

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 steal magical objects.

These children are known as Lærling.

The Encyclopaedia of Northern Magic

Glasgow, 1869

Even the foul yellow fog didn't slow them down as they raced through the city that night. Neck and neck, they burst out from the maze of narrow alleyways onto the cobblestone streets of the Trongate. Dodging their way past the carts and the carriages, they arrived at last, breathless and red-cheeked, by the tatty entrance of the Britannia music hall.

'I won!' gasped Kern.

William snorted. 'I don't think so.'

He looked to her, ready for an argument, but her attention had turned to the dark upper windows of the music hall.

'D'you think it's really there?' she asked.

'Only one way to find out,' he told her and with that they headed inside.

The music hall's tiny foyer had certainly seen better days. Faded posters clung to the peeling grey paint while an unwelcoming, stone 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 threat of low-level violence, William rolled up his right coat sleeve.

‘No!’ hissed Kern.

He pretended not to hear her as he revealed the black, horse-shaped tattoo on his arm.

The ticket-man’s eyes widened in horror.

‘I didn’t realise. Is he here?’ He pushed a bunch of tickets across the counter.

‘Compliments of the establishment.’

Taking the tickets, William hooked his arm round Kern’s and swaggered across the foyer.

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

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

They soon reached the first floor where a cheery song drifted out through the large wooden door that led into the theatre.

‘I love this one,’ sighed William. He stared at the door and for a moment wished he could step through it into a normal life. The kind where you went to music halls to see shows, not steal cursed maps.

They continued on to the second floor to find that a locked door blocked their way to the attic. Fortunately, he and Kern picked locks with the same ease that other children picked their noses. They had it open in no time.

William led the way up the narrow stairs and upon reaching the dark attic, he pulled a handful of glaar from his pouch. Able to concentrate the magic held in water, this mud was often used to ignite spells. He whispered his request and the familiar thrum pulsed through his hand as the glaar sparked to life. Soon, a soft golden glow blossomed to light up the space.

They were in a large, cobweb-filled storage room packed with boxes, but it was on the far side that he 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'd clearly had no idea of their true value. If their information was correct, then hidden inside one of them was an object that had been sought after by Sammlers for centuries.

Beside him, Kern unrolled her toolbelt, and with a jolt, he realised he'd left his on the ship. Well-practised at hiding his carelessness, he decided to use a different approach for the search. While Kern assessed which hammer and chisel to use, he walked to the top of the table and placed his hands on one of the stone faces.

'You won't sense anything,' she told him. 'The magic will be too concealed.'

'For you perhaps,' he said with a grin. Sensing magic was one of the few areas where he was stronger than Kern. On top of that, he was pretty sure her sense had begun to fade. Not that she'd ever admit it.

He continued to place his hands on one face after another while Kern chipped away at the head in front of her. It didn't take long before he got distracted by a head with rather fancy hair.

'Ha, look at the wig on him, 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 more money than the rest of you peasants put together.'

The next one 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 then,’ he said. ‘Your turn.’

She 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 even though they were rubbish.

Laughing together was one of the few highlights in their rather dark lives.

Moving along the heads, he stopped in surprise when he felt a faint hint of magic coming from one of them. He was about to call Kern then decided against it. Even with her lesser sense for magic, everyone knew she was the better Lærling. If he could be the one who found the Sea Lord’s Map, it might show Gallowglass what he was worth.

‘Did you sense something?’ asked Kern.

‘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 the gang’s magic master. William couldn’t resist. He heaved up the head 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 hit the table then toppled off to smash onto the floor. As it cracked open, a blinding flash of light filled the room and when it finally faded, William could see twelve golden faces floating above them. They did not look happy.

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Kern kept a close eye on the shimmering faces as she dragged William back to a safe distance.

From what she could see, each of them was a match for one of the stone heads on the table. As if that wasn't eerie enough, their mouths were all moving as though shouting in rage, but there was not a sound to be heard.

Eventually, the ghostly images came to rest in a protective dome around the broken head and it was then that she spotted an item in amongst the smashed stone. She couldn't be sure it was the map, but it was clearly something worth protecting. The find had been typical William of course. All luck and no work. Still, she wasn't going to complain. They'd already been in the city longer than was safe. The sooner they got back to the ship the better.

'It could be a simple illusion to scare us off,' she said. 'But it could also be a trap. I'll make a list of spells that might have been used and come up with a test for each.'

She had hardly begun to consider the various possibilities when William marched back to the table.

'What are you doing?' she gasped.

'Speeding things up!'

