earl had sat at the edge of her world, like a spider patiently spinning a web of confusion and deceit. And now it was time to take the fight to him. She pulled herself together.

‘Agnetha said he was in a hotel,’ she said. ‘So I’m guessing it will be the best hotel in Walmington.’

‘The Hotel Resplendent,’ said T’Maugh, softly. ‘It makes sense.’

‘And he’ll be in the best room in the hotel,’ said Rosa. ‘I can’t imagine him taking anything else.’

‘The penthouse suite,’ said the Professor. ‘Which brings us back to our problem. How are you going to walk through a town filled with the Earl’s forces, and then climb four storeys of a building also filled with enemies, and take a coin out of the Earl’s suit without him noticing?’

‘Hmm,’ said Rosa. ‘If only I were in a building completely packed with magical items, with a curator who knows the history of each and every one of them. Maybe *in those very unlikely circumstances* there might be the tiniest possibility of coming up with some kind of workable plan.’

The Professor glared at Rosa, and for the first time, she started to wonder if she’d gone too far. Then he got to his feet, brushed some dust off his cardigan, and gave Rosa a grin of such impish delight, he looked at least thirty years younger.

‘I’ll make a pot of tea,’ he said. ‘And we’ll see if we can come up with something. But at the first sign of danger, you have to promise to run straight home.’

‘I promise,’ said Rosa meekly, and it wasn’t until the Professor had left the library that she realised he had referred to the Cabinet as her home. She felt an odd feeling in her throat, as though she were struggling for breath, only in a good way, but then the feeling passed.

I wonder, she thought, if I’m anywhere near as sure about the whole thing as I sounded?



Chapter Twenty-Four

There was something enormously satisfying about making plans, Rosa decided. Pretty much everything she had done since waking up on the train had been a bit... improvised. In fact, throwing things and running had been her most well-chosen courses of action thus far, and so sitting around a table with friends, looking at a map and making calm and considered decisions was like a visit to some better, more ordered world. Rosa was even starting to enjoy the taste of tea, although to the Professor's despair, she still insisted on three lumps of sugar in each cup.

'You realise the second you put a foot outside the Cabinet, absolutely nothing will go as it should,' said T'Maugh.

'I know,' said Rosa happily. 'But I'll deal with that as it happens.'

'Improvise and Adapt,' said Sergeant Watkins, nodding approvingly. 'Make the best plan you can, and be prepared to throw it out the window when it h'all goes wrong.'

It certainly was a good plan, although Rosa had no illusions that it was guaranteed to work. Already, two of the Sergeant's most trusted lieutenants had been sent on what the mouse called a 'reconnoitre', to talk to some of the local mice and confirm the hotel's use as the Earl's base of operations.

Meanwhile, Rosa and the Professor returned to the strange gallery of apparently empty display cases and bare dummies that lay at the very bottom level of the Cabinet. The Professor had already been down late the previous

night, checking that whatever had climbed down the manhole cover hadn't made it any further into the building.

Something had certainly crossed the bridge, which was alarming, but had been stopped by the heavy iron door. Whatever it was had battered the metal considerably, leaving dents visible from the inside, but the lock had held firm, and the building hadn't been breached.

Even so, Rosa kept casting nervous glances around the silent gallery while the Professor rummaged in various drawers. Finally he found what he sought, and the two of them headed back upstairs.

Rosa and the Professor had decided early on not to involve the new arrivals in the plan – it just seemed safest to share the details with as few people as possible.

Which caused a slight hitch with the next stage. The item the Professor had taken from the underground gallery had turned out to be a rather dull-looking test-tube, filled with a fine, purplish powder.

'This needs to be mixed with water, and heated,' said the Professor. He handed her an empty mist sprayer he had taken from the conservatory.

'Rinse this out, and fill it,' he continued. 'And if you spill any, make sure you wash it away with plenty of water. It won't actually work until it's cooled, but we don't want to give the game away if we don't have to.'

'You really think the Earl might have sent one of them to spy on us?' asked Rosa quietly. They were just outside the kitchen, and one of the new arrivals was inside, singing tunelessly as they banged around various pots and pans. It sounded like the man with the heavy brow.

The Professor sighed. 'I really don't know,' he said. 'But let's assume he did, until we know he didn't, shall we?'

Rosa nodded and entered the kitchen. The heavy-browed man was indeed making himself a mug of hot chocolate, but Agnetha was there too, sitting

quietly at the table. Her blue eyes tracked Rosa steadily as she made her way to the small stove.

‘Just mixing up some insect spray,’ Rosa improvised, as she took a small battered saucepan, tipped in the contents of the test tube, and added some tap water, which promptly turned a rather sickly purple colour.

Agnetha nodded, but continued to watch Rosa as she worked, turning on the gas, and stirring the water as it began to heat.

The man smiled at her, then produced a paper, and started the crossword.

‘Twelve letter word, beginning with ‘I’, meaning ‘not noticed’,’ he said.

‘Inconspicuous?’ said Agnetha, watching Rosa carefully. ‘Indiscernible?’

The man stared at the paper for a while, his lips moving.

‘Inconspicuous’ is thirteen,’ he said. ‘And ‘Indiscernible’ doesn’t fit. How about you, young lady? Any ideas?’

‘I’m afraid I don’t really understand crosswords,’ said Rosa politely, who was wondering if she should have stirred the mixture. What if she had accidentally used a magic spoon? Was there even such a thing as a magic spoon?

The man grunted, disappointed, and moved on to the next clue. ‘Three letter word, ends in ‘y’, clue being ‘to observe or scrutinise.’

‘Spy,’ said Rosa automatically. It was unfortunate that she was looking directly at Agnetha as she said it. The dwarf narrowed her eyes, but the man smiled.

‘Spy!’ he said happily. ‘Your insect spray’s bubbling over, by the way.’

Grateful for the sudden break in tension, Rosa turned off the gas, unscrewed the cap of the mist sprayer, then picked up the saucepan and carefully tipped in the entirety of the liquid. She screwed the lid back on tightly, then, remembering the Professor’s instructions, thoroughly rinsed out the pan, and the spoon.

‘I’ll see you later,’ she said. The man waved vaguely, but was clearly too deep in his crossword to really know what was going on. Agnetha nodded. It wasn’t an unfriendly nod. But then it wasn’t a friendly nod either.

Rosa quietly backed out of the kitchen, the container in her hand warm and heavy with promise. She hoped it would be enough.

When she returned to the maproom, the two mice were back, and Gary was sitting on the back of a chair, chewing something nasty. The Earl was definitely staying at the Hotel Resplendent, the mice confirmed. His car was parked outside, and the place was positively heaving with his staff. The local mice had described strange boxes being carried up to the top storeys, and odd creatures wandering the halls at night.

The Professor took all of this in, glancing only occasionally at Rosa to make sure she was aware of the seriousness of what she was about to attempt. She was, of course, and oddly the more she knew of the layout of the hotel (the Professor used the mice’s collected intelligence to draw a rough map – it seemed that the hotel had the same layout as a sister building in Bournemouth he had once visited, which was useful), the more confident she grew that her plan would work.

T’Maugh was less enthusiastic, particularly since the details of the plan had made it clear that she would not be able to accompany Rosa.

‘It’s too risky,’ she announced. ‘You’ll be spotted leaving, whichever way you go.’

‘Which is why I need a diversion,’ said Rosa calmly. ‘Sergeant Watkins, is the Cabinet still being watched?’

The mouse nodded. ‘Someone on every corner of the building, ma’am,’ he said. ‘And they’ve made more Wurglah too. Might not be the shiniest corns on the cob, but they’re persistent. And they can hang around on a street corner for days at a time, just watching.’

‘Good,’ said the Professor. ‘No point creating a diversion if no-one’s watching. Rosa, you’d better go and get changed, then we’ll pick a mirror and wait for sunset.’

‘No-one’s asked me if I’m all right with this,’ grumbled Gary.

Rosa felt a sudden flash of contrition.

‘Sorry Gary,’ she said. ‘Please will you help me with my plan?’

The monkey looked rather startled, then frowned at her as if suspecting some kind of trick.

‘S’pose,’ he said finally. ‘Just nice to be asked, that’s all.’

‘Good lord,’ said T’Maugh.

When Rosa got to her room, the female mouse once again politely turned her back while she got changed. Sensible boots, jeans and a thick jumper seemed appropriate, and by the time she had tied her hair back into a ponytail, she felt like a soldier, about to go into battle. Briefly she considered putting some burnt cork or something on her face, but if the stuff in the mist sprayer did its job, that wouldn’t be necessary.

‘Not taking your handbag, miss?’ asked the mouse politely, once Rosa had coughed as an indication she could turn round. The top rank of Rodentian officers had been fully informed of the plan, which made this mouse a major at the very least. To be sure, Sergeant Watkins had personally threatened to eat the ears of any rodent who let the secret out, and Rosa was reasonably sure he meant it.

‘I don’t think so,’ said Rosa, absently. In fact, since the Earl had, in his discreet and regretful way, accused her of stealing it, she had rather gone off her bright strawberry handbag. Currently, however, her attention was taken by a man standing on the corner of the road outside, two storeys down. He was wearing a smart suit, with a thick winter coat over the top. His hair was short, and neatly cut, and he had a slightly pudgy face, so he certainly wasn’t a

Wurglah. Just as Rosa was starting to wonder if she was seeing enemies where they didn't exist, the man looked straight up at her, and grinned, showing a mouthful of gold teeth.

Rosa gasped, and jumped back from the window.

'Just that you take it off with you every night,' said the mouse, calmly. She too had seen the man, but seemed utterly unbothered. 'So I assumed there was something important about it. Treasured possession, sort of.'

'I do?' said Rosa, confused. The mouse stared at her, suddenly looking equally startled.

'Well, only to the bathroom. I mean...' she shuffled embarrassedly on the window sill. 'Don't mean to pry, miss. We all get caught short in the middle of the night.'

Rosa couldn't remember ever getting up in the night. Not once, since she had come to the Cabinet.

'I must be sleepwalking,' she said. 'Do I look like I'm sleepwalking?'

'Come to think of it,' said the mouse, 'you did have the same look on your face as my uncle Oswald had. Terrible sleepwalker, he was, for a while.'

'Something he grew out of?' asked Rosa interestedly.

'Sort of,' said the mouse. 'He got eaten.'

'Rosa!' called the Professor, from the bottom of the stairs. 'It's time!'

'Good luck miss,' said the mouse briskly. 'We're all rooting for you.'

'Thank you,' said Rosa. The surge of confidence that had come with picking the right clothes had gone now, replaced with a horrible sickly fear. But it was too late for that now.

The mouse saluted Rosa, which should have felt silly, and cheesy, but the mouse was, after all, an army major, so it didn't.

‘Dangerous things, mirrors,’ said the Professor. ‘Look into them all you want, but you’ll never see what everyone else sees.’

The mirrors in the hallway had all now had their covers taken down, apart from one: a huge, ornately framed thing with clawed feet. The heavy sheet hung over it like a shroud. Rosa felt an almost irresistible urge to pull the sheet aside and see what lay beneath, but the Professor shook his head.

‘Best left,’ he said quietly.

The next mirror, a large Victorian looking-glass, was almost as large, making it useless for their purpose. The third barely qualified as a mirror at all, being comprised of hundreds of broken shards painstakingly reassembled into their original configuration. There was a gap in the very centre, where one shard was still missing. Rosa glanced at her thousand splintered reflections, and shivered, quickly looking away.

But the Professor had finally found the oval mirror he was looking for. It had a simple frame, and was about as simple as a mirror could be: just polished glass on a silver backing. The Professor took it down, and tucked it under his arm.

‘This will do the job,’ he said. ‘Its talking days are long gone anyway. Do you want to see if you can find Carlos?’



Chapter Twenty-Five

Carlos the taxi driver's English wasn't perfect, but through a combination of pointing and smiles he eventually seemed to understand that Rosa wanted him to hide, then at a certain gesture, pop up.

The more complicated bit was explaining that Rosa wanted him to take his hair out of the elastic band in which he kept it tied back.

'It's bad for your hair anyway,' she said sternly. In the end, the easiest thing was to take it out herself. Carlos looked startled as the long black hair suddenly flowed around his face, then grinned at Rosa, gently tugging a strand of her own hair.

'Exactly,' said Rosa. 'We match. Now come on, we need to go to the roof.'

Carlos just frowned at her, so Rosa took his hand in her bigger one, and led him up to the top of the Cabinet.

The room at the top of the Cabinet was long, and thin, and papered with an odd jungle pattern that swirled with dark abandon, never quite repeating. There were two windows in the room: both slightly open. Gary perched at the east end, T'Maugh and the Professor waited with the mirror at the west. Carlos looked around, confused, as the Professor handed Rosa her coat, and a small, tatty-looking wooden box with a tiny metal catch set into the lid.

'Push the catch to the right to go small,' the Professor had told her earlier, after a lot of stuff about curates and talking mice Rosa hadn't quite taken in.

‘I’m going out, Carlos,’ Rosa said. ‘But I need your help with one thing.’

Carlos shrugged and smiled.

‘Is it worrying that an important part of the plan rests in the hands of a man who doesn’t even speak English?’ asked T’Maugh.

‘I speak English,’ said Carlos, unexpectedly. ‘I learn from the people who get in the car. They say “take me to the train station, tiny man’ and ‘put your pedal to the metal titchy person, if you can reach the metal, haha only joking.”’ His voice was soft, and musical.

‘Oh,’ said T’Maugh, who had the grace to sound a little ashamed. ‘My apologies Carlos.’

‘Not to worries, Lady Dog,’ said Carlos. ‘I think I have picked up the gist of the plan.’

‘Lady Dog,’ mused T’Maugh. ‘I like that. Lady Dew, are you ready?’

Rosa was tucking the hotel map into her pocket, and placing the box and mist sprayer into a small rucksack she had found at the back of the wardrobe. The liquid had cooled now, which meant only the cap and lever were visible. The plastic bottle itself had vanished, though Rosa’s fingers were certainly wrapped round something.

‘That’s nasty stuff, Rosa,’ warned the Professor. ‘Don’t use it until the last minute, and wash it off the moment you’re safe. The effects can play nasty tricks on the mind.’

Rosa nodded and placed the coat round her shoulders, ready to drop it quickly.

‘Ready,’ she said.

‘No-one asks me if I’m ready,’ grunted Gary from the other end of the room.

‘Ready, Mister Gary?’ asked Carlos.

Gary narrowed his eyes. ‘S’pose,’ he said finally.

‘Right,’ said the Professor. ‘Just have to wait for one of the Earl’s... ah – there we go.’

Down below, a figure was moving in the darkening shadows by the park railings. A woman. She was wrapped in a thick fur coat, and wore a fur hat. And gloves, also trimmed with fur. Rosa was willing to bet none of the fur was fake. The woman didn’t look like she’d seen them.

‘Here we go,’ murmured the Professor. Opening the window wide, he held the mirror up to the sinking sun, light suddenly flashing from between his hands.

The woman looked up, and Rosa held her breath, trying not to stare down, but wanting to make sure she had been seen. The Professor continued to flash the mirror in a series of short then long bursts of light.

Down below, the woman had looked away for long enough to attract the attention of the man with the gold teeth. He sidled over to her, trying to look casual, but clearly wondering exactly what it was the Professor was up to. Which was exactly the point.

Rosa waited until she was sure both the Earl’s spies had seen her, then turned casually away from the window and dropped suddenly to the floor.

Carlos stared at her in wonderment, then looked even more surprised when Rosa slipped off the coat and placed it round his shoulders.

‘Stand next to the Professor,’ she whispered. ‘You have to look like me.’

Carlos frowned, then suddenly nodded, and with the coat round his shoulders popped up next to the Professor, just where Rosa had been standing. He even flicked his hair in a rather swishy motion.

‘All right, all right,’ muttered T’Maugh. ‘There’s no awards for this, you know.’

But it seemed to be working. The spies stared as the Professor flashed his fake message across the rooftops of Walmington. Keeping low to the ground, Rosa scuttled across the floor to the far windowsill where Gary was waiting.

‘Your wing *is* better isn’t it?’ she asked anxiously.

‘Seems all right,’ he said carelessly. ‘But you never know. Might have to let go of some extra weight, if things get rough.’

‘Don’t you dare,’ said Rosa crossly. Gary snickered, then sighed as Rosa glared at him.

‘First-time fliers,’ he said. ‘Always nervous. Don’t you dare throw up.’

‘Right,’ said Rosa, with a determination she didn’t really feel, and twisted the catch of the wooden box to the right.

The floor rose up to meet her with frightening speed. Rosa gasped as the room around her stretched and grew until she was no higher than the skirting board.

Gary’s huge paw reached down to pick her up and place her, not that gently, into a pocket in his padded sleeveless jacket. The monkey slipped out of the window, fell about a storey in a lurching motion that made Rosa wish she hadn’t had quite such a big tea, then spread his wings and rose into the air.



Chapter Twenty-Six

What Rosa had had in mind for the flight from the Cabinet to the Hotel Resplendent was a sort of gentle soaring up above Walmington. Perhaps a brief glimpse of the town from above, last rays of sunshine twinkling off the sea, that sort of thing, followed by a dignified landing on the roof of the hotel.

However, if Rosa made a list of her immediate sensations on that flight, as it had actually happened, it would look something like this:

This seems to be rather too fast.

Also, there is an apple core in this pocket, almost half as big as me.

WEATHER VANE!

This apple core really should have been thrown away about a week ago.

BRICK WALL!

There's no-one on the streets, apart from people who are almost certainly in the Earl's employ. There's another pirate, and that's one of the women, I think, and there's an-

AIR CONDITIONING UNIT!

Gary is possibly a better flier than I take him to be. Maybe I should just-

WE CAN'T FIT THROUGH-

Oh, we did.

And finally:

I feel sick.

By the time Gary had skidded to a landing on a flat icy patch on the roof of the Hotel Resplendent, Rosa was feeling decidedly unwell, and smelling strongly of apple. She crawled weakly out of his pocket and lay for a moment on the freezing roof.

By the time she had got herself together enough to stand up, realise she was on the edge of a precipice that was, to her current scale, about a thousand feet to the ground, and sit down again, Gary was still talking. In fact, he had been talking all the way through the flight, but the combination of a cold wind blowing in her face at about a hundred miles an hour, and a desperate need to cling to the pocket's fabric to avoid being thrown out as he had swooped and jinked in the air, had prevented her taking anything in.

'... seen me on that last bit! Done it before, but that was *way* the fastest time...'

The monkey's eyes were shining, and both paws and wings were flailing about wildly as he described the journey. Rosa managed a weak smile. It was such a change to see Gary being anything other than a sulking bundle of fur and feathers wrapped around a mobile phone, that she didn't want to do anything to spoil the moment.

'Wicked,' he said. 'Shame Angry Paws and ole' Cardigan Face couldn't see it though.'

'I'll be sure to tell the Professor and T'Maugh you completed the first part of the journey with unnecessary flashiness and at great personal danger to the pair of us,' she promised gravely.

'Would you?' asked Gary gratefully. 'That would be brilliant.'

Rosa looked around for a way in to the hotel. Even at her current size she was too big to fit between the ventilation grille set into the roof, and also she had a feeling some kind of whirling-bladed style fan would be involved at some point. Dropping down the chimney didn't feel like much of a plan either.

'One of them windows is open,' said Gary, pointing to a small raised section of roof, just above their heads. 'I could chuck you in there if you like.'

'Could you maybe place me gently in there instead?' suggested Rosa. Gary shrugged, raising his eyes, and for a moment saw just how much of what the monkey did was an automatic response. It was as though everyone expected him to be annoying, so that was how he acted. But Rosa wasn't sure how much of it was the real Gary at all.

He picked her up, and half leaped, half flew up to the very peak of the building. Sure enough there was a small, narrow window, certainly too small for Rosa to have entered in her normal size. Gary lifted Rosa up to the window, and she had a quick peek through. A corridor, empty in both directions.

'Okay,' she whispered. 'In there.'

Gary reached his arm through, and down as far as he could, until Rosa was about an inch from the flat top of a storage heater. Dangling from Gary's finger for a moment, she screwed up her courage and let go. The drop winded her, but didn't hurt, and then she was inside the hotel.

Instinctively, she gave Gary a thumbs-up. To her surprise, he gave her a thumbs-up back, then looked a little embarrassed at how uncool he had just been, and tried to turn it into some kind of street gesture instead. It didn't really work.

'Remember,' mouthed Rosa. 'Three taps on the window when I'm back, and it's time to go.'

'Whatever,' Gary mouthed back, and flapped off to a corner of the roof to play a game on his mobile phone.

Hmm. Maybe that was the real Gary after all.

Sitting on the storage heater Rosa took the wooden box out of her pocket and pressed the catch to the right again. She was taking the mist sprayer out of her backpack even as the heater shrank beneath her, and then she was she was normal-sized again.

Footsteps were coming up the stairs now, and Rosa didn't plan on being seen. Turning the mist sprayer towards herself, she worked the handle with her thumb, the spray pleasantly cool against her face, with a slight aftertaste of blackcurrant. Quickly she covered herself in an even coating of the liquid.

The voices grew louder. Not the deep voices of the tattooed men Rosa had heard in the Walmington pub, or the higher voices of the women, but something in between. The voices of children. Or teenagers.

Rosa looked down at herself. Nothing had changed, other than she was now slightly damp all over. For a moment, she looked wildly at the other end of the corridor, but it was too far away, and even if she made it, who was to say there wasn't something far worse round the corner? The corridor was certainly too bare to try and evade them by going small. Either way, she would be seen...

Two familiar boys in tracksuits and baseball caps rounded the corner, a third trailing behind them slightly, and Rosa was about to shout out and fiercely warn them... what exactly? That her jumper was a bit clammy? That if she untied her hair it would go all frizzy at them? Then she saw that all three were holding swords; proper, sharp-looking swords, and she felt herself go pale.

