

PART I: THE MAP

CHAPTER 1

Sammlers are magic collectors who abide by a strict set of codes. As children possess a much greater sensitivity for magic than adults, many Sammlers use them to retrieve magical objects. These children are known as Lærling.

The Encyclopaedia of Northern Magic

Broomielaw Docks, Glasgow 1869

The ship fell silent as Gallowglass crossed the deck with a blood-stained sack in his hand. Making his way up the stairs to the forecastle, he peered down at the smartly dressed gang gathered below. With a look on his face that lay somewhere between resignation and regret, he pulled the source of his discontent out from the sack.

‘What exactly is this meant to be?’

Crammed in amongst the assembled criminals, 13-year-old Kern could clearly see that her boss was holding up a severed leg. She also knew a rhetorical question when she heard one. Alas, the same could not be said for some of her co-workers. Gallowglass stood in stoic silence as he waited for the shouts of ‘It’s a leg Chief’ to come to an end. Observing her boss perched up high before them, Kern thought he looked more like a pastor than a notorious criminal. She snorted to herself at the idea of it. Gallowglass worshipped no one but himself.

‘I asked for that lying cheat Archibald Taggart to be brought in,’ said Gallowglass once the answers finally stopped. ‘And yet we appear to be missing a substantial portion of the man. Where is Gudgie?’

The assassin shoved his way past Kern to the front. A nasty, red-faced man, his

permanently sweaty upper lip was topped by a half-hearted moustache.

‘Here Chief, sorry Chief. That was all that was left of him.’

Stuck just behind Gudgie, Kern winced at the stench. The man smelt like a disreputable butcher’s shop. Beside her, William pulled a face and pretended to gag at the smell. She tried not to snigger, but he could always make her laugh. Of course he could. He was her best friend in the whole world. Her only friend. She sighed and tried not to think about the fact that one day she might have to kill him.

‘I told you to be discrete,’ said Gallowglass. ‘But there are already reports of more police on the streets this evening.’

‘He made a run for it, tried to hide over at the woodworks,’ said Gudgie. ‘It wasn’t my fault. He put up a fight, and the place was full of saws.’

Gallowglass gave no reaction to this information as he returned the leg to its sack. He was always in control. With his neatly clipped black hair and beard, and his carefully pressed clothes, he was a perfect picture of order. When he was finished, he carefully wiped his hands then pulled something from his coat.

‘I have tolerated your reckless violence for too long,’ he told Gudgie as he held up an intricately carved stone ball.

‘Not that, Chief!’ cried the assassin. ‘Please, it won’t happen again.’

‘Correct!’ said Gallowglass and with that he whispered secret Pictish words.

Gudgie howled in horror as the magic took hold. Kern gave William a reassuring pat as they watched the glittering golden trail of Gudgie’s life force rise up out of his right arm to be sucked into the ball. This could happen to any of them as long as they bore the mark of the Black Kelpies.

Gudgie's howls lasted no more than a few seconds before he slumped onto the deck. Then, with one final burst of light, the magic that had been his life, sparkled in his fading eyes and disappeared forever. Gallowglass put the stone ball back in his pocket before returning his attention to the crew.

'Where are the Lærling?' he said. A sour smile formed on his lips. 'Or have they tried to escape again?'

Kern ignored the crew's laughter as she and William edged forward. They'd made many escape attempts over the years including one the previous month, but Gallowglass always found them. They should have received brutal punishments but were saved by Gallowglass's strict adherence to the Sammler Code. Decisions about Lærling had to be made by the Bone Dice and no matter how many times she and William ran away; the dice always rolled in their favour.

'I am thrilled to see you are still with us,' said Gallowglass. 'Can I be assured that we will now see an end to these pointless attempts at escape?'

'We're finished with all that Chief, honest,' said William, his face impressively contrite. 'We know it can't be done. Don't we Kern?'

Looking up at Gallowglass's cold blue eyes, she couldn't bring herself to voice her agreement. Instead, she gave a sullen shrug.

'Good. I am glad this fact has finally sunk in,' said Gallowglass. 'Follow me.'

'Should we prepare for departure Chief?' called one of the sailors.

'No,' said Gallowglass. 'There has been a change of plan.'

Kern's mind raced as they followed their boss across to the hatch and down into the dank body of the ship. He was not one to change his plans. On they walked in silence through the dark, narrow passages until Gallowglass slammed open his cabin door and marched inside.

It had been some time since they were last in this room, but nothing had changed. It remained a testament to the obsession that drove Gallowglass. Almost every inch of wall space was covered in sheets of writing or drawings relating to his plan to rob the heavily secured base of the powerful Sammler Club. They had denied him membership many years ago and this would be his revenge. Revenge was such a theme as they were growing up in the gang that she and William had even made a game of it. If one of them annoyed the other, then revenge would have to be had. It was fair to say she was much better at it than William.