He bent towards the smashed head and the second his hand touched one of the ghostly faces, a light sparked out. He howled as he was flung away with such force that he landed on his back halfway across the room. Kern's heart thumped as she sprinted over to his limp form.

'William!'

He let out a loud groan in reply and her fear instantly morphed into annoyance. She was about to give him a lecture on the importance of caution when dealing with unidentified magic, when she noticed his hair. His dark auburn curls were now a wild, spiky mess.

'How did that feel?' she asked.

'Sore, obviously!'

‘Yes, I could hear that, but what kind of sore? Was it magic?’

‘No, I don’t think so.’

Kern gave a satisfied nod. ‘It’s concentrated static electricity. You need magic to achieve the concentration, but it gets used up in the process so you wouldn’t have noticed any. I’ll cast a mist. The moisture should disperse the charge.’

She opened her pouch, scooped out a handful of glaar and whispered her request. Gold light sparkled from the mud as its magic came to life and in no time, it had created a gentle mist. Once this mist had surrounded the faces, a shimmer sparked out and flew down into the ground.

With its magic used up, the glaar in Kern’s hand had turned to dust. She brushed it away as she spoke. ‘It should be safe now.’

William took a deep breath then cautiously poked a finger into one of the faces. When no shock occurred he bent down towards the smashed head.

‘Got it!’ he called and with a grin, lifted out a rune-covered tube.

The ghostly faces were now absolutely livid. Edging away from the angry apparitions, William tugged at the tube’s lid.

‘Wait!’ Kern warned. ‘Remember the curse.’

‘Can you get cursed just from touching it?’

‘Probably not,’ she said. ‘But maybe use your hanky.’

‘You think my snot’s going to protect me from an ancient curse?’

‘It would certainly frighten me off.’

William chortled. ‘See, you *can* be funny!’

Kern stared at him. ‘There’s nothing funny about bad hygiene.’

In the end, they decided it would be better to leave the map inside the tube and William

stored it in his coat pocket. Leaving the faces raging silently into the darkness, they crept out of the attic and headed downstairs.

Kern allowed herself a little bit of optimism as they ran. If they really had found the Sea Lord's Map, then perhaps Gallowglass would ignore Sammler code and keep both of them after their apprenticeship ended. She didn't let her hopes get too high of course. You learned to expect the worst when you'd grown up on a ship full of thieves and murderers.

Music and laughter echoed out from the theatre as they bounded down the stairs towards the exit. Skidding round the final corner to the foyer, they came to an abrupt halt as they saw the group of men standing by the booth.

The ticket-man had summoned the police.

CHAPTER 2

Lærling begin training at a very young age and always work in pairs. In most cases, their sense for magic starts to fade around the age of thirteen. At this point, only one of them will be chosen to stay and become a Sammler. The fate of the unsuccessful Lærling is rarely pleasant.

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The clatter of police rattles sounded out behind them as they burst through the front door and sprinted away from the music hall. It used to be no problem coming into Glasgow, the police had always been easy to bribe. But not now. Not since Chief Constable McCall had taken over. Still, it was unusual for this many police to turn up quite so quickly.

As they ran, William double-checked his coat pocket to confirm that the tube was still there. There'd been plenty of false sightings of the Sea Lord's Map over the years, but something about this time made him feel hopeful. The faint hint of magic he'd sensed from the tube was old and dark, quite different from anything else they'd stolen for Gallowglass.

They bolted along Trongate and then Argyle Street until they were able to turn south and speed down Jamaica Street towards the river. William felt a rush of exhilaration. He loved the thrill of a chase, though he knew Kern was less of a fan. Certainly, she looked pretty annoyed as she thumped along beside him.

'Sorry about the police!' he called.

'You will be,' came her out-of-breath reply.

William groaned. It was fair to say his actions sometimes caused their jobs to take unexpected turns. Whenever that happened, Kern would always get him back with a crafty bit of

revenge. He tried not to think about what she might do this time.

They turned onto Clyde Street and the yellow fog was so thick, they could barely see more than a few yards ahead as they bounded onto the dockside and raced towards the *Dark Horse*. Behind them, McCall's men remained in pursuit, their rattles still clattering. The ship's look-outs soon heard this familiar sound and bellowed a warning. In no time, clanking noises rang out from the engines and before they could reach it, the gangplank was heaved up.

'There!' shouted William pointing to the rope ladder hanging down the starboard side.

Together they sprang over to grab the rungs just before the ship's magical mechanics sent it hurtling off down the river. The wind blasted against them, swinging the ladder across the side of the ship as they hung on for dear life. Along the riverside, flames from the nearby ironworks glowed an eerie red through the fog, as the sounds of the docks vanished behind them.