But the boys showed no sign of seeing her at all. The lead boy with the blue eyes was boasting about something – how much the Earl owed him for helping out, Rosa heard as they grew nearer, and that he had promised to pay him (millions of pounds were mentioned, as were gold jewellery and a recording contract, though even the boy sounded a little doubtful on the last one). The other boy was pretending to listen, but was more interested in scraping his

sword along the hotel wall, scratching a crude line through painted plaster as he went.

They were only a few feet away now. There was no way they couldn't have seen her. Rosa moved a hand in front of her eyes, and saw nothing, although she could feel the slight movement in the air as it flapped around. She looked down and saw again, nothing. The liquid had worked.

The boys were nearly upon her now, and she ducked down out of the way of the second boy's sword, even as it knocked a small picture off the wall. They didn't even seem to notice, although Rosa was pleased to see the third boy giving the fallen picture a small, guilty look as he passed.

Then the boys were off around the corner, their voices fading, and Rosa was alone once more.

She gave them a few minutes head start before moving off, but made the mistake of trying to look at her feet as she went, and nearly lost her balance completely. This invisibility thing was trickier than it looked. Leaning against the wall, she waited until her heart had stopped pounding before trying again. Then she turned back suddenly and looked at the fallen artwork.

It was an odd-looking thing. In fact it was hardly a picture at all, just a grey space in a simple frame, and when Rosa picked it up to look at it (and it would have looked most odd if anyone had walked down the corridor at that moment and seen it hanging in mid-air), she saw that it wasn't even grey, not really. It was just the colour of... nothing, although it smelt very faintly of the sea.

Rosa hung it back on the wall, over the line scratched in the wall. Perhaps it was a silly thing to do, but if the boys returned, they would surely assume a member of the hotel staff to be responsible, if they thought about it at all. Anyway, it felt like an appropriately Professorish thing to do, to show what side she was on.

Now, to find the Earl's room. Rosa thought of the map in her pocket... and would have kicked herself, if there wasn't a good chance she would have fallen over. The map, like everything else in her backpack, was invisible. She would have to go by memory.

Reality one, plan nil, thought Rosa, and decided to head back up the corridor, in the direction the boys had come from.

At least a dozen hotel doorways stretched in both directions. Unfortunately, no-one back at the Cabinet had been able to tell Rosa the number of the room the Earl was staying in, so it looked like she was just going to have to be patient.

Gently, she turned the handle of the nearest door. It was locked, of course. *Reality two, plan nil*. Well, she was on the top floor, so the penthouse suite had to be one of these, surely. Rosa sighed, and looked about for clues.

The Hotel Resplendent was certainly worthy of its name, especially when you knew Walmington wasn't that big a town. The walls, where they hadn't been scratched, were painted a deep, expensive-looking red, with details such as picture rails and light switches picked out in gold. The carpet was a pale cream, which didn't seem terribly practical to Rosa, and if it had been any thicker, the indentations of her feet would have been plain to see. She made a mental note to walk round any rugs. There really were a surprising number of drawbacks to being invisible, although one advantage was that while you were pondering the décor, a maid could wheel a cart round the corner of the corridor and be completely oblivious to your presence, only a few feet away.

One of the bedroom doorways opened, and Rosa jumped, but it was only a second maid, carrying an armful of bed linen, which she dumped on the first maid's cart, replacing it with a fresh set.

'All them blokes with tattoos and gold teeth on the first floor,' said the first maid, 'they might dress smart, but they don't half have some odd habits.'

Ten of them crammed into each room, when that Earl's bought enough rooms for all of them twice over!

She was plump and elderly, with a round friendly face, and spoke with a soft country accent. The second maid, who was also plump, but younger and paler, nodded gloomily in agreement.

'And they keep tying sheets together, Mrs P,' she said. Clearly the first maid had some slight seniority, although their uniforms were identical. 'Hanging them up to sleep from. It'll do no good to them light fittings.'

'Hammocks,' said Mrs P.

'Language!' said the second maid, then both women collapsed, hooting, laughter rippling across their bodies like waves in jelly.

Rosa couldn't quite see what the joke was, but the way to find the Earl's room had become clear. If the maids continued in their slow trundling progress, then surely sooner or later they would come to the room Rosa was after. Rosa could slip in behind them, take the coin and be gone before anyone knew what had happened.

The younger maid reached for the handle of the next door, but Mrs P stopped her, frowning.

'You don't want to go in there,' she warned. 'That's where them *women* sleep.'

The maid leapt back from the door as if stung, and shivered. 'You *say* sleep,' she said. 'Little Polly went in there on the first night, said them beds had never been touched, but they'd been in there all night. Room full of old books, and bubbling things, and Manager says he saw a toad. And Polly didn't last long after that, neither.'

Mrs P sniffed. 'No loss,' she said. 'Probably just got on the train with the rest of them. And if not, well...'

She shrugged her ample shoulders to suggest that whatever fate had befallen poor Polly was probably her own fault. Rosa decided that round-faced jolly maids really ought to at least *try* and be good-natured. Otherwise it seemed like cheating.

The maids went past the next three doors. The last had a pair of black boots put out to be cleaned, and a tray, on which was a small pile of white bones.

‘Rats,’ said Mrs P, and tipped the tray into a rubbish bag slung from the end of the cart.

‘Don’t tell Manager,’ said the other maid. ‘You know what he’s like with rodents. Mad about them, he is. Traps everywhere.’

They were at the last door now, and Mrs P had produced a swipe card from her pocket. It was edged with gold, and Rosa felt her heart pounding. Could this be the one?

The women, annoyingly, were still chuntering on about rats, and mice, and managers. Mrs P drew the card across a ridge above the door handle, and they stepped inside, Rosa keeping as close behind them as she dared, lest the door shut and she be left in the corridor.



Chapter Twenty-Seven

The room was enormous. Rosa would have guessed it was the Earl's even without the black suit jacket hanging on the back of a fat leather armchair. There was a fire in the grate.

This must be the place where the Earl had made his broadcast, Rosa realised. A single window looked out over the sea, where the sun had now set, and the street lamps were coming on, one at a time. One of the Earl's taxis, chunky and almost insect-shaped, prowled along the seafront as if it was on some kind of patrol. Then Mrs P drew the curtains, and she could see no more.

Rosa's progression towards the jacket was slow and careful. The women were bustling around the room, plumping pillows, changing linen and dusting in a thorough, angry sort of way, and Rosa had to slip between them in a slow dance as she avoided dusters, flicked sheets and spray cleaner. At one point Rosa's backpack swung from her shoulder, and would have knocked against Mrs P's shoulder but she managed to grab it in time, flattening herself to the wall as the plump woman rushed past to stop the other maid flicking a duster over a nearby desk.

'Best leave that,' she advised. 'Earl Dorincourt, he don't like no-one touching his things.'

'Pretty though,' said the maid, staring wistfully at a huge green gem lying casually on the desktop, next to a CD case. 'Imagine being that rich, you can just have lovely things lying around.'

‘Keep in with the Earl,’ replied Mrs P with a wink, ‘and you’ll not have far to go. He looks after those as are loyal to him, I’ve noticed.’

While they were talking, Rosa slipped a hand into the Earl’s left jacket pocket. Nothing. The right pocket held only a silk handkerchief, and the small breast pocket was empty. There was another pocket inside, and keeping an eye on the women while they planned how best to keep in with the Earl, Rosa was able to slide her hand around to check. Nothing there either.

Suddenly, the women were packing the cart and leaving the room. Rosa had a split second to consider sneaking out after them, then saw one of the women had left an interior door ajar, revealing a walk-in wardrobe larger than the room she had been occupying in the Cabinet. That settled it.

Rosa waited a full minute until the women had left, then tried the main door very gently. As she had hoped, it could be opened perfectly easily from the inside. She let the door shut again, just as quietly, then looked back at the room.

I’m starting to enjoy this, thought Rosa. Indeed, there was something intensely pleasurable about being able to snoop about the Earl’s property. For a moment, Rosa considered writing a message in the bathroom mirror, or moving all the furniture an inch or so to the left, but quickly realised it was the invisibility talking. The Professor had warned her it would start to play funny tricks with her mind if she remained invisible for too long. *Time to find the coin and get out.*

Except Rosa couldn’t find the coin. Plenty of pockets in the dozen or so jackets hanging up in the wardrobe did have cash in them, but either notes, or denominations too big or too small. She even checked in the shoes, but there was nothing.

The desk, then. The surface was cluttered, but no coins were to be seen. Rosa lifted up the CD case, which had on it a picture of a rather large lady with her hair in plaits, but there was nothing underneath. Inside a drawer was what Rosa thought at first must be another jewel, although it had no facets and was

shaped more like an egg. It was sparkling with light, warm in her hand, and undoubtedly very valuable, but it wasn't what Rosa was after. She put it back in the drawer, and slid it shut, very gently. This wasn't looking good.

A card swiped through the lock outside and the Earl entered. Instinctively, Rosa looked for a place to hide, but of course he just walked straight past her. The Earl was wearing another suit Rosa hadn't seen before, this one of a dark red hue. He was singing a song to himself, almost under his breath, but Rosa was just able to make out the words of the chorus, the gist of which seemed to be that 'all small things should have bows in their tails'. It should have been a jolly little song, but something about the way the Earl sang it, made it distinctly sinister. He held a white tube in his left hand, which he placed on top of the desk, before momentarily entering the white marble bathroom to turn on one of the heavy gold taps.

Rosa moved quietly into a corner, where she could watch the Earl with no danger of him accidentally bumping into her. He seemed in a good mood, still singing as he took his jacket off and laid it down carefully on the bed, then removed his shoes, and placed them neatly next to the armchair. Rosa was rather worried that the undressing would continue – a naked Earl wasn't something she particularly wanted to see – but fortunately the Earl then moved into the bathroom, closing the door firmly behind himself.

Taking the opportunity, Rosa sprang across the room and delved into the pocket of the jacket that now lay across the bed. Inside was a fifty pence piece, with the year '1973' written across its middle.

Taking the three twenty pence pieces from her pocket, Rosa rubbed them against the jacket sleeve until they were visible, then slipped them into the pocket, taking out the fifty pence piece. Feeling around in her backpack, she took out the mist sprayer. There was hardly any liquid left now, but it was enough. She squirted the last few drops over the coin, turning it over in her hands as she did so, watching the coin fade slowly from sight, although she could still feel it, heavy and warm in her hand. Rosa put the coin in her pocket,

and was about to slip quietly out of the room when her attention was caught by the white tube the Earl had been carrying.

It was a roll of paper, and had unfolded slightly since it had been laid on the desk. Rosa could just see the word '-allery' on it. In the bathroom, the taps squeaked off, and for a moment there was silence, Rosa poised perfectly halfway between the desk and the door. Then there was splash, a loud sigh as the Earl lowered himself into the bathwater, and then a contented silence.

She turned back to the paper, gently unrolling it into one large piece of paper. It looked like a map, although it didn't entirely make sense; some rooms that should have been connected weren't, and others that couldn't have been were. The word Rosa had seen had been part of 'Natural History Gallery'. Each of the rooms was labelled, with names such as 'Library', 'Armoury', 'Map Room' and 'Conservatory'. Written at the top was the word 'Cabinet'.

But there was something else. A small piece of paper that had been rolled up with the map, almost as an afterthought. In fact, it was so thin, and so small, it looked as though it had simply stuck itself to the heavier paper. Rosa held it up to the light. It was a receipt, although this one didn't look like it had come from a shop. A faint watermark at the top had the letters 'DI' intermingled, the same logo as on the internet, and the Walmingtonian's laptops. The rest of the writing on the paper was faint, and mostly faded away. But in the centre were clearly visible the words 'Internal Transfer - R. Dew' and then simply '1 unit'. The rest of the receipt was illegible. She stared at the paper for a long time, until even the bits she could read lost their meaning.

Rosa considered taking the map and the receipt back with her. But she had no invisibility serum left, and a roll of paper floating along the corridor on its own was bound to attract attention. So instead she stared at the map, trying to fix every detail in her head, to tell the Professor. What were those arrows, placed outside the building, and pointing inwards?

One of the arrows had 'P' written underneath. Another had 'WW'.

Pirates, thought Rosa, with a sudden sick feeling. *And the other must mean Wicked Witches. This had to be some kind of attack plan.*

There was a splash from the bathroom, and the Earl began singing again. Time to get back to the Cabinet.

Rosa peeked carefully out into the corridor. The coast was clear. Letting the door shut almost silently behind her, she raced as quickly as she dared back to the window above the storage heater, and tapped on the glass three times.

Nothing happened. She sighed. It wasn't altogether surprising. Pushing the window open, Rosa stepped out on to the flat section of roof, now approximately ten times smaller than when she had last stepped on to it. The night air was cold on her face, after the centrally heated plushness of the hotel, and there was a very slight breeze. Rosa kept one hand flat against the roof and was careful not to look down.

'Gary!' she whispered, as loudly as she dared. Nothing. Rosa edged her way further around the roof, in the direction where she had last seen Gary playing on his mobile phone. Still nothing. Or rather...

On the flat tiles, turning a little in the breeze was a single iridescent feather. Gary was gone. Then there was a roar from what felt like only a few feet away, and Rosa knew that her theft had been discovered.



Chapter Twenty-Eight

Rosa barrelled down the stairs three at a time, and for a moment it looked as if she was going to get away with it. Then she heard the noise of footsteps coming towards her at high speed.

Five men were charging up towards her, too many to sneak past. They wore smart business suits and held cutlasses in their big, heavy-knuckled hands.

Rosa ran back to the first staircase. Two attractive, well-dressed young women were walking quickly up towards the Earl's room. Clearly the alarm had been raised, although if Rosa flattened herself against the wall, they might just go past without noticing. There was a single doorway at the top of the stairs, set slightly back into the wall, and Rosa pressed herself against it, hands flat to her sides, with even her head turned to one side.

The men in suits thundered straight up the next flight of stairs and out of sight. This might not be so bad after all: if all the forces that might be looking for Rosa were heading upstairs while she slipped downstairs, she might just get away with this.

The women were getting very close now. Rosa recognised them from the bar on the seafront: the young-looking witch who seemed to be their leader, and the German woman who had offered Rosa the gingerbread. Both wore pink velour tracksuits. The leader wore matching gloves.

'I grow rather weary of Cedric's constant histrionics,' she was saying coldly. 'For a leader, and a man of frankly mature years, there's something repellently childish about him.'

Cedric? thought Rosa. She must be talking about the Earl. It was a good name. He looked like a Cedric. But the women were practically next to her now, and almost instantly, the leader's head snapped round, looking right at her.

'I smell something,' she murmured. Both stopped instantly.

Rosa would have run for it that second, but for the fact that the witch's gaze slid off her, whilst her assistant stared around in all directions, almost as much in panic as in anger. Neither woman looked quite as attractive as they had in the seafront bar. Their skin looked wrinkled, their faces jowled and sagging on one side.

They're using up their bodies, like the Professor said, thought Rosa.

'Vere?' cried the German.

The lead-witch narrowed her eyes, then took in a great noseful of air. All Rosa could do was hold her breath again and stare straight ahead with appalled fascination. The assistant was stalking up and down the corridor, nose held high, like a hunting dog.

'I smell it too!' she cried.

'Well of course you smell it,' growled the woman. Her nose was just inches away from Rosa's face now, and her face was shifting, the ears growing more pointed, as if whatever was inside the woman-shape was trying to get out. Rosa felt her hand reaching for the box in her backpack, but then she thought of the pile of small white bones on the tray the maid had taken. Being small wouldn't help her one bit.

'Apple?' said the assistant, with a puzzled tone to her voice. The woman suddenly turned her gaze from Rosa, and cast a look of such utter disdain at her underling, Rosa was surprised she didn't just shrivel up on the spot.

‘You idiot!’ she screamed. ‘Why must I surround myself with morons, with no more gift for natural witching than-’ Then she paused, and took another sniff of the air.

‘No, wait, I can smell it too,’ she said, and looked puzzled. The animalistic shape that had taken over her features dropped, and if it wasn’t for her lack of hair, she would have looked like a perfectly pleasant young woman again.

‘Those local brats the Earl’s been using,’ she said, suddenly sounding completely uninterested. ‘Saw one of them swigging some can of cider earlier, ghastly little tick.’

They strode off in the direction of the Earl’s room, and only when she was absolutely sure the coast was clear, did Rosa heave a deep sigh of relief. That apple core in Gary’s pocket might just have saved her life.

On the ground floor of the hotel, the Earl’s allies bustled around in a purposeful manner. Rosa was easily able to evade them by ducking into doorways, just keeping still as they passed. Once she was passed by a couple of shambling Wurglah, which gave her pause for thought. With no eyes, did the creatures see the same way humans did, or rely on some other sense? Fortunately, the creatures made no reaction but merely staggered further down the corridor, heavy bundles of swords and pistols in their arms.

The ground floor looked like some kind of army training ground. The whole space was swarming with pirates, and there was even some kind of sword-sharpening device set up in a corner: a great stone wheel turning slowly on a treadle while men in suits queued up to sharpen their cutlasses, sparks dancing and dying on the marble floor.

A large white board was set up in the foyer. Pinned to it was another map of the Cabinet, this one covered in swooping red arrows. All the time, more pirates were entering the building, checking their names off clipboards as they went. It was too busy here.

The back of the hotel, thought Rosa. That might be quieter.

Large wooden crates almost blocked the corridors to the rear, at least twenty of them, stacked two high. Rosa bent down and peered cautiously into the metal grille, at the front of the nearest crate. Something stirred, rustling the straw inside, then a long, sinuous body turned and bright eyes met her.

The creature looked something like a rat, though with a shorter face, and small round ears. It was the size of a large dog, only a little smaller than T'Maugh, although its body seemed somehow too long, and there was something snakelike in its appearance. Mad black eyes met Rosa's, and it bared its teeth, hissing at her.

Rosa staggered backwards at the sheer ferocity of the thing, accidentally putting her hand against the wire grille of another crate. A second creature hurled itself against the metal. Crates rattled and shook as the rest of the creatures woke up, hissing and spitting.

A door burst open at the far end of the corridor, and one of the larger pirates appeared between the crates, swinging his cutlass in wide, lazy arcs as he stalked slowly down the corridor.

'Got ourselves a little intruder,' he whispered. The tattoos that showed above the collar of the pirate's pinstriped suit swirled round the back of his neck and over his bald scalp. Unlike the mouthfuls of gold owned by the other pirates, his teeth were gleaming white, and filed into sharp points.

Rosa turned, about to make her way further to the rear of the hotel, when another pirate blocked her passage. This one wore a tattered butcher's apron that had once been white, but was now stained a variety of horrible colours, a kaleidoscope of grot. He carried a heavy cleaver, and like the other pirate, was swinging it to and fro in front of him.

The crates were rocking now as the creatures hurled themselves around their prisons in a frenzy, desperate to get their teeth into whatever it was they could smell, but not see.

‘Come on weasel-food,’ crowed the cook, and Rosa realised he must be talking to her. ‘Pets need their grub.’

‘They’ll get enough food tomorrow,’ gurgled the first pirate, and the cook shot him a look of annoyance. The attack was going to be tomorrow! As if she needed any more motivation to get out...

The pirates were getting closer now, and Rosa was stuck halfway between the two. The passageway was thick with crates now, and for a second, both men were out of sight.

Rosa felt a door handle against her hand, and without even pausing to think, turned it and slipped inside the room, shutting the door as quickly and quietly as she dared. The pirates were still closing on each other outside, and it wouldn’t fool them for long, but there might just be another way out...

But this wasn’t a passageway, just a small room, filled with enormous washer-driers that clanged and rattled. The air was hot and fuggy.

In the corner of the room, someone had dumped a load of potted plants, or was trying to start some sort of tropical garden. Earth was piled up to a height of Rosa’s knees, and a bizarre mix of plants and vines seemed to have burst out of it, all tangled round each other reaching up to the plaster ceiling in a green explosion of vines and trunks and leaves. But there seemed to be some kind of solid core to it. Cautiously, Rosa stepped forward, wondering if there might be a place to hide from the pirates who were even now yelling at each other from outside the door.

Something dropped from the ceiling, spiralling slowly through the hot air. Rosa put out her hand and caught it, so that it seemed to suddenly stop in mid-air. It was a skeleton leaf.

Two eyes opened amongst the foliage, and the shape of a boy suddenly became apparent amongst the clinging vines. Although whether the leaves wrapped around him or grew *from* him was impossible to tell.

Somehow, thought Rosa, *he's both leaf and boy*.

And was looking directly at her.

The door handle rattled, and the two pirates burst into the room, brandishing their weapons, and peering suspiciously around them.

The leaf boy opened his mouth to speak, and Rosa hurled herself towards him, her lips suddenly pressing themselves against his.

The leaf boy's eyes opened wide with amazement, but he made no move to throw her off, or betray her. Rosa could feel her feet sinking into the soft earth, and hoped desperately her pursuers wouldn't think to look down.

The bald pirate grunted suspiciously. 'Pity anyone who wandered into here,' he said. 'Wouldn't last two minutes.'

'Must have doubled back,' said the cook. 'We'll find 'em.'

They backed out of the room, and all was silent. Rosa pulled slowly away from the boy, and wiped her mouth. His lips had been sweet and sticky, and tasted like the plants smelled. The boy continued to stare, eyes so bright it seemed they might bore through her. He had been hot to the touch. The cold weather outside must be like death to him.

He suddenly gnashed his teeth at her.

'Are you a prisoner here?' Rosa asked, unafraid. If he was going to cry out, or threaten her, he would have done so by now. 'You could come back, with me. I'm sure the Professor wouldn't mind. That you broke in before, I mean.'

The boy shook his head, then a hand shot out from amongst the vines and grabbed her wrist. She nearly cried out, but the sticky, rootlike fingers held her with surprising gentleness. His other hand emerged and tapped her clenched fist. Automatically, Rosa opened a palm, and the boy dropped something into it.

The small silver paperknife seemed to float in the air. It was heavy in Rosa's hand, a little blackened with age, and shaped like a sword. It was the fourth Treasure.

The boy sprinkled something over the paperknife, and released her wrist,. Slowly, as Rosa watched, the tiny sword faded from view. She slid it in her jeans pocket and looked back up. The boy faded back into the plants again, though bright eyes still glittered from amongst the vines.