In the middle of the cabin, the bald, moustachioed figure of Hexenmester, the gang's German magic master, sat looking through a leatherbound notebook. While most of the gang wore dark grey shirts and trousers under their black coats, the masters chose their own clothes. As was typical for magic masters, Hexenmester wore black and gold, the two colours of magic.

'Well?' asked Gallowglass.

'The first few pages seem plausible,' came the reply. 'And the details are accurate, but after that it becomes a rambling mess.'

'Do you think the owner of this diary really had the map?'

Kern groaned. It was another sighting of the Sea Lord's Map, a magical object that Gallowglass needed for his robbery plan. Its last known location had been in Glasgow and every year they got reports of its whereabouts. They always came to nothing.

'He clearly believed he had it,' replied Hexenmester. 'But I doubt it was the real thing.'

A smooth voice spoke out from the corner of the room. 'This information will not stay secret for long. We should retrieve the map tonight.'

Bob Dragon, the gang's spy master, emerged in a typically over-dramatic manner from one of his magic-made shadows. A ridiculously handsome man, his good looks had helped him

charm information from men and women all over town. Peering at him, Kern wondered how much money he'd wasted on his expensive suit and opulent purple necktie.

'I find your whole story suspicious,' said Hexenmester. 'You say you found the diary in the old Oswald mansion, but your job is to spy on people. Why were you in that derelict dump?'

Kern had a pretty good idea what Bob Dragon would have been up to. The man had debts all over town and the mansion was often used by thieves to hide stolen valuables.

'I do not care how this information was found,' said Gallowglass. 'Can it be trusted?'

'Nein!' snapped Hexenmester, tossing the book onto the large desk. 'These are the ramblings of a mad man.'

Bob Dragon grabbed the diary. 'Mad or not, his sketches of the map's runes are perfect.'

The only sound was the ticking of the clock as Gallowglass paced in front of a small blackboard covered in numbers. Kern and William always worked as a team, but Sammler Code meant that they were also in competition. Gallowglass had been keeping score since their first theft. She was one point ahead, but she took no pleasure in this. Their apprenticeship would soon be over, and only the best Lærling would be chosen to remain in the gang. An unpleasant fate awaited the loser, and she didn't plan on letting that happen to either of them.

'I am loath to risk staying longer in the city,' said Gallowglass when he finally spoke. 'But I cannot ignore the possibility of finding the Sea Lord's Map.' He turned to look at them. 'You two will undertake the theft. Do not let me down.'

Hope swelled in Kern's chest. *Caring is weakness.* That's what Gallowglass had taught them, and yet he couldn't hide how much he cared about that map. She felt a tingle of excitement as a plan began to form in her head. If they really had located the Sea Lord's Map, then tonight might be the night when she and William finally escaped the clutches of Gallowglass.

CHAPTER 2

Certain types of soil are able to and focus the magic held in water. The result is glaar, a mud that is commonly used to ignite spells. Though increasingly rare in Europe, sizable deposits can still be found in western Scotland and northern Russia.

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William felt a surge of anticipation as he peered out from the *Dark Horse* into the thick yellow fog that sat on the docks that night. Tonight's job was a simple robbery but he had seen Kern slip her bag on under her long coat. She was up to something. He hoped it was an escape plan.

Skipping down the gangplank, he felt a faint shiver of magic as he passed through the shadow that shrouded the ship. With a mighty leap, he sprang the rest of the way to land with considerable flourish on the dockside.

Looking back, he watched Kern stomp down behind him with a strong sense of purpose and a firm grip on the handrail. She didn't react as she passed through the edge of the shadow but he wasn't surprised. Her sense for magic had been fading for some time, not that she'd admit it.

'Bet I beat you to the music hall,' he said as she joined him on the dockside.

Her sombre face lit up. 'Bet you don't!'

'I'll give you a start to make it fair!' called William as she dashed past. He grinned at the sight of her wriggling uncomfortably in her outfit as she ran. Going into town meant blending in, so wearing their Black Kelpie uniforms was not an option. He didn't mind his brown suit and overcoat, but Kern hated her long grey dress which she claimed was 'completely impractical'.

He soon caught up and they were neck and neck as they raced over Jamaica Street, past the Customs House and down into the alleys that wound through the darkness towards the

merchant district.

The Tolbooth tower clock struck ten as they burst out onto the cobblestone streets of the Trongate. Leaping puddle after puddle, they dodged their way between the carts and carriages, to arrive breathless and red-cheeked outside the tatty entrance of the Britannia music hall.

‘Dead heat,’ said Kern.

William snorted. ‘I think you’ll find I won.’

Running was one of the few areas where he could beat Kern and he was not giving up this chance of victory. He looked at her, ready for an argument but her attention had already turned to the music hall. Light from a nearby gas light flickered across her mousy brown hair as she peered at the dark windows of the upper floors.