Once they'd left Glasgow's boundaries, the ship slowed and they were at last able to edge their way up. When they neared the top, the mighty figure of Muckle leaned over to give them a helping hand. In addition to being absolutely massive, Muckle was famed for his heightened senses. It was this combination that got him the job as Gallowglass's bodyguard. No man got past his bulky form and no poison deceived his super-sensitive nose.

Once he reached the top, William sprang over to land on the deck with considerable aplomb. Moments later, Kern landed beside him looking decidedly windswept with her mousy brown hair plastered across her face. Hexenmester shook his head as he pointed at her.

'Alte Schwede!' called the magic master. 'We have caught for ourselves a great big fish!'

'I'd throw it back,' said another of the crew. 'Looks more trouble than it's worth.'

William knew Kern was used to such insults from the men, but he hated how they picked on her. A bit of distraction was usually the best way to stop them.

‘Good evening gentlemen!’ he called as he sprang up onto a barrel. ‘Did I ever tell you about the time we sailed to Kinsale to steal Brusnahan’s Ball and almost ended up in a Spanish prison?’

‘Get down.’

The deep voice that spoke was quiet but filled with such authority that even passing seagulls fell silent as the dark figure of Gallowglass stepped out onto the deck.

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Kern shared a worried glance with William as he jumped off the barrel to land beside her. Their chief did not look happy. Not that the man was ever a picture of joy, but when a dark mood hit him, you could be sure someone was going to pay.

Gallowglass said nothing as he thumped his way up the forecastle stairs carrying what appeared to be a blood-stained sack. The crew held their breaths as he reached the top and pulled out the source of his discontent.

‘What exactly is this meant to be?’

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 gave the order that a debtor be brought in to explain his lack of payment,’ said Gallowglass once the answers finally stopped. ‘And yet we appear to be missing a substantial portion of the man. Where is Gudgie?’

‘Here Chief!’ called Gudgie as he shoved his way to the front. A nasty, red-faced man, his permanently sweaty upper lip was topped by a half-hearted moustache.

‘Sorry Chief,’ he said. ‘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. Her only friend.

‘I told you to be discreet,’ said Gallowglass. ‘Yet I received multiple reports of extra police on the street this evening. Something clearly alerted McCall to our presence and I strongly suspect it was you.’

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

Gallowglass showed no reaction to this information as he returned the leg to the 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. Taking a moment to wipe his hands, he then retrieved something from his coat.

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

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

‘Correct!’ said Gallowglass and with that he whispered to the stone.

Gudgie howled in horror and grabbed at the spot on his arm where he bore the Black Kelpie tattoo. The magic began its work and soon the glittering golden trail of his life-force floated up out of his arm to be sucked into the ball. His 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.

Kern saw William had covered his eyes and gave him a little pat to tell him it was over. This could happen to any of them as long as they bore the mark of the Black Kelpie. Gallowglass returned the stone ball to his pocket as he marched down the stairs and across the deck to stand in front of her and William.

‘Did you get the map?’

‘Yes Chief!’ said William but his cheerful expression quickly turned to one of panic as he tried pocket after pocket with no success. His hands began to shake as the awful truth dawned on him and his dark brown eyes were wide with fear as he turned to face their chief. ‘It’s gone.’

‘Gone?’ said Gallowglass. ‘Are you telling me you lost it?’

‘That depends on how you define lost,’ replied William.

‘Do not test my patience boy. Do you know where it is or must I remind you about the consequences of failure?’

Under normal circumstances Kern might have let William suffer a little longer, but it was not the day to anger Gallowglass.

‘Oh wait, I’m sorry,’ she called as she pulled out the tube. ‘Did you mean *this* map?’

A mix of relief and annoyance swept across William’s face as she handed the tube to their chief.

‘I knew you’d nicked it from me!’ he whispered.

She snorted in disbelief before adding. ‘Consider that my revenge.’

Hexenmester joined Gallowglass and together they examined the object. Staring at the markings that covered the tube, Kern wondered if it really did contain the infamous map created

by the goddess Laukia. Not that anyone ever called it Laukia's map. Instead, it had been named after the man who stole it from her. Mysing Skemmdar, better known as The Sea Lord.

Eventually, after several minutes of examination followed by a heated discussion with Hexenmester, Gallowglass turned to address the crew.

'The markings appear to be accurate but it could easily be another well-made fake. It will have to be tested.' He gestured to her and William. 'You two come with me. I did not appreciate having half of Glasgow's police brought to my doorstep. For both your sakes you had better hope this really is the Sea Lord's Map.'