‘I have to go,’ said Rosa. ‘But thank you.’

Small white teeth chattered at her from amongst the greenery, then the eyes closed, and Rosa was looking once more at bark and leaves. She stepped back on to the tiled floor, then cautiously opened the door and slipped back out into the corridor. The coast was clear now.



Chapter Twenty-Nine

Rosa rang the Cabinet doorbell, and the Professor appeared, looking up and down the empty street, a puzzled expression on his face.

‘Hello Professor,’ Rosa said. The Professor grinned, and smacked his forehead with such ferocity Rosa feared he might hurt himself.

‘Come in, Rosa!’ he cried. ‘Only let me know when you *are* in, if you see what I mean.’

‘I’m in,’ said Rosa obediently, and he shut the door behind her. ‘I got the coin,’ she said. ‘And the sword too. But pirates and witches are coming, lots of them.’

Rosa had spent an hour hiding in an empty bedroom in the Hotel Resplendent, until she was absolutely sure the alarm had died down. Someone had discovered paw marks on the roof (she overheard the pirates talking amongst themselves, more gossipy than witches by far), and the general assumption was that whoever had stolen the coin from the Earl had left by the same rooftop they had used to get in. But it was still with a pounding heart that Rosa crept from her hiding place and out through a side door, paperknife and coin placed carefully in separate pockets so there was no chance of any noise giving her away.

She was soon hurrying through the dark, silent streets, chillingly aware of not seeing a living thing, or even a half-living thing, on the way back to the

Cabinet. Street lamps were lit, casting harsh blue shadows across the piles of slushy snow that melted during the day and froze hard every night.

In all the houses and shops that Rosa had passed on her way to the Professor, there had been not a single sign of habitation. Walmington had become a ghost town, every creature remaining gathered either to the Hotel, or to the Cabinet: rival camps in a war that was about to start at any moment.

Now safely back in the Cabinet, Rosa tried to explain what she had seen at the Hotel. She used a lot of arm gestures, which of course the Professor couldn't see. But he got the gist of it, and quickly asked Sergeant Watkins to place the Rodentians on full alert.

The next thing Rosa wanted to do was to find Gary (she had caught a glimpse of feathers at the top of the stairs, but the monkey had done a pretty impressive vanishing trick himself the second Rosa shouted his name), but T'Maugh had appeared by then, and insisted that Rosa head straight for the shower, still in her clothes, and wash the invisibility serum off herself. Rosa was too tired to argue, and even though she felt pretty silly standing under the hot running water, fully dressed, the feeling of relief when a pink blur appeared in front of her eyes, then resolved further into a hand, clutching a now clearly visible fifty pence coin and small silver paperknife, was immeasurable.

She stayed under the shower for long after arms, legs, and hair had slowly returned to full visibility, then stepped out of her wet, heavy clothes, and returned to the shower until her fingers had turned wrinkled and prune-like. Rosa never wanted to be invisible again. To have people walking around just feet away with no idea you were there... it must be what being dead felt like.

Gary's defence was that he'd been distracted by seagulls, whom he accused of suddenly attacking him for no reason. This had led to a full scale aerial battle, the details of which no-one had really cared about, to the monkey's great

chagrin, and he had decided to fly back to the Cabinet to get a snack. He had reached it about five minutes before Rosa had rung the doorbell, at which point, it turned out, T'Maugh and the Professor were on the point of single-handedly storming the Hotel Resplendent.

The Professor, T'Maugh, Sergeant Watkins and Rosa gathered in the map room. Gary had gone off in a sulk, and to be honest Rosa was rather glad. Gary hadn't made eye contact with Rosa since she had returned, something she would have liked to have put down to guilt, but it quickly became all too clear he had absolutely no concept of having done anything wrong.

Wrapped in a huge towelling robe and clutching a mug of chocolate, Rosa gave them a more detailed, and certainly more visible, account of what she had seen of the Earl's forces, although for some reason she skipped over her encounter with the skeleton leaf-boy. She didn't quite know why, and from the Professor's expression, she guessed he knew there was a little more than she was telling, but he let the matter slide, and she was grateful.

The Professor had made considerable progress with the translation of the notebook. Most of the second half of it was a list of street names, like Cherry Street Lane, or Thursday Street. The nature of what it was the Earl was going to try and summon, however, was hardly any clearer. The term used in the notebook was the Tribe word for 'door', although confusingly, this was very close to the Tribe word for 'air'. And it was going to be big. The writer had even made sure that this didn't mean the Tribe version of 'big', which was anything larger than a shoebox. This was properly big.

Rosa looked at the notes the Professor had made. They concluded in something almost, but not quite, like a poem.

Air above the water. Wood on stone.

Four Treasures + Blood/Fire.

Door (Air?) opens many Doors.

‘Blood/Fire?’ asked Rosa.

The Professor threw his arms in the air, helplessly. ‘That’s as far as I can get,’ he said. ‘But whatever this ritual does, it opens a portal to somewhere there are so many Figments, the Earl needs an army just to carry them. And with so many Figments to take apart and sell, he’ll become more powerful than ever. He could become one of the richest men in the world.’

Rosa stared at the umbrella, coin, jar and sword lying on the kitchen table. They didn’t *look* magical, or exciting. If anything, they looked a bit... scruffy.

All the things the Earl could tell me about myself, thought Rosa, *if I just handed the Treasures over to him right now. Whether I’m a pop star, or an heiress, or a princess, or an orphan... or just an ordinary girl.*

Rosa gripped the mug of hot chocolate tightly, then cleared her throat.

‘We have to destroy the Treasures,’ she said.

T’Maugh made a small, puzzled whining sound in the back of her throat. But the Professor nodded.

‘You’re right, of course,’ he said. ‘It’s the only option. And Rosa has more to lose than any of us.’

T’Maugh looked alternately between them.

‘You’ve both gone mad,’ she said. ‘Destroy them? After all we’ve gone through to get them?’

‘They’re just *things*,’ said Rosa. ‘The Earl’s planning on hurting *people*.’

‘Yes,’ the dog replied. ‘Us. And they’re the only bargaining chips we have.’

The Professor sighed and picked up the jar.

‘I’m sorry, old thing,’ he said, and let the jar go. Rosa closed her eyes, and heard the smashing of pottery on the kitchen’s tiled floor.

That's it, she thought. *Now I will never find out who I am*. She opened her eyes.

The shards rose into the air, reassembling themselves instantly into a jar again. In a few seconds, even the cracks had healed over.

'Of course,' said the Professor, seeming utterly unsurprised. 'They never could have survived so long otherwise.'

He replaced the jar on the table, and taking the paperknife, bent it into a right-angle. It straightened itself almost immediately. Rosa thought of the umbrella, how she had pulled it from the throat of the dead caterpillar and marvelled at the lack of damage.

'Feel better now?' said T'Maugh briskly. The Professor laughed, a little embarrassed, and Rosa nodded. Still, it had been worth a try.

'We fight then,' said the Professor. 'How many weasels, did you say, Rosa?'

'At least twenty,' she replied. It was as though they had never even discussed destroying the Treasures. And deep in Rosa's heart, a tiny spark of hope flickered guiltily into life. The game wasn't over yet.

'You saw a map, you say, ma'am?' asked Sergeant Watkins politely. Rosa nodded. 'Arrows everywhere. On each side of the Cabinet.'

The Professor had drawn a rough map of the Cabinet on a large piece of paper, laid out on the table. The Sergeant was standing in the centre of the map, slowly turning around, trying to visualise where the attack would come from. Rosa frowned at the map.

'Mostly here,' she said, pointing to the side of the Cabinet she could now see faced the park. The mouse walked the distance across the map, measuring carefully with his match.

'Makes sense,' he said finally. 'They know we have the Treasures now. My h'best guess is, they're going to send in the weasels first, cause chaos, then charge

in while we're distracted. Probably h'easiest to get the cannon through the park, too.'

'Cannon?' asked Rosa, shocked. None of the others looked surprised.

'They're pirates,' said the Professor. The Sergeant stepped nimbly aside, letting him roll up the map. 'It's what they do. We'll prepare for an attack at dawn.'

'Better go and tell the others,' said T'Maugh, lumbering to her feet. 'Look like they'd be pretty handy in a confrontation, some of them. The rest can make bandages.'

Rosa felt sick. 'You're sure? It just seems to be happening so quickly.'

But the Professor shook his head. 'The Earl must have been planning this for months, maybe longer. If I hadn't locked myself away, I'd have spotted the signs. No, I'm afraid it's time to find out who's with us, and who's against us.'

Rosa opened her mouth, then shut it again. She was thinking about Gary. The Professor looked at her, one eyebrow raised, but waited until everyone else was out of the room before he sat down again.

'What is it?'

'I don't want to say,' said Rosa miserably.

He smiled at her. 'Would you be happier talking to T'Maugh?'

She shook her head. 'I can't. I'm sorry.'

The Professor smiled. 'It doesn't matter. Maybe when you're ready, you could help me pack away some of the more delicate Figments? No sense putting them in harm's way.'

She nodded. The Professor smiled at her.

'I've been in battles before, you know,' he said. 'I've seen the end of worlds, and fought people who at other times would have been my friends, and I had to kill a few of them just to stay alive. And do you know what the worst thing is?'

‘Um, the boring bit before the fight?’ guessed Rosa.

‘Good lord no,’ he said cheerfully. ‘It’s eight giants coming at you with clubs just as you realise you’ve left your glasses in your other pocket.’

‘Oh,’ said Rosa. ‘There aren’t any giants coming to get us, are there?’

‘Not as far as I know,’ he said.

‘And I don’t wear glasses.’

‘Well then there’s nothing to worry about,’ he said. ‘Better lock the Treasures away. The book too.’

He slid aside a framed map to reveal a heavy, solid-looking safe. The map was of a small valley, at the foot of a lonely mountain. Just at the moment, it looked like a much better place to be than a small seaside town near... wherever Walmington was near.

The Professor saw her expression and smiled as he spun the combination. ‘We’ll sort you out with a weapon later though, just in case.’

She managed to smile back, but wasn’t sure if that made her feel better, or very slightly worse.



Chapter Thirty

Rosa dressed in her room, the mouse major once again politely looking out on to the street.

‘Not that there’s anyone there,’ she said. ‘They’ll all be preparing themselves, back at base camp, same as us.’

Rosa nodded, but she didn’t feel like talking. Instead, she just sat on the edge of the bed, staring down at the skeleton leaf in the palm of her hand. She felt bad for not telling the Professor about her encounter with the boy, but far worse about something else.

What she had wanted to say was this: amongst their number there was almost certainly a traitor, possibly more than one. The Earl had to have got the plans to the Cabinet from somewhere, and a person on the inside would be the best person to do it. Agnetha had been her first choice, and she still wasn’t convinced she *wasn’t* a spy. But lately something much worse had occurred to her.

Had Gary really been attacked by seagulls, and then simply wandered off to get a sandwich, just as Rosa needed to escape from the Hotel with the one Treasure out of the four the Earl had in his possession? Or had he in fact deliberately abandoned her in the hope she would get caught? And when Rosa and the Professor were running from the Wurglah, who exactly had he been texting from the roof of a nearby house?

Except... Gary had been at the Cabinet far longer than she had. She could hardly go accusing people of being a spy when she had just turned up out of the blue herself. And maybe he really was just being Gary. It was all so *complicated*.

There was a soft butting at the door, and T'Maugh entered. Rosa had never worked out how she could turn the handle.

'Time to nail crooked bits of wood over the windows,' she said.

Rosa put the leaf back in the empty book, and followed the big dog downstairs.

In fact, they weren't hammering crooked bits of wood over anything. Odder than that, there didn't seem to be any windows on the ground floor at all any more. Rosa distinctly remembered there being one rather pretty window in the hallway, although you couldn't see much out of it, as it was comprised principally of old green beer bottles, stacked on top of each other and cemented in place. But where the bottles had been, there was now just blank wall.

'They all slid down to the basement about an hour ago,' said T'Maugh. 'Quite a sight actually. Not that there'll be much of a view from down there, but it saves glazier's bills.'

'But...' Rosa stared at her. 'Did the Professor do that?'

'The Cabinet did it on its own,' explained T'Maugh, although it wasn't really any kind of explanation at all. 'It knows sometimes, when there's trouble brewing.'

'But-'

'Now,' said the dog, ignoring her completely, 'I'll point out some of the more fragile items, mirrors and so on, and you can take them up to the library for safe storage.'

Carefully, Rosa stacked up the mirrors, picking up as many as she could. All the pictures in the house had been taken down too, she saw as she carefully climbed the few steps to the library.

The shelves were completely bare. In the centre of the room was a smallish bag made of a worn, carpet-like material. Into it, the Professor was placing the last few books.

‘Marvellous,’ he said, spotting Rosa. ‘Just pop them in there, would you?’

Logically, they shouldn’t have fitted, but each one slid down inside the bag, with an odd smoothness, as though some unseen hand was gently taking them away from her and then storing them away.

‘Good, good,’ said the Professor, a little distractedly. He was holding in his hands a framed photo of a woman. She had nut-brown skin, and curly close-cropped hair.

‘Do you want me to put that in the bag?’ asked Rosa politely.

The Professor shook his head. ‘I don’t think she’d like it. All cooped up with a load of old books.’

The woman was squinting at the camera, and smiling, in a lopsided, slightly distracted sort of way. She was pretty, despite her slightly tomboyish appearance. The Professor turned the frame over, and gently placed it face-down on a high shelf, then saw Rosa’s questioning expression.

‘An old friend,’ he said gently. ‘We lost touch, a few years ago. Some stupid argument. Both of us said things we didn’t mean.’

‘She looks nice,’ said Rosa, who wasn’t sure what else to say. The Professor smiled.

‘I’m not sure about *nice*,’ he said, ‘but she was always interesting. Constantly dragging me into things that were none of her business. Notorious for it.’

There was an awkward silence for a moment, then the Professor clapped his hands together, as if something had just occurred to him.

‘There’s probably room in the carpetbag for a person,’ he said, nudging it with his foot. ‘If you like. No-one’s ever tried it before, and it never gets heavier, no matter what you put in it.’

It was tempting, for about a second. Then Rosa thought about what it would be like, hiding in the darkness, rattling about with mirrors, and pictures, and books, while her friends fought outside.

‘I won’t, thank you,’ she said, and the Professor smiled.

‘I thought you wouldn’t,’ he said. ‘You remind me of her, you know. Now, shall we find you a weapon?’

When the Professor finally unlocked the armoury, a small queue of people was waiting patiently behind him. It was really a large cupboard rather than a small room, so he simply reached in and started passing things back.

‘Experienced types first please,’ he said, and somehow Rosa wasn’t surprised to see the woman from the chip shop (whose name, it turned out, was ‘Tashira’) and Agnetha push their way to the front. Tashira took a long curved sword that looked like a sharper, more precise version of the weapons the pirates carried, and an armoured coat made of interlocking metal discs, like leaves lying on top of each other. She swished her blade appreciatively then stepped aside for Agnetha, who picked a couple of small axes.

‘Bit of a stereotype,’ she said conversationally to Rosa, who just smiled back at her as if she knew what she was talking about. ‘But stick to what you know. Also, I used to be able to throw these at least thirty feet.’

‘Yes, well, do watch the furniture,’ said the Professor sternly. Agnetha wandered back down the corridor, testing the blade with her thumb and humming happily to herself.

Gradually the Professor handed out the rest of the weapons, and what armour there was. Carlos seemed most pleased with the tiny mail shirt that had been on a hanger at the back of the cupboard, although the spiked ball on a chain seemed perhaps a trifle ambitious. Rosa made a mental note that if she found herself at any point between Agnetha and Carlos, the best thing to do would be to lie flat on the floor and wait until any noise stopped.

Finally, the man with the brow having picked a large wooden club, it was Rosa's turn.

'I'd like a sword please,' she said.

'I daresay you would,' said the Professor, 'but this will suit you better. It was a Treasure itself, in its own time.'

Disappointingly, he handed her an old spear. At least it could have been a spear. If you looked at it another way, it could just as well have been a length of railing broken off from the park. It was long, and the point at the end looked sharp enough, but it wasn't, well... *cool*.

The Professor caught the look on her face and sighed. 'Here's why you can't have a sword,' he said.

He held his hand out, and Rosa passed the spear back. Then, to her surprise, he drew his own sword, and put it in her hand. Rosa swished it a couple of times. It was heavy, but perfectly weighted. It felt alive.

The Professor took another sword out of the cupboard, and stepped back into the corridor. T'Maugh was sitting there now, watching with interest.

'Now come at me,' he said. Rosa looked doubtfully at him. The Professor's sword was hanging rather sadly in his hand, as though he wasn't treating the matter with any great seriousness. Rosa leaned forward and batted at him with her own sword.

T'Maugh snorted, and the Professor sighed, knocking away her weapon without even seeming to look at it.

'Not like that,' he said. '*Actually* come at me. Imagine I'm the Earl.'

Rosa narrowed her eyes. What should have happened then was the mere mention of the Earl provoking her into a surprisingly ruthless and accomplished attack, leading to a swift apology from the Professor (possibly with an unfortunate but impressive new tear in his cardigan) and a rapid promotion to Head Cabinet Defender for Rosa.

What happened instead was Rosa poking at the Professor, who again blocked the blow, this time forcing her blade to the left. Angrily, Rosa used all her strength to try and return her sword to its original position – only for the Professor's sword point to suddenly dip, then rise again, giving her hand a sharp tap. Rosa lost her balance, dropping her sword and toppling forward to find a sharp pointy bit of metal about an inch from her chest. She windmilled her arms furiously, trying to regain balance, and wasn't sure whether to be grateful or annoyed when the Professor dropped his sword and gently caught her by the shoulder.

'I'm fine,' she said shortly then stooped and picked up the sword and handed it back to the Professor. 'Maybe I'll use the spear,' she said finally.

'Couple of years training,' said the Professor gravely, 'and you have the making of an excellent swordswoman. The short version goes like this: hold it tightly, and if you see anything you don't like, give it a poke.'

'With the pointy end,' said T'Maugh.

Silently, Rosa accepted the spear back, and tried a practice thrust or two. Suddenly, the idea of being at least two metres away from an enemy rather than the half metre or so offered by the sword seemed rather more attractive. 'Is there any armour that will fit me?' she asked humbly.

In the end, she was kitted out with the leather gauntlets she had used to pick up the bits of broken glass from the floor of the Natural History Gallery, a battered breastplate with a red dragon insignia on it, and a helmet that she suspected had started out life as some sort of cooking pot. It certainly smelled slightly of porridge. And the gloves still smelled like, well, sports equipment. Still, the Professor's demonstration had impressed something upon her: looking cool was all very well, but staying alive was really the important thing.

She thought of the Earl's allies: manicured witches and pirates in smart business suits, versus the rather scruffy, worn inhabitants of the Cabinet. Tatty armour and an improvised spear seemed more in keeping with being on the Professor's side, somehow, like a flag of allegiance. She just hoped the pirates hadn't guessed she had carried news of their plans back to the subject of their attack. Unlike the others, Rosa had seen the forces ranged against them. The pirates outnumbered the Cabinet defenders by at least three to one.

After all that, the rest of the night passed in something of an anticlimax. The mice were keeping watch in shifts and after the Walmingtonians had made something of a show of parading up and down the various corridors of the Cabinet, clanking and rattling in their new martial finery, they eventually found quiet corners to go to sleep.

Rosa propped her spear up against the wall and curled up in the large armchair that was, along with the large, claw-footed mirror, all that remained of the Figments that had been in the hallway. Everything else had either been placed in the carpet bag, or carried up to the attic, hopefully out of harm's way. Rosa had tried to use the green glass ball earlier, pressing both hands against it in an attempt to see anything more of the plans the Earl was making against them. But the glow at the heart of the glass had just been a reflection of the electric light above, and eventually she had been forced to give up. The wallpaper up there was slightly unnerving too, seeming to have a depth to it that a simple repeating pattern of vines and creepers shouldn't possess.

So she had come down to the hallway, and sat in the chair, on which someone had placed an old blanket. It was plain, and grey, with a few odd scorch marks in the centre. Rosa put it around her shoulders, and wondered what the morning would bring.



Chapter Thirty-One

Rosa awoke to a cold wet nose pressing into the side of her face. She fumbled around for the spear, which turned out to be propped against the wall just out of reach.

‘I’m so pleased you’re on our side,’ said T’Maugh dryly.

Rosa glared at her and picked up the pot-helmet from her lap where it had fallen during the night. The edges of her breastplate were digging into her shoulders and stomach most uncomfortably, and the gauntlets had dropped back behind the chair after she had used them as a pillow. They hadn’t worked very well.

‘Is it dawn yet?’ asked Rosa. With no windows on the ground floor any more, it was impossible to tell. ‘Has it started?’

T’Maugh shook her head. ‘Not quite,’ she said, ‘But they’ve been seen, coming across the park. If you come up to the attic, you can have a proper view.’

‘Right,’ said Rosa. Holding the spear carefully, she stumped up the stairs after the dog.

‘Is my helmet on properly?’ she whispered, as they climbed the next set of stairs. The Walmingtonians had woken now, and were collecting in quiet groups, testing their weapons and discussing tactics in hushed tones.

‘Is it on your head?’ whispered T’Maugh.

‘Yes.’

‘Then you’re fine.’

The centre of the attic was piled high with all the items too large to fit into the carpet bag. The green glass ball sat uselessly on its bone stand, propped between the large claw-footed mirror and a wooden chair with small wings on its legs.

In the east window, the sun was starting to rise, just a low glow on the horizon, but enough to silhouette Sergeant Watkins gazing through the tiniest telescope that could ever have existed.

The Professor was looking out of the west window, where two taxis crawled slowly across the snowy grass, then backed up to the railings across the road from the Cabinet. Rosa moved to his side.

Other figures were visible now, walking out of the mist. At least thirty pirates, armed with cutlasses, and daggers. They wrapped chains around the railings, and attached them to the vehicles, which revved their engines wildly, yanking an entire section of railing, some twenty foot across, out of the ground. Casually, the pirates started walking through the gap and towards the Cabinet.