‘D’you think the map’s really there?’

‘Only one way to find out,’ said William and with that he headed inside.

The music hall’s tiny foyer had certainly seen better days. Faded posters clung to the peeling grey paint while an unwelcoming, concrete staircase led to the theatre above. Over at the ticket booth, a balding man sat engrossed in his newspaper.

‘No weans at the late show,’ he grunted.

‘We’re thirteen!’ said William.

‘Congratulations,’ came the reply. ‘You’re still not getting in.’

William attempted to charm the man with his sunniest smile while beside him, Kern did her best to make her pale, solemn face look friendly. The ticket-man was not impressed.

‘The pair of you get out of here before you get a skelp.’

Ignoring the man’s threats of low-level violence, William sidled up to the ticket-booth and opened his coat.

‘No!’ hissed Kern.

William just grinned at her, then pulled back his shirt to reveal the black, horse-shaped kelpie tattoo on his arm. These magical marks bound them to Gallowglass, but they also had their uses.

The ticket-man’s eyes widened in horror. ‘I didn’t realise. Is he here?’ He stuffed a bunch of tickets into William’s hand. ‘Compliments of the establishment.’

Crossing the foyer together, Kern side-eyed him as they reached the stairs.

‘What if he gets the police?’ she said.

‘Did you see his face?’ William scoffed. ‘He wouldn’t dare.’

They headed upwards and cheery song drifted out from the theatre as they reached the first floor.

‘I love this one,’ sighed William and swaying in time to the music, he wished for a moment that he had a normal life. The kind where you went to music halls to see shows, not steal cursed maps.

On reaching the second floor, they sneaked past the empty offices and continued up to the attic where a locked door blocked their way. Fortunately, he and Kern picked locks with the same ease that other children picked their noses. They had it open in no time.

William crept into the dark attic as he pulled out a handful of glaar from his pouch. The comforting thrum of the magical mud pulsed through his hand as he whispered his request. The mud sparked to life and a soft golden light lit up the space. They were in a large, cobweb-filled storage room packed with boxes, but it was on the far side that they saw what they had come for.

Laid out on a long, wooden table were twelve stone heads. Carved in the image of rich and powerful men from the city, these heads had hung outside the nearby Tontine Hotel until it

had closed earlier that month. They had been bought for an excellent price by the Britannia's owner, but he had no idea of their true value. If Bob Dragon's information was correct, then hidden inside one of them was the Sea Lord's Map.

William walked round the table as Kern unrolled her toolbelt. They'd chased many false sightings of the map over the years, so he didn't expect to find anything tonight. Still, those heads had been hanging outside the hotel for over a century. It was quite a coincidence that Bob Dragon had got his information just after they'd been taken down.

The Sea Lord's Map chooses its owner. So said the myths. Perhaps the map had chosen them? He couldn't help but daydream a little at the thought of it. He might end up the most famous Sammler of all time. As Kern began to chip away at the first head, William tried to sense if magic was hidden inside any of them. He stayed focussed for less than a minute before he got distracted by a head with particularly fancy hair.

'Ha, look at the wig on this one!' he called to Kern. 'Bet he was stinking rich!' He tilted up the head and adopted a posh drawl. 'Let me make it very clear. I may just be a head, but I've got more money than the rest of you peasants put together.'

The next head was even better. William contorted his face to match its grumpy, scrunched-up expression. 'I haven't pooped for years,' he snarled. 'And now I'm really angry!'

'Shh,' spluttered Kern between snorts of laughter.

'Come on, your turn.'

Kern screwed up her face in thought as she looked at the head beside her.

'I,' she finally said. 'Am very...stony!'

William guffawed. He always laughed at Kern's jokes despite the fact they were rubbish. Laughing together was one of the few highlights in their rather dark lives.

Moving along the heads, he finally felt a faint hint of magic coming from one of them. He was about to call Kern then stopped himself. He knew she was the better Lærling. So did everyone. If he found the Sea Lord's Map, then it might show Gallowglass what he was worth. Perhaps it would even persuade their boss to ignore Sammler Code and keep them both.

'Did you find something?' asked Kern, still chipping away at her stone head.

'No!' said William, and he was sure she would spot him blushing. He was normally an impressive liar, but he could never manage it with her.

Putting down her tools, Kern peered across the table. 'He looks like Hexenmester.'

The bald, moustachioed head lying before him did indeed resemble their magic master. A grin spread across William's face as he lifted it up and adopted a German accent.

'I do not like children, they are as bad as witches! I will blow them up. I will make them all go boom!'

He swung the head forward, only for it to slip through his hands. It smashed onto the floor and as it cracked open, he was blinded for a moment by a flash of golden light. Stumbling backwards, he blinked until at last he was able to focus. There, floating above them were twelve ghostly golden faces, and they did not look happy.