‘Cannon,’ called Sergeant Watkins crisply from the east window. Something was being dragged across the park on Rosa’s side too, a quarter the size of one of the taxis, but clearly much heavier, iron-rimmed wheels carving great ruts out of the frozen earth.

‘They’re aiming low,’ said the Professor. ‘Get everyone up from the ground floor.’

Sergeant Watkins saluted, and signalled calmly with a small red flag. Another mouse at the top of the stairs relayed the message, and from the floors below, Rosa could hear footsteps and jangling metal as the Walmingtonians quickly moved up a level.

But the Earl’s allies had brought more than cannon with them. Two pirates were being practically dragged across the snow by a pack each of long-bodied, vicious-looking creatures.

‘Weasels!’ said Rosa urgently. ‘They’re going to send the weasels in first!’

‘This side too,’ said the Sergeant, jumping down from the windowsill and scurrying across the attic floor. ‘Better start stiffening some sinews.’

He vanished down the stairs. There was a moment of stillness as the pirates gathered behind the cannon. Even the huge weasels had stopped pulling at their chains, as if they too had guessed what was about to come.

‘Dammit,’ said the Professor softly. ‘Should have brought the seedlings in from the conservatory. Completely forgot.’

A pirate touched the glowing end of a rope to the top of the cannon, and turned away, hands over his ears. There was a mighty cracking sound as it fired, followed almost immediately by a second as the Cabinet shook from the impact. The Professor put the palm of his hand against the wall, and closed his eyes, as if listening.

‘They’ve breached the walls,’ he said finally. ‘Both sides.’

The weasels were released from their chains. They shot inside the holed walls, their ghastly hissing cries audible even over the sound of the pirates, who were now yelling and screaming themselves as they charged forward.

The Professor and T’Maugh remained utterly silent. Rosa reached out to stroke T’Maugh. She had a heavy spiked collar on, which looked surprisingly fetching.

‘Should we-’ Rosa started to say, then a grappling hook smashed through the window. A large piece of glass bounced off her breastplate and fell the floor, where it stuck point first. The hook itself dragged slowly across the wooden floor, then caught on the windowsill next to the Professor, who had picked up his sword, but didn’t seem ready to use it yet. Was he scared? Had he given up?

Sometimes Rosa wondered if he was much older than he looked. Perhaps he didn't quite realise what was going on?

The face of a pirate appeared above the windowsill. His hair was tied back in a ponytail, and he had tattoos crawling all over his face. Gold teeth were clamped on to the biggest cutlass Rosa had yet seen.

'Good morning,' said the Professor politely, and cut the rope. The pirate just had time to widen his eyes in surprise, before plunging suddenly out of sight.

The Professor brushed his hands, and smiled broadly at Rosa.

'Can't see them trying to get in this way again for a while,' he said. 'Think I'd better go down and lend a hand. Rosa, you and T'Maugh all right to keep an eye on things up here?'

Rosa nodded, and the Professor darted downstairs, into the sound of clashing steel, and what sounded nastily like teeth scraping against metal.

In the attic, all was still.

'Do you think,' said Rosa suspiciously, 'the Professor is just trying to keep me out of trouble?'

'I think if the Professor was trying to do *that*,' said T'Maugh, 'he'd have tipped you off the bench the minute we found you.'

'How did you two-' started Rosa, but the big dog had pricked up an ear. Above them, quiet at first, but getting steadily louder, was the sound of some kind of aircraft.

'Odd,' said T'Maugh. 'Don't usually get planes going overhead.'

The sound got louder, and still louder, then there was a thump from directly above them. Something had landed on the roof. And then another thud.

Two somethings. Then the plane, or whatever it was, left, and footsteps scabbled across the roof.

A pirate swung in through the east window, vaulting in from above. He wore a pink, candy-striped shirt and carried a cutlass in each hand. He saw T'Maugh first, advancing towards her swinging his blades regularly.

T'Maugh lunged at him, growling, but a second pirate swung through the west window. This one, to Rosa's surprise, was female, although she was dressed in the same striped business suit as all the others. She held in her hand a spiked ball on a long metal chain, which she whirled around her head with a low humming noise.

The dog growled, unsure which to attack first. Rosa took a deep breath, and prepared to step out, but the woman lashed out with her weapon, the spiked ball just missing T'Maugh, but the chain wrapping itself around the dog's neck.

Stepping out from hiding, Rosa swung the spear like a club, hitting the male pirate hard in the back of the legs. He gave a shout of surprise and turned, but Rosa's second blow sent him sprawling into the Figments piled up in the centre of the room.

T'Maugh had found her balance now, and Rosa had just given her a chance to focus. There was a brief tug of war, which the woman had no chance of winning, then the chain was wrenched out of her hands, and the dog was advancing upon her, growling.

The woman drew a long slim knife from her belt, and tossed it from hand to hand as T'Maugh backed her into a corner. Rosa's pirate, however, was finally getting up. Rosa swung the spear again – and he caught it with his free hand, wrenching it from her grasp and tossing it into a corner of the attic. Slowly, keeping one eye on Rosa, he moved round backing Rosa up against the pile of Figments.

T'Maugh and the female pirate, meanwhile, were engaged in a similar game of cat-and-mouse. The dog couldn't attack the pirate without coming within range of the knife, and the pirate couldn't attack the dog without coming within range of the teeth. They circled each other warily.

The male pirate lunged, and Rosa dodged to one side, knocking an old toy chest, spilling its contents out across the floor. A steel catapult rolled to a stop just an inch from her hand, and she snatched it up, only to realise that there was absolutely nothing nearby she could use as ammunition.

The pirate rolled to his feet, and seeming to realise he was in no immediate danger, put his face close to Rosa's and opened his mouth in a wide grin. To her horror, Rosa could see the stump of a tongue, wiggling at her from inside the pirate's mouth. She felt a sudden pang of pity, which was replaced almost immediately by fear as the pirate raised both swords high in the air.

'Rosa!' cried T'Maugh, and the female pirate used the distraction to kick the dog in the side of the head, hard. T'Maugh barked, but it was a woozy noise, and she seemed to have lost the ability to concentrate on all four legs at a time.

Rosa gasped, and the male pirate grinned again, beginning to bring the swords down. Pulling back hard on the catapult, Rosa snapped the elastic in the man's face, and he staggered back, yelling with pain. Seeing her chance, Rosa snatched up her spear and pushed him hard in the chest with the blunt end. The pirate fell back to the window, slipped on the broken glass – and vanished from sight.

Even a pirate with no tongue can scream, thought Rosa, absently, although the sound stopped abruptly.

The female pirate had grabbed a tall hatstand from the pile of Figments. Recovering a little, T'Maugh growled and spat, but with the knife in one hand and the hatstand in the other, the pirate was able to keep her at a distance, all the while edging nearer and nearer to the door.

Rosa scabbled desperately amongst the spilled contents of the toy chest, looking for something, anything, that could be used as ammunition for the catapult. But by the time her hand had closed on a bag of marbles, the female pirate had edged her way to the attic door. With the Professor trusting Rosa and T'Maugh to repel attacks from the attic, no-one would be expecting pirates to be coming from above.

The woman smirked at Rosa, then hurled her knife at T'Maugh, snatching up one of the male pirate's dropped swords as she did so. The dog leapt aside, but the blade must have hit her in the paw, for she gave a great yelp, and snatched up her front leg.

With a cold fury, Rosa fitted a marble to the catapult elastic and let fly. The missile hit the doorframe an inch from the pirate's head. There would be no time to fire another.

The pirate moved towards the stairs – and stopped, held by some unseen force. She snarled, and seemed to kick out with one foot, but the other was held fast. To Rosa's astonishment, a long thin vine had stretched out of the jungle-patterned wallpaper, reached past the doorframe and wrapped firmly around the ankle of the pirate's boots. The pirate raised her sword, and another vine lashed out from the same side, coiling around her wrist even as a third vine, and a fourth and a fifth followed, enveloping the woman in green tendrils and slowly dragging her back into wallpaper that no longer looked like wallpaper at all, but the entrance to another world. From somewhere far away could just be heard the distant sound of beating drums. Rosa started to step forwards.

Were those shapes dancing? Rosa thought. She could almost make out large monstrous creatures swaying rhythmically around a campfire, far back in the jungle. If she just stepped a little closer...

But T'Maugh limped forward, placing her heavy body between Rosa and whatever was in the wallpaper, even as the vines dragged the pirate further in and further out of sight.

'I wouldn't,' she warned, and she was probably right. The vines had retreated fully now, and the scene was flattening, the seams between the rolls of paper becoming visible once more. Then there was a burping sound, a pair of bright green knee-high pirate's boots were spat out into the attic, and the wallpaper became wallpaper once again.

'Never seen that before,' said T'Maugh, rather weakly. She tried to put her weight on her injured foot, then pulled it back again, wincing.

'Your paw!' cried Rosa, and fell to her knees. The dog sniffed, as though she was making a fuss about nothing, but let the girl inspect her paw.

'I don't think the knife got you,' she said worriedly, 'but you may have trodden on some of that broken glass.' Indeed, a sliver of broken glass at least an inch long was stuck in the base of T'Maugh's paw.

'Can't reach,' said the dog calmly. 'You'll have to take it out for me.'

Rosa made a face. 'I'm not sure I can,' she said anxiously.

T'Maugh sighed, and held her paw up. 'You'll just have to be brave,' she said. 'Now stop mucking about or I'll bite you.'

Rosa swallowed. 'On the count of three,' she said.

'Right,' said T'Maugh.

'One,' said Rosa, and pulled out the splinter.

When T'Maugh had stopped swearing (Rosa had politely turned her head away, and pretended she hadn't heard), she pronounced herself impressed.

‘That’s exactly how I’d have done it,’ she said, and though she still limped a little, the worst of the pain seemed to have gone. She licked Rosa’s hand in gratitude, and looked around the room.

‘I suspect,’ said T’Maugh, ‘this attic can take care of itself. Fancy helping the others ejecting a few more pirates?’

‘Yes I do,’ said Rosa stoutly. Seeing the female pirate throw the knife at T’Maugh had outraged her more than she would have thought possible. How *dare* these people fire cannon at the Professor’s home and attack her friends? She tucked the catapult in her back pocket, and hung the bag of marbles from a loop on her belt. The breastplate seemed to fit her much better now she had adjusted the strap, and even the helmet didn’t smell quite so much of porridge any more. It was time to defend her home.

‘Then let’s go,’ said T’Maugh, and they headed downstairs.



Chapter Thirty-Two

Later, by talking to the survivors, Rosa was able to piece together the different stages of the attack. The Professor had charged down the stairs and along the first floor corridor to a series of frenzied hand to hand combats: Tashira running through a pirate at least twice her size: Agnetha wrapping her thick arms around the waist of a howling weasel and hugging the last of its breath out of its body: the heavy-browed man breaking the skulls of three pirates in a row as easily as if they had been hard-boiled eggs.

The other weasels, however, were gathering in a tight knot of long brown bodies at the bottom of the stairs. Needle teeth were bared, some of the mouths already wet with blood.

‘Ready?’ said Sergeant Watkins, conversationally.

‘Ready,’ replied the Professor, and the mouse army poured down the corridor from behind them, enveloping the creatures until all that could be seen was a thrashing sea of fur and tails.

The Professor drove his sword through the skull of a weasel which had shaken off its mouse attackers and was dragging itself down the corridor despite neither of its back legs seeming to be in working order. It died instantly, and the Sergeant leapt nimbly over his body, disappearing into the fray with a shout of ‘Eyes and paws, lads! Eyes and paws!’

By the time Rosa and T'Maugh arrived, the tide was already turning against the mice. Unlike the slow, confused Wurglah, the weasels were more than capable of dealing with multiple foes, and of co-operating, plucking the small brave creatures from each other's flanks and dashing them against the wall. Rosa felt her heart in her mouth as she saw the small bodies littering the floor as the weasels danced and spat.

'They're too quick!' shouted the Professor. 'Sergeant, move your lads on to the pirates – we'll take these.'

The mice abandoned the unequal fight, moving further down the stairs to where pirates were still climbing in through the breached walls. They had done their work well, despite fearful losses, and fully five of the beasts lay still on the floor, either dead or too injured to move.

But that still left at least a dozen, now free to climb to the top of the stairs, glittering eyes fixed on the three obstacles before them. Rosa gripped her spear tightly as the weasels scrambled forwards, climbing over each other in their blood-frenzy. T'Maugh seized one by the throat, shaking it until its neck snapped, while the Professor stabbed and slashed with a cool economy of movement.

But the creatures were fast, and hard to pin down. One snarled at the Professor, sliding around his blade like water, and was through, crouching low to make its spring at Rosa. There was no time to think. She simply held the spear out in front of her, turning her head as the creature sprang – and impaled itself immediately on the point. Rosa made herself shake the dead thing off the point and stand up straight, ready for the next attack.

Two more weasels managed to evade T'Maugh's teeth and the Professor's blade, and Rosa dispatched both of them. The first again fell victim to its own impulsiveness, but the last seemed more prepared. It hissed at Rosa, then dodged her clumsy thrust, hurling itself at her throat. Rosa managed to throw

herself back, and it crashed into her breastplate instead, both of them plunging to the floor.

The spear was still in her hand, and she managed to force the creature to the ground, pushing the weapon's shaft across its throat. The creature snarled at her, and its body twisted and thrashed beneath hers, but Rosa kept pressing down until she felt bones cracking. The weasel's eyes rolled back in its head as it died.

The Professor hauled Rosa to her feet. He and T'Maugh had dispatched the rest of the creatures, but the pirates were steadily forcing the Walmingtonians back up the stairs.

'We have to fall back,' said the Professor tightly. 'If they split us into small groups, they can pick us off at their leisure.'

Rosa nodded, unable to speak. Her face was covered in streaks of blood and spittle from the dying weasels. There was a serious dent in the breastplate and a scratch along one leg where a lashing claw had cut through the thick denim of her jeans. But she was alive.

The Walmingtonians were falling back up the stairs towards them now. Those that could, at least. Tashira and the heavy-browed man were nowhere to be seen.

Agnetha pushed between the Professor and T'Maugh and looked straight at Rosa, pulling out one of her axes. She weighed it in her hand – then hurled it straight at Rosa.

Time seemed to stop. Rosa watched with a curious detachment as the axe whirled through the air at a slow, dreamlike rate – only to sail past her head, its handle connecting solidly with the head of a pirate creeping down the corridor towards her from behind. The pirate hit the floor, and Agnetha strode past them, picking up the axe.

'Meant to hit him with the blade,' she said, scowling.

‘There’s more behind us,’ said the Professor. ‘Grappling hooks I think, through the second window.’

‘Carlos!’ cried Agnetha suddenly. ‘We’ve left him behind!’

‘He went upstairs,’ said one of the drivers. ‘Said he heard something and went to check.’

Rosa risked a peek along the corridor to the Natural History Gallery. In the gloom of the long side corridor there was the glimmer of pale clothing. Three boys, with swords drawn, were standing over a small humanoid body.

‘Carlos!’ yelled Rosa, and darted down the corridor.

‘Rosa!’ yelled the Professor, and T’Maugh launched herself down the corridor with a thunderous bark, but both waves of pirates suddenly surged forwards, and she was cut off from them entirely.

Not that Rosa cared at that moment. All she saw was Carlos, poor brave Carlos who had helped her without ever really knowing what was going on, lying unconscious before three armed teenagers, each easily twice his size.

Rosa was upon the boys before they knew what was happening. The butt of the spear caught the youngest boy in the small of the back, and he went down squealing. The second henchman simply dropped his sword from nerveless fingers and fled. The leader, however, for all his faults, was braver than the others. He turned to Rosa, sword point flickering out towards her, daring her to make an attack. Like Rosa, he wore a breastplate, but his had been made of dark iron, edged with gold.

Rosa jabbed at him with the spear. He dodged backwards, though this suited her plan just as well. They were gradually moving further and further into the Gallery, and Rosa had fought for her life here once before.

The boy’s blade met Rosa’s spearpoint with a series of tiny, metallic sounds.

‘Who are you?’ he said, dodging back from Rosa’s longer reach once more. He nearly tripped over a pile of broken wood display frames, but to Rosa’s disappointment managed to keep his balance and keep backing away.

Silently, Rosa jabbed with the spear, too fast for the boy to block, the tip making a pleasing scratching noise as it drew a jagged line down the boy’s flashy armour. He was starting to look panicked now, as he was driven ever further back into the Gallery. Glass eyes that had once seemed so unsympathetic to Rosa now gazed coldly upon her one-time tormentor. With one hand she removed her pot helmet, her hair tumbling out, black and thick and clotted with gore.

‘You’re her!’ The boy was blabbering now, and the sword dropped from his fingers. ‘If I’d known who you were, I’d never had said anything, honest! We were just having fun!’

‘And who am I?’ hissed Rosa. ‘How does the Earl know so much about me? Why did he have a receipt with my name on it in his hotel room? Do I have family? Friends?’

She punctuated each question with a jab in the boy’s breastplate, but it seemed to be having little effect. His smirk was returning, and the sword blade suddenly appeared with a renewed steadiness of hand.

‘You don’t know!’ he crowed. ‘Little miss fashion, little miss friend of the Cabinet, she doesn’t even know who she is!’

His blade suddenly lashed out, trying to knock hers to one side. Remembering the Professor’s trick, she pushed back, then suddenly dipped the blade, thwacking the side of his hand as she brought it back up. The boy yelped and dropped his sword.

Rosa held the spear at the boy’s throat. The spear itself no longer seemed like a broken-off piece of railing, but a warrior’s weapon, a queen’s weapon. The golden blade danced with fire and light, the haft no longer painted metal, but burnished wood, warm and smooth and alive.

The boy swallowed, but defiance still lit his eyes.

‘You won’t do it,’ he sneered. ‘You haven’t got what it takes.’

‘My friend has,’ whispered Rosa. ‘Look behind you.’

He didn’t, of course. It was the oldest trick in the book, and both of them knew it. But Rosa had picked her spot carefully. Behind her was a high glass cabinet, containing a large llama-like creature, or rather two llama-like creatures joined at the middle. But the creature wasn’t important. It was the polished glass, reaching almost up to the ceiling that Rosa wanted the boy to look at. And as he glanced over her shoulder, and she saw his eyes widen, seeing an enormous polar bear standing behind him, mouth open in a snarl, great axe lifted high above his head. The last threads of the boy’s courage snapped, and he fled, gibbering with fear, towards the far end of the Gallery where a grappling hook had smashed through a stained glass window. The boy was through the window and gone, even before Rosa had time to lower her spear and feel a great wave of tiredness wash over her.

There was a noise from behind.

‘Glad you’re all right Carlos,’ she said, turning. ‘I thought for a moment-’

But it wasn’t Carlos. Three pirates were advancing on her, grinning. In the lead was the man with the bald head and the filed teeth from the hotel.

He swung a great fist, studded with heavy iron rings, and hit Rosa in the side of the head before she had time to react. Darkness rose up around her.



Chapter Thirty-Three

The Professor and T'Maugh must have been sitting by her bed for a long time. Two cold cups of tea were placed on her bedside table, and outside the sun was going down. *I never even saw it come up*, thought Rosa dizzily, and felt obscurely cheated. Her mouth was dry and her head pounded, but she was alive. Her spear was leaning in a corner of the room, breastplate and helmet neatly stacked on a chair.

'Carlos!' Suddenly she struggled to an upright position. 'Is he-'

'He's fine,' said the Professor. 'He's been popping in every ten minutes to see if you've come round.'

'A pirate got me,' said Rosa, slightly embarrassed. 'In the Gallery.'

The Professor raised an eyebrow at that, and Rosa noticed for the first time his arm, contained in an improvised sling made from a torn bedsheet.

'Odd,' he said. 'We found you on the floor outside the maproom.'

But Rosa was staring at his arm. The Professor wiggled his fingers reassuringly.

'Just a sprain,' he said. 'And T'Maugh's paw is fine, thanks to you.'

'We'll find you a nice lion with a thorn in its pad next,' said the big dog, resting her head on the duvet and meeting Rosa's gaze solemnly. 'If dashing off after sword-wielding bullies isn't enough of a challenge.'

‘I’m sorry about that,’ said Rosa meekly. ‘I think I may have got a bit carried away.’

She lay her head back on the pillow, still feeling rather delirious. Apart from T’Maugh’s heavy, snuffly breathing, and the slight rasping sound as the Professor scratched his arm through the sling, all was silent.

‘You drove them off,’ guessed Rosa. ‘The pirates, I mean.’

There was a slight, uncomfortable silence.

‘Ah,’ said the Professor. ‘There’s some truth in that. We certainly put up more of a fight than they’d anticipated. But when they’d got what they came for, there wasn’t much point in them hanging around.’

Rosa sat up again, staring at him. ‘What do you mean ‘got what they wanted’?’

The Professor rubbed beneath his eyepatch. It was a long time before he answered.

‘The Treasures, the book, all my notes, everything. We found the safe blown wide open. Somehow they knew exactly where to look. I fear you may have been correct about there being a spy in the Cabinet after all.’

There was another silence, longer this time, before Rosa said what they were all thinking.

‘Gary?’

T’Maugh made a low growling sound, and the Professor shook his head sadly. ‘He vanished when all the fighting started.’

‘Luckily for him,’ growled T’Maugh.

But now it was out in the open, it didn’t feel right. Gary hadn’t been there when the Professor had locked the Treasures in the hidden safe behind the map. So how did the pirates know just where to go? None of this made any sense.

Something else felt wrong. Rosa stared around her room until her gaze fell upon the windowsill. The bric-a-brac, the bit of wood, the carved woodpecker, were still there, as was the grey shrivelled lump that was all that remained of the caterpillar meat, but nothing else. Or rather, no-one else.

‘There was a mouse here, on watch,’ she said. ‘I think she was a major. An officer anyway. She was on watch here before. Is she...?’

But she knew, even before the Professor was shaking his head.

‘The defender fought very bravely,’ he said gently. ‘But Sergeant Watkins lost at least a third of his troops. Weasels are nasty vicious beasts. You did very well, you know, killing three of them. You should be proud.’

But Rosa was turning her face to the wall, feeling the hot tears running down her cheeks. She hadn’t even known the mouse’s name, and she was gone.

‘Did anyone else... die?’ she whispered, turning back to the Professor. He looked at her steadily.

‘Tashira, from the chip shop,’ he said. ‘She was the bravest of all, I think. Her sword broke, but she kept fighting, wouldn’t surrender. One of the taxi drivers was pushed out of a window. And Agnetha lost a couple of fingers trying to catch up with you and Carlos. She’s all right, but won’t be throwing any axes for a while.’

‘I thought she was the spy, you know,’ said Rosa miserably. ‘Until she saved me from that pirate.’

‘I know,’ said the Professor. ‘You never know who your friends are, until you’re backed in a corner, fighting pirates. And if that isn’t a proverb, it should be.’

He patted her on the hand. ‘Come down when you’re ready,’ he said. ‘We need to decide our next move. Even if the Earl holds all the cards, we can always come up with something. Darkest before the dawn and all that.’

‘It’s a long time until dawn,’ said Rosa quietly.

‘Yes,’ he admitted. ‘It is.’

The Professor picked up the cold mugs of tea and left the room. T’Maugh got to her feet, but stayed looking at Rosa, dark brown eyes fixed unblinkingly on hers.

‘You fought well, little one,’ she said, and for once there was no hint of sarcasm, or grumpiness in her voice. A wet nose pressed against Rosa’s, and she didn’t try to squirm away, or pull a face, because it was a kind of salute. Then the big dog left, and the Professor reached back from the corridor and closed the door behind them both, leaving Rosa alone in her room.

She lay awake in bed for some time. After a while Carlos had arrived with a bowl of soup. She smiled at him, but didn’t feel like talking. The soup sat on the bedside table, gradually cooling.

Rosa couldn’t help thinking about something the mouse had said. About Rosa’s handbag. How she had taken it into the bathroom with her at nights, when no-one else was around, something she had no recollection of doing.

The strawberry-coloured handbag was tucked under the bed. By leaning over, Rosa could just about reach the bright red plastic straps and pull it towards her without having to get out of bed. Not that she even felt tired any more, just that at the moment, bed felt like a safe place to be.

Downstairs, the other occupants of the Cabinet started moving about, presumably brushing up all the broken glass and clearing away broken pieces of wall. She supposed the windows would have moved up from the basement, light returning to the ground floor as they slid up into sight and back to their rightful positions. It would have been something to see.

Rosa held the handbag upside-down and shook the contents out on to the duvet. There were the oversized pair of silver sunglasses with star-shaped rims, and the wide-brimmed green hat, a little crushed, the white feather now

bent and ruffled. They didn't look like things Rosa would even wear any more: like they belonged to a different person.

There was something else in the handbag. No amount of shaking would dislodge it, but she could feel it shifting around. Not heavy, but a solid object certainly. Rosa felt inside the bag until her fingers encountered a pocket, tucked in to one side. A popper gave way, and Rosa pulled the thing out.

It was a mobile phone, but an odd-looking design: fashioned from bright primary colours, with large round buttons as if designed for a much younger child. There was something babyish and distasteful about it.

It beeped once, and Rosa nearly dropped it. But she could hear noise from it now: shuffling, rustling noises, background talking, and shallow breathing. Someone had the phone up to their mouth, though they hadn't yet said anything.

Reluctantly, hardly daring to breathe, Rosa pressed the phone to her ear. There was a wet, slithery sound as though someone was licking their lips.

'Well done Rosa,' said the Earl. 'I really thought something was amiss when you failed to make your nightly broadcast, but I never should have worried. The contents of the safe you pointed out have been... most interesting.'



Chapter Thirty-Four

Rosa dropped the mobile phone on to the bed, staring at it in disbelief.

‘Hello?’ said the voice from the phone. Then, after a brief pause, the Earl spoke again.

‘This is the other Rosa, isn’t it?’ he said, ‘Friend-of-the-Cabinet-Rosa. Fights-Weasels-Rosa. Fearless-Defender-of-the-Weak-Rosa.’

It would have been easier to understand if the Earl had been mocking, or sneering when he said these things, but he wasn’t. He sounded gentle, sad, even sympathetic.

‘I’m the spy?’ whispered Rosa. ‘I told you where the safe was?’

‘You told me everything,’ said the Earl. ‘From the first night you spent in the Cabinet. But now your work is done. Come back to me now my Rosa, and I’ll tell you all about it.’

Rosa held the phone in her hand for a long time. Then she got out of bed, placed the phone on the floor and smashed it to pieces with the blunt end of the spear.

After that, she opened the doors of the heavy old wardrobe and started taking out all the clothes, everything she had been wearing when she first arrived at the Cabinet.

Rosa walked slowly through the conservatory, past the bench where she had spent her first night in the Cabinet, and up to the loose pane of glass. It fell out almost as soon as she touched it. Carefully, she leaned it to one side and took a deep breath before heading out into the night.

She was wearing the clothes she had woken up in, back on the train. The hat and sunglasses were stuffed back into the strawberry handbag, as were the dreambook the Professor had given her (still blank) and the skeleton leaf. The remains of the mobile phone she had left on the bed, along with the clothes she had borrowed, folded in a neat pile. Rosa had thought about leaving a note, but couldn't think what to say. The use-once, go-anywhere rail ticket the Professor had given her was curled up tightly in her hand. She still had no idea where she would go.

Something stirred in the ivy to her left. Rosa turned to it tiredly. It could be a pirate, or some new creation of the Earl's, but really, what did it matter? It turned out they were on the same side after all, so she was hardly likely to be hurt.

The ivy twitched again, and small dark eyes peered out anxiously, brightly coloured wings suddenly fluttering amongst the leaves. It was Gary.

'Take me with you,' he said quietly.

Rosa stared at him.

'I don't know where I'm going,' she said.

Gary shrugged. Not his usual careless, sulky shrug, but a gesture of utter hopelessness and defeat.

'Don't matter. They all think I stabbed them in the back anyway. Think I sold them out to the Earl.'

'That was me,' said Rosa. It felt funny, saying it out loud. 'I didn't know I was doing it, but I was.'

'Oh,' said Gary, and finally, 'Take me with you anyway.'

Rosa reached out and stroked the top of Gary's head softly. His tail curled out, wrapping itself around her hand.

She sighed, and looked at the gap in the conservatory wall, then over to the Cabinet and back at the gap again.

Then, Rosa made the hardest decision she had ever made in her life.

'Gary wasn't spying for the Earl,' announced Rosa, walking into the kitchen, the monkey hanging from her arm. 'I was.'

She extended her arm and Gary dropped quietly on to the table. The Professor, who had been in the process of making some toast, just stared at her. T'Maugh sat down with a thump. It was almost funny.

Rosa dropped the shattered remains of the phone on to the table.

'I think the Earl has some sort of control over me,' she said. 'When I'm asleep. Or I'm a different person. Something like that. Either way, I didn't know I was doing it. You have to believe me.'

'You told the pirates where the safe was,' said the Professor, laying the toast down gently on the plate. He didn't look cross, or upset.

Rosa nodded. 'That's why they knocked me out I think. It was the quickest way to find out.'

'Then it's a spell,' said the Professor, sounding almost relieved. 'You're in the right place. Over the years I've learned all sorts of tricks, ways to dispel the most stubborn cantrips....'

Absently, Rosa noticed the huge hole in the side of the kitchen, the way most of the pirates had come in. Someone had tacked up an old shower curtain over it, and it moved gently in and out with the slight breeze that was rising up outside. It was like someone's breathing.

She shook her head. 'It's who I am. Or part of who I am. Either way, there's only one way I can find out.'

'You're not going to him.'

It was T'Maugh who spoke, her voice deeper than Rosa had ever heard it. There was an undercurrent of anger in it.

'I have to.'

'You were going to go to the station again, weren't you?' The Professor sounded curious again. Why couldn't he sound disappointed, or furious? That would make this easier. Or maybe it wouldn't.

'I was going to. But I'd have to see him eventually. He's the only one who knows where I come from. Who I really am.'

'The Earl can't tell you who you are, Rosa Dew. No-one can. Stay-'

'I can't stay here,' she said. 'It's not safe. For any of you. And I have to go and see him alone.'

The Professor frowned. 'But you're just a girl!' he said. It was the only stupid thing Rosa had ever heard him say. She turned on him, eyes blazing.

'The world doesn't care that I'm just a girl! I just get knocked about, bumping into things, and monsters, and people, and I have no idea why, or what I'm supposed to do about it.'

'None of us do,' said the Professor. 'Not really.'

She smiled up at him through her tears. She had regretted her tone immediately, though not the words. She reached out a hand to T'Maugh, hoping to stroke her soft fur one last time before she left, but the big dog moved her head suddenly, refusing to look at her.

'I'd better go,' she said simply.

‘Come home as soon as you can, Rosa Dew,’ said the Professor. She nodded, hardly able to stand it any more, and bowed to the mice, who after a moment, bowed back. Miserably, Gary bit the tail off a dried scorpion.

Agnetha suddenly pushed her way into the kitchen. ‘You’re up then,’ she said. Her left hand was bound up in white bandages, but the axes still hung from her belt. ‘There’s a car outside. Bloody great long thing. Black windows an’ all.

‘That’ll be for me,’ said Rosa.



Chapter Thirty-Five

The ride from the Cabinet to the Hotel Resplendent was a short one, perhaps only five minutes or so. The Earl had been waiting for Rosa outside, leaning silently against the long dark bulk of the Prototype. He opened the door for her, then walked round the other side, started up the low growling engine and they were away.

The interior of the car was like a step back to another age: gleaming dials and bright gauges set in glowing burnished wood, edged with a dark metal that sparkled as they passed each streetlamp in the small, empty town.

Rosa ran a finger along the wooden dashboard. It was warm and smooth, humming slightly with the power of the engine beneath.

‘Cut from a single piece of peach kernel,’ said the Earl. ‘Polishes up beautifully, but terribly hard to get hold of. Had to cut a deal with the New York Museum of Natural History. The trimmings are malignite, of course.’

Rosa had no idea what he was talking about, and didn’t reply. The Earl turned his attention back to the road. He didn’t seem offended.

Soon they were at the hotel. A maid, unfamiliar to Rosa, stepped out, bobbing and curtseying nervously. She reached out to take the handbag, but Rosa clutched it to her chest. It was all she had in the world now.

‘Perhaps you’d be so good as to show Miss Dew to her room,’ said the Earl smoothly, and turned to Rosa. ‘You’ll want something to eat,’ he said to Rosa, ‘and then, when you’re ready, we’ll talk.’

The maid led Rosa up the stairs to a small, but neatly furnished bedroom a level below the Earl’s, where she hung up her coat for her, and laid her handbag neatly upon the bed. Rosa let all this be done to her, as if it were happening to someone else.

‘Are you hungry, miss?’ the maid asked.

‘No,’ she said. ‘But I suppose I’d better eat.’

On the way to the dining room, Rosa passed a number of pirates, some of whom she recognised, both from her previous visit, and from the attack on the Cabinet. Many of them were bandaged; some of them were wearing freshly-made metal hooks. They glared at her as she passed, but she ignored them, and sat alone in the vast dining room, where a nervous waiter brought her a succession of finely crafted, exquisitely flavoured and seasoned dishes. She ate a little of each. They may as well have been sawdust, for all she could taste.

After a little while, the maid took the dishes, and made another quick curtsy.

‘The Earl asks if he could see you, miss,’ she said, eyes looking straight down at the floor. ‘In the lounge.’

The maid gestured in the direction of a dark room, set off to one side. A low fire was burning in a wide fireplace. Two chairs and a table had been pulled up in front of it. The Earl sat in one of them, and had placed a briefcase on the table. He looked up as Rosa approached, and smiled pleasantly.

‘Coffee, my dear?’ he said to Rosa.

‘I prefer tea,’ she said flatly, and sat in the chair opposite the Earl. He seemed determined to turn this into one of his performances. She would just have to be patient. ‘Masala Chai, if you have any.’

The Earl looked a little startled at this, but the maid mumbled that she might be able to find some somewhere and scuttled off. Regaining his composure, the Earl popped the catch on the briefcase.

‘Would you like to know who you are, Rosa Dew?’

‘I want my memories back,’ said Rosa. ‘I want to know who I really am. It’s time you told me.’

The Earl smiled at her and opened the briefcase, taking out a long thin stick with a sparkly blue star on the end. It looked like a cheap toy.

‘What’s he up to now?’ thought Rosa despairingly. *‘Why can’t he just return my memories and be done with it?’*

‘The number of blue fairies you have to hunt down before you get a working wand... You have no idea,’ sighed the Earl.

‘No,’ said Rosa flatly. ‘I don’t.’

He grinned at her, as if they were sharing some kind of joke.

‘Neither do I. I lost count. But finally, just as I was about to give up, I had one last tip-off, and there she was. Didn’t hand the wand over without a struggle. I tried to buy it off her of course, but she was stubborn. Fairies often are.’

He pushed the wand over the table to Rosa. She picked it up. It was almost weightless, a dead thing. If there had ever been any magic in it, it had long been used up.

‘Luckily I’d brought some cold iron with me, or I’d have been there all day!’

The Earl mimed hitting something over the head and chuckled. Rosa shuddered and pushed the wand back across the table to him.

‘I want to know what this has to do with me. Do I have a family? Did I really steal from them?’ She stared at the wand again, then back up at the Earl with sudden fierceness. ‘Did you take my memories with the wand? Is that what happened?’

The Earl shook his head, looking so pleased with himself he might burst.

‘Oh Rosa, better than that. So much better than that.’

The maid brought a silver tray over, coffee black as poison for the Earl, Masala Chai for Rosa. It smelled almost as good as when the Professor had made it. The Earl thanked the maid, and waited for her to leave before moving to the briefcase again, spinning it round to face Rosa. He opened it a few teasing inches, so Rosa could almost see what was inside, then stopped.

‘Perhaps you’re not ready,’ he said, horrid mischief playing over his face. His eyes were positively sparkling.

Rosa took the case from his hands, and opened it.



Chapter Thirty-Six

Inside was some empty plastic packaging, on a card backing. The card was brightly coloured, the plastic transparent. None of it made any sense. It must have been a joke.

‘Look at the packaging!’ The Earl was practically hugging himself with glee.

Rosa lifted the card out of the case. The plastic was attached to it, protective packaging for something that was no longer there. The picture on the card, slightly distorted by the plastic, was labelled ‘ROSA DEW™ POSEABLE FASHION DOLL!’ Beneath, in smaller writing, it said ‘ROSA DEW™ has a quirky fashion sense, and a can-do attitude! Comes with eighteen points of articulation!’

‘Eighteen points!’ chuckled the Earl. ‘Not bad at all!’

Just another piece of merchandise, like the list of things on Agnetha’s computer. But this was different somehow, almost... familiar. Rosa stared at the picture that made up the background image on the packaging. It was a cartoony image of a girl, with brown eyes and long black hair.

She was wearing purple suede boots, a green flared skirt with little mirrors running around it in a complicated pattern, a pink shirt covered by a black jumper that was more holes than jumper, an ankle-length cream coat with thick fake-fur cuffs and collar, and a wide-brimmed green hat with a white feather sticking jauntily out of the band. She was posed in what Rosa supposed was a ‘can-do’ attitude, pointing to what was presumably an exciting event of some

kind happening somewhere off in the distance, one leg kicked kookily behind her, eyes wide with some unspecified variety of glee. However many points of articulation Rosa had, she knew she had never stood like that in her life.

Now she looked again, the plastic packaging was clearly designed to take a small plastic toy – the indented shapes fitting a doll probably about six or seven inches high. There were further indentations for a number of smaller items. At the bottom of the packaging, it said ‘Accessories listed overleaf’. Sure enough, when Rosa turned over the card, there were the items photographed and blown up: a strawberry handbag, an oversized pair of silver sunglasses with rims shaped like stars, a brightly-coloured mobile phone. They were crudely made, with thick moulding lines running across them at slightly odd angles.

Rosa stared up at the Earl. ‘I don’t understand,’ she said. ‘You modelled a doll on me?’

The Earl frowned. He looked a little disappointed in her.

‘The other way round, my dear,’ he said, as if talking to an idiot.

Rosa stared at the packaging in blank incomprehension. Was this another of his tricks? But slowly, the truth was starting to dawn on her.

She looked up at the Earl in horror.

‘The wand brought the doll to life, brought *you* into being,’ he said, proud as any parent. ‘Although I must confess I had my doubts at first. Turning a plastic doll into a real human girl... well, it sounds like some silly fairy tale, doesn’t it? I had a hand from our witch friends of course, got them to load a few extra spells into the old thing.’

The Earl swished the wand in the air a few times.

‘Made sure you’d wake up with enough basic skills to get by. And interest in clothes came automatically, I suppose, but I added some general knowledge, a

bit of politeness – the youth of today are so often without it you know, but it’s a virtue, it really is.’

‘Anyway, at first, nothing happened at all. And then there you were, asleep on the seat.’

Rosa thought of the carrier bag that had wrapped itself around her foot, the receipt she had found with her name on it in the Earl’s table drawer. There could be no doubt that what the Earl said was true. He had created her, more or less, and let her go of her own volition to the Cabinet. What better spy could there be than someone who didn’t know she was a spy?

And every night, on that stupid, cheap plastic phone, she had called the Earl and let him know exactly how far the Professor had got with locating the necessary items and translating the notebooks. The Professor had trusted her, and why shouldn’t he? Rosa wasn’t a threat, just a girl with no memory, and a slightly dippy fashion sense.

‘So what you said about my parents, the things I stole...’

‘I lied, obviously!’ He leaned forward, intently. ‘And it hurt terribly to do it, Rosa, when the truth was so much more interesting, but it had to be done. And you turned out so much better than I had dared hope.’

‘There is no real Rosa Dew, is there?’ whispered Rosa. ‘I never lost my memory, because-’

‘Because you never had a memory to begin with,’ finished the Earl. ‘No, the name ‘Rosa Dew’ only ever belonged to a range of toys that never quite took. But the rights were going cheap, and I can never resist a bargain. You were a blank slate, a fresh start. There was always a danger someone would recognize the name, there’d been a few adverts for the range, but they’d probably think it was a joke.’

Rosa just stared at him blankly. It was all too much to take in. He patted her comfortingly on the hand.

‘You were never supposed to have thoughts of your own at all,’ he said. ‘Not really. Not beyond what the wand gave you. I hoped you’d pass for enough of a real person to intrigue those fools at the Cabinet, but to pitch in with them to the extent that you did! Quite magnificent, my dear! And when you somehow found your way over here to take back the one Treasure I’d managed to obtain – I was so proud! A little annoyed at first, admittedly, but then I realised just how far you’d come. My Rosa!’

He dabbed sentimentally at his eyes with a handkerchief. Rosa swallowed and forced herself to concentrate.

‘The caterpillar – didn’t you send it?’

‘Of course.’ He was gazing intently at her now, earnest even. ‘I’ve always thought it would be such a wheeze to create – ‘

‘But it could have killed me!’

‘Ah, but I needed something to convince your precious Professor you needed his protection.’

Rosa thought of the creature smashing around the Gallery after her, and the horrid noise it had made after she had pushed the umbrella – the first Treasure – down its throat.

‘So it wouldn’t even have hurt me?’ She felt sick. The Earl laughed.

‘Dear child, it would have swallowed you in one gulp! But that was a risk I was willing to take.’

‘And when the pirates attacked the Cabinet. I told them where to find the Treasures, didn’t I?’

He frowned now. ‘They shouldn’t have hit you. That’s the problem with pirates, you see. Terribly keen on hitting things, and being menacing and so forth, but no good with the finer details. I shouldn’t have sent them in at all, but they were getting restless. And I’m ashamed to say I was starting to wonder just how much I could trust my little spy on the inside. You seemed to be playing

your part as the newest addition to the Cabinet just a little too well, if you get my meaning.

‘Still, a knocked-out Rosa was as good as a sleeping Rosa. It was all part of the spell – while awake, you thought you were a real person. But underneath, you’ve always been loyal to me.’

Rosa picked up the wand off the floor and flexed it between her fingers.

‘You won’t need the Professor or the Cabinet any more then,’ she said. ‘Are they safe now?’

‘You still care what happens to them?’ The Earl looked taken aback. ‘Good lord, those pirates must have walloped you harder than I thought. Well, I’ll still need the Professor’s help on one final matter, and then it’s all resolved, you’ll be pleased to hear. Done and dusted.’

‘So... you won’t need me to spy for you any more? Will I...’ she hardly dared to ask. ‘Will I be able to dream? Like a normal person?’

‘Ah.’ The Earl tapped his fingers on the arm of the chair for an uncomfortably long time. ‘I’m afraid, my pet, you may be getting carried away. A few days ago, you didn’t exist. By rights, you never should have lasted so long. You’re not a real person, you know. The spark that animates a genuine thinking, living thing, can be imitated, but never perfected. You’ve come so far, but I’m afraid you will never know what it is to dream, to know love, to have a soul. I’m so sorry.’

He even looked sorry, smiling ruefully as he tucked his handkerchief away and took a delicate sip from his cup.

Rosa just blinked at him. *Could it be true?* she thought. *Could everything she had ever felt be fake?* She loved the Cabinet, and the Professor, and T’Maugh, and even, since she had caught a glimpse of the sad lonely creature that lay beneath the cocky, annoying exterior, Gary. But if she wasn’t a real human being, then her feelings couldn’t be real. And the Cabinet was the last place she belonged. There was a terrible emptiness in her heart, and she honestly couldn’t

tell if it was sadness, or just that she had looked inside herself, after what the Earl had told her, and found nothing at all.

‘Then turn me back,’ she said.

The Earl looked up, startled. ‘I’m sorry?’

‘Turn me back into a thing. A stupid plastic doll. If I have no feelings, then I won’t care. If my feelings are fake, and meaningless, then I’d rather feel nothing at all.’

‘Oh my poor Rosa.’ He looked at her with sad, compassionate eyes. ‘If that is what you want, that is what I can arrange. But on one condition.’

‘What?’ It was like a kind of torture. She had never asked to be brought to life, and now she wanted that short, foolish lie of a life to be ended, the Earl wouldn’t grant her that either.

‘Promise you’ll wait until the ritual is performed. Just another hour or so, and oh, the things you will see. Great things, I promise you Rosa. New worlds will be opened to us, and... I’ve said too much.’

He gave her a conspiratorial wink, and stood up. ‘I’ve given you a lot to think about. Too much, even for a real person, I suspect. I suggest you rest until the ritual is ready to be performed. Try to postpone any big decisions until then. It’s only right you see the whole picture before you start to think about the rest of your life.’

It was that ‘real person’ comment that did it. It occurred to Rosa then that maybe the Earl wasn’t even trying to be cruel. It was entirely possible that he believed everything he said, was convinced everything he did really was for the best. This made it somehow much, much worse. She stood, and looked the Earl full in the face.

‘I shall go back to my room then. And think about what I want to do.’

He nodded briskly at her. 'I think it's for the best. Best to rest after such a busy day. I'd say 'sweet dreams' but of course...' he tipped his head on one side, 'you won't have any.'

The Earl turned to the fire and threw in a large piece of wood. It was ornately carved, and when it started to burn, gave off a sweet smell, like pears.

Their conversation seemed to have ended.

Rosa didn't go back to her room straight away. She didn't want to be alone, really alone, just at the moment. She thought of finding the leaf boy, but he floated across her path at one point, down the far end of a corridor, his feet just a few inches off the ground. Their eyes met, and almost immediately he moved away before she could even speak. Whatever had passed between them earlier had gone.

Rosa drifted through the hotel like a ghost. People may have been able to see her this time, but their gaze slid off quickly, and they started to talk about something else. In a way, it wasn't that different to being invisible. Idly, she retraced her steps, moving slowly up the levels of the hotel.

The scratch in the walls outside the witch's rooms was still there, and again there were trays outside their rooms, but their contents would be harder to explain to the manager. There were three trays, each with a pile of bones, much larger than the rats' bones she had seen earlier. They were larger, the size of a child – or a teenage boy. A skull sat neatly on top of each pile, gleaming whitely. They would have looked fake, like something you could buy at a joke shop, but they were real enough.

A door opened, and the lead teenage boy appeared, smirking slightly at Rosa's puzzled expression. For a moment, Rosa thought she had made a mistake. Then she saw that the face beneath the skin didn't seem to fit quite right – the shape was just slightly off.

The boy did something to his face, and the features settled down, becoming more recognisably the features of the boy who had chased Rosa down the alley, all that time ago. The eyes, though... the eyes were amber, almost golden. When the two other boys appeared behind him, she could see their eye colours too had changed.

The witch-boys pushed past Rosa and swaggered down the corridor, followed by the others. Between them, they carried the jar, umbrella, sword and coin. Seeing the Treasures in the witch-boy's hands should have filled Rosa with furious rage, or crushing disappointment. But she just felt tired, and alone.

The last witch-boy shut the door, but not before Rosa caught a glimpse of their old skins, now wrinkled and flaky-looking, but folded up neatly on the bed.

After that, Rosa went back to her room and propped a chair under the door handle.



Chapter Thirty-Seven

Rosa lay on the bed, her eyes closed, trying her hardest to dream, even though she knew in her heart this wasn't the best way to do it. But she had to try something. She screwed her eyes shut, clenched her fists as tight as she could, and tried to think of nothing at all.

Oddly enough, emptied out and tired as she was, as her mind sank into the depths, it felt almost as though it were somehow brushing against someone else's. Or *something* else's. It was vast, and cool, and seemed barely to know she was there at all. It was too large, and too deep, like trying to swim alongside the largest whale there had ever been, or trying to get the attention of a mountain. And yet, for a second, Rosa thought it had sensed her, a great dark mass shifting slowly, bringing its great bulk round to try to find this tiny creature that had dared to come so close...

There was a sharp rap on her door. The link, if it had been a link at all, was broken. Rosa sighed, and removed the chair to find the Earl standing in the corridor, practically beaming at her. He was wearing the suit, or rather The Suit that he had been wearing when Rosa had first met him, although it was now topped off with a long black winter coat and fine leather gloves.

'We'll be taking the car,' he said. 'A short drive, but the conditions when we arrive will be rather extreme, I'm afraid.'

Rosa shrugged and pulled on her coat with the fake fur cuffs and collar. She had liked her coat before, but now, having seen it as an illustration on the packaging the Earl had given her, it didn't feel like hers any more.

‘No moping, my dear,’ said the Earl sharply as he led her down the stairs and out into the foyer. ‘Let’s not spoil the big moment, shall we?’

As before, the foyer was full of pirates, but the mood was different. They were just as well-armed (and there seemed to be many more of them – to her surprise, Rosa realised that the small army who had attacked the Cabinet had numbered perhaps only a quarter of the full force), but more relaxed. Pirates were chatting, comparing weapons and joshing each other comfortably. Some even seemed to have had new tattoos made for the occasion. Most of them said ‘Mum.’

There were some newcomers too: one group of what looked like bikers, with black and white crash helmets, gripping rusty chains, and casting suspicious looks at the pirates around them. And goblins; pale, nasty-looking things not much taller than Agnetha’s drivers, with backwards-jointed legs, clutching black knives and crude nets.

‘Last-minuters,’ said the Earl, following Rosa’s gaze with some pleasure. ‘Don’t worry my dear, your little Cabinet is perfectly safe. No, these chaps are here for the last stage of the project. Not the sort your Professor would hang around with, I dare say!’

None of the new arrivals seemed to mix with any other kind. Indeed they all looked as if they would turn on each other, given half a chance.

‘I’ve seen goblins before, in the Cabinet,’ said Rosa, shrugging. The Earl looked taken aback.

‘Have you?’ he asked, looking a little disappointed.

‘Yes,’ said Rosa. ‘They were stuffed.’

The Earl didn’t say very much after that, and Rosa stood silently and watched his new, larger army get into what seemed like an endless succession of taxis.

Rosa, the Earl and the witch-boys were still there when the last taxi left an hour later, and for a ghastly moment she thought they were all going to have to squash into the Prototype together. Then a sledge rounded the corner, bells jingling and moving at a steady pace, although no-one was driving it. It was pulled by wolves; huge grey things with slavering jaws and wild, rolling eyes. They stopped obediently outside the foyer, and the witch-boys got in, their leader pausing briefly to stroke the lead wolf. It whined happily, seeming to recognise its new owner even in a different skin, and licked his fingers. Then the witch-boys climbed aboard, and the sledge slowly set off in the same direction as the taxis.

Rosa and the Earl walked round to the side of the hotel, where the Prototype was waiting. It really was a beautiful machine, every inch of it polished, and buffed until it shone. Even the tyres looked brand new. Rosa didn't wait for the Earl to open the door for her, she just climbed in herself and sat silently, arms folded. She couldn't imagine something like this being in the Cabinet. It seemed too clean, too businesslike. Everything the Earl owned seemed to be in perfect working order: he liked things that were neat, and efficient and had no personality of their own whatsoever.

'Trying to picture one of these in your precious Cabinet' said the Earl slyly as they drove after the others. 'Gathering dust, and slowly falling apart?'

They were moving very slowly, rolling with a stately grace over the snow that had started falling once again. The wind was up, too. Rosa had rolled the window down a little, taking rather a chance on the number of switches and levers on the car's dashboard, but it had worked, and the cold air swirled around the interior of the car like knives.

Rosa scowled. She was regretting opening the window now, but didn't want to give the Earl the satisfaction of closing it again. 'At least the Professor

cares about the things he has,' she said, looking straight ahead. 'He doesn't think everything's there to be used.'

'Or even looked at,' said the Earl softly. 'He explained to you, I suppose, that 'Cabinet' is really just another word for "Museum".'

Reluctantly, Rosa nodded.

'Then let me ask you this: in all the time you were there, did you see a single person come to view these wondrous items? Parties of schoolchildren perhaps? Holidaymakers travelling hundreds of miles just to catch a glimpse of the *objets fantastiques* they had read about in guidebooks?'

Rosa said nothing, and the Earl snorted. 'Of course not. S _____'s a hoarder, my dear, with no interest in letting others see items that belong, by right, to everyone. Charming eccentric, with his cardigans, and his amusing collection of friends and his little garden, but really, let's not consider him as anything other than a failed version of myself.'

'And you're doing all this for the public good, I suppose?' Rosa surprised herself with the scorn in her voice. If she didn't have real feelings, she was doing an excellent job of pretending to be utterly repulsed by the Earl's soft cooing tones. Although something at the back of her mind whispered that the Professor's collection really did have something hoard-like about it, stashed away in an anonymous building in a forgotten seaside town. There was a grain of truth in what the Earl had said, and it troubled her.

The Earl smiled at her, clearly aware he had touched a nerve. 'You'll see,' was all he would say. And then, after just a few minutes' drive, they were there.

The procession of taxis before them should have cleared the road completely. But the strong winds were thick with snow, the tarmac on the road only visible for a few seconds before being covered over again. The sledge in front of them seemed to have no trouble at all, the wolves trotting patiently through the white blizzard ahead.

When they turned on to the seafront road, the taxis were nowhere to be seen. At first, Rosa thought it was down to simple lack of visibility, but the Earl pointed them out with one gloved finger as they drove past.

The taxis were lined up neatly on the beach, parked side by side at even intervals, unwieldy-looking bonnets pointed straight out to sea. For a moment, Rosa thought the Prototype was going to join them, but instead it swept majestically past, following the sledge.

But surely continuing along this road would only take them out of Walmington altogether? And to turn left would mean heading back into town. Did the Earl really know what he was doing?

Apparently he did. And so did the witch-boys. Through the open window, Rosa could hear them chanting now, a low guttural sound, barely human at all. The sledge turned right, towards the sea – and on to a pier that stuck out clumsily at right angles from the seafront. Rosa remembered seeing it from the Cabinet: a long old-fashioned edifice, carved sandstone pillars lifting it from the sea. It was topped with wooden decking that had probably needed replacing at least twenty years ago, and were now gap-toothed with rot, where it wasn't frosted with snow.

The sledge and the Prototype both rolled on to the pier, and Rosa gasped, worried that the combined weight would cause the whole thing to collapse. But despite its worn-down condition, it was of solid construction, and took both vehicles without complaint.

There was a small wooden building to one side of the pier, really little more than a stall. 'Whelkses' said the sign above the shuttered hatch. 'Eeels' it said, below. Standing to one side of the stall, sheltering from the wind and snow, but otherwise looking calm and relaxed, as though they were out for a pleasant afternoon's stroll, were the Professor and T'Maugh.



Chapter Thirty-Eight

Rosa's heart leapt, and she moved towards them, but the Earl shot out an arm and held her back. The Earl wasn't a particularly big man, but his grip was like iron, and Rosa struggled in vain.

'Let's not get carried away, my dear,' murmured the Earl. 'If any nastiness were to occur, your friends would appear to be somewhat... outnumbered.'

Reluctantly, Rosa resisted the temptation to run towards the pair, walking slowly behind the Earl as he strode confidently towards them. The Professor looked at her and smiled, and though T'Maugh still looked unsure, when Rosa managed a small, discreet wave in her direction, she thought she saw the dog's tail twitch in the snow, just once.

'*Air above the water. Wood on stone*,' recited the Professor to the Earl, who just smiled at him, and raised a hand in greetings. Neither the Earl nor the Professor looked flustered in the least, as though seeing each other in this place was the most natural thing in the world.

'You worked it out then, finally?' said the Earl. He beckoned to one of the witches, who stepped forward with a silver tray. It contained three mugs of steaming hot chocolate. 'Even without your notes. I must say, I am most impressed.'

'The pier,' said the Professor, and took one of the mugs. 'Made from stone and wood, suspended above the water. I should have thought of it straight away.'

The tray was offered to Rosa, who shook her head and frowned at the Professor, trying to warn him. *It's a trap! The Earl knew you would be here, he*

must have done! But the Professor just smiled at her. His eyelid flickered once, discreetly.

Was that a wink? It was hard to tell when the person only had one eye.

‘I knew the notebook would make its way to you eventually,’ said the Earl. ‘But you were quite right, I had no idea it was a Tribe artefact. I’d picked up scraps of information here and there, hung out in the right chatrooms, followed a few red herrings. But in the end, of course, I realised it would come to you in time. I just had to wait, which gave me all the more time to investigate your marvellous little town.’

He was rubbing his hands together with glee, a strangely childish gesture. It was as if he had no concept that anyone could be anything other than delighted for him.

‘It’s going to make a wonderful base of operations,’ he continued. ‘I’m thinking of renaming it ‘Doringville’. Or possibly ‘Earlton’, I can’t decide. Oh, it’s going to be a marvellous sight, my dear S_____, but tell me honestly, are you ahead of me? Have you any idea what’s going to happen?’

The Professor shook his head. ‘I like to think I was close. I thought I’d come down and see the end result for myself. Just wish I’d worked a little quicker.’

The Earl flapped a hand consolingly. ‘Don’t be so hard on yourself! You did terribly well. And did you get any further with the rest of the little piece of doggerel?’

‘Hmm,’ said the Professor. ‘I must admit to the remainder leaving me a little baffled. The *Four Treasures* were of course, pictured, so the difficulty was simply in location. Well done on the coin, by the way. Locating a single fifty pence piece must have been quite the trick.’

The Earl smiled modestly, and looked at the ground. If Rosa hadn’t known him better, she’d have sworn he was blushing.

‘But *Door (Air?) opens many Doors,*’ continued the Professor. ‘I’m ashamed to admit that had me baffled. And as for *Blood-*’

‘Ah!’ interrupted the Earl quickly. ‘One step at a time!’

Please tell me you have the Rodentians hidden away somewhere, thought Rosa. *Or Agnetha, even if she only has the one working hand.* But the Earl had clearly thought of this. He murmured something to the pirate who had brought the tray, who scuttled off as quickly as decorum would allow.

‘If you’re wondering who else I brought with me,’ said the Professor calmly. ‘I must admit to performing a little aerial surveillance before I came out. Just be to on the safe side. But that’s all’

Gary dropped out of the sky on to the Professor’s shoulder. He didn’t say a word, but turned his cap backwards and stared at the Earl.

‘No mouse army?’ asked the Earl. ‘No unemployed taxi drivers, or Neanderthals, or whatever nonsense you have left rattling around in your little museum?’

T’Maugh growled at this, and for a moment the witch’s chanting was lost in the rumble, but the Professor patted his friend once, and she stopped.

‘The mice wanted to come, but I feared they’d suffered quite enough of late. So it’s just us, I’m afraid,’ said the Professor cheerfully. The Earl nodded.

‘A shame, in a way,’ he said. ‘I really think this is going to be a sight worth seeing.’

‘Really?’ asked the Professor. ‘I’m not sure these conditions are suitable to seeing more than the nose in front of one’s face.’

‘Ah,’ said the Earl. ‘Let’s just wait a moment, shall we? I think our singing friends have nearly come to the end of their first movement.’

Not that there had been anything even slightly musical about the witches’ chanting, yet when it suddenly finished, a tone was left hanging in the air. It was

as if it had always been there, but it had taken the witches' voices to bring it out into the open.

There was another noise too, a low rumbling sound. For a moment, Rosa thought T'Maugh was growling again, then realised that the dog was completely silent, although her fur was bristling thickly. The Professor was listening intently, his head cocked slightly on one side, like a bird. Rosa thought briefly of the carved woodpecker that sat on the windowsill of her bedroom. Or what had been her bedroom.

The rumbling noise was joined by a higher pitched noise now, a rippling, cracking sound, like a thousand tiny panes of glass being broken. Or less like lots of small things smashing, than one huge piece slowly... unsmashing. Then when Rosa turned her gaze from the Professor, and followed his out to sea, she realised what was causing the sound.

The sea was freezing over.

The snow had stopped falling now, and the wind had dropped completely. With the visibility cleared, everyone could see the tide of ice sweeping out into the darkness. Seabirds, quickly sensing what was coming towards them, hauled themselves into the air and squawking, flapped off to safety. In a matter of seconds, the sea beyond the pier was a frozen, silent landscape of dead waves, the reflected glow from the assembled headlights becoming sharper, casting deep black shadows.

One by one, the taxis' engines began to growl. But, instead of nosing down the few metres of pebbly beach and on to the frozen sea, they remained in place, the energy seemingly directed inwards. Grinding mechanical noises issued forth from each vehicle, black smoke pouring from exhausts as the cars shuddered and popped, looking as if they were about to fly apart from whatever was making them judder and churn from the inside.

The car nearest Rosa suddenly made a great creaking sound, and the bonnet stretched and groaned, looking for a second as if it was going to tear itself free from the chassis entirely. But instead, the bonnet of the car pushed itself outwards, becoming pointed, neater-looking and more aerodynamic, propeller blades unfurling like the petals of a flower. The car doors that had looked so thick and unwieldy unfolded, with a series of clangs and crashes, into short stubby wings, just as fins rose from the vehicle's rear section.

The rest of the cars along the beach were following the example of the first, wrenching themselves slowly and painfully from one shape to another. Finally the mass transformation was complete, turning what had been clunky, old-fashioned-looking taxi-cabs into neat, efficient-looking aeroplanes. Each propeller began to spin, slowly at first, then blurring into a silver disc – the engines were quieter now, purring almost silently as though much happier to be free, their true shapes out in the open at last. But they held their positions, crouched neatly on the beach, their occupants waiting calmly for the next stage of the Earl's plan to unfurl.

The witches were chanting again. Louder this time, and even harsher than before. Rosa clamped her hands over her ears, and saw T'Maugh rubbing her head against the side of the stall as if trying to force the sound from her head, but the chant continued, and grew still louder.

Something was stirring, out above the frozen sea. Squinting, still trying to block out the noise, Rosa thought at first that something huge was stirring in the night sky, out amongst the clouds. Then she realised it *was* the clouds.

It was as though a great funnel was appearing in the sky, a whole level of the atmosphere being pulled down in a point, stretching itself down and slowly twisting. The air around the pier, which had temporarily been stilled, began to move again, outwards this time, as if it was being sucked towards the great spout of air. In just a few seconds Rosa could no longer hear the witches, though she could still feel their words, making her stomach churn and her knees shake.

The twisting spout of air danced on the horizon, growing darker and more solid with every moment. It was getting bigger, or coming nearer. Or both.

Rosa felt something brush against her mind, and swallowed hard. This was it. This was what she had felt, lying still and silent on the hotel bed. The great creature she had touched, then pulled away from.

The witches fell silent, and the wind settled to a steady hum. The great spout of air was now steady in the distance before them, though its base swayed to and fro, never quite still, ranging over a patch of frozen sea probably larger than Walmington itself.

‘It’s alive,’ whispered the Professor.

The Earl and Professor stood beside each other, both staring out to sea. For a moment they could have been the same person. Then Rosa saw that where the Professor looked upon the cyclone with awe and wonder, the Earl had on his face a look of greed and malice. His eyes sparkled with avarice, and he dabbed the corner of his mouth with a handkerchief.

‘My dear S____,’ he said. ‘Of course it is. It always has been. And now it must be tamed.’

The Professor reluctantly dragged his gaze from the cyclone and stared at the Earl, then over at the army of air-taxis, lined up alertly on the shore.

‘With *machines*?’ he asked. He was trying to keep the laugh out of his voice, but Rosa heard it, and from the sudden twitch of the Earl’s smile, she knew he had heard it too, even though he tried to disguise it.

‘With the Treasures,’ he said, and beckoned to the witches.



Chapter Thirty-Nine

The lead witch-boy stepped forward. Behind him, the second boy carried the jar, the third next to him, holding something in his gloved hands. It was a deck of cards, the one the witches had been playing with when Rosa had walked into the bar, although she now realised they hadn't been playing at all. The third boy lifted up the top card, showing it to Rosa as much as the Earl. It showed a drawing of a simple clay container.

'Cups,' said the lead witch-boy. He cleared a space in the snow with one trained foot and taking the jar, laid it carefully on the ground. The third boy held up the next card. It showed a drawing of a simple stick.

'Wands,' said the lead witch-boy. He took the umbrella and placed it carefully in the jar. Then came the next card.

'Swords.' The lead witch-boy dropped the tiny paperknife into the jar. 'And coins.'

He dropped the fifty pence piece after the paperknife. It clinked when it hit the bottom, a clear bright sound that lasted much longer than it should. The silence that followed seemed to Rosa to be deeper and darker as a result.

'Can we get on?' snapped the Earl. 'Schedules, and so forth.'

Rosa shivered as the witch-boy stepped back from the jar, drew a breath, and sang a single note. Out over the sea, the cyclone trembled. It curved over itself, then snapped back to the perpendicular, vibrating faster now, like a plucked string. Still on the Professor's shoulder, Gary shivered. He seemed

drawn to the sight, and repulsed by it at the same time. His fur was standing on end, and his wings continually fluttered, then drew in, then fluttered again. T'Maugh was murmuring something to him, soft, reassuring words. Rosa had never heard her talk to him like that before. The witch-boy closed his mouth, but the note remained, hanging in the air.

'No fireworks?' asked the Earl. 'No walking widdershins, no magic words?'

The witch shook his head, and the Earl shrugged. 'It doesn't matter,' he said, although he looked a little disappointed.

The Professor laughed, and there was pity in the sound. 'Poor Cedric,' he said. 'Always wanting more. Was it because you started with so little? Is that how you came to confuse possessions with love? It must have been many years since anyone called you 'Dearest.''

The Earl turned on him, snarling. 'You *dare*-' he started, but the Professor was frowning.

'*Door (Air?) opens many Doors,*' he said suddenly. 'So which world is it you mean to travel to?'

The Earl smiled, his mask back on, and tutted as if admonishing a child. 'My dear Professor,' he said, and Rosa felt a chill at the word, as though the Earl were merely pretending to give him a title he would soon snatch away, '*All of them.*'

But the Professor was shaking his head. 'It can't be done. The thing could pick up, say, a house, drop it into another world, certainly. But the only documented-'

'You live too much by the book,' said the Earl. 'Rules can be twisted, or deeper laws found where only chaos was thought to exist. The cyclone lives between worlds. If fact, it can *only* live between worlds, spinning into existence at the weak points, where the fabric of reality has become patched and thin.'

‘Cherry Tree-,’ said Rosa. ‘Indeed,’ interrupted the Earl. ‘And many other places to boot. Of course there were many ways to travel to and fro from Otherworlds in the old days. Through wardrobes, or into mirrors. Old churches, forgotten wells... But those days are gone, and most of the doorways along with them. I dare say there’s a station platform here, a door that opens on to a brick wall there, but the cyclone... now there’s a creature of a different order altogether. Only a few have been powerful enough to bend it to their will for a few seconds, using it to walk between worlds, skip from plane to plane with no consequence or payment.’

‘There’s always consequence,’ said the Professor. ‘Always payment.’

Rosa heard him, and she thought she understood his words, but just then she saw the leaf boy. He was floating a little apart from the witches, just a few inches above the pier’s surface, the greenery that cloaked him rippling gently in the breeze. A single leaf detached itself and was carried steadily out to sea, vanishing towards the cyclone.

The boy saw Rosa looking at him and returned her gaze, levelly. She wondered if he even understood what was happening, which side he had chosen.

The Earl continued. ‘The way to summon it was bound into the Treasures long before our time, the items themselves scattered across different worlds. They should never have been brought together. With them, I can break down the barriers between worlds, travel to as many as I want.’

‘With an army.’ It was T’Maugh who spoke, glaring out at the ranks of air-taxis. The Earl looked shocked.

‘You people with your wars and your armies! My dear beast-’ T’Maugh growled at that, low and long, but he ignored her and continued ‘- I happen to be a businessman. I have associates, of course, and stout fellows all, but I can’t be expected to fling open the gates of free trade alone!’

For the first time, the Professor looked puzzled, out of his depth. ‘Then why open a gateway to the Otherworlds if not...’ His voice faded away, and realisation dawned. ‘You mean to strip worlds of their Figments, reverse-engineer them, and sell the rights to the highest bidder.’ His voice was flat.

The Earl grinned at him. ‘That’s just the start! There are people in those worlds who’ll work for, well... peanuts. I wasn’t the first to find that out. I’m going to set up factories, open call centres. Walmington will become a gateway to a whole new industry. We’ll have to open an airport of course, get some development loans.

‘Sustainable resource development, I’m thinking of calling it.’

The base of the cyclone was pulling slowly and painfully from the surface of the sea, lifting itself so its opening faced the pier like a great black mouth. It was at least a mile away, but Rosa could see landscapes shifting and flickering within it: a sandy bay dotted with sailing ships, green buildings sparkling with the light of another world’s sun, the dark spires of a city that could have been part of Rosa’s own world, or another world entirely.

The Earl made an almost imperceptible gesture and the line of air-taxis began to roll forward. Tyres crunched over pebbles, then suddenly, silently, met the frozen sea and began to move faster and faster. One by one, they lifted into the air, moving neatly into squadrons, at least twenty to a group.

‘But you can’t control where they end up,’ said the Professor. He sounded more puzzled than worried. ‘They’ll become scattered across the Otherworlds, with no way of getting back.’

‘You’re forgetting the last ingredient,’ said the Earl. He had taken something from his inside suit pocket. It was curved and didn’t look meant for human hands, or even made by them – but it looked sharp, and deadly.

‘Blood/Fire?’ mused the Professor.

‘Essence of Dragon,’ said the Earl.

They were standing beneath the pier’s only streetlamp. Rosa had just enough time to see that the Earl was holding a knife, and that it glittered in the electric light, before he plunged it into the Professor’s stomach.



Chapter Forty

Rosa gasped, and Gary shot into the air, a squawking mass of panicking fur and feathers. T'Maugh didn't even bark, she just hurled herself at the Earl's throat – only to freeze instantly in place at a single murmured word from one of the witch-boys.

The Professor coughed, and crumpled slowly to the ground. The Earl wiped the blade on a handkerchief and crouched next to the Professor.

'You were a dragon once, you see,' he said quietly. 'You kept it quiet, but I found out, and a thing like that stays in the blood.'

The Professor tried to say something, but coughed again. His mouth was suddenly wet with blood.

It was as though Rosa was awoken from a dream – or had fallen into one. She ran to the Professor's side, sinking to her knees on the icy wooden surface and clutching his hand.

The Professor managed a smile. 'I *was* a dragon once,' he said. 'I'd quite forgotten.'

His voice wasn't weak, and he didn't even sound as if he was in much pain, but too much blood was seeping out on to the pier. It ran between the cracks in the wood and seemed to form strange symbols, coming near the jar of Treasures without ever quite touching them. The witches had begun to sing again, fractured harmonies now, broken pieces of song being forced together in ugly, welded shapes. They were taking control of the cyclone now, and in that

place in the back of her mind, Rosa could hear the great voice moaning, calling out as the witches cracked its stormbones into new positions, wrenching worlds into new alignments.

But Rosa didn't care about any of that. The Professor, the kind gentle man who had taken her in and given her a home, and whom she had betrayed, was dying. Gary fluttered to the ground, landing on Rosa's shoulder, his tail curling softly around her neck. It tickled a little.

T'Maugh was frozen in mid-lunge, eyes wide, teeth bared, her front paws raised off the ground entirely. The snow was beginning to fall again, and a few flakes had settled on her nose.

'Don't worry about your dog, dear fellow, she's tip-top,' said the Earl reassuringly, tucking the knife back into his pocket. 'Just held in time for a while, it'll soon wear off. Although I'll be long gone by then of course. And so will you.'

He took out a keyring and pointed it at the Prototype. The headlamps blinked once, and the engine began to purr. Like the air-taxi, it too was undergoing a transformation into a flying vehicle, although this was a smoother process: an easy movement from one state to another. Large, batlike wings extended from underneath the car's chassis, wheels withdrawing under the body even as the car rose gently up in the air. A large fin sprouted from the boot, and Rosa remembered the first time she had seen the car, and had thought instantly of sharks. But it wasn't the car she should have been concerned about: it was the owner. The Earl was already striding toward the Prototype, one door opening smoothly to accept him.

'This isn't even about money, is it?' spat Rosa at his back. 'You just want to destroy anything you can't buy for yourself.'

The Earl sighed, and to Rosa's surprise, turned and sat on the car's running board, looking back at her. The Prototype settled a little under his weight, but seemed stable.

‘I envy you,’ he said to Rosa. She didn’t even want to talk to him any more. The Professor had fallen silent, and though his gaze was on hers, she wasn’t sure if he could really see her any more. His hand continued to grip hers, but less tightly every moment. But the Earl was still talking.

‘It all seems so *vital*, doesn’t it?’ he said. ‘Everything matters, every emotion fresh, and real. But these times pass, Rosa my dear. Exactly when is hard to say. For some, two is the beginning of the end.’

Rosa suddenly felt the leaf-boy standing next to her. He was looking down at the Professor, head slightly tilted on one side. He had seen death before, she was sure of it. It was something he was familiar with, carried around with him. Underneath the thick scent of the leaves that clothed him, he stank of it.

The Earl sighed. Rosa refused to look at him, but still he talked.

‘You’re right of course, money isn’t the quest, my dear,’ he said. ‘It’s just a way of keeping score. You see, as a child, I was cursed.’

Rosa shook her head, the Professor’s hand in hers growing colder. His eye stared straight ahead.

‘Not enough,’ said Rosa. ‘And not as much as I curse you now.’

The Earl clapped his hands, delighted. ‘So literal!’ he cried. ‘This is exactly what I’m talking about. Do you know, when I was young, younger than you are now-’

‘I’m only three days old,’ said Rosa, dully.

‘Literal,’ said the Earl again, ‘but do bear with me. He was right you know. I was called ‘Dearest’, and a fine, young, graceful figure I cut in those days. But age withers. These times, Rosa, that seem so bright, and fresh with promise... they fade. Every day is a day closer to death, a step further away from summer. My mother died when I was very young, and it was as though a story had ended. My golden days were finished. But I wanted them back.’

‘So you could live forever,’ said Rosa. She just wanted the Earl to get into the Prototype and fly away. But he shook his head.

‘So I could be *me* again,’ he said. ‘Not this grown-up shell, this old man you see before you. I was never supposed to become this. I found potions that could restore youth for a while, even delaying the ageing process. But the real magics, the true magics, are no longer found on this earth. This is a tired, thin place. But out there...’

He gestured out towards the cyclone. The air-taxis were just visible, heading for the dark mouth. They were just dots now, tiny in the night sky, but the shifting landscapes were settling down, becoming more regular, the witches’ song making them shuffle, neat and regular, little clockwork worlds.

‘Magic potions,’ he said. ‘Fountains of Youth. Spells and magic pools and a thousand ways of regaining all that once seemed lost. Undoing all the terrible things I’ve done to get to where I am today. I know I’ve done wrong, Rosa, of course I do, but you see, it’s all been in the best possible cause. I’ll have to trade a few items away, I accept that. I already know plenty of people in the right places who’ll be glad to speed up a public enquiry or two in exchange for an amusing talking pet, or a singing sword. But eventually, I’ll be able to go back. I was innocent then, and this world ruined me. But I can go back. There’s always a way.’

The Earl stood then, and swung himself into the Prototype. Then he paused briefly.

‘The money will help, of course,’ he said. ‘This time round.’

Then the car lifted almost silently from the pier, swung into the sky and followed the others.

‘What a complete buffoon,’ said the Professor quietly.

‘Yes,’ said Rosa. ‘The decisions you make – that’s who you are.’

‘True,’ he said, ‘But I meant, there’s a fountain of youth in the conservatory. He could have just asked.’

Rosa remembered sipping from the water, the first night she had broken into the Cabinet.

‘Really?’ she said, shocked. ‘It just gave me a funny glowing feeling.’

‘Well, you already *are* a child. Also you need to adjust the nozzles underneath for the proper flow. I think currently it just has mild antiseptic qualities.’

The Professor coughed again. There was no blood, and for a moment, Rosa felt a wild surge of hope. But the Professor shook his head.

‘Too far gone, I’m afraid,’ he said. ‘Your friend here can sense it.’

He nodded at the leaf-boy, who stood quietly a few feet to one side. Rosa stared at him with hate in her eyes.

‘He’s not my friend. He’s just like the Earl. Another little boy, too scared to grow up.’

The leaf-boy looked at her, not seeming to hear the words, then turned his gaze back to the Professor, who twitched suddenly, his hand jerking out of hers.

‘When children died,’ whispered the Professor, his voice suddenly faint, ‘he went part of the way with them so they should not be frightened.’

The boy nodded, and stepped closer, but Rosa swung at him with her fist, and he jumped back.

‘You’re not a child,’ said Rosa to the Professor. ‘And I don’t think you’d want to be again even if you could. Would you?’

The Professor smiled, and tried to shake his head.

‘I’m not frightened either,’ he said. ‘I’ve died before, or come very close. It didn’t hurt.’

The leaf-boy stared at the Professor. The vines and creepers that ran across his body were trembling.

‘Go *away!*’ said Rosa, but the Professor frowned at her.

‘I don’t think he’s ever understood death,’ he said. ‘Perhaps now would be as good a time as any for him to try.’

He beckoned weakly to the leaf-boy, who looked at Rosa for a moment, then stepped forwards.

‘But he’s on the Earl’s side!’ cried Rosa, then realised the stupidity of what she was saying. Reluctantly, she stepped aside. The leaf-boy rustled as he walked past her, a couple of green tendrils reaching out to brush against her face. Angrily, she slapped them aside, but he was ignoring her now.

‘Nothing to be afraid of, old chap,’ said the Professor, and Rosa thought suddenly of how typical it was that even moments from death, he was doing his best to reassure another. The boy was next to him now, trying to reach out a hand to touch the dying man, but fingers and leaves trembled, halting a foot from him.

Rosa couldn’t watch. She turned her face to T’Maugh, poor frozen T’Maugh, and buried her face in the dog’s fur.

‘I’m so sorry,’ whispered Rosa in her friend’s ear. There was no way of knowing if the dog could hear her or not. ‘I don’t know if you believe me, but you have to know it’s true. I would never hurt you or the Professor. You were the only friends I had, and now I don’t even have that.’

The witches fell silent then, and in that strange moment when a sound you hadn’t realised you could even hear any more suddenly stops, she felt something answering her loneliness. A distant moan, something to be felt rather than heard.

Rosa... it cried, and at first she thought T’Maugh had been freed from her spell. Then she realised it was the cyclone.

Help me.... It said.

‘Rosa?’ said another voice, about an inch from her ear. It was Gary. Rosa turned back to the Professor and gasped.

The boy had his hand on the Professor’s stomach. The strands of greenery that enveloped him were no longer waving around, but wrapped closely to the boy’s body. More vines seemed to be growing out from the boy’s hands, extending towards the Professor, and as Rosa stared, extending *into* the Professor. The vines rippled and twisted, more growing and folding themselves around him. It was hard to say where the boy stopped and the Professor began.

Rosa yelled, and hurled herself at the boy, trying to knock him away, but he was too strong, holding her back with one arm. The Professor’s one eye stared straight up, open wide in shock. She couldn’t hear him breathing.

Let him go, said the voice in her mind, and Rosa didn’t know if it meant the boy or the Professor, but she couldn’t agree to either. She raked the arm with her nails, and even tried to bite it, but the leaves and bark were too thick, and she could get no purchase. She spat the horrible taste from her mouth and half-sobbed, half-shouted at the boy, but he ignored her. Gary had flown to the top of the stall, and turned somersaults with anxiety, shrieking with fear. Neither of them made any more sense than the other.

The Professor coughed. It wasn’t a weak, faint cough, but a rich, loud expectoration. The sound of someone who had just accidentally swallowed a large insect, or was halfway through a rather thick cold.

He raised his hands to his lips, and pulled away a small green leaf.

‘Good lord,’ he said.

The boy let go of Rosa, who ignored him and dropped to the Professor’s side. The Professor was struggling to sit up, although the difficulty seemed to

come more from the cold than his injury. They both looked at his stomach, which was now coated in greenery, leaves lying one on top of another, plastered thick with sap and blood. Carefully, the Professor peeled off the mass of leaves. The shirt underneath was shredded, but the skin was smooth – unbroken.

The boy staggered suddenly, and fell to his knees.

‘Help him,’ said the Professor. ‘I think he just saved my life.’

Rosa took off her coat, and wrapped it around the boy’s shoulders. He stared at her with uncomprehending eyes, then seemed to smile, although it was hard to tell.

‘What did you do?’ asked Rosa. ‘Who are you?’

Leaves were falling from the boy’s skin now, turning brown as they left him. One fell in Rosa’s palm, withering almost instantly, becoming skeletal before her eyes.

The boy tried to gnash his teeth, but they were falling from his mouth, landing one by one in the snow, turning from white to yellow, to dust.

There was no green on him now. It was like watching summer turn to autumn in a few seconds.

The boy smiled, and Rosa found his hand in hers. The fingers were dry and rough, and she held them as gently as she could, as she leaned forward, kissing him very gently on his cheek. His skin tasted not of dust, as she had half-expected, but of the dark dry soil of the conservatory, warm and slightly bitter.

When she opened her eyes again, the boy was gone. Her coat held his shape for a second, then collapsed slowly to the ground, spread over a rough patch of decayed leaves, black against the snow.

The Professor coughed again, and spat something nasty off the edge of the pier.

‘Do excuse me,’ he said, sounding rather embarrassed, and climbed a little unsteadily to his feet.

‘But... but he was just a *boy*,’ said Rosa.

‘He was older than me, you know’ said the Professor. ‘Much older, I think. Perhaps he gave me what he had left, because he felt he’d lived long enough.’

There was so much Rosa had wanted to ask the boy. Which Rosa had he thought he was giving the Fourth Treasure to? Had he been trying to help, even then, or simply trying to speed the Earl’s plan along? And now she would never know.

Rosa stared into the night sky. The large dot that was the Prototype was rapidly catching up with the series of smaller dots heading for the mouth of the cyclone.

‘We have to stop the Earl,’ she said.

The Professor and Gary stared at her.

‘How?’ they said together.

It was a good point. There was silence for a moment. The witch-boys had stopped singing and were standing round the sledge, idly chatting. T’Maugh was still frozen, caught mid-leap, and the Treasures sat in the middle of the pier where they had been left, abandoned now their work had been done. But maybe they still had a use.

‘The Treasures worked because they were brought together, all in the same place,’ said Rosa slowly. ‘If we can split them up again, send them back into different worlds, the Earl will lose control.’

‘You mean throw them into the cyclone,’ said the Professor flatly. Rosa nodded.

‘Rosa,’ said the Professor gently. ‘The Earl and his men must be nearly at the cyclone already. I simply don’t think there’s any way of catching them up. Even if we made it back to the Cabinet, there’s nothing there strong enough to carry the three of us.’

She turned to him.

‘Correct me if I’m wrong,’ she said. ‘But didn’t one of us used to be a *dragon*?’



Chapter Forty - One

But of course the Earl still had some allies left. Rosa walked up to the witches quickly, before she had time to think about what she was doing. Gary wrapped his tail more tightly around her neck, but stayed on her shoulder.

The head witch-boy smiled at them, a wide happy smile that would have looked natural and innocent if you didn't know who was behind it. The original boy, the one whose skin the witch had taken, had probably never smiled like that. Rosa wondered if she was the last person who had seen the boys before the witches had taken them. It was too late now.

'You're going to fly into the cyclone,' he said, matter of factly.

Rosa nodded. 'You can try and stop us if you like,' she said. 'But we'll fight you.'

'We're not scared,' said Gary, although Rosa could feel him trembling.

The boy shrugged. It clearly didn't matter to him whether anyone was afraid of him or not.

'Our work here is done,' he said. 'We've been well-paid. Other places to go, people to happen to.'

Rosa felt shocked. 'But... your boss? Aren't you going to... protect him?'

The boy laughed again. 'He was just a means to an end,' he said disdainfully. 'We were paid to do a job, and it is done. Take the Treasures, do with them what you will. I care nothing for them, or for the Earl, or for you.'

Rosa nodded. 'You must be very lonely,' she said suddenly. She didn't know why she said it.

The boy glared at her, the first real emotion Rosa had seen on that face since it had been taken over. But he got into the sledge without a word. The other witch-boys, and a couple of the women Rosa recognised from the bar were packed in tight, wearing thick fur coats and passing round bright red sweets on a silver tray. The boy cracked a whip and the wolves hauled the sledge off the pier and on to the road, metal runners grinding against the icy tarmac.

None of the witches looked behind them, and soon they disappeared into the snow.

'I think it's just us now,' said Rosa.

They felt bad leaving T'Maugh behind, stiff and frozen. But it didn't seem like there was a lot anyone could do until the spell had worn off. The Professor protested that it was a long time ago that he had been a dragon, he was rather embarrassed about the whole thing in fact, and wished people would just leave it. Also, it had been some sort of magical curse, and another chap had gone to a lot of trouble to remove the curse and turn him back into a human being again.

'But the spell worked when the Earl stabbed you,' pointed out Rosa reasonably, 'so there must be something dragony left in you. Anyway, have you ever *tried* to turn back into a dragon again?'

The Professor explained in some detail about how it would never occur to him to do such a thing, and Rosa had to explain that if he definitely couldn't turn into a dragon, there was going to be no way at all to catch up with the Earl. So he might as well try. Which was how to everyone's surprise (and though she wouldn't admit it, Rosa's most of all), they happened to be flying hundreds of feet up in the air.

The Professor made an elegant dragon, if you ignored his rather stumpy legs. His body was long and serpentine, with great ridges on his back that gave Rosa and Gary something to hold on to. His tail seemed almost as long as his body again, and whipped from side to side as they moved through the air. Huge, batlike wings beat the air from time to time, but the movement was more like swimming than flying.

The closer they got to the cyclone, the faster they travelled, the winds beginning to suck them in. Hundreds of feet beneath them, the sea was still frozen, even more than a mile out, long past its usefulness as a landing strip. For the first time, Rosa started to wonder at the true power wielded by the witches, and shivered.

‘Cold?’ called up the Professor-Dragon anxiously. ‘I could slow down if you like. The wind chill must be something fierce.’

‘It’s fine!’ shouted Rosa back, grinning. If there was something fierce up here, it was her. She clutched the jar of Treasures in one hand, clung to a spine-ridge with the other, and stared into the wind as if it was alive. Perhaps it was. The presence in her mind that had been there ever since the Earl had begun to summon the cyclone was stronger now. It wasn’t speaking, but she could feel it, waiting patiently for her to come closer.

Gary wasn’t doing so well. For a creature that seemed to love flight so much, he could have looked happier. He clung to the next ridge down from Rosa, using not only both hands, but feet and tail too.

‘Feel sick...’ he mumbled. Rosa managed to rein in the temptation to gloat.

The black specks in the distance that were the air-taxis were growing larger. Then suddenly a few of them were growing larger more quickly than the rest. Some of the more alert pilots had seen the dragon-shape behind them and turned round to see the pursuers off.

‘You’ll need to keep a look out to the right,’ said the Professor-Dragon, suddenly crisp and businesslike. ‘Restricted field of view, I’m afraid. Little bit worried about landing, what with the depth perception, but I suppose we’ll deal with that when it happens.’

Rosa had been a little scared to look at the Professor’s ruined eye when she and Gary climbed up his outstretched foreleg on to his broad, scaly back, especially as it was no longer covered by an eyepatch. But it hadn’t been frightening to look at. Just a blank socket where an eye should be, with a big scar running up across it.

‘Two moving to the right,’ said Rosa urgently. ‘I think they’re trying to force you to land.’

Indeed, the air-taxis had divided into two pairs, swooping down from above.

‘Can’t have that,’ said the Professor-Dragon firmly, and rose up sharply, forcing them instead below him.

‘Hang on,’ he added, rather too late to be useful. Gary hadn’t opened his eyes the entire time, and as she struggled to keep her place and the Treasures at the same time Rosa couldn’t help thinking that a prehensile tail really could come in rather handy.

The air-taxis shot past them, so close Rosa could see the faces of the pirates inside. The vehicles crossed each other below and headed back up again, engines straining with the effort.

‘They’re coming up from behind this time,’ said Rosa. The pirates had changed their tactics, taking up a safe position a few hundred feet behind the Professor-Dragon, leaning out of the windows and discharging every weapon they could find. A bullet pinged off a thick scale just next to Rosa’s hand, whilst a crossbow bolt whined over Gary’s head, just as he had gathered up the courage

to open his eyes. He screamed and shut them again, burying his face in his wings to be on the safe side.

The air-taxis were gaining on them now, slowly and stealthily creeping up behind. Even despite herself, Rosa had to admire the pilots' courage – the winds were fierce, and the whirling snow was more like sleet. The Professor-Dragon was hardly beating his wings at all, letting the howling winds carry him closer and closer to the mouth of the cyclone.

'They're behind you!' she shouted.

'Good lord, are they really?' said the Professor-Dragon, and lazily flicked his tail, knocking the nearest air-taxi back into the others. Windscreens frosted and wings snapped off, three of the craft plummeting out of sight, then reappearing as an orange bloom on the frozen sea. A trail of black smoke belched into the air to mark the site, then the ice opened up and swallowed the vehicles whole.

The remaining air-taxi was still trying to down the Professor-Dragon, despite its wheezing exhalations of smoke and rattling wing. The great tail lashed out once more, but the craft dodged beneath it, moving swiftly to the right.

'To your right!' shouted Rosa, but the Professor-Dragon knew exactly what was happening. His rear leg unfolded, punching a neat hole in the craft's fuel tank. The engine stuttered, coughed, then cut out altogether, craft and occupants dropping suddenly like a stone.

Beneath them, the ice was finally starting to break up. The plummeting craft dropped neatly into a black patch of water, the waves folding back over it almost immediately, as if claiming back its own. A few seconds later a fireball blossomed underwater, then shrank back almost instantly into nothingness.

The Professor-Dragon gave another flap of his huge wings. The mouth of the cyclone was in front of them now, almost filling the sky, the Prototype and the rest of the air-taxis hovering just outside. From the smoke they were

belching from their exhausts, and the trembling of the Prototype's wings, they appeared to be operating at full power. Yet something was stopping them getting any closer.

Rosa, said the cyclone. Its voice wasn't weak. Something so vast and all-encompassing could never be called that. But it was distracted, straining. Rosa knew it was taking all the power it could call its own just to keep the Earl and his forces from entering.

'I brought the Treasures,' she shouted, and the Professor-Dragon turned his head slightly, frowning.

'What?' he said.

'I'm talking to the cyclone,' Rosa called out. She could hardly hear herself over the rushing winds, but the dragon's hearing was keen.

'Righto,' he called back cheerfully.

I brought the Treasures, said Rosa, inside her head this time, and she felt the great mass of the cyclone's mind dip and shift. It was pleased, she knew.

Then I shall tell you what to do, it said. And it did. Rosa called out its instructions to the Professor-Dragon, and he didn't question her once.



Chapter Forty-Two

The roaring winds were howling around Rosa's ears, constantly trying to pluck her from safety and hurl her into the empty air. Her fingers were numb with cold, and the only way she knew she was still holding on to the jar was because she could see it, icicles stretching from the rim directly towards the cyclone.

They were below the mouth now, and the Professor-Dragon's wings creaked as he changed his angle, clawing his way almost vertically up the sky, towards the hovering vehicles now outlined above them.

Rosa felt Gary climbing over her shoulders and snuggling in the space between her body and the handhold. It was like having your own personal hot water bottle, even if it meant she was now hanging on for two.

The dragon's wings beat desperately, fighting through the twisting, screaming air at the entrance to the cyclone. Rosa closed her eyes and held on as tight as she could. One by one, her senses were shutting down, only the frantic beating of the monkey's heart against her own, and the steady slow rhythm of the great dragon's heart beneath her reminding her she was alive at all.

The Professor-Dragon burst from beneath into the middle of an entire squadron of air-taxis, scattering them like panicking birds. The Prototype, however, tilted a little in the wash of the Professor-Dragon's beating wings, but kept position.

Fully half the sky was taken up with a huge circle of blue. Wherever the centre of the cyclone led, it was daytime there. Rosa caught a glimpse of a vast dark forest, a few tracks leading through it, but no buildings to indicate which Otherworld this was. Not that she'd even know if anyone told her. Then the sky span round into darkness again, as the Professor-Dragon wheeled to avoid the Prototype, which was suddenly hurtling straight at them.

It shot past, then turned neatly in the air and hovered before them, turning gently in place as the Professor-Dragon circled round to make another attempt at breaking through into the Otherworld beyond. Rosa suddenly realised that where the dragon had to keep flying just to avoid falling out of the sky, the Prototype, and the air-taxis, had no such restriction. They could hover in place, like a whole swarm of birds of prey, and wait for the larger beast to tire. For the first time since they had launched off the pier and into the air, Rosa began to feel that success was far from certain.

There was a burst of static, then the Earl's voice suddenly boomed out into the air. Rosa could see a speaker sticking out of the Prototype's bonnet, an old-fashioned gramophone horn, but it worked perfectly.

'Congratulations!' said the Earl. Rosa couldn't see anything beneath the smoked glass, but she just knew he was smiling. He always was.

'Witches betrayed me, I suppose,' boomed the voice. 'And you tricked my poor lost boy on to your side. Did he survive the encounter?'

'He chose to help us!' shouted back Rosa angrily. 'Maybe he wanted to do something with his life, help other people.'

'So much potential,' sighed the Earl. 'He had learnt to store youth, you know, protect himself from the ravages of time. I always meant to ask him how he did that. But it was all for nothing.'

'It was for *everything*,' called Rosa. 'What's the point of potential if you never use it? Why stay young forever if you're too afraid to live?'

There was silence for a moment. Some of the air-taxis began to move in, trying to block the Professor-Dragon from coming close to the Prototype, but the Earl squawked something at them through the speaker, and they instantly backed off, hovering just out of reach. This was between the dragon and the flying car.

‘My dear Rosa,’ sighed the Earl, and even through the static it was possible to hear the sadness in his voice. ‘You grew up too fast.’

Something long and thin dropped from the Prototype’s undercarriage. It righted itself in the air, then shot towards them. Then the Professor-Dragon jinked to dodge the missile, which shot past them, then stopped in mid-air, turned and came for them again.

‘From the right this time,’ shouted Rosa. ‘Drop now!’

It missed again, but closer this time, and was barely past them before turning and attacking again. The huge ribcage beneath Rosa was wheezing terribly; they couldn’t keep turning in the air like this for much longer.

‘You will be careful with those Treasures, won’t you?’ called the Earl mockingly. They were slowly being pushed further and further from the entrance to the cyclone, and Rosa could feel her teeth grinding with frustration.

The missile span in the air, preparing for what would surely be its final attack – and something detached itself from Rosa and hurled itself into its path. Feeling the sudden movement from her coat, Rose stared down, and saw that Gary was gone. A tiny blur of feathers, screeching with fear and anger, was just inches away from being blown to smithereens.

But there was no explosion, no sudden cloud of feathers. Instead, Gary was sitting astride the missile, pulling apart a tiny control panel and ripping out great strands of wire with his teeth.

The missile stuttered, spinning uselessly in the air, then suddenly nosedived and plummeted straight down. Gary hauled himself into the air even as it exploded. The blast wave caught him, and for a horrible moment Rosa

thought the monkey would fall, stunned, into the waves, but he managed to ride it out, wings flapping frantically as he caught his balance, a tiny speck on the vast sea. He started working his way back to them, but it was a long way. Rosa and the Professor-Dragon were nearly at the mouth of the cyclone now, the swirling winds beneath them almost solid with sleet.

Drop the Treasures into me, one at a time, called the cyclone. I can scatter them, wrest control back from the Earl. But they must not fall into the sea, or I will be enslaved forever.

‘We’re nearly there,’ shouted Rosa, and the Professor-Dragon beat his heavy wings once more. But the Prototype had backed up, and the swarm of air-taxis was coming in fast. There was nothing to lose now, for either side.

The dragon and the car flew at each other. At the last minute, a great gout of flame erupted from the dragon’s mouth, and Rosa saw the paintwork bubbling, one of the wings boiling with smoke. The car spun crazily in the air, then sank, the Earl’s screamed words now just bursts of static.

They flew on, into the cyclone, and felt the cold snowy air turn suddenly to warm sunshine. Rosa held out the jar with frozen fingers and tried to shake loose the Treasures within. If they all fell as one, everything they had fought for would be undone.

Their momentum stopped, suddenly, then the dragon’s wings beat the air, managing to stop them tumbling from the sky altogether. Rosa looked down, and saw to her horror the Prototype, attached to them by a thick cable. The Earl had fired some kind of harpoon, which had attached itself straight into the dragon’s fleshy side. It had been too quick for him to even make a sound, but he was breathing heavily now, trying to haul himself and the Prototype, which hung heavy and inert, swinging from side to side like some ridiculous pendulum.

‘The Treasures,’ moaned the Professor-Dragon. ‘Drop them, Rosa!’

But they were frozen solid. Rosa rattled the jar desperately, and felt something inside break free. There wasn’t time to check, so she hurled the jar

from her, hoping against hope it would land neither in the sea, nor the forest, but in the lip of the cyclone, the living winds that could scatter the Treasures back into different worlds.

The Earl had climbed out of the Prototype window now, and was working his way hand over hand up the cable. His eyes were burning with hatred, and his beloved suit was smoking and tattered, but he was only a dozen yards away. The contents of the jar fell past him, too quickly and too small to see if the job had been done.

Then the Professor-Dragon gave a great sigh, folded up his wings and plummeted down, down, out of the sky.



Chapter Forty - Three

Rosa couldn't feel anything. Well, that wasn't strictly true; she felt terrified, worried, confused and afraid, all at once. But everything around her was black. She looked down and could see nothing; tried to move her hands to her face and felt nothing. She was reasonably sure she was breathing, but that could have been habit as much as anything.

Hello Rosa, said the cyclone. It didn't sound huge any more. Just a voice, calm and quiet and very near.

Hello, said Rosa.

There was a silence for a while. It could have been a few seconds, or perhaps a hundred years, it was impossible to tell. Then Rosa remembered everything that had happened.

Are my friends all right? she asked anxiously. *Gary was too far away to catch up. And the Professor had been injured, and I threw the Treasures as far as I could, but my hands were cold and I-*

Your friends are in perfect health, said the cyclone. *I caught them and soon I will return them to the Cabinet. But there is a matter we must discuss.*

Rosa looked around her. But she wasn't sure what she was looking with, or even if there was an 'around' to look at. There was just... nothing.

Where am I? she asked.

You are in the gap between the worlds.

Rosa frowned. *Is it all like this?*

There was a wood once, with little ponds. But I cannot find it any longer.

Rosa frowned. *And this is where you live?*

I do not live. I just... exist. Sometimes the worlds rub together, and I can manifest for a short time. Some people have the gift to call me, though few have called me 'friend'.

The Earl can't be a friend, said Rosa. You wanted me to help you against him.

The Earl is a terrible man, and so much worse because he thinks he is doing good. And yet...

The cyclone fell silent. Somehow Rosa could guess what he was going to say.

He has made you an offer, she said.

Yes. I am alone, Rosa Dew. I have always been alone, a thing of dreams, spinning and twisting between worlds. Even the winds that lend me form have to be dropped in time. I am empty. I am the last of my kind.

There was not a trace of self-pity in the creature's voice, no bluster or bombast. And yet behind those words was a terrible sadness. Rosa had been alive for approximately three days, and the discovery that she was just a thing, a tool created for a purpose, had come close to destroying her. What must it be like to have never even known a body, to be able to pick up houses, and people and things, and shift them effortlessly between worlds, but never to have even known freedom?

But you can talk to me, she said.

Yes, agreed the cyclone. *Because you are empty, hollow. You live and breathe, but you are not a real person. You will never dream, or know love. You are an empty vessel.*

If, in that moment, Rosa had been able to feel her heart, it would have broken. Instead, she just felt numb. She said nothing.

More than anything, said the cyclone, I desire to walk, to touch, to feel. The Earl has offered me a means of residing in a human body. But to live inside a person who already has a soul would be a monstrous thing. They would be pushed to the margins of their own existence, forced back into their own memories, no longer truly alive.

The Earl offered me to you, didn't he? said Rosa.

Yes, said the cyclone. It didn't even hesitate.

And the Professor? T'Maugh, Gary, the Rodentians? They would be unharmed?

The Cabinet, and those who depend upon it, would be left in peace, said the cyclone. This he has sworn, on his true name. It cannot be undone.

Rosa sighed. She would have given anything to have felt the air leave her body, to feel as close as she ever would to being alive. It wasn't death she was accepting, not really. But if her friends were guaranteed to be safe, and she had never really been alive in the first place...

Do it, she said.

Close your eyes, said the cyclone gently.

Rosa nearly laughed then. What difference did it make? But she closed them anyway.

This won't hurt, said the cyclone. And it didn't. Not a bit.



Chapter Forty - Four

Rosa awoke back on the pier. The Professor was standing opposite her – no longer a dragon, but a tall, ageing man with grey hair and an eyepatch. He wore the same clothes as before. T'Maugh was in exactly the same position, although perhaps with a little more snow on her. There was a flutter of wings, and Gary appeared from nowhere, hurling his arms around Rosa's neck, then immediately dancing back, hanging in the air, looking awkward and shy. The Professor put his arm out and the monkey settled on his sleeve, took out his mobile phone and began fiddling with it.

Then Rosa turned and saw the Earl.

She felt confused, and angry. He didn't even have the decency to gloat openly. Instead he looked calm, at peace. His suit was utterly ruined, with bits of the Prototype's upholstery still clinging to it. Yet his skin was unmarked – he was holding his hands out before him, staring at them as if he had never seen them before.

But... should she even be noticing this? If the cyclone had taken over her body, pushing whatever she had instead of a soul to the margins... what was feeling this? What was thinking the thoughts that were running through her mind, feeling relief that her friends were all right, anger at the Earl for surviving all that he had done, prospering even?

Then she met the Earl's gaze, and saw two whirling vortices, brown eyes replaced by spinning wreaths of grey. The cyclone looked back at her and smiled.

‘It is a terrible thing to offer the life of another,’ it said. ‘To create a person, try to convince her she has no worth, then offer her up as a gift. The soul of a person who acted this way would have to be a small, petty thing, easily displaced.’

Rosa stared at him. ‘Is the Earl still in there?’ she asked.

The cyclone shook its head. ‘He is between the worlds now. He is more powerful than he ever could have hoped, in a way.’

Rosa frowned. ‘I hoped something bad would happen to him,’ she said. It wasn’t a nice thing to say, but it was true. The cyclone looked at her steadily.

‘You may find, Rosa Dew,’ it said, ‘that to be given everything you ever wanted is a curse far more powerful than anything witches or demons can bestow.’

‘Well if anyone ever gives me a soul,’ she said rather tartly. ‘I’ll let you know.’

The cyclone laughed. Not the snide mocking laughter of the Earl, but something richer and deeper. Rosa felt a flash of hatred that someone would mock her so. Then, to her shock, she realised that the Professor too, was smiling.

‘I don’t understand,’ she cried. ‘Why would you-’

But the Professor approached her, laying a comforting hand on her shoulder.

‘The cyclone told us what you did,’ he said. ‘How could anyone willing to give up her life for her friends not have a soul?’

‘But the Earl,’ said Rosa, ‘he told me, he said...’

‘The Earl,’ said the cyclone, ‘can barely stand to think of other people existing at all. I hardly think he can be relied upon as an authority in these matters.’

‘Oh,’ said Rosa, and suddenly felt terribly foolish.

The Earl could feel worlds sliding past him. For a moment he thought he was a child again, lost in an alien land, strangers towering over him, a babble of foreign tongues. But he could touch nothing, and when he looked down, he saw nothing. The worlds flashed past, quicker now, impossible to grasp. He was a phantom, voiceless and powerless, desperate to find something to hold on to. He nearly touched something, once, then lost his balance, and began to spin, faster and faster until soon there was no time to think about himself at all. The howling vortex that had once been an Earl was just a thing now, bodiless and screaming and utterly alone.

‘What about the Earl’s allies?’ asked the Professor. ‘The witches left, but there’s plenty of others knocking about. Enough pirates, and weasels, and Wurglah to make a fuss if they wanted to. They’re your responsibility now.’

‘The hotel bills are paid up to the end of the week,’ replied the cyclone, ‘but I’ll be encouraging them to return from wherever they came. There is nothing in Walmington for them now. But I’m afraid many of the original inhabitants are unlikely to return. This will be a ghost town for some time, I think.’

‘We can start again,’ said the Professor, and yawned suddenly.

‘I want to go home,’ said Gary suddenly.

‘Agreed,’ said the Professor. ‘Coming, Rosa?’

Rosa nodded, then frowned. ‘Wait,’ she said, ‘What about T’Maugh?’

‘We’ll have to carry her,’ said the Professor. ‘You can’t undo the spell, I suppose?’

The cyclone shook his head. ‘It will wear off shortly. But I can offer you some assistance with the journey home.’

Rosa stared at him. ‘Can you still do your... travelling thing?’

‘Of course,’ he said, and gently opened a space in the night air, as easily as undoing a zip. Through the tear was a desert. It was night there too, although there was a green glow on the horizon.

‘This is the monkey’s home, I believe,’ he said. ‘Would you like to go back? I understand messages have been travelling between the two worlds for a while.’

The Professor blinked. ‘That’s who you’ve been texting?’

Gary shrugged, staring intently into the other world.

‘Whatever,’ he said, although his heart didn’t seem to be in it.

‘Gary,’ said Rosa gently. ‘I think this might be your chance to go home.’

‘Yeah, well,’ said Gary thoughtfully. ‘Not sure it’s what you’d call ‘home’ exactly. Wasn’t born there, was I? Might be nice to visit sometime, but you know, I’ve got stuff to do. Seagulls don’t mug themselves.’

‘Garibaldi Tiberius Aloe vera J. Monkey,’ said the Professor sternly, ‘Are you saying you’d rather come back to the Cabinet with us?’

‘Oh *God*,’ moaned Gary, ‘Just leave it, will you?’

The cyclone closed the tear, and the world was gone.

‘Aloe vera?’ asked Rosa. Gary put his head in his paws.

‘If you’re going to open one of those to the Cabinet,’ said the Professor, ‘I’d just as soon walk. No offence, but interplanar travel upsets my digestion terribly.’

‘I was thinking of another method,’ said the cyclone. Something large and dark dropped out of the sky, landing on the pier next to them with a thud.

‘Great heavens,’ murmured the Professor weakly. ‘I assumed it had been lost. Or damaged beyond repair.’

It was the Prototype. All that was left of the wings were burnt struts, the paintwork was horribly singed and much of the dark glass was frosted with cracks, but the engine was purring, and the headlights were still shining.

‘I have no use for the thing,’ said the cyclone. ‘It will need restoration, I’m afraid.’

‘A serious job,’ mused the Professor. ‘New seat covers, and some of that brass needs-’ He caught Rosa’s gaze and coughed, embarrassed.

‘Let’s get T’Maugh in, shall we?’ he said. ‘And then we can go home.’

But Rosa was looking at the cyclone. ‘You’re more powerful now, aren’t you?’ she said. ‘Now that you’re free.’

The cyclone nodded.

‘What will you do?’ she asked. ‘Will you be better than the Earl? Or worse?’

‘I don’t know,’ it said.

‘If you’re worse,’ said Rosa, ‘I’ll find you.’

‘Understood,’ said the cyclone.

They drove slowly through the dark empty streets. Rosa looked back once, as the Prototype’s half-melted tyres moved from the pier on to the road, but the cyclone had already gone. She didn’t look back again.



Chapter Forty-Five

They carried T'Maugh, with some difficulty, up the stairs and placed her at the entrance to the natural history gallery, facing inwards.

'She was really going for him,' marvelled Gary. 'When she comes out of that spell, she'll be doing about a hundred miles an hour. I want to watch.'

The Professor had promised Rosa the Cabinet would be made available to visitors the moment everything was back in its place. He hadn't been keen, muttering something about the need to get in a proper archivist, and sort out the catalogue once and for all, but Rosa felt that he wouldn't put up any serious objection. She couldn't help thinking that spending renewed time as a dragon had made him confront any... hoarding tendencies he might have.

'All right,' he said finally. 'But I'm locking away the pointier things. And the things that turn people into other things.'

'That sounds sensible,' said Rosa, who was sitting back on the floor, picking a book out of the carpet bag. Other books lay about her in unseemly piles, devoured and left where they had fallen.

'It might be nice if some of those made it as far as the library, at some point,' suggested the Professor gently.

'Mmm,' said Rosa, who wasn't really listening.

'-AAAARGH!' said T'Maugh, bursting out of her spell and charging down the gallery at high speed. Gary, who had been perched on her head, playing a game on his mobile, burst screeching into the air and hit his head on a

lamp fitting. From the far end of the gallery came a scrabbling thumping sound as a confused T'Maugh tried to halt her progress on the polished floor and slid into a display case.

'I'd better go and make sure she's all right,' sighed the Professor, and strode off into the darkness. Gary landed on the floor, clutching his head, and hobbled off in the other direction, complaining that no-one was paying him any attention.

Rosa was barely aware of any of it. She sat, cross-legged in a pool of light, her only movements the sideways flicker of her eyes, and the occasional turn of a page. As soon as she finished one book she put it down and started on the next.

Later she would help the Professor rebuild the Cabinet, and listen to Gary moan about his injured head, and have a proper talk with T'Maugh, now the spell had finally worn off. And that same night she would have her first proper dream. It would be odd in places, and scary in others, and she wouldn't remember much of it.

But for now, she was reading